Battles in the Desert

BY JOSÉ EMILIO PACHECO

I The Ancient World

I remember, I don't remember. What year was it? We already had supermarkets, but still no television, only radio: *Las aventuras de Carlos Lacriox, Tarzan, The Lone Ranger, La Legión de los Madrugadores, Los Niños Catedráticos, Leyendas de las calles de México, Panseco, Doctor I.Q., La Doctora Corazón desde su Clínica de Almas.* Paco Malgesto narrated the bullfights; Carlos Albert covered soccer games; Mago Septién was the baseball announcer. The first postwar cars had begun to circulate: Packards, Cadillacs, Buicks. Chryslers, Mercurys, Hudsons, Pontiacs, Dodges, Plymouths, De Sotos. We went to see Errol Flynn and Tyrone Power movies, to matinees featuring an entire film from beginning to end. My favorite was *The Mongo Invasion.* The most popular songs of the day were "Sin ti," "La Rondalla," "La Burrita," "La Múcura," "Amorcito Corazón." Once again, an old Puerto Rican bolero could be heard everywhere: "Por alto está el cielo en el mundo / por hondo que sea el mar profundo / no habrá una barrera en el mundo / que un amor profundo no pueda romper."

It was the year of polio: the schools were full of children with orthopedic devices; the year of the foot-and-mouth-disease: tens of thousands of sick cattle were being shot throughout the country; the year of the floods: downtown had once again become a lake, and the people rode in boats through the streets. They say that with the next storm, the sewage system will burst and inundate the capital. So what, my brother answered, we are living up to our ears in shit anyway under Miguel Alemán's regime.

The face of El Señor Presidente was everywhere: immense drawings, idealized portraits, ubiquitous photographs, allegories of progress showing Miguel Alemán as Our Father Who Art in Heaven, laudatory caricatures, monuments, public adulation, incessant private abuse. As punishment, we had to write in our notebooks a thousand times: I must obey, I must obey my parents and my teachers. They taught us national history, national language, geography of the capital city: the rivers (there were still rivets), the mountains (they were still visible). This was the ancient world. The grown-ups complained about inflation, exchange rates, traffic, immorality, noise, delinquency, overpopulation, beggars, foreigners, corruption, the limitless wealth of the few and the abject misery of almost everyone else.

The newspapers said: This is an anguished moment for the entire world. The specter of final war is hovering on the horizon. The atomic mushroom was the dismal symbol of our times. Nevertheless, there was still hope. Our textbooks confirmed this: Mexico, as can be seen on the map, is shaped like a cornucopia, a horn of plenty. For a still unimaginable 1980, a future of plenitude and universal well-being was predicted, without specifying just how it would be achieved. Clean cities without injustice, poor people, violence, congestion, or garbage. Every family with an ultramodern and aerodynamic (words from that era) house. No one will want for anything. Machines will do all the work. Streets full of trees and fountains, traveled by silent, nonpolluting vehicles that never collide. Paradise on earth. Finally, utopia will have been found.

In the meantime, we modernized and incorporated into our vocabulary terms that had sounded like Chicanoisms when we had first heard them in the Tin Tan movies and then slowly, imperceptibly, had become Mexicanized: *tenquíu, oquéi, uasamara, sherap, sorry, uan móment pliis.* We began to eat *hamburguesas, páys, donas, jotdogs, malteadas, áiscrim, margarina, pinutbuter.* Fresh juice drinks of lemon, jamaica, and sage were buried by Coca-Cola. Only the very poor continued to drink *tepache.* Our parents soon got used to drinking *jaibol,* even though at first it had tasted to them like medicine. Tequila is prohibited in my house. I once heard my Uncle Julian say, "I serve only whisky to my guests: We must whitewash the taste of Mexicans."

II Ravages of War

During recess we used to eat those kinds of cream tarts that no longer exist. We played in two gangs: Arabs and Jews. Israel had just been established and there was a war against the Arab League. The children who really were Jews and Arabs only insulted each other or fought when they spoke. Our professor, Bernardo Mondragón, said to them: You were born here. You are as Mexican as your fellow students. Don't pass on the hatred. After all that has happened (the endless massacres, the extermination camps, the atomic bomb, the millions and millions of deaths), the world of tomorrow, the world in which you will grow up and be men, should be

THELMA DADDER, BOOK VENDORS ON CALLE OBREGON, COLONIA ROMA, MEXICO CITY.

a peaceful place, without crime, without vileness. A short laugh rang out from the back row. Mondragón watched us sadly, probably asking himself what will become of us over the years, how many evils and catastrophes are we yet to witness.

The extinguished brilliance of the Ottoman Empire still persisted like the light of a long-dead star. For me, a child of the la colonia Roma, both Jews and Arabs were "Turks." The "Turks" didn't seem as strange as Jim, who was born in San Francisco and spoke two languages without an accent; or Toru, who was brought up in a concentration camp for Japanese; or Peralta and Rosales. They did not pay tuition; they were on scholarship; they lived in the rundown neighborhood called the la colonia de los Doctores. La calzada de La Piedad—not yet renamed avenida Cuauhtemoc—and parque Urueta formed the border line between the Roma and Doctores. Romita was another town altogether. Hombre del Costal lurks there. The Great Kidnapper. If you go to Romita, my son, they will kidnap you, scratch your eyes out, cut off your hands and your tongue, then throw you out into the streets to beg, and the Hombre del Costal will take everything you get. During the day he is a beggar; at night he is an elegant millionaire, thanks to the exploitation of his victims. The fear of being near Romita. The fear of riding the streetcar over the avenida Coyoacán bridge: only rails and girders. Underneath runs the dirty River of Piety, which sometimes overflows when it rains.

Before the war in the Middle East, our class's main sport revolved around giving Toru a hard time. Slant eyes, Chinaman, ate the shit and away he ran. Watch out, Toru, I'm going to nail you up by the horns. I never joined in with the jeers. I thought about how I would feel if I were the only Mexican in a school in Tokyo; about how Toru must suffer when he sees those movies that portray the Japanese as gesticulating monkeys who died by the thousands. Toru was the best student in the class. He excelled in every subject. Always studying, with a book in his hands. He knew jujitsu. One time he got sick of it and almost tore Domínguez to pieces. He forced him to get down on his hands and knees and beg for forgiveness. Nobody messed with Toru after that. Today he manages a Japanese factory and employs four thousand Mexican slaves.

I am from the Irgun. I will kill you: I am from the Arab League. The battles in the desert began. We called it that because it was a courtyard of red earth—brick and volcanic rock dust—without any plants or trees, just a cement box in the back. It was built over a passageway leading from the house on the corner to the street across the way that was used as an escape route during the times of religious persecution. We thought this underground area was a vestige of some prehistoric era. Nevertheless, the Cristero war was closer to us at that time than our infancy is to us now. This was the religious war against reform in which many members of my mother's family participated as more than just sympathizers. Twenty years later she continued to worship martyrs like Father Pro and Anacleto González Flores. No one, on the other hand, remembered the thousands of dead peasants, the agrarian reform advocates, the rural professors, the press gangs.

