Violence

A novel by Marise Ferro

Translated from the Italian by Jennifer Panek

1

It started like this. We were at the table, having fruit at the end of dinner—my father's moment of choice for giving orders or imposing unwanted obligations. "Marina Viale is coming over tonight," he said. "I invited her for the usual time when our friends visit. She likes gelato di crema. Make sure we've got some."

As always when he flaunted his will in some particularly offensive way, he didn't look directly at my mother or me, instead letting his eyes merely glance off the tops of our lowered heads. Despite how accustomed I was to enduring his tyranny and hearing his insolent demands, I looked up in surprise. He noticed and said, "Something you wish to object to?"

"Not before mother does," I replied, giving her a look to urge her to speak up.

My mother, as usual, bent her head and said nothing. My father chuckled and stood up from the table, dominating us with his stature, his strength, his masculine good looks. "We're agreed, then," he added. "Some good gelato di crema and a nice warm welcome."

He lit a cigar and left the room.

"How can you put up with it, mother?" I burst out, almost shouting. "Marina Viale is his mistress! How can you have her over and introduce her to your friends?"

My mother raised a tired hand. “Your father’s friends. They’re his servants; they’re fine with anything he does. Don’t worry yourself about such things. Please. You’re young; you can’t understand.”

“I can’t understand that he’s insulting you even more blatantly than usual by making you host his mistress? Until now he’s at least shown some respect for our home.”

“Respect? You’re fooling yourself, *cara*. Marina Viale isn’t the worst I have to put up with—at least she’s a respectable woman, well brought up, and she seems to love your father; she could change him for the better. Compared to. . . . but why talk to you about such things? You can’t understand.”

“No, I can’t understand how you can be so accommodating. A respectable woman, as you call her, wouldn’t agree to go to her lover’s house where his wife and daughter live.”

My mother stood up from her chair as if it had burnt her and headed for the door. Her gait was shuffling, her body more frail than usual: the gait and body of a victim. I felt pity and disgust, and said nothing further. I got up too, and went out into the garden. I needed to be alone, to walk around. Solitude and movement were the only things that could bring a bit of calm to my thoughts. I walked as far as the sea and then back again in enough time to avoid being scolded by my father in front of his usual evening guests.

All summer long, from nine in the evening to midnight, he’d surround himself with the few friends he had. Out in front of the house, a blue lamp lit up a patch of the yard furnished with wicker armchairs, bamboo couches with cretonne covers, and portable tables. The lamp shone on the clumps of white daisies, on the geraniums and star jasmine; beneath its spectral light, they no longer seemed fresh and alive. People’s faces turned chalky white, with black marks for eyes and mouths. The light and the faces under it bothered me so much that I always

sat off to the side, in the dark. My preferred spot was a low, ivy-covered wall with a stone bench at its base. With my back to the wall, I sought to make them forget I was there at all. The things around me came to my aid: the bitter aroma of the ivy, the perceptible droop of the Persian silk tree branches, the faint light on the water in the stone basin, the tall hedge of flowering bougainvillea. The garden I knew, the garden I loved, could only be sensed through its fragrance: I could smell the magnolias, the jasmine, the tea roses, one by one, precise and almost tangible in the warm air, and those mysterious lives with their invisible roots felt like a breath from another world. The starlight seeped into the pine needles; silver rivulets coursed down the trunks of the palm trees; you could see the beach where the traces of the waves on the sand shone lustrous like the scales on a fish. The night in its beauty settled on my heart and tore me away from the human world.

I used to spend nearly the entire day in a state of rage, a controlled fury. I was nineteen and had lived a solitary life, with no friends my own age, relegated by my father's wishes to ignorance and idleness. He was a hard, haughty, domineering man. He had no checks on his will, nor did he desire any, and his bad qualities were enhanced by his wealth, which filled him with pride and arrogance. He'd married my mother, chosen deliberately from a family of modest means, so he could have a woman in the house whom he could bully. He was a despot with all of a despot's faults: the stupidity, the mood swings, the insensitivity, the blind self-love. I'd never seen him show doubt, or fear, or sadness. At home and abroad, he moved undaunted through life, with his showy good looks that gave him the air of a conquering hero.

I hated him. In him, I hated the human race itself, finding it contemptible. There was no history to my hatred; it was a fixed, smouldering feeling that ached inside me sometimes like an injured internal organ. All day long, I'd turn the same thoughts over and over; at times, they'd

stop being thoughts and turn into a viscous, self-poisoning filth. I lived joylessly, with a constant uneasy awareness of my inability to accept men and men's behaviour. Contempt and hatred made me stubborn. I knew nothing of compassion, only refusal. I felt a need for excess. The only thing I could think of to oppose the cowardice and lying and bullying that surrounded me was violent in the extreme. Death. I used to fantasize about death as the only possible solution.

Sitting against the wall as my father chattered with his friends and my mother held her tongue, I used to play a game. As a child, I'd overheard a debate that had left an impression on me: namely, whether a man might have the right to kill an invisible and distant enemy, perhaps on the other side of the world, simply by pushing an electric button. *Tuer le mandarin.* This mode of death appealed to me and my imagination. Sitting in the garden on a glorious summer's night, I would entertain myself by imagining pressing a button and watching my father's friends drop one by one. There were two of them, with their wives: two rich, self-satisfied men, stupid and boastful, without a thought in their heads. They talked in commonplaces and about nothing but themselves. The women were even more vacuous, concerned only with safeguarding their comfortable lives and protecting their vanity. No one could have had any good reason to mourn them, were they to die. *Tuer le mandarin*. I pressed the button; they collapsed like marionettes. I didn't touch my father or my mother, despite their being the daily source of all my unhappiness. Why not? I wouldn't have been able to say.

That night I watched Marina Viale join the group. She was the last to arrive, and she paused for a moment outside the light cast by the blue lamp, as if she were afraid of it. She was extremely pretty, with a gentle face and a statuesque body, full-figured yet lithe, with exquisite curves. In the half-light, her expression was distant, with something not quite human about it. Her face was serious, there was a slight nervousness to the way she looked around her, and when

her lovely dark eyes fell on my mother, her eyelashes quivered a little. I saw, or seemed to see, a look of tenderness soften her face, already so soft. Unexpectedly, I felt no antipathy towards her, but I had no time to think it through, as my father was calling out to me: “Antonia! Say hello to Signora Viale.”

I came out from the shadows and greeted Marina. She shook my hand and smiled at me. Without saying anything, she sat down in an armchair and stayed there, reserved but not detached. I went back to my spot and watched her. From time to time, she would turn her head and I realized she was trying to see me. But I was hidden by the low, ivy-covered wall, and was able to watch her unobserved. I’d prepared myself to hate her and, instead, I liked her. She was different from what I’d imagined. Given that I was constantly faced with my mother, a mild-looking, mild-mannered woman, I’d imagined my father to be attracted to the flashy, vulgar type, with a shrill laugh and plenty to say for herself. Marina was beautiful in a calm, decorous way; in how she carried herself, her gestures, her clothes, she was a genuine lady. “How can she be someone my father loves?” I wondered, “and how can she love him?”. Lost in my wandering thoughts, I didn’t feel the time passing. My father’s voice brought me back to earth: “Did you hear that, Antonia? The lady has invited you for lunch tomorrow.”

My response was immediate and irritable: “Sorry, father, I can’t. My apologies to Signora Viale, but I have plans….”

“Plans? Plans with whom? Where? I won’t hear of any plans. At nineteen, your plans aren’t important….”

Marina interrupted. “Why aren’t they important, Orengo? Let Antonia keep her plans—she can come another day.”

And so I said, “No, signora, I can come tomorrow, thank you.”

"I'll expect you for one, then, but you can come earlier, if you like, and see my garden."

Standing tall in front of me where I was seated, Marina looked enormous, and also welcoming. Her voice had a varying timbre to it, with raspy notes. A lovely voice that gave form to the night and the fragrances that surrounded me. I felt glad I'd accepted her invitation. She was taking her leave. After saying goodbye to my mother, she walked away towards the gate, accompanied by my father and the other guests. I didn't follow them, going instead to the house and waiting for my mother in the doorway while she turned off the blue lamp.

"You heard that, mother?" I said when I reached her. "I've been invited over by Marina Viale and I've said yes. What do you think of me?"

My mother shrugged a shoulder. "That you're a child. Good night, *cara*. I told you, though," she added, turning to look at me before she went up the stairs that led to our bedrooms. "Marina is a refined, cultured woman. You'll like her."

2

The following day, I dressed carefully for my lunch with Marina. I liked looking pretty, and I was good at it. My face lent itself to artifice: it was pale, smooth-skinned, and extremely young-looking, and could handle all the colours and whims and risks of fashion. After I'd made up my face in a way that was nearly imperceptible but still accentuated my grey eyes with their copper-flecked irises and my wide, well-shaped mouth, after I'd thoroughly brushed my hair, which I wore long and straight so that it swung with every movement of my body, I put on a flame-red dress and looked at myself in the mirror. I was too done up, not at all casual, but this felt to me like the most suitable look for visiting the home of my father's mistress.

Marina lived outside of town in a secluded villa, understated and comfortable in the old Genoese style that is now unfortunately dying out. You reached it by means of a neglected, unpaved road that ran along a cliff overlooking the sea. Pines and olive trees tumbled down to the cliff's edge and formed a dense cluster around the house. Beyond the ample garden rose the promontory, with its wild mediterranean vegetation left to nature.

I was hot when I reached the house, opened the gate myself, and walked up the long path bordered with flowering oleanders. Marina was waiting for me lying in a hammock, in the part of the garden that was shaded at that time of day by both the house and the pine trees. She lay indolently, a posture that gave her full figure an ineffable charm; there was a splendour to her abundant flesh, which she'd clearly protected from tanning. I found her even more attractive than the night before; her loveliness was carnal and yet refined. "Maybe she's better than I expected," I thought. There'd been times when I'd thought about her relationship with my father and

imagined her with her throat bleeding, dishevelled and horrific, as if after an attack; her death, for me, could only be a violent one: black blood on her luxuriant breasts.

"I'm glad you came early. We can talk for a bit before we sit down for lunch. Have a seat. My goodness, you're so pretty," she said, holding out a slender hand that was quite unlike her body.

I sat down on a wicker chair and looked around, happy with my peaceful surroundings, the neatness of the garden; I could smell the sliced lemon on the table set for our aperitif. Sensing I was thirsty, Marina said, "wait, I'll call Augusta and ask her to bring some ice."

She called out, and at the door of a room that was all glass and windows, a tall, slim woman appeared. She looked about forty, perhaps older, with numerous white strands gleaming in her black hair. Her face was severe, her brown complexion lit up by the sharp light of her dark eyes. The lipstick on her full lips was peeling. Ugly? No. There was a proud carriage to her long, well-shaped neck and small, bird-like head; her thin figure, with no curves at the bust or hips, was graced with fine bone structure and erect, elegant posture. The simplicity of her clothes—a pink blouse and a deep blue skirt—accentuated her natural elegance. I hardly had time to think about it, but I felt ashamed of my red dress.

"Augusta, could you get us some ice, please?" said Marina.

Augusta went back in the house and came out again almost immediately with a silver pail.

"This is Antonia," added Marina. "Is she the way you imagined her?"

"No. Last night you described a quiet, reserved kind of girl."

"And instead you'd say she's…?"

"A trouble-maker, a proud sort, maybe a rebel…"

Marina laughed her lovely, throaty laugh. “It’s the red dress. Don’t be scared.”

Augusta grinned, gave me a friendly wave, said, “I’ll go check on lunch,” and disappeared back into the house.

Her pretty eyes were shining as she gazed up at the leaves hanging overhead and said, “Augusta has a dramatic imagination, but she’s the finest woman I know. Everyone says she’s an angel. I don’t believe in angels, so Augusta’s a counterfeit angel. She’s my late husband’s sister; she’s lived with me ever since I became a widow and came out here to live in complete solitude. She’s poor and she wants to live a life of sacrifice to pay me back for anything I do for her. I don’t ask her to, and I don’t much appreciate it, because sacrifice is a burden—it obliges you to be grateful. I’m lazy. I love Augusta for who she is, not for what she does. But is there any way to make her see that? Did you notice? She does everything herself, as if we didn’t have staff. She’s so energetic, she tires me out sometimes. If I didn’t have her, though, this house would be unbearable, and my life might be as well.”

I looked at Marina in surprise. She spoke simply and sincerely, as if I were her peer in age and experience, confiding her thoughts to me with no ulterior motives. My wariness wasn’t natural to my character but induced by my upbringing: nobody at home had ever spoken to me as an equal. Her spontaneity filled me with such pleasure that I felt myself grow suddenly docile, ready to listen to Marina, to accept her. Besides, there was something both childlike and animal about her as she lounged there, plump, relaxed, laughing. I felt as if she were part of nature, with all of nature’s truth and all its impurity. Up until then, nature had been the only thing I’d loved and respected; Marina, as part of it, couldn’t help but attract me. In the noonday heat, in the green quiet, she was the same as everything alive around her, the trees and flowers, the light, the

wind, the seashells. I smiled at her and said, “You’re right next to the sea. Don’t you ever go swimming?”

“No, I don’t like the sun. But if you’ll come with me, I’ll break with habit and take the risk of getting a sunburn. We can swim right down there, look, in that little sandy cove. Would you like to?”

I looked where she was pointing. I knew the coastline fairly well, but I’d never ventured out as far as the little strip of grey sand that I could now see as it lay, completely deserted, between two small rocky promontories. The sun beat down on it, reflecting back gleams of multicoloured light. “How lovely!” I exclaimed. “If I had my swimsuit, I’d go down right now. And you’d come too, wouldn’t you?”

“Yes, I’d come too. But you don’t have your swimsuit, and it’s lunchtime. Come around tomorrow by boat around half past four and we’ll have a swim down there.”

“I will!” I said, not repressing my enthusiasm. “It’ll be just you and me, right?”

“Yes, Augusta’s never taken her clothes off—I don’t think she’s ever bought a swimsuit in her life. Such an odd woman, with so many rigid restrictions on herself. But look, look, Antonia! Look who’s coming to visit because it’s lunchtime!

I looked. Two Siamese cats were strolling slowly towards us on the path that led to the sea. A male and a female, with rich, dark markings and long, exotic faces. They went straight to Marina, who got out of the hammock to greet them. They wrapped themselves around her legs with soft meows and half-closed eyes. She bent down, gathered the pair of them up like sheaves of hay, and held them to her chest. They lay relaxed, exposing the pale fur of their soft bellies.

“Aren’t they beautiful?” said Marina, putting her face down close to their sweet little faces. “They’re a loving couple—he’s Zozie and she’s Zazie. They’re very gentle and

affectionate; he's a terror only to the birds, which I have to rescue from getting pounced on when I catch him at it. And she's the perfect mama."

I took Zozie from Marina's arms and felt his warm, relaxed weight; his fur smelled like grass drying in the sun.