I did not understand anything: war, any war, seemed to me to be the stuff of which movies are made. Sooner or later the good guys win (who are the good guys?). Fortunately, there had been no wars in Mexico since General Cárdenas squelched the Saturnino Cedillo uprising. This was difficult for my parents to believe, because their childhood, adolescence, and youth were spent against a background of constant battles and executions. But things seemed to be going well that year. Classes were constantly being called off so they could take us to the inaugurations of highways, avenues, sports arenas, dams, hospitals, ministries, enormous buildings.

As a rule, they were nothing more than a pile of rocks. The president inaugurated enormous unfinished monuments to himself. Hours and hours under the sun without so much as a sip of water—hey, Rosales, bring some lemons, they're great to quench your thirst, pass one over here—waiting for Miguel Alemán to arrive. Young, smiling, simpatico, shining, waving from aboard a cattle truck surrounded by his retinue. Applause, confetti, paper streamers, flowers, girls, soldiers (still wearing their French helmets), gunmen, the eternal little old lady who breaks through the military barricade and is photographed with El Señor Presidente as she hands him a bouquet of roses.

I had many friends, but my parents did not like any of them: Jorge because he was the son of a general who fought against the Cristeros; Arturo because his parents were divorced and he was looked after by an aunt who charged people to read

their fortunes; Alberto because his widowed mother worked in a travel agency, and a decent woman should never work outside the home. That year Jim and I became friends. During these inaugurations, which had become a natural part of life, Jim would say: Today my father is going to come. And then: Do you see him? He is the one with the sky-blue tie. There he is, standing next to President Alemán. But nobody could distinguish him from all those other heads plastered with linseed oil or cream. But yes, they often published pictures of him. Jim carried the clippings around in his knapsack. Did you see my dad in *El Excélsior*? How strange: you don't look like him at all. Well, they say I look like my mother. I'm going to look like him when I grow up.

III Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves

It seemed strange for Jim, whose father was an influential businessman and held an important position in the government, to be attending a run-of-the-mill school more appropriate for those of us who lived in the downwardly mobile colonia Roma than for the son of Miguel Alemán's omnipotent close friend and banking partner. Every time the president blinked, Jim's father made millions: contracts for everything; land in Acapulco; import-export and construction permits; authorization to establish subsidiaries of North American companies in Mexico; stocks in the asbestos industry just when a new law was proclaimed requiring all porches to be lined with carcinogenic asbestos; the reselling of powdered milk destined for free school breakfasts in poor neighborhoods; falsification of vaccinations and medicines; enormous dealings in gold and silver on the black market; large parcels of land bought for pennies an acre just weeks before the announcement of a new round of development projects that would raise the value ten thousand times; a hundred million pesos changed into dollars and deposited in Switzerland the day before the devaluation.

Even less comprehensible was that Jim would live with his mother in an apartment on the third floor near the school rather than in a mansion in Las Lomas, or at least in Polanco. Strange … Not really, the others would say during recess. Jim's mother is that guy's *mistress*. His wife is an old hag who always appears at social events. If you want to see her, just watch where they're giving things away to poor children (ha, ha, my dad says that first they make them poor and then they give them handouts). She's obese and repulsive. She looks like a cross between a parrot and a mammoth. But Jim's mother, on the other hand, is young, beautiful. Some people think she is his sister. And, Ayala chimed in, he isn't the son of that son-of-a-thieving-bastard who's fucking Mexico over anyway. His father is a *gringo* journalist who took his mother with him to San Francisco and then wouldn't marry her. The Señor doesn't treat Jim very well. They say he's got women all over the place. Even movie stars and things like that. Jim's mother is just one of many.

That's not true, I answered. Don't talk like that. How would you like it if they talked about your mothers that way? No one dared say these things directly to Jim but, as if intuiting what they were saying, he insisted: I don't see my dad very much because he's always abroad, working for his country. Sure, whatever you say. Alcaraz replied: "Working for his country"—Ali Baba and the forty thieves. At home they say they're even stealing what isn't there to steal. The whole Alemán government is just a den of thieves. Why don't they buy you a new sweater with the money they steal from the rest of us?

Jim starts to fight and doesn't want to talk to anybody. I cannot imagine what would happen if he found out what they were saying about his mother behind his back (when Jim is present, our classmates limit their attacks to the Señor). Jim has become my friend because I do not judge him. In other words, it is not his fault. Nobody chooses how, when, where, or to whom one is born. We will no longer participate in the recess wars. Today the Jews took over Jerusalem, but tomorrow the Arabs will get their revenge.

After school on Fridays, Jim and I would often go to the Roma, the Royal, the Balmori: movie theaters that no longer exist. Lassie or young Elizabeth Taylor movies. And our favorite was the triple feature we must have seen a thousand times: *Frankenstein, Dracula,* and *The Wolfman.* Or the double feature: *Adventures in Burma* and *God Is My Co-Pilot.* Or even the one Father Pérez del Valle loved to show on Sundays in the Club Vanguard: *Goodbye, Mr. Chips.* It made me as sad as when I saw *Bambi.* I saw that Walt Disney movie when I was three or four, and they had to drag me out of the theater in tears because the hunters had killed Bambi's mother. They killed millions of mothers during the war. But I did not know that; I did not cry for them or their children, even though in Movieland—along with Donald Duck, Mickey Mouse, Popeye the Sailorman, Woody the Woodpecker, and Bugs Bunny cartoons—they showed the newsreels: bomb formations falling on cities, cannons, battles, fires, ruins, dead bodies.

IV A Middle Ground

I had so many brothers and sisters I could never invite Jim over to my house. My mother was always cleaning up after us, cooking, or washing clothes. She would have loved to buy a washing machine, a vacuum cleaner, a blender, a pressure cooker, an electric refrigerator (ours was one of the last existing iceboxes that needed to be loaded with a fresh block of ice every morning). At that time my mother could only see the narrow horizon she had been shown at home. She detested everyone who was not from Jalisco. She thought that all other Mexicans were foreigners and particularly loathed those from the capital. She hated la colonia Roma because all the good families were beginning to move out and only Arabs, Jews, and Southerners—people from Campecho, Chiapas, Tabasco, Yucatán—were moving in. She scolded Hector who was already twenty years old, and instead of attending

classes at the National University where he was enrolled, spent his days at the Swing Club and in pool halls, cantinas, and whorehouses. His greatest passion was to talk about women, politics, and automobiles. Everyone complains so much about the military, he would say, and just look at what happens to the country when they stick in a civilian president. If they had not cheated my dear General Henríquez Guzmán, Mexico would be in as good shape as Argentina is now with General Perón. You'll see, you'll see how things are going to be around here in 1952. I'll lay odds Henríquez Guzmán will be president, with the Revolutionary Party or against it.

My father spent all his time at his soap factory, which was rapidly going under due to the competition and marketing of the North American brands. The new detergents were being advertised over the radio: Ace, Fab, Vel, and they proclaimed that soap was a thing of the past. While for most of us (still ignorant of the dangers) all those suds meant cleanliness, comfort, well-being and, for women, a liberation from endless hours at the wash basin, they were, for my family, the crest of a wave that was sweeping away our privileges.