"I didn't know you liked cats—I love them too, and I hate that I can't have any because Father doesn't want them around."

"What?" Marina exclaimed, "You've got that big garden and your father won't let you have cats?"

"Yes. You have no idea how much I used to cry when I was little, begging him to let me have one."

"Silly man! I'll take care of it—you'll get your cats. Zazie's got kittens, four of them, three months old, and all weaned and ready. Two of them are yours, if you like. Want to come and choose them?"

Delighted, I agreed and followed Marina into the garage. In a basket, sleeping together in a heap, were four soft kittens, their fur still white, with only the faintest markings on their paws and noses. Marina chose the biggest and most beautiful ones and handed them to me.

"Here you go—they're all yours. Take a good look at them, check them all over, make sure they've got blue eyes, and off they go!"

"I'm so happy! I'll take them home with me today!"

"I'll get you a basket, and I'll phone your father. Put them back now, though, and you can come get them later."

A maid had come out to tell us that lunch was ready. We went back through the garden and into the house. As we walked in, Marina put an affectionate arm around my shoulders. I

didn’t stiffen; I didn’t move away. Her gesture felt natural and right and gave me a slight shiver of pleasure.

3

Returning home around five, I reproached myself, though I had to admit I couldn't manage to put much stock in my own recriminations. "All in all, I had a lovely day. Marina's completely different from what I imagined, her home is warm and welcoming and well-kept, nothing like mine, where everyone's so hostile to each other that even the objects and the furniture have turned cold and rejecting. I like it better in Marina's house. And with all this, she's my father's mistress. If I had, well, not morals, but some respect for my mother, I'd be acting quite differently, but here I am coming back with the kittens she gave me, complicit in her plan to get my father to accept them." My thoughts were overtaken by the gloom of coming home, of seeing my mother's browbeaten face, of hearing my father's sharp voice. I reached the gate and felt a kind of fury at the sight of my neglected garden, the flat ground around my house full of trees—fine trees, but without the fragrance or freedom of pines. Although sunset was not far off and the patches of wet around the freshly watered planters gave off that odour of damp earth I was so fond of, I took no joy in any of it. The two kittens, tired of being shut up in Marina's wicker basket, were scratching at it impatiently. I hurried to the kitchen, where I found my mother—intent, as usual, on interfering with the cook's plans. I opened the basket and the kittens jumped out, all trusting.

"Look how pretty they are, mother!" I exclaimed.

My mother turned, making a face as she saw them. "How horrible," she said, "I think they're dreadful. Repulsive things. Who gave you those?"

"Marina—her cat Zazie had kittens."

"Oh, is this the way it's going to be, then? You've turned against me too?"

"Of course not, mother. I got them because I like them, because I've always wanted to have them. All I was thinking was that I'd like to have a couple of sweet little creatures for company."

"You've had a productive visit. Your father will get rid of them, fortunately."

"I don't think he will—this time he'll let me keep them. And, mother, don't you argue that he shouldn't. What trouble will they be to you? They're mine, I'll take care of them, and we've got a big garden. Resign yourself to us having cats—they're hardly the worst thing you've resigned yourself to."

My mother gave me a look of misery mixed with rage. She said nothing further, but sighed and walked away, her head drooping, as always, over her left shoulder.

That evening, shortly before his friends arrived, my father spotted the kittens sleeping on a cushion and said, "You found yourself the one ally who could help you win. Now we've got cats. They are beautiful, I have to admit."

I was glad, and at the same time, I felt a flash of anger. "When I was little, I begged and cried to have a cat, and I got slapped for it. Marina, his mistress, settles the whole thing with one phone call. What do I have to thank for his acquiescence? Love? Can father be submissive? He'll be even more disgusting than he was before!" Any docility, I felt, would corrupt the part of his personality that was wild and free, the part no formal education had been able to touch, that blood-deep independence, that law, something fierce and natural passed down to him from his fearless and fearsome ancestors. He seemed stricken. "Love-stricken," I thought. "At his age, that wound could be mortal." I imagined my father destroyed. But love is a slow death, full of magic and secrecy, and only a violent death, a tortured death, could satisfy my resentment. I rejected my father being stricken to death by love.

I was distracted by the arrival of Marina. I went out into the garden and met her under the Persian silk tree, its leaves shut for the evening. There was going to be a full moon, and the night was so clear that the sky seemed almost white. Among the shadows, Marina was warm and affectionate. “You won,” I told her. “Father even said your kittens were beautiful. Are you that powerful, then?”

Marina shook her head. “I’m not powerful. I’ve got means you’re unaware of, and they’re certainly not my strength, nor your father’s either. But these aren’t things you’d understand, because you’re a wild child. Come, don’t sit off by yourself like you always do. Sit next to me.”

I obeyed and sat down beside Marina, across from my mother, who hid her face behind her waving fan. I could see her only intermittently: one dark eye, a side of her forehead, the bitter corner of her mouth. But I wasn’t bothered by her. I wasn’t even bothered by my father and his vacuous friends. I was calm; I didn’t think about pressing the electric button and making them all fall down like marionettes. All I felt was the beauty of the night, and it seemed to me like the first tranquil evening I’d had since I’d taken up my imaginary weapons and begun to battle everyone around me. The calm emanated from the night, from Marina; she too was a font of darkness, with all of its fragrance and all of its mystery. Her silence was almost as tangible as her body, but it was a silence that inspired trust. As if caught up in a current, I let myself go, my mind and nerves relaxed, thinking of nothing, oddly at peace.

The next day at four, like we’d agreed, I rowed up to a flat rock below Marina’s place. I got out of the boat, tied it to an outcrop, and was about to go up and call her, but she was coming towards me, down the steps cut into the cliff. She was wrapped in an ample pink robe, with her

swimsuit underneath. A wide-brimmed straw hat suffused her face with a blonde glow that lightened her big, dark eyes. She gave me a smile and a lazy wave. She exuded languidness, as if she'd just got out of bed, and she looked so young that instead of waving back, I asked, "How old are you?"

She laughed. "Only you could ask such a completely unexpected question. I'm old, at least to you. I'm thirty-five."

"You don't seem old to me—you seem really young. That's why I like you."

"Oh, so you like me?"

"Yes, but I hated you up to yesterday."

While we were talking, I untied the boat, leapt in, and kept it steady for Marina to get in too. With her sitting in the stern, I started rowing towards the sandy cove.

"I could tell you detested me," said Marina, "but why?"

"Because you're my father's mistress."

Marina's lips tightened a little and her face fell. She hesitated for a moment, perhaps in embarrassment, and then said "I thought you didn't know. It was silly of me, but it prevented me from thinking some painful things. I figured that everyone in your family, starting with your father and mother, would have kept this fact from you—something that can't make sense to you and you can't accept. I'm sorry. I didn't want you to be hurt. Are you?"

"I don't know . . . not today. I'm here, as you can see."

"Why are you here?"

I answered with another question. "Why did you want me?"

Marina looked at me with a serious expression and I could tell she was about to be completely honest. "Because I was afraid of you, and I wanted, in some way, to win you over.

Do you know what I mean? I wanted—or rather, I want—to have you like me, and to have you forgive me. But here I am, completely defenceless—believe me—and without any agenda at all, ready for you to judge me however you want to judge me. You're free to despise me and to tell me as much. After last night, I feel I ought to treat you like a woman capable of understanding any kind of situation." These was the first vulnerable words I'd ever heard, the first confession a woman had ever made to me, and a woman whose wrongdoing or sin—I didn't know what to call it any more—had put her in a position of inferiority to me, a mere girl. I responded from the heart and with like sincerity.

"Up until yesterday, like I said, I hated you. I wished I had the power to get you thrown out of the house; I wanted to hurt you. If I really think about it, I agreed to come over to your place so I could insult you, but here I am now, just as defenceless as you. But I'm defenceless with nobody *except* you: I hate everyone who's not in this boat; I'm at war with all of them."

Marina couldn't stop herself from laughing, but she quickly grew serious again and asked, "Do you hate your father as well? Are you at war with him?"

"Him most of all."

"Why?"

"It's hard to say. I don't hate him because he has you in his life; I've hated him ever since I was old enough to think, because he's done nothing but hurt me. He's a terrible father; he's always forced me to think things which my mind shouldn't have even imagined. He violated my mental innocence, I could say. I'm guessing you don't really know him, or he's different with you, but he has no respect for anyone, his ego burns down everything, his insensitivity…."

"Antonia, stop, stop! I don't want to hear any more of this. I only know a single side of your father, I admit, and I've already suspected he's not a good man, but you're not the best

person to stand up as a witness for how bad he is. You're a merciless judge, as all young people are of their parents, and you're fighting your battles through your father, the first man you've had to deal with. It's a war as old as time, and it doesn't tell me about anything other than your own prejudices and your own need for kindness and understanding. But there's no point in me lecturing you about parents and children: you're not going to understand, at least not today, all up in arms with your resentment. I just want to ask you one thing: have you ever tried to feel sorry for your father? Have you ever thought that maybe he needs help and kindness, like you do?"

"No. Never. And you're not going to persuade me to start having compassion for him now. I have real grievances. I'd have to erase my childhood, my teenage years, my memories, my feelings, my dreams, even, which he's turned into nightmares. . . ."

Marina looked at me sadly, and something in her eyes touched me: it was a look full of pain but also full of love, a look I'd never seen before, directed at me, in any human eyes. I couldn't keep going with my rant, and she took advantage of this to add, "Your children are always your judge, jury, and executioner. You can't help your father, from your position, because you need someone to help you. And what's more, he wouldn't understand or accept help from you; the only kindness he understands is . . .". She paused, weighing what she was about to say, and decided to say it: ". . . is the sort that's expressed physically. Sensually. Do you get what I mean?"

"No, though I sort of do, because I'm looking at you: you're so beautiful, and so full of warmth. I'm starting to see, actually, why my father loves you. What I don't get is why you love him. Why *do* you love him?"

"I love him because he's weak."

I burst out laughing, though I immediately felt bad about it, fearing I'd offended Marina. But she just shook her head and said, "You don't believe in your father's weakness? You don't know him very well."

"I know what he is when he's around me and my mother."

"True—what he is when he's around you and your mother. Around me . . .". She didn't finish this, and didn't want to continue. Instead, she looked me in the eye and said, "Can you forgive me, Antonia?"

I realized, confusedly, that this touched me where I was most vulnerable, and I was moved by her frankness. My reply was impulsive: "Yes."

"And your father. Can you forgive him?"

"No. I forgive you because you're intelligent and you're being sincere with me; you're offering to be my friend. My father doesn't treat me with sincerity or with friendship, either. All he wants is to give orders and be obeyed without argument. He doesn't even think to ask if I'm unhappy. All that matters is that he's the boss. I don't want a boss."

I stopped. A heavy silence fell between us, which Marina broke by saying, "I understand. Or, at least, I feel I do." She spoke with effort, almost with difficulty. "And I'm worried about you. You're so young, Antonia. You're still a creature built out of fairy tales, who can't accept the world and its men for what they are . . . . I wanted to win you over, yes. I wanted to tame you, even, but now that I'm with you, I'm feeling something completely different. You need help, and I want to help you, *cara.*"

Her words and the simplicity with which she spoke them had a strange effect on me. They touched me, but they made me stiffen, too. "You've already helped me today," I replied.

The boat, which my distracted hands guided with instinctive skill, slid up on the sandy shore and came to a stop. I stepped out into the ebbing waves, helped Marina out, dragged the boat up to dry land, and lay the oars inside it. I moved easily, confidently, feeling lighter than I ever had before, my body swift and elastic. Once out of the boat, Marina took her robe off and stretched out in the shade of a large rock. In her bathing suit, she looked magnificent, her beauty on full display. Her generous, luxurious figure was a triumph of form and colour.

"Come here, Antonia; stay still for a moment. How on earth are you not sweating?"

"I'm a dry kind of person—not much fluid in me. But weren't we supposed to go swimming? And here you are lying down!"

"In a minute, in a minute! Look how pleasant it is here. Lie down here in the shade, and let's be quiet and live in peace."

Marina invoked our silence. She was filled with languidness, with the need to stop thinking. I stretched out beside her on the warm sand. The flames of the day had died away and the colours of the sunset rose up in the sky, tinting the air. A celestial blue washed with the faintest pink spread over the sea and its coast. It was the time of day when the wind died down, and memories did too; when the mind recovered itself, just as the earth did, full of wandering sunbeams and blurring contours, in a kind of contemplative solitude. I closed my eyes and felt the weight of the hour and of time itself. Beside me lay a form that seemed indestructible. What power was it that taught Marina how to forget? The excess of life, of sheer animal spirits, that radiated from her made a powerful impression on me. Her body occupied its defined space; her breath had its defined rhythm. She was as sure as the rocks, as the shore, as the coast. I let myself go. I thought of nothing; I imagined nothing. Everything inside me went completely still.

When we rowed back an hour later, a lemon-coloured crescent moon glinted yellow off the foam of the waves. Climbing the steps carved into the rock, with Marina ahead of me, I could feel my wet hair on the back of my neck, and the breath of the falling night made me shiver despite the heat. The stairs deposited us onto a path in a grove of pines, and I realized we were at the side of the house. Marina went in, into a study full of tall bookshelves lined with beautifully bound books, and sank down into an armchair.

"Those steps just kill me. I'm exhausted—you see what it's like to not be used to going to the beach or having a swim. I'd have dinner like this, in my bathing suit, but Augusta being always dressed from head to toe intimidates me a bit. You know what you should do, Antonia, seeing as we've stayed out so late? Have dinner here and sleep over. I won't be going into town tonight; I'm not going to go to your place. Stay and keep me company."

"I'd love to, and all I'd have to do is call my father to get permission, but what would I wear? I came by boat and all I've got is my swimsuit—and it's wet, too."

"I'll lend you one of my dresses. Then again, three of you could fit into any dress of mine. Let's be really lazy and eat our dinner in our dressing gowns. Come, we'll go get changed. It'll be fun to see Augusta's face when she sees us like that. She'll think I've forgotten the proper etiquette of dressing for dinner and I'm setting you a dreadful example."

"Is she a prude?"

"Who?"

"Augusta."

"No, she's very lenient about other people's sins; she might not be about her own, if she had any. She was raised to believe in keeping up appearances. There are lots of things she

forgives me for: lazing around, eating too much, spending too much money. But this evening I plan to quite unrepentantly upset Augusta's formality. Let me go phone your father."

She went into the adjoining room and made a call. I could hear her faintly—a warm, affectionate voice. I knew such a tone would be impossible for him to resist, and felt safe that my father wouldn't object to my not coming home—my first time ever. And indeed, Marina came back with a smile, saying, "Permission granted. Come on, let's get changed."

The moonlight was already shining into Marina's room. From the long terrace outside the window that ran the entire side of the house, you could see the coast, picked out by the streetlights of the road that ran along the sea, vanishing into a bright, distant blur. "Don't turn the lights on," said Marina, "I'm worried about mosquitos. Here, put on this white one and I'll wear the blue."