Monseigneur Martínez, the archbishop of Mexico, decreed one day of prayer and penance to halt the advance of communism. I will never forget that morning. During recess, while I was showing Jim one of my Big Little Books—those illustrated stories with tabs in the upper corners of the pages that look like cartoons when you thumb through them quickly—Rosales, who had never picked on me before, shouted, Hey, look at those two faggots. Let's go beat the shit out of those faggots. And I jumped him. Your mother's a whore. You son-of-a-bitch. Just you wait and see who's a faggot, you fucking Indian. The teacher pulled us apart. I had a split lip, and his nose was bleeding all over his shirt.

Thanks to that fight, my father taught me not to scorn others. He asked me who I fought with. I said Rosales, that Indian. My father said that in Mexico we are all Indians even if we do not know it or want to be and that if the Indians were not poor, no one would consider it an insult. I called Rosales "trash." My father pointed out to me that nobody is to blame for living in poverty and before judging others I should ask myself if he has had the same opportunities as I.

Compared to Rosales I was a millionarie, but next to Harry Atherton, I was a beggar. The previous year, when I was studying in Mexico High School, Harry Atherton invited me over to his house in Las Lomas: underground pool room, swimming pool, a library with thousands of leather-bound volumes, a butler, wine cellars, gymnasium, steam bath, tennis courts, six bathrooms (why do the homes of wealthy Mexicans always have so many bathrooms?). His room looked out onto a sloped garden with a waterfall and lots of ancient trees. Harry had been sent to Mexico High School instead of the American one so that he could be totally immersed in a Spanish-speaking environment and thus familiarize himself with those people who would be his helpers, his eternal apprentices, his servants.

We ate dinner. His parents did not say a word to me and spoke English throughout the entire meal. Honey, how do you like the little spic? He's a midget, don't you

think? Oh Jack, please. Maybe the poor kid is catching on. Don't worry, dear, he won't understand a thing. The next day, Harry said to me: I'm going to give you some advice. Learn how to use your silverware. Last night you ate your filet with your fish fork. And don't make so much noise with your soup, don't talk with your mouth full, chew slowly, and take small bites.

The exact opposite happened with Rosales right after I came to this school, when the problems at my father's factory had already made it impossible for him to pay the tuition at Mexico High School. I went to Rosales's house to copy some civics notes from him. He was an excellent student, the best in composition and spelling, and we all took advantage of him for things of this sort. He lived in a neighborhood constructed out of boards. The broken pipes inundated the patio. Shit floated in the greenish water.

His twenty-seven-year-old mother looked like she was fifty. She was very friendly to me and, although I had not been invited, they shared their dinner with me. Brain quesadillas. They made me sick. A strange grease similar to car oil oozed out of them. Rosales slept on a straw mat in the living room. His mother's new lover had banished him from the only bedroom.

V However Deep the Ocean Lies

After the fight with Rosales, Jim was convinced that I was his friend. One Friday, he did something he had never done before: he invited me to his house for an after-school snack. I was sorry I couldn't invited him over to mine. We walked up to the fourth floor and opened the door. I have a key because my mother doesn't like to keep a maid. The apartment smelled of perfume; it was tidy and very clean. Garish furniture from Sears Roebuck. A picture portrait of his mother by Semo Studios, another picture of Jim on his first birthday (the Golden Gate Bridge in the background), many more of the Señor on the Olive Train, in the presidential airplane, in group photos. "The Cub of the Revolution" and his team. The first university graduates to govern the country. Technicians, not politicians. Impeccable moral fiber, the propaganda insisted.

I never thought Jim's mother was going to be so young, so elegant, and above all, so beautiful. I did not know what to say to her. It is impossible to describe how I felt when she gave me her hand. I would have liked to just stand there staring at her. Please, go on into Jim's room. I'll finish preparing your snack. Jim showed me his collection of atomic pens (fountain pens that smelled awful, leaked sticky ink, and were all the rage that year when, for the last time, we used ink wells and blotters); toys the Señor had bought for him in the United States: missile-shooting cannons, jet-propulsion fighter bombers, soldiers armed with flamethrowers, plastic machine guns (plastics were just coming out), a Lionel electric train, a portable radio. I don't bring any of these things to school because nobody in Mexico has toys like this. No, of course not. We, the children of World War Two, had no toys. Everything went

into war production. I read in *Selecciones* that even Parker and Esterbrook were manufacturing war materials. But I could not have cared less about the toys. Hey, what did you say your mother's name was? Mariana. That's what I call her. I don't call her Mom. What about you? Well, no. I address my mother formally, just like she does my grandmother. Don't make fun of me, Jim. Don't laugh.

Come have a bite to eat, Mariana said. And we sat down. I sat in front of her, looking at her. I did not know which to do: eat nothing or gobble everything down to make her feel good. If I eat, she'll think I'm a starving child; if I don't eat, she'll think I don't like her cooking. Chew slowly. Don't talk with your mouth full. What can we talk about? Fortunately, Mariana breaks the silence. How do you like them? They're called Flying Saucers. I toast them in this machine. I love them, ma'am; I've never eaten anything so delicious. Pan Bimbo, ham, Kraft cheese, bacon, butter, ketchup, mayonnaise, mustard. It was all so different from the pozole, birria, tostadas, chicharron en salsa verde my mother made. Do you want another Flying Saucer? I would be more than happy to make one for you. No, thank you anyway, ma'am. They're delicious, but really, please don't bother.

She didn't touch a thing. She talked, she talked to me the whole time. Jim remained silent while he ate one Flying Saucer after another. Mariana asked me: What does your father do? I was ashamed to answer: He owns a factory that makes bath and laundry soap. The new detergents are putting him out of business. Oh, no. I'd never thought about it in that way. Pause. Silence. How many brothers and sisters do you have? Three sisters and a brother. Were you all born here in Mexico City? Only me and the youngest girl, and the rest were born in Guadalajara. We had a big house on San Francisco Street. They tore it down. Do you like school? School's not bad, but our classmates are the pits, don't you think, Jim?

Well, ma'am, if you will please excuse me, I have to go now (how can I explain to her that they'll kill me if I get home after eight?). Thanks a lot, ma'am. Everything was really delicious. I'm going to tell my mother to buy one of those toasters and make me some Flying Saucers. There aren't any in Mexico, Jim interjected, speaking up for the first time. If you want, I'll bring one back for you from the United States when I go.

You are always welcome here. Come back soon. Thank you very much again, ma'am. Thanks Jim. See you on Monday. How I would have loved to remain there forever or, at the very least, take along with me the photograph of Mariana that was in the living room. I walked down Tabasco Street, turned onto Córdoba to get to my house on Zacatecas. The silvery streetlamps only dimly illuminated the streets. A city immersed in semidarkness: the mysterious colonia Roma of those days. An atom in the immense world, prepared many years before my birth like a stage set for my performance. I heard a bolero playing on a jukebox. Until that time, the only music we had heard was the National Anthem, church hymns, Cri-Cri and his children's songs: "Los caballitos," "Marcha de las letras," "Negrito sandía," "El ratón vaquero," "Juan Pestañas," and that circular, dense, absorbing melody by Ravel that Radio XEQ played before beginning its daily broadcast at six-thirty in the morning

when my father turned on the radio to wake me up to the clamor of the *la Legión de los Madrugadores*. When I heard this other bolero that had nothing whatsoever to do with Ravel's, the words caught my attention. "Por alto está el cielo en el mundo / por hondo que sea el mar profundo...."