She'd taken off her swimsuit as she spoke and was walking around in the nude to fetch the dressing gowns. Streams of silver light ran down her back, mingling with the dark shadows of her body. I felt a sudden tenderness for that big body which proclaimed, merely by displaying itself, its own laws and its own innocence. "What a free and happy woman," I couldn't help but think. But that was all I thought, because Marina was tossing me a dressing gown. I went into the bathroom, removed my swimsuit, and put it on. It was a tunic of heavy white silk into which I vanished as if I'd put on a nun's habit. Tying the belt snugly around my waist gave me my figure back, and once I'd smoothed my hair and applied a bit of lipstick, I found I looked pleasingly elegant and sophisticated. When Marina saw me, she exclaimed "A thin woman can wear anything: you look gorgeous, Antonia."

She was ready to go, and we went down to the dining room together, laughing.

Augusta, warned that I'd be staying for dinner, was waiting for us in a white blouse and grey skirt. When she saw us in our dressing gowns, a wave of red came over her face, deepening her colour.

"Are you scandalized?" asked Marina.

"No. You look a bit theatrical, but very pretty."

"And what makes you so indulgent tonight?"

Augusta didn't answer; her smile seemed to hide a certain awkwardness. We saw down at the table, in the warm circle of light cast by a low-hanging fixture. It illuminated the tablecloth, the silverware, the crystal; our faces and the rest of the room were lit only dimly. The maid came and went, serving with quiet attention. The rising moonlight filled the wide-open windows; from the garden you could hear the rasping song of the crickets, and beneath it, the sound of the waves on the rocks.

I felt myself flooded with wellbeing. There were no harsh words, no meanness to disturb the silence; the room was filled with peace and quiet elegance; everything happened with perfect order, as if order were the sole measure of the days, the evenings, the nights. Marina and Augusta, two women who'd been strangers to me before yesterday, seemed like two tutelary angels, emanating a sense of security.

Marina said suddenly, "Antonia, you look like a little girl—you're no more than eight tonight. Your face looks like it must have looked ten years ago."

"Really? Yes, I do feel good. I'm not thinking—I'm just giving myself over to the two of you and all of this."

"I wouldn't say Antonia looks like a child," Augusta interjected. "An adolescent, rather, one who's busy asking herself questions that don't have answers. Don't compare her to children;

you know I don't like them. People say they're innocent but they're not, because we produce them and they come loaded with all our faults. I don't understand why people always wax poetic about childhood."

Unexpectedly, Marina burst out laughing, her head thrown back to reveal her firm, full breasts beneath the light fabric of her dressing gown. Her laugh was contagious, and I laughed too; Augusta, embarrassed, stopped in her tracks. Marina gradually composed herself and said "Did you hear that? These are the unexpected sides of Augusta. She seems like such a mild-mannered woman, so calm and gentle, and yet she doesn't like children—she can't stand being around them."

"I like awareness, Marina. You know I do. Children still live in that limbo of feelings."

"They've at least got that lovely smooth skin, though. Kissing them is like kissing a rose," laughed Marina, adding mischievously, "Ever tried kissing a rose, Augusta?"

Augusta went along with the joke. "Yes, there's a rosebush in the garden, the one with those gorgeous full blooms I can never manage to pick because they just fall apart. They're perfect for only a couple of hours. You wouldn't know, because it's when you're asleep. At seven in the morning, when the sun's just up, those roses are so soft and smooth, with such a delicate colour and scent, that I've kissed them quite often."

I watched Augusta as she spoke. Her voice was low and neutral; her face betrayed no warmth; her eyes, beneath their heavy lids, were bright but expressionless. Her mouth looked sad; still bearing a faint trace of lipstick, it opened in a measured sort of way, showing the well-defined shape of her lips and her square, white teeth. She sat erect on her chair, her wrists resting on the edge of the tablecloth, her hands gracefully wielding her knife and fork. She gave off a bitter, herbal odour, something that was no longer perfume but its delicate decay. I felt as if there

were obscure powers in her, running deep underground. “Marina’s right: she’s a counterfeit angel,” I thought, and felt the urge to laugh.

“Why are you laughing?” asked Marina.

“I was laughing?”

“Yes—what were you thinking?”

“That Augusta is a counterfeit angel.”

We’d finished eating; Augusta was the first to get up from the table, and she paused for a moment as she passed behind my chair.

“An angel?” she said, leaning down over me so far that I could feel her breath on my ear lobe. She ran her hands through my hair, withdrawing them quickly as she stood back up.

“What magnificent hair,” she exclaimed. “So thick and fresh and full of strength.”

She walked briskly away, but stopped by the open French doors. The moonlight made her figure look even more meagre but lent an astral pallor to her face. She stood for a moment, still and tense, and then came back towards me and kissed the top of my head.

“You’ll come back often, won’t you?”

“Yes,” I murmured.

And then some uncontrollable impulse made me jump to my feet and declare, “I’m suffocating at home. My father and mother live all wrapped up in their own feelings and resentments, like they’ve forgotten I need air to grow. Some days I feel like I can’t breathe, as if I’m sick. But here. . . .”

I trailed off, choked by my own distress. I ran and threw myself down on a sofa, burying my face in the cushions. Without saying a word, Augusta and Marina came and sat down beside me. Augusta placed a hand on my shoulder; I could sense its protectiveness. Little by little, in the

silence that followed, my despair subsided. I was overcome by a sensation of weakness I'd never felt before, almost a need for sleep.

I stayed there, my head buried in the cushions, letting the two women quietly watch over me. I felt like a child who'd fallen ill and was finally being taken care of.

4

I went home the next day around three in the afternoon. I was in my swimsuit and couldn't go through town. Since it was hot, I chose the route with more shade, which would take me straight to the servants' entrance. At the point where the dunes parted around a muddy stream that flowed down to the sea, the street narrowed to a little-used path. I was surprised to see someone there, and even more surprised to recognize this person, from the back, as my mother. In a few steps I caught up with her and started walking next to her. She jumped, not expecting to see me, and her face seemed to dissolve behind a wave of fear. I was so completely and openly bewildered that I didn't even say hello.

"What on earth are you doing here at this hour, mother?"

She stopped, hesitated a moment, and then stammered, "I wanted to come and meet you—I was worried, you know. Such a long visit, not coming home for the night. But then it was so hot that I gave up and I was just heading back…."

"And you were coming a way that you never take, on this rough path?"

"It's shady along the stream."

"True, but you never go out at three."

"And you, Antonia, have never been away from home so long," my mother said in a strangely hard voice. "You might well imagine that I wasn't at all happy about it, and I was worried."

I didn't press it any further; she was right. When it came to Marina, first I'd accused her of cowardly acquiescence, and then I'd gone over to the enemy. Even though her coming to meet me was out of character for her natural passivity, her tendency to not respond to insults, what

she'd said seemed to justify it. Besides, I was tired and hot and couldn't wait to get indoors where it was cool and dark. So I said, "Father was fine with it, for once, and you may as well be too." As soon as we reached the house, I headed straight for my room.

Feeling the need for an afternoon nap, I lay down on my bed and fell asleep. At five, I woke up rested, took a cold shower, got dressed, and went out in the garden to look for the Siamese kittens. They weren't on their favourite cushion; they weren't in their basket. I searched all the rooms; I looked in the kitchen. I didn't find them.

The maid said, "They were out in the garden around two."

I looked for them in all the bushes, in every out-of-the-way corner. I enlisted the gardener's daughter for help and sent her over to the neighbouring houses, out along the road, down to the beach. The kittens were nowhere to be found.

"Could they *both* have run away?" I exclaimed after two hours of fruitless searching.

"They must have gone home, back to Marina's house," said my mother.

"They're too young—little kittens don't have that instinct yet, to go back to the place they know."

"Then they must have escaped out the gate and someone stole them."

"Who would steal someone's cats in a town that's full of them?"

"But yours were purebreds. They were beautiful."

"You're talking too much, mother. This isn't like you. I'm tempted to ask *you* where my kittens are."

"Me? I don't take care of animals. You know that."

I said nothing more, but a sudden flash of anger made me hate my mother, too. I hated her evasive face, the way her eyes wouldn't hold your gaze, her too-blonde, too-fine hair, her

slumped shoulders. To get hold of myself, I left the house and went down to the sea. The little crowd of June beach-goers had already left; the sand was deserted. I waded through the stream over large, flat stones, and kept going, out towards the wilder part of the coast. The sun had vanished behind a big cloud streaked with red; the dunes cast bluish shadows, and the tall agaves that grew on them looked almost animal, full of warm and fleshly fluids. It was a Mediterranean evening, splendid and mysterious. I walked out as far as a cliff that crumbled into the sea in rocky fragments, where it was impossible to pass. I was obliged to turn back. I felt calmer; the walk had done me good, but I had no desire to see my father or my mother. I realized I was awaiting Marina's arrival as if it were a liberation.

Dinner seemed even longer and gloomier than usual. I kept thinking about the lost kittens; my father made his usual disparaging remarks, which were met with silence. But that evening, during the fruit course—the time he liked best for giving orders—he suddenly turned pleasant, and asked, "Where did you put the kittens, Antonia? I haven't seen them yet today."

I saw my mother startle and glance at me with a quick, anxious eye. A suspicion lacerated my mind; without answering my father, I got up from the table and went out to the garden, calling "Mother!"

I wanted to be alone with her for at least a moment. Her steps, as she came towards me, seemed even wearier than usual.

"What is it?"

"You have to tell me where the kittens are. You know—I'm positive you do. That look you gave me . . . I'm going to come right out and call it guilty."

"Guilty's a big word. Besides, seeing you're so perceptive, you ought to be able to understand."

"Oh, so there's something to understand?"

"Yes, Antonia. What there is to understand is that now your father isn't the only one in this house doing exactly as he pleases. Now there's you, too. You went to Marina's house, you brought those cats of hers home, you spent the night there, and. . . ."

"And?"

"And I can't handle any more!"

"And so you took it out on the kittens."

"Yes, I started with your kittens."

"And what did you do with them? That strange walk you took, at three in the afternoon, out by the stream . . . . I'm starting to figure it out, mother . . . and I don't want to."

"Figure it all out, then. I put your kittens in a bag, put in a heavy rock, tied it up well, and threw it into the deepest part of the stream."

"Today, when I saw you."

"Today, when you saw me."

"And you told me you were coming to meet me because you were worried."

"I lied. I couldn't have imagined I'd run into you at that hour."

Anger, grief, fury: it all came crashing down on me and swept me away. I was breathing hard, as if I were about to dive into deep water; I let myself be sucked into the whirlpool. A sudden flush of heat set my blood on fire; sweat soaked me from head to toe, and I lost my self-control. I turned my back on my mother and ran. I fled across the garden; I opened the gate; I was out in the road. I was running at full speed; no one could come after me. I could hear the noise of my mother's and father's voices jumbled together, my name being called repeatedly. I ran even faster, glad that it was nighttime. I took a shortcut, instinctively avoiding the town, and

ran towards the road that led uphill to Marina's house. I was panting when I got there, my throat parched. I stopped beside a tree. I had regained my awareness of the things around me, I realized, because I recognized it from its odour: it was the pepper tree, brushing my forehead with its cool, airy, fragrant leaves. I caught my breath. I watched the moon emerge from behind a cloud, illuminating the upright posture of Zozie the cat as he sat motionless on the garden path. He was listening, I knew, as only cats can listen, to the moths as they flew, or the rustle of fallen petals drifting in the wind along the ground. I bent down over him and wept. Cold, silent tears ran down my cheeks, into my mouth. I swallowed them, letting my mind go blank. All of a sudden, I heard Augusta's voice.

"Who's there?"

I saw her standing in the doorway to the library, peering into the dark. I threw myself at her.

"It's me, Augusta. Please let me stay with you! Please let me stay!"

"But what's wrong? What happened? Are you crying?"

"Yes, I'm crying."

"Come into the house and tell me."

Sitting beneath a lamp with a pink shade, curled up against Augusta's knees, I told her about the kittens being killed. I spoke rapidly, not pausing for breath. When I was done, I paused, and since Augusta said nothing, I said, "You think I'm ridiculous, don't you? You think I'm weak. I'm not ridiculous and I'm not weak. It's cruel and unfair to kill a defenceless, trusting animal. And it's cowardly, because there's no law to prosecute us for it and so there's no punishment to stop us from doing it. To see that much cruelty and that much cowardice in my

mother—it hurt so much that I just completely rebelled and ran away. I don't know what instinct drove me to come here for refuge. There's no cruelty here, I think, and no cowardice.

Augusta, who had been sitting absolutely still as she listened to me, hesitated for a moment before she spoke. "There's peace in this house. You felt it, and that's what you ran towards, more than you ran towards us. You're young. You need serenity and balance, and reasonableness, too. You can't find any of that in your own house. But can you find them here? Marina and I are two women who've chosen to live in isolation so we don't have obey all the usual conventions. But we've already had our suffering; we have our ruins inside us. Every year, maybe even every day, every hour we live through—and perhaps you know this too—we leave scraps of ourselves behind, and they form what we call having experience, having a past. For a lot of people, experience and the past become ruins that clog up their hearts and minds. Maybe Marina and I have chosen the antidote—or the narcotic—that lets us forget our experience and our pasts. Solitude spares us a great deal of contamination. But seeing who we are, can we give you what you've implicitly asked us for, what you're asking us for tonight? Can we give you the help you need? I don't know. The most we might be able to give you is affection and understanding."

"Do you think that's nothing, Augusta? It's all I want; it's what I'm starving for."

"Then stay with us—outside of every kind of convention and conformity—provided your father and mother allow it."

"Don't even mention them," I said furiously. "Don't go destroying everything you're doing."

Augusta rested a calm hand on my head, as if she were stroking a dog to make it friendlier.

"Okay, I'll talk about something else. Marina's gone down to your house, and by now she'll have found out about you running away. She'll be happy to find you here, and the two of you can discuss…."

She stopped at the sound of footsteps on the gravel path. It was Marina, and my father was with her. He burst into the room in his usual way and planted himself in front of me: "I won't stand for any scenes from you, or any nonsense either. You're going to go home right now, apologize to your mother, and make sure you never let yourself get carried away in such a senseless rage ever again."

"Do you know why I ran away?"

"I do, and that's why I'm ordering you to apologize to your mother. Making such a tragedy over a couple of cats…."

"It's not about the cats, father—it's because what she did was so cruel and so cowardly. If anyone should apologize, it's her, but she never does. And if you think that killing two innocent animals is something trivial, two beautiful little animals enjoying their lives, just to spite me and Marina, then you don't understand anything about anything. Have you asked Marina what she thinks of all this?"

Strategic to the point that it surprised even me, the question calmed him down instantly. He turned to Marina and asked, "So, whose side are you on?"