I looked down Álvaro Obregón Avenue and said to myself: I'm going to keep my memory of this moment intact because everything that now exists will never be the same again. One day it will all seem to have been part of the most remote prehistoric era. I'm going to preserve it because today I fell in love with Mariana. What will happen? Nothing will happen. Nothing could possibly happen. What will I do? Change schools so as not to see Jim anymore and therefore not see Mariana? Look for a girl my own age? But at my age, nobody can look for a girl. The only thing a person of my age can do is fall in love secretly, silently, like I had done with Mariana. Fall in love knowing that all is lost and there is no hope.

VI Obsession

You're late. But Mom, I told you I was going to go to Jim's house for a snack. That's right, but nobody gave you permission to stay out until this time of night: it's eight-thirty. I was very very worried about you: I thought you had been killed or the Hombre del costal had kidnapped you. What kind of garbage did you eat? I wonder who *your little friend's* parents are. Is he the same one you go to the movies with?

Yes. His father is very important. He works for the government. For the government? And they live in that filthy building? Why didn't you ever tell me? What did you say his name was? Impossible: I know his wife. She and Aunt Elena are intimate friends. They don't have any children. It is a great tragedy in the midst of all that wealth and power. They're putting one over on you, Carlitos. I don't know why, but they sure are putting one over on you. I'm going to ask your teacher and get to the bottom of this mystery. No, please, I beg of you: don't say anything to Mondragón. What would Jim's mother think if she found out? She was very kind to me. Oh no, this is all I needed! What kind of secrets are you hiding? Okay, tell me the truth: you didn't really go over to this so-called Jim's house, did you?

I finally convinced my mother. In any case, she was left with the suspicion that something strange had occurred. I spent a very sad weekend. I became a child again and went to plaza Ajusco to play alone with my little wooden cars. Plaza Ajuscois where they took me for sunbaths when I was a baby and where I learned to walk. Houses from the era of Porfirio Díaz, some that have already been demolished to make room for horrible buildings. The fountain in the shape of a figure eight; dead insects floating on the water. And Doña Sara P. de Madero lived between my house and the park. It seemed unbelievable to me that I could see, even from afar, a person whose name appeared in the history books, a participant in events that had occurred forty years earlier. That fragile, dignified old woman, still in mourning for her assassinated husband.

As I was playing in plaza Ajusco, one part of me reasoned: how can you fall in love with Mariana if you've only seen her once and she's old enough to be your mother? It's stupid and ridiculous because there is not even a remote possibility that she'll feel something for you in return. But the other part of me, the stronger part, was deaf to all reasoning: I kept repeating her name as if the act of enunciating it again and again would bring her closer to me. Monday was even worse. Jim said; Mariana really liked you. She's glad we're friends. I thought: so she knows I exist, she noticed me, she realized—just a bit, at least a bit—the effect she had on me.

For weeks I asked about her, obliquely, using any pretext I could think of so as not to arouse Jim's suspicions. I tried to camouflage my interest while finding out everything I could about Mariana. Jim never told me anything I did not already know. He appeared to be totally ignorant of his own history. I wondered how it could be that everybody else was not. Again and again I begged him to take me to his house to see his toys, his illustrated books, his comics. Jim read comic books in English that Mariana bought for him at Sanborn's. He made fun of our heroes: Pepín, Paquín, Chamaco, Caron, and for the most privileged among us, Billiken, the Argentinian, and Peneca, the Chilean.

Since we always had a lot of homework, Friday was the only day of the week I could go over to Jim's house. At that time of day, Mariana was invariably at the beauty salon, getting ready for her evening out with the Señor. She would always return at eight-thirty or nine o'clock, and I could never wait until then to see her. Our snacks were always ready and waiting for us in the refrigerator: chicken salad, cole slaw, cold cuts, apple pie. Once, when Jim opened a closet, a picture of Mariana at six months old lying naked on a tiger-skin rug fell onto the floor. I felt a great wave of tenderness come over me when I thought about something one never thinks about because it is so obvious: Mariana had also been a little girl, she had been my age, and she would be a woman my mother's age and then an old lady like my grandmother. But at that moment she was the most beautiful woman in the world and I thought about her constantly. Mariana had become my obsession. However high the heavens or the skies, / however deep the ocean lies.

VII Today is the Day

And then one day—one of those cloudy days I love and nobody else can stand—I could no longer control myself. We were in National Language Class, as they used to call Spanish. Mondragón was teaching us the past conditional: *Hubiera o hubiese amado, hubiéramos o hubiésemos amado, hubierais o hubieseis amado, hubieran o hubiesan amado,* It was eleven o'clock. I asked for permission to go to the bathroom. Then I sneaked out of school. I rang the doorbell to Apartment 4. One, two, three times. Mariana finally came to the door: fresh, beautiful, without any make-up. She was wearing a silk kimono. She was holding a razor just like the one my father used, only in miniature. She had been shaving her legs or her underarms when I rang the

bell. She was, of course, surprised to see me. Carlos, what are you doing here? Did something happen to Jim? No, ma'am. Jim is just fine. Nothing happened.

Somehow we were already sitting on the sofa. Mariana crossed her legs. For a split second her kimono opened ever so slightly. Her knees, her thighs, her breasts, het flat belly, her mysterious hidden sex ... I don't know how to tell you this, ma'am. I'm very embarrassed. What are you going to think of me? Carlos, I really don't understand. This is very strange to see you here like this at this time of day. You should be in class, shouldn't you? Yes, of course, it's just that I couldn't stand it any longer. I can't stand it. I ran away from school without permission. If I get caught, they'll expel me. Nobody knows I am here with you. Please, don't tell anybody I came here. Don't tell Jim. I beg you, least of all Jim. Promise me you won't.

Wait a minute. Calm down and let's see what this is all about. Why are you so worked up? Did something terrible happen at home? Are you having problems at school? Do you want some chocolate milk, Coca-Cola, a sip of mineral water? Trust me. Tell me how I can help you. No, you can't help me, ma'am. Why not, Carlitos? Because I came to tell you—I'll just come out and say it once and for all, please forgive me, ma'am—that Fm in love with you.

I thought she was going to laugh, scream at me, tell me I was crazy. Or maybe, better yet: Get out of here right now. I'm going to tell your parents and your teacher. I dreaded all of these possible reactions: all the ones I could have expected. Nevertheless, Mariana was not outraged, and she did not make fun of me. She sat there looking at me sadly. She took my hand (I'll never forget that she took my hand) and said:

> *I understand you perfectly. You have no way of knowing how well. Now you have to try to understand me and face the fact that you are a child just like my son and, for you, I am an old lady: I just turned twenty-eight years old. So, not now and not ever will there be anything between us. You understand me, don't you? I don't want you to suffer. Many terrible things await you in the future, you poor boy. Carlos, try to think of this as a joke, like something funny, so when you remember this as an adult, you will smile and not feel any resentment about it. Keep coming here with Jim and treat me just as what I am to you: your best friend's mother. Don't stop coming over; act as if nothing has happened, and in this way the infatuation—I'm sorry, love—will die down, and it won't become a problem for you, a tragedy that could cause you lasting damage for your entire life.*

I felt like crying. But I controlled myself and said: You're right, ma'am. I understand everything you say. I want to thank you very much for reacting the way you did. Forgive me. In any case, I had to tell you. I thought I would die if I didn't tell you. There is nothing to forgive you for, Carlos. I like it that you are honest and confront your feelings. Please don't tell Jim. I won't say a word. You needn't worry.