"The cats' side, of course," said Marina, her tone not entirely serious. "Poor, innocent victims of a family drama. It really is unfair…."

My father gave a peculiar laugh and looked at her appreciatively, his eyes dancing. He was no longer thinking about me or my mother. His love for Marina was relaxing him; her very

presence was enough to distract him. I felt certain she would bring him around. I motioned to Augusta and together we left the room.

Augusta took me up to the bedroom where I'd spent the previous night.

"For tonight, it's best you go to bed and sleep," she said. "Tomorrow you'll be in better shape to judge things—yourself and other people included."

"I'm not judging anything, Augusta—I'm running away. I can't stand living at home any more. I could stay if there was someone I loved or who loved me, but my parents have never had time to care for me—I've always been a third wheel, even in how much they hate each other. If you want me here, I'll stay. Of course you'll tell me about what one ought and ought not to do, about what people will think, about one's duty to one's family and so on and so forth…."

"We will, but it'll be purely theoretical. I've told you that Marina and I live outside all the conventional rules; up here on this cliff, we don't care what people think—we're free as much as anyone can be free. Marina's the boss, and she herself will tell you that you're welcome to stay as long as you like. You can decide what you need to do. Your father, though, has his parental rights, and he can order you to…."

"My father will do what Marina wants. You'll see. I figured that out a moment ago, and that's why I left them alone."

"So you can be shrewd when you want to be," said Augusta, with a laugh.

"Yes, when it comes to saving myself. It's my survival instinct, right?"

I found myself able to joke around, something that never happened. It made me feel surprised and happy. I kissed Augusta on the cheek, got into bed, and said "Turn out the light." And then I fell asleep.

My father, after two days of back and forth with my mother and Marina, gave me permission to “spend my summer holidays,” as he put it, at Marina’s. I’d been sure he’d give in. Only later on, when I was calmer and could reflect on things, did I realize that he’d given in not out of weakness but as a whole new and calculated level of insult to my mother. By leaving home and going to live with his mistress, I was dealing a blow to our family; I was beginning to destroy it. In preferring his mistress, moreover, I was pardoning and accepting his affair. In Marina’s house I became his accomplice: there was nothing I could say to him now. I understood, in a muddled sort of way, that this was wrong of him and selfish of me; what I didn’t understand was the harm I was doing to my mother. I needed to live a different life—to not spend my days as a constant witness to their quarrels and their rancour. I ran away, and like all those who run away, I didn’t stop to look behind me.

My mother accepted this new situation without complaint. All she said, when I went to pack my bags, was “Quite the strange vacation you’re taking. You really are your father’s daughter.”

Her words startled me; they felt like an insult I didn’t want to understand. I closed my suitcase, said, “The two of you don’t leave me a choice,” and walked out of the room.

It was the beginning of July. Anyone my father cared about, in his way, was given the explanation that I’d be spending the summer at Marina’s so I could go swimming at a lovely little beach, all rocky and secluded. I never did find out what the town had to say about this, nor did I care in the least. It was the first time I’d been away from home, and that fact itself filled me with joy; I didn’t think about how I’d managed it. My father gave me a monthly allowance, and I moved into the room where I’d slept so peacefully: I brought my books, my records, my trinkets. Waking up in the morning to the realization I wouldn’t be seeing my parents was a moment of

sheer happiness. The window was filled with the clear blue of the sun-drenched sea and let in the sharp, green smell of the garden. With my elbows resting on the windowsill, I could see that the world out there for me to contemplate was one of infinite beauty and purity.

5

I spent the summer in deliberate solitude, with Marina and Augusta as my only companions. They grew more important to me each day. I could tell that they both cared about me, though in different ways. In Marina, with her natural, full-blooded warmth, it was perhaps a maternal feeling for the child she'd never had; in Augusta, it was something more complex, more intellectual, maybe even an obscure desire for excitement. Being with them made me forget my excesses of rage, my extreme fantasies. I read a great deal, and reading quieted the chaos inside me. Marina and Augusta made sure that my days went by easily, utterly untouched by any relation to ordinary life. Living in their house was my great escape. At certain times, I felt I was forgetting my past and had no impatience whatsoever for the future. There was no conflict, no bullying: life just flowed. The world began on the other side of the tall pittosporum hedge, on the other side of the rocky promontory that hid the town and the house where I'd been born and raised. Sheltered from everything, entrusted to a pleasant routine, to the garden, to mindless hours at the beach, with no need for money, with no desire for anything beyond my reach, I lived as if in a fantasy realm, outside of all practical concerns. It was the first holiday of my life and I finally felt the joy of being nineteen.

Every morning, after she'd ordered the groceries and set the domestic staff and the gardener their tasks, Augusta would come to my room with a tea tray and wake me up. It would invariably be ten o'clock. Despite the late hour, it was an effort to tear myself away from sleep, and I would spend several minutes curled up at the far side of the bed, my eyes stubbornly shut.

"Come on, up you get," Augusta would say. "Lazing around in the morning makes a person feel gloomy."

"Oh, please let me sleep in. You're the active type, not me."

"It's a gorgeous sunny day and you should go for a swim."

"There's loads of time—I like having my swim at one, when there's nobody at the beach."

Augusta would sit down at the foot of my bed with the air of someone about to get up and leave at any moment, but gradually she'd relax, clasp her hands around one of her knees, and watch me as I ate. My appetite, my delight in sinking my teeth into the fresh croissants, must have been contagious, because after a brief internal struggle, she'd give in to temptation and say, "Pour me a bit of tea in your cup."

"Yes, but you have to have a croissant too."

"No, no croissant."

"Why not? Are you afraid of gaining weight, skinny as you are? Come on, just one, to make me happy."

Augusta would eat half a croissant, her face flushed with enjoyment. Watching her, so strict, so controlled, I would think to myself, "Who knows why she's condemned herself to abstinence? I need to teach her how to give in to small pleasures." But I wouldn't have wanted to have Augusta lose the discipline that made such a pleasing counterpoint to Marina's indolence. I loved her rigour because it was the opposite of all the moral and physical laxity I'd been accustomed to; I liked the thought of being taken care of by a strong woman, one who had little time for feelings or bodies.

One morning I asked her, "Haven't you ever fallen in love?"

Augusta looked at me, her fingers laced around her knee. Her answer was simple: "No."

"Not with anyone? Not even with an animal, a tree, a landscape, a book?"

"Of course I've felt love for animals, and plants, and flowers, and books, and the beautiful light in September and April."

"But you've never lost your head over someone? Never wanted to give yourself to anyone?"

"Can you ever really give yourself to someone and escape your own loneliness? I don't think you can. And besides, I do give myself. Just not to a man."

"I've never been in love; I've never kissed a man, but I feel like it's necessary to love someone. I don't think you're right to close yourself off."

"I'm not trying to be right. I'm just answering your question."

"And it's the truth? You've really never been in love with anyone?"

"No. I've been an orphan since my early teens, you know. I didn't even have time to love my parents in any conscious way."

"What about Marina? And your brother, Marina's husband, who you used to live with?"

"Deep affection and strong devotion, but not the transporting, burning kind of love that you're talking about."

"And are you happy?"

"God, what a lot of questions! No."

"Why not?"

Augusta looked full into my eyes. I saw her black irises, flecked with bronze; the skin of her heavy eyelids was a delicate shade of ochre. I had a sudden image of how ardently those eyes would burn with love.

"I can't say, exactly," she replied. "I'm not looking for happiness, as I don't believe in it, but there is something missing…."

"What?" I insisted, as I hopped out of bed.