I freed my hand from hers. I got up to go. Then Mariana stopped me. Before you go, can I ask you for a favor? Let me give you a kiss. And she gave me a kiss,

not exactly on the lips, but on the corner of my mouth. A kiss just like the ones Jim always got before going off to school. I was shaking. I did not kiss her. I said nothing. I went running down the stairs. Instead of going back to class, I walked all the way to Insurgentes. I arrived home totally confused. I pretended I was sick and wanted to go to bed.

But the teacher had just called. Surprised at my sudden disappearance, they had looked for me in the bathrooms and throughout the entire school. Jim declared: He probably went to see my mother. At this time of day? Yeah, Carlos is real weird. You never know what's going on in his head. I think he's got a screw loose somewhere. He has a brother who's a half-crazy gangster.

Mondragón and Jim went to the apartment. Mariana confessed that I had been there for a few minutes to pick up my history book I had left there the Friday before. This lie made Jim furious. I don't know how, but he had figured out the whole thing and explained it in full detail to the teacher. Mondragón called the factory and the house to tell my family what I had done, even though Mariana had flatly denied everything. Her denial made me appear even more suspect in the eyes of Jim, Mondragón, and my parents.

VIII The Prince of this World

I never dreamt you could be such a monster. You couldn't possibly have learned that kind of behavior in this house! Tell me the truth: it was Hector who led you into this foolishness. Anyone who corrupts minors deserves a slow, painful death and all of hell's worst punishments. Come on, speak up, don't just sit there crying like a sissy. Tell me that it was your brother who talked you into doing it.

Listen, Mother, I don't think I did anything so terrible. And you still have the gall to insist you haven't done anything wrong? As soon as your fever drops you are going to confess and take communion so that Our lord Jesus Christ can forgive you your sins.

My father did not even scold me. He simply stated: This boy is abnormal. Something in his head just isn't working right. It must be from that fall on his head in plaza Ajusco when he was six months old. I'm going to take him to see a specialist.

We are all hypocrites. We cannot see ourselves or judge ourselves the way we see and judge others. Even I, who never knew anything about what was going on, realized that for years my father had been maintaining another household: a woman—his ex-secretary—and two children. I remember an incident that occurred at the barbershop while I was waiting to get my hair cut. Some copies of *Vea* and *Vodevil* were lying next to the news magazines. I took advantage of the fact that the barber and his customer were engaged in exchanging verbal assaults against the government. I hid *Vea* inside *Hoy* and began leafing through the pages with pictures of Tongolele, Su Muy Key, Kalantán, all half-naked. Legs, breasts, mouths, waists, buttocks, the mysterious hidden sex.

The barber, who shaved my father almost every day and had been cutting my hair ever since I was a year old, could see my facial expressions through the mirror. Put that down, Carlitos. Those things are for grown-ups. I'm going to tell your father on you. That's when I figured out that children are not supposed to like women. And if you challenge this edict, they create an enormous scandal and tell you that you're crazy. How unfair!

When, I asked myself, was the first time I was conscious of feeling desire? Perhaps it was the previous year when I saw Jennifer Jones's naked shoulder in *Duel in the Sun* at the Chapultapec Theater. Or maybe it was when Antonia lifted up her skirt to mop the yellow-painted floor and I saw her legs. Antonia was very pretty and she was always kind to me. Nevertheless, once I said to her: You're bad because you kill chickens. It would upset me greatly to watch them die. Better to buy them already dead and plucked. But none of that lasted very long. Antonia left the house because Hector refused to leave her alone.

I did not return to school, and they prohibited me from going out anywhere else. They took me to Our Lady of Rosario Church where we attended Mass every Sunday, where I had done my first Holy Communion, and where, thanks to my steady attendance of Mass on the first Fridays of the month, I had accumulated some indulgences. My mother sat down on one of the benches, praying for my soul that was in danger of eternal damnation. I knelt down in front of the confessional. Scared to death, I told Father Ferrán everything.

In a soft and slightly panting voice, Father Ferrán questioned me on all the details: Was she naked? Was there a man in the house? Do you think she had committed a shameful act before opening the door? And then: Have you ever abused yourself? Have you ever brought on an ejaculation? I don't understand what you are talking about, Father. He then proceeded to give me an explicit description. When he realized that he was talking to a child who was as yet incapable of even producing the raw material necessary for an ejaculation, he regretted having done so and then launched off on a lecture I did not understand at all: as a result of our state of original sin, the devil is the prince of this world, and he is continually setting traps for us, attempting to lure us away from our love of the Lord and tempting us into sin: one more thorn in the crown of our Lord Jesus Christ.

I said: Yes, Father; but somehow I could not conceive of why the devil would personally bother about leading me into temptation. Even less so could I understand why Christ would suffer because I had fallen in love with Mariana. As is expected under the circumstances, I showed myself ready and willing to mend my ways. But I did not regret anything, and I did not feel guilty: to love someone is not a sin. Love is good; only hatred is demonic. That afternoon, Father Ferrán's lecture made much less of an impression on me than did his practical guide to masturbation, When I got home, I felt a great longing to abuse myself and bring on an ejaculation. I did not do it. Instead, I recited twenty Our Fathers and fifty Hail Marys. I took communion the next day. In the evening, they took me to a psychiatrist's office with white walls and nickel-plated furniture.

IX Mandatory English

A young man asked me some questions and wrote down everything I said on lined sheets of yellow paper. I did not know what to say. Since I was totally ignorant of his profession's vocabulary, it was impossible to find a way for us to communicate. He asked me questions about my sisters and my mother that had never even entered my head. Then they made me draw every member of my family and paint trees and houses. Next they gave me the Rorschach test (is there anyone who *doesn't* see monsters in those ink blots?) with numbers and geometric figures and questions I was supposed to answer. The questions were as silly as the answers I gave. "What I like most": to climb trees and scale the walls of old houses; lemon sherbet; rainy days; adventure movies; Salgari novels. No, better yet: to lie awake in bed. But my father always dragged me out of bed at six-thirty in the morning to do exercises, even on Saturdays and Sundays. "What I hate most": cruelty toward people and animals; violence; screaming and shouting; arrogance; the abusiveness of older brothers; arithmetic; the fact that some people have nothing to eat while others have everything; finding garlic cloves in rice or stew; that they trim trees or kill them; watching someone throw bread away.

The woman who gave me the last tests spoke to the man right there in front of me. They acted as if I were a piece of furniture. It is very clearly an Oedipal problem, Doctor. This child is intellectually deficient. He is overprotected and docile. A castrating mother is undoubtedly the primal injury. He went to see that woman, fully aware that he might find her with her lover. I'm sorry, Elisita, but I have reached opposite conclusions: the boy is extremely intelligent and unusually precocious, so much so that by the time he is fifteen, he may become a total idiot. His abnormal behavior stems from a situation of neglect, excessive discipline from both parents, and a strong inferiority complex. Don't forget that he is very short for his age and the youngest male child. Note, if you will, how he identifies with the victim: animals, trees that cannot defend themselves. He is looking for the affection that is lacking within the family unit.

I felt like shouting at them: You idiots, why don't you at least come to an agreement before carrying on with this nonsense in a language you don't even understand yourselves?! Why do you have to label everything? Why don't you just accept the fact that someone can fall in love? Haven't you ever fallen in love? But the man came over to me and said: You can go now, my friend. We'll send the test results to your dad.

My father was sitting solemnly in the waiting room surrounded by worn-out copies of *Life, Look, Holiday* and glowing proudly because he could read them all fluently. He had just passed, at the top of his class, an adult night course in intensive English, and he studied every day with workbooks and records. It was so strange to see a person of his age—an old man of forty-two!—studying. Very early every morning, after his exercises and before breakfast, he reviewed his irregular verbs: *be, was, were, been; have, had, had; get, got, gotten; break, broke, broken; forget, forgot, forgotten;* and he practiced his pronounciation: apple, world,

country, people, business. These words came to Jim so naturally and yet were so difficult for my father.

Those were terrible weeks. Only Hector defended me. Wow, you sure got it on! You scored quite some number there. I mean, you start making it now with chicks like her, hot stuff, better than Rita Hayworth, and what won't you do when you grow up? Hey, man? You're all right: trying to catch some action now before you're really up to it, instead of jerking off. I'm sure glad that neither of us turned into faggots even with so many sisters. But watch your step, Carlitos; don't let that bastard set his goons on you and break your ass. But Hector, my God, it's not such a big deal. The only thing I did was tell her I was in love with her. There's nothing wrong with that. I didn't do anything else. Seriously, I don't understand what all the fuss is about.

You were bound to end up at a school for beggars what with your father's greediness, my mother insisted. He throws money away on *other* expenses, but when it comes to his own children, he never has any. Can you believe it: letting the son of a woman *like that* into the school? We must transfer you to a school for our kind of people, from our class. And Hector: But, Mom, what class are you talking about? We are right where we belong: a typical Colonia Roma family on the way down: the essence of the Mexican middle class. Carlos is just fine where he is. That school is precisely for people of our class. Where else are you going to put him?

X Fire Rain

My mother always insisted that our family—that is to say, her family—was one of the best in Guadalajara. Never any scandals like the one I had created. Honorable, hard-working men. Devout women, self-sacrificing wives, exemplary mothers. Obedient and respectful children. Then came the Indian hordes seeking their revenge against decency and good blood. The revolution—the old chieftains, that is—confiscated our ranches and our house on San Francisco Street on the pretext that there were too many Cristeros in the family. On top of that, my father—who, despite his degree in engineering, was held in contempt for being the son of a tailor—squandered the inheritance from his father-in-law on one absurd business venture after another, like trying to set up an air route between cities in the interior of the country or exporting tequila to the United States. Then, using money borrowed from my maternal uncles, he bought the soap factory that did well during the war and then went under when the North American companies invaded the domestic market.

And that's why my mother never tired of repeating: We've ended up in this accursed Mexico City. Infamous place, Sodom and Gomorrah awaiting the fire rain, a hell where horrors, the likes of which were never seen in Guadalajara, like the crime I had just committed, were daily occurrences. Sinister Capital City where we had to live among the worst elements. Contagion, bad examples. Birds of a feather flock together. How could it be, she insisted again and again, that a supposedly

decent school would accept a bastard (what's a bastard?), the illegitimate son of a kept woman? Because there really is no way of knowing who the father is when you consider how many clients that prostitute must have, that corrupter of youth. (What does that mean, an illegitimate son? What's a kept woman? Why do you call her a prostitute?)

My mother had momentarily forgotten all about Hector. Hector boasted about being the *stud* of the university. It was rumored that he was one of the right-wing militants who forced Zubirán, the rector, to resign and erased the sign that read "God does not exist" on the mural Diego Rivera painted in the Prado Hotel. Hector read *Mein Kampf,* books about Field Marshal Rommel, *Breve historia de Mexico* by Vasconcelos, *The Stallion in the Harem, Insatiable Nights, Memoirs of a Nymphomaniac,* pornographic novels published in Havana and sold under the counter on San Juan de Letrán and around Tivoli. My father devoured *How to Win Friends and Influence People, Achieving Self-Control, The Power of Positive Thinking, Life Begins at Forty.* My mother listened to all the radio soap operas on station XEW while she did her household chores, and sometimes she read something by Hugo Wast or M. Delly, to relax.

And to see Hector now! What a lean, bald, solemn, elegant fifty-year-old man my brother has become. So serious, grave, devout, respectable, so dignified in his role as a businessman at the service of the multinationals. A Catholic gentleman, the father of eleven children, an important member of the Mexican extreme right (in this respect, at least, he has always been impeccably coherent).

But in those remote days: the servants who took flight because "the young boss" would try to rape them (egged on by his gangs motto: "Make it with a maid," he would burst into their room on the roof at midnight, naked, erect, and impassioned by his novels; he would struggle with the girls and ejaculate on their nightgowns before managing to penetrate them, and then the shouts would awaken my parents; they would get up; my sisters and I would watch everything, our mouths hanging open, from the bottom of the winding stairway; they would scold Hector, threaten to throw him out of the house, and at that hour of the night would even fire the servant, an even guiltier patty than "the young boss" for going around *leading him on*); venereal diseases contracted from Meave whores or those on Dos de Abril Street; a fight between two rival bands on the banks of the Piety River, one stone's throw that broke his incisors; a locksmith's skull cracked open with a rubber pipe; a visit to the police station because Hector and a bunch of friends from Urueta Park had taken some drugs and ransacked a cafeteria owned by a Chinese couple; my father having to pay the fine and the damages and pull strings in the government so they wouldn't send Hector to Lecumberri. When I heard Hector had taken drugs, I thought he owed some money because in my house debts were always referred to as drugs (as far as that goes, my father was the perfect drug addict). Later, Isabel, my older sister, explained to me what it was all about. It was only natural for Hector to be on my side: I had, at least provisionally, replaced him as the black sheep in the family.

XI Specters

There was another uproar at the beginning of the year when Esteban became Isabel's boyfriend. In the 1930s, Esteban had been a famous child actor. Logically, when he grew up, he lost his sweet little voice and innocent face. They no longer gave him parts in movies or theater; he made a living reading jokes on Station XEW, drank like a fish, and was determined to marry Isabel and go to Hollywood to try his luck despite the fact that he did not speak a word of English. Whenever he came to see her, he was in a stupor and reeking of booze, without a tie, his suit stained and wrinkled, and wearing dirty shoes.

Nobody could figure it out. But Isabel was his devoted fan. In the absence of Tyrone Power, Errol Flynn, Clark Gable, Robert Mitchum, and Cary Grant, Esteban was Isabel's only chance of kissing a movie star, even if he did only star in the same Mexican movies that had become the butt of family jokes at least as frequently as Miguel Alemán's regime. Did you see Pedro Infante's face? He looks just like a chauffeur. No wonder all the housemaids are in love with him.

One night my father threw Esteban out of the house: he arrived home late from English class and found him in the living room with the lights dimmed and his hand up Isabel's skirt. Hector tossed him out into the street, knocked him down, and then kept kicking him until Esteban managed to get on his feet, all bloody, and run away like a dog. Isabel refused to speak to Hector and began attacking me at the slightest provocation, even though I had tried to stop my brother from kicking poor Esteban on the ground. Isabel and Esteban never saw each other again: a short time later, defeated by failure, poverty, and alcoholism, he hanged himself in an infamous hotel in Tacubaya. Sometimes they show his movies on television and I feel like I am watching a ghost.

The only positive outcome of that period was that I got to have my own room. Up until then, I had slept in twin beds with Estelita, my little sister. Once I was diagnosed as a pervert, however, my mother thought the girl might be in danger. They moved her into the room with the older girls, much to the dismay of Isabel, who was studying in a junior college, and Rosa Maria, who had just gotten her diploma as an English-Spanish bilingual secretary.

Hector wanted to share my room with me. My parents refused. In the aftermath of his most recent adventures with the police and his latest attempts to rape the maid, Hector slept in the basement under lock and key. He had only a few blankets and an old mattress. My father used his old bedroom to store the factory's secret accounts and repeat each lesson from his records a thousand times: *At what time did you go to bed last night, that you are not yet up? I went to bed very late, and I overslept myself. I could not sleep until four o'clock in the morning. My servant did not call me, therefore I did not wake up.* I don't know of any other adult who learned to speak English in less than a year. Clearly, he had no other choice.

Once, without them knowing, I overheard a conversation between my parents. Poor little Carlos. Don't worry, he'll get over it. No, this is going to have an adverse effect on his entire life. What bad luck! How could this have happened to our son?

We should think of it as an accident, as if he had been hit by a truck or something, don't you think? Within a few weeks, he won't even remember. If he thinks we have been unfair to him now, he will realize, when he grows up, that it was for his own good. It is all because of the immorality you breathe in this country with this corrupt government: it's the worst we've ever had. Look at the magazines, the radio, the movies: everything is part of a conspiracy to corrupt the innocent.

So, as it turned out, nobody could help me. I was completely alone. Hector saw it all as a mischievous prank, something amusing, like breaking a window with a ball. Neither my father nor my brothers nor Mondragón nor Father Ferrán nor the authors of those tests understood anything at all. They were judging me by standards to which my behavior could not conform.

I began the second new school at the end of July. I knew nobody. Once again I was the foreign intruder. There were no Jews or Arabs, no poor kids on scholarships, no battles in the desert, although there was, as usual, mandatory English. The first few weeks were hell. I could not stop thinking about Mariana. My parents thought the punishments, the confession, the psychological tests—the results of which I never saw—had cured me. Nevertheless, on the sly and to the great surprise of the newspaper vendor, I bought *Vea* and *Vodevil* and played with myself without bringing on an ejaculation. Mariana's image reappeared, above and beyond Tongolele, Kalantán, Su Muy Key. No, I had not been cured: love is a disease in a world where the only natural thing is hatred.

I never saw Jim again. I never dared go near his house or back to the old school. When I thought of Mariana, the impulse to go see her was mixed with a sensation of discomfort and ridicule. How stupid of me to have gotten involved in such a mess that could have been avoided by simply repressing my idiotic declaration of love. Too late for regrets: I did what I had to do, and even now, so many years later, I cannot deny that I had fallen in love with Mariana.

XII La Colonia Roma

There was a big earthquake in October. A comet appeared in November. It was said that these presaged an atomic war, the end of the world or, at the very least, another revolution in Mexico. Then La Sirena Hardware Store burned down, and many people were killed. By the time Christmas vacation came around, everything had totally changed for us. My father had sold his soap factory and had just been appointed manager of the North American company that had bought him out. Hector was studying at the University of Chicago, and my older sisters were in Texas.

One day at noon I was returning home after playing tennis at the Junior Club. I was seated sideways on a bus on the Santa María line reading a Perry Mason novel when, on the corner of Insurgentes and Álvaro Obregón, Rosales boarded the bus and asked the driver for permission to sell the Adams Chewing Gum he was

carrying in a small box. He saw me. Ashamed, he jumped off the bus as fast as he could and hid behind a tree near Alfonso y Marcos, where my mother used to get her permanents and manicures before she had her own car and could go to a salon in Polanco.

Rosales: the poorest boy in my old school, whose mother was an orderly in a hospital. Everything happened in a matter of seconds. I jumped off the Santa María while it was in motion; Rosales tried to escape; I caught up with him. Ridiculous scene: Rosales, please don't be ashamed. It's great that you're working (look at me, who'd never worked a day in his life). You shouldn't be ashamed of helping your mother (look at me, playing the role of *La Doctora Corazón desde su Clínica de Almas*). Hey, come on, I'll buy you an ice cream at La Bella Italia. You can't imagine how happy I am to see you (look at me being magnanimous with money to spare, in spite of devaluation and inflation). Rosales: sullen, pale, retreating. Finally he stopped and looked me in the eyes.

No, Carlitos, I would rather you bought me a torta, if you don't mind. I haven't eaten breakfast. I'm really starving. Listen, aren't you still mad at me because of our fights? What are you talking about Rosales? Those fights don't matter now (look at me, the generous one, capable of forgiving because I had become invulnerable). Okay, Carlitos, let's sit down and talk.

We crossed Obregón, then Insurgentes. So, tell me: did you get through the school year? How did Jim do on his exams? What did they all say when I never returned to school? Rosales kept quiet. We sat down in a torteria. He ordered one chorizo and two steak sandwiches and a Sidral Mundet. And you, Carlitos, aren't you going to eat? I can't: they're expecting me at home. Today my mother made rosbif, my favorite. If I eat anything now, I won't be able to eat later. Just bring me a Coke and make it very cold.

Rosales put the box of Adams on the table. He looked out onto Insurgentes: the Packards, Buicks, Hudsons, the yellow streetcars, silver-colored lampposts, multi-colored buses, the pedestrians who were still wearing hats: a scene and a moment that will never be repeated. The building in front: General Electric, Helvex Heaters, Mabe Stoves. A long silence; mutual discomfort. Rosales very restless, avoiding my eyes. He wiped his damp hands on his worn-out tweed pants.

They brought the food. Rosales took a bite out of the chorizo torta. Before chewing it, he took a sip of water to wet it down. It was nauseating. Drawn-out hunger and anxiety: he devoured it. He asked me with his mouth full: And you? Did you get through the year even with the change of school? Are you going somewhere for vacation? On the jukebox, "La Múcura" ended and "Ghost Riders in the Sky" began. We are going to meet my brothers and sisters in New York for Christmas. We already have reservations at the Plaza Hotel. Do you know what the Plaza is? But listen, why don't you answer my questions?

Rosales swallowed saliva, tortas, and soda. I thought he was going to choke. Well, Carlitos, it is just that, look, I don't know how to tell you this. Everybody in our class knew everything. What's everything? That thing about his mother. Jim told every

single one of us. *He hates you.* We all thought that what you did was pretty funny. You're really nuts. And to top it off, someone saw you confessing in church after your declaration of love. And somehow word got out that they had taken you to the nut house.

I didn't respond. Rosales kept eating in silence. Suddenly he lifted his eyes and looked at me: I didn't want to tell you, Carlitos, but that isn't the worst part. No, someone else should tell you. Let me finish my sandwiches, They're delicious. I haven't eaten for a whole day. My mother lost her job at the hospital because she was trying to organize a union. And the guy who lives with her now says that since I'm not his son, he has no obligation to support me. Rosales, really, I'm sorry to hear that, but it's none of my business and I have no reason to get involved. Eat whatever you want and however much you want—I'm paying—but tell me the worst part.

Well, okay, Carlitos, it's just that it makes me real sad, you have no idea. Out with it, Rosales, once and for all, don't play around with me. It's just that, look Carlitos, I don't know how to tell you: Jim's mother is dead. Dead? What do you mean, dead? Yes, yes, Jim isn't at school anymore. In October he went to live in San Francisco. His real father came and got him. It was horrible. You have no idea. It seems like she had some kind of argument or something with that Señor who Jim said was his father but wasn't. He and his mother—her name was Mariana, right?—were in a cabaret or a restaurant or a very elegant party in Las Lomas. They were arguing about something she had said about the thieves in the government, about how they squandered the money they stole from the poor. The Señor didn't like that, and he raised his voice in front of all his powerful friends: ministers, foreign millionaires, his top associates in all his business schemes, whatever. And he slapped her right there in front of everybody, and he screamed at her that she had no right to talk about honor because she was a whore. Mariana got up and went home in a taxi and took a bottle of Nembutal and slit her wrists with a razor blade and shot herself, and she did all of it at once, I'm not sure how it was exactly. Anyway, Jim woke up and found her dead, lying in a pool of blood. He almost died too from pain and fear. And since the doorman of the building wasn't there, Jim went to Mondragón: he had nowhere else to turn. You should have seen the crowds of curious onlookers and the Green Cross and the agent from the public prosecutor's office and the police. I didn't dare look at her dead, but when they brought her out on the cot the sheets were covered with blood. For all of us, it was the worst thing that had ever happened to us in our lives. She left Jim a letter in English, a long letter asking him to forgive her and explaining to him everything I just told you. I think she also left some other notes—maybe there was even one for you, but there'd be no way of finding out—but they disappeared because the Señor covered everything up immediately, and they forbade us to talk about it among ourselves and especially at home. But you know how gossip flies and how difficult it is to keep a secret. Poor Jim, poor old buddy, how much we teased him at school! I really feel bad about it.

Rosales, this isn't possible. You're pulling my leg. You invented everything you just told me. You saw it in some fucking Mexican movie, the kind you like. You

heard it on some sleazy soap opera on station XEW. Those things can't happen. Don't joke with me like that, please.

It's true, Carlitos. I swear to God it's true. May my mother drop dead if I told a lie. Ask anyone you want to at school. Talk to Mondragón. Everyone knows, even though it didn't come out in the papers. I'm surprised you didn't find out about it until now. Remember, I didn't want to be the one to tell you: that's why I hid, not because of the chewing gum. Carlitos, don't look at me like that: are you crying? I know, it's really terrible and horrible what happened, I was also very upset by it, you have no idea, But you're not going to tell me that seriously, at your age, you were in love with Jim's mom.

Instead of answering, I got up, paid with a ten-peso bill, and walked out without even waiting for the change or saying good-bye. I saw death everywhere: in the little pieces of animal about to become sandwiches and tacos, along with the onions, tomatoes, lettuce, cheese, cream, beans, guacamole, jalapeño peppers. Live animals like the trees they had just finished pruning on Insurgentes. I saw death in the soft drinks: Mission Orange, Spur, Ferroquina; in the cigarettes: Belmont, Gratos, Elegantes, Casinos.

I ran down Tabasco Street telling myself, trying to tell myself: It's one of Rosales's bluffs, an idiotic joke, he has always been a jerk. He wanted to get his revenge because I saw him starving to death with his little box of chewing gum and me with my tennis racket, my white suit, my Perry Mason in English, my reservations at the Plaza, I don't care if Jim opens the door, I don't care if I make a fool of myself. Even though everyone is going to laugh at me, I want to see Mariana. I want to prove that Mariana isn't dead.

I arrived at the building, dried my tears with a Kleenex, walked up the stairs, rang the doorbell to Apartment 4. A girl about fifteen years old answered the door. Mariana? No, no one by the name of Mariana lives here. This is the home of the Morales family. We moved here two months ago. I don't know who might have lived here before. Maybe you should ask the doorman.

While the girl was talking, I looked past her into a different living room: dirty, poor, disorderly. No pictures of Mariana at Semo's or of Jim at the Golden Gate Bridge or of the *Señor serving his country* with the president's team. Instead of all that, the Last Supper in metallic relief and a calendar with pictures from The Legend of the Volcanoes.

The doorman in the building was also new. The one from before wasn't there anymore: Don Sindulfo, Zapata's old ex-colonel who had become Jim's friend and sometimes told us stories about the Revolution and cleaned the apartment because Mariana didn't like having maids. No, son, I don't know any Don Sindulfo or this Jim you're talking about. There's no Mariana here. Forget it kid, don't insist. I offered him twenty pesos. Not even if you give me a thousand, kid. I can't accept it because I don't know nothing about nothing.

Nevertheless, he did take the money and let me carry on my search. At that moment I remembered that the building belonged to the Señor, and he had hired

Don Sindulfo because his father—who Jim called "my grandpa"—had been a friend of the old man when they had both fought in the Revolution. I rang all the doorbells. I was so ridiculous with my little white tennis suit and my racket and my Perry Mason, asking questions, my face on the verge of tears peering in through the door. The smell of rice soup, the smell of chiles rellenos. In all the apartments they listened to me almost fearfully. My white suit was so incongruent! This was the house of death, not a tennis court.

No. I've been in this building since 1939 and as far as I know, no one by the name of Mariana has ever lived here. Jim? Don't know him either. In Apartment 8 there is a kid about your age named Everardo. In Apartment 4? No, an old couple without children lived there. But I came over here to Jim and Mariana's house a million times. You're imagining things, kid. It must have been on another street, in another building. Okay, good-bye. Don't waste any more of my time. Don't get involved in what's none of your business and create more problems. Enough kid, please. I have to get lunch ready; my husband gets home at two-thirty. But, ma'am. Go away or I'll call the police, and they'll take you straight to the juvenile authorities.

I returned home and I can't remember what I did afterward. I must have cried for days. Then we went to New York, I stayed at a school in Virginia. I remember, I don't remember even what year it was. Just these bursts, these flashes of light that bring everything back and the exact words. Just that little song that I will never hear again: "Por alto está el cielo en el mundo / por hondo que sea el mar profundo..."

How ancient! How remote! What an impossible story! But Mariana existed; Jim existed; everything I went over in my head existed even after such a long time of refusing to confront it. I will never know if the suicide really happened. I never again saw Rosales or anybody else from that period. They demolished the school; they demolished Mariana's building; they demolished my house; they demolished the colonia Roma. That city came to an end. That country was finished. There is no memory of the Mexico of those years. And nobody cares: who could feel nostalgic for that horror? Everything came to an end just like the records on the jukebox. I will never know if Mariana is still alive. If she is, she would be sixty years old.