Augusta got up too, an odd look on her face.

"Such a demanding child!" she exclaimed. "Enough, enough! No more questions! If you keep asking, I won't answer."

"Okay, then, don't answer. I might not even understand your answer. I'm just asking because I'm curious to find out what you're like. I haven't known you that long, but I've already trusted you with nearly everything there is to know about me."

Augusta seemed not to be listening; she went and looked out the window, her head briefly in the sun. But a moment later she turned, strode rapidly towards me, took my face in her hands, and kissed me. "Thank you, Antonia. You've no idea how much joy you give me."

She stepped away; there was something strangely supplicating in the gesture her hands made as they let go of me.

"Hurry up and get dressed. It's really late," she said.

She seemed tense, her warm breath vibrating on her lips. She headed quickly to the door, stopping in the doorway to add, "Marina's waiting for you: it's a glorious day out there, and you two can have a lovely swim down by the rocks."

And with an affectionate wave of her hand, she left.

As I walked to the bathroom, I couldn't help but think, "I don't get her. She wants what's good, but she's attracted to what's bad. She seems so calm, but she really isn't. What an unusual woman!" These thoughts were difficult but, at the same time, they were light: they didn't hurt; they didn't weigh on me; they flew through my head and left no trace.

7

It was late September, with the wind rustling through the zinnias in the garden. The tuberoses yellowed on their stems, giving off a dizzying perfume, and the last of the oleanders withered among their stiffened leaves.

At Augusta's urging, I'd started getting up earlier to sit out in the garden in the sun. It was a honey-coloured sun that even Marina could tolerate, shading her face with her straw hat as she exposed her body to its rays. The waves below us lapped against the first dead leaves; a hyacinth-blue sky flooded the garden with rapturous light. I would sit beside Marina and read; she'd sit with the cats on her lap and do nothing at all, while Augusta came and went between the house and the garden, the garden and the house. Every now and then, Augusta would sit down silently beside me in that about-to-get-up way of hers, her hands clasped around one knee; I'd look up from my book and smile at her. Occasionally, our silence would be broken by the faint sound of the wind as it blew along the ground.

One morning all three of us were out in the sun as usual when a boy from the town came running up the pathway. He had an urgent letter to deliver to Marina. She opened it and turned pale as she read it. Her hands trembled slightly.

"What is it?" I asked. "Bad news?"

Marina hesitated and then said, "Yes, and it's for you, *cara*."

"Who's it from? Let me read it."

"It's a note from your father. I'd rather you didn't read it."

"Then tell me the bad news—don't be afraid."

"Your mother has killed herself. They found her this morning."

"How?"

"With the gas from the water heater in her own bathroom. She was alone in the house; your father didn't sleep at home last night."

I paid no attention to the shame in her voice at those last words.

"My mother?" I said.

"Yes."

I felt my throat go dry and tight. The colour drained out of the garden, and I was suddenly no longer alive in the same way I'd been a moment ago, but instead in a different way, in a completely different world.

"That's impossible," I stammered. "You've read it wrong."

Marina pressed her hands between her knees as if she were suddenly cold, an oddly pathetic gesture. With effort, she said, "I didn't read it wrong. Antonia, I don't know what to say."

"Don't say anything. I'm not grieving. I'm just astonished."

"Grief will come."

But it didn't, at least not in the way that Marina meant. I didn't collapse, I didn't cry, and above all, I didn't feel compassion and I didn't feel pity. My mother's suicide had destroyed, at a single blow, the idea I had had of her; it destroyed my image of her, my memory of her gestures, her words, her ways. The new woman who took her place in my mind even destroyed the past, my everyday life in which she'd been the first human being who'd looked after me, who'd watched me, who'd watched over me, who perhaps had loved me—however little it all had answered my needs. Suddenly, violently, I found myself faced with a stranger—a stranger, moreover, that I couldn't talk to, who would never answer the questions that were beginning to rise up, hard and merciless, within me. My mother, in killing herself, had become

unrecognizable. But through the disorder of my thoughts flashed an image of my mother's face on the day she'd killed the kittens. I saw her walking up the path along the stream in the heat of the afternoon; I could hear her words as she lied to me. "So she was capable of violence, then?" I thought. "I didn't know that; I thought she was resigned to being a victim. I didn't know her." No—I hadn't known my mother. All I'd ever seen was the day to day self she presented to my father, with her look of wounded acceptance. I'd never sought beyond that look, which had always filled me with irritation and impatience. "I didn't know her, I didn't know her," I kept repeating to myself. It was all I could think about. I spent that entire day huddled in an armchair, tormenting myself with questions I couldn't answer.

Towards evening, Augusta—who'd been circling me all day without saying a word, as if respecting my silence—said, "Let's take you home, Antonia. You should be there, where your mother is. You can't avoid it, even if you have no urge to hurry down to be near her."

I roused myself and murmured, "Why? I'm afraid, Augusta, I'm afraid."

Even the idea of seeing my mother's motionless corpse filled me with terror.

Augusta didn't relent. "You'll understand why later. It's not just your duty as her child; it's your duty as a human being."

And Marina said, "Augusta's right. Go put on a black dress, and go with her."

I obeyed and passively followed Augusta. It was late evening, an extraordinarily still, limpid evening with stars like white flames in a clear, windless sky. Their reflected light lay cradled in the calm sea. In silence, I walked down the road at Augusta's side; in silence, I reached the house and went in. The maid said nothing as she opened the door. I went up to my mother's room. Augusta didn't follow.

My mother was lying on the bed, rigid, her hands crossed on her meagre chest. Her face was not peaceful but remote and austere, as if it were not her own face but that of some pallid ancestor who bore a strange resemblance to her. I leaned over her and felt the cold emanating from her yet undecayed flesh. I shivered in horror; I wanted to scream, to beg someone to spare me from the agony of contemplating her. I cried out for Augusta and she came running. She took my hand, and led me into the next room, which was my mother's sitting room and study. The first thing I saw was my father sitting at her desk. He was calmly reading through her letters and then tearing them up. The light from the desk lamp showed where his hair was starting to thin. Time was leaving its mark, carrying away his good looks, and I despised that indifferent face of his; I felt an instinctive need to defend the secrets I was sure that desk contained.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Oh, are you here? I'm sorting Clara's papers, obviously."

"Leave it for me. It's better if I do it."

"By all means. Empty all the drawers and rip up the lot of it. Clara even kept the bills for the laundry."

I sat down as my father got up and walked out of the room without looking at me. Augusta silently left as well. I was alone, already unhappy with the task I'd given myself. The desk, the letters scattered untidily over its wood surface, the letters lying in the open drawers made me deeply uneasy; they were even more undeniable then the body lying in the next room. To touch them was a real violation. But the thought of my father having his hands on my mother's papers pushed me to do it. I steeled myself and began unfolding and reading. Letters from acquaintances, greeting cards, old bills, old calendars, all came up at random. I emptied the drawers; nothing I found had any whiff of secrecy. I kept looking, I kept reading: a need was

rising inside me to discover my mother's private life—a confession, a cry—or else her last wishes, the reason for her suicide. I found nothing. Her desk, the place where anyone would keep their memories, fragments of their past, their secrets, remained mute. My mother had left nothing to tell of her. And then I realized I was grieving. It hit me savagely, expressing itself not in words or thoughts but in questions asked of the void. I didn't know my mother; I had never known her. She had lived in silence and in silence she had died. All I knew was that she'd been in intolerable torment; that much, her suicide revealed. But her suicide was also the obstacle that my grief ran into, that turned it into an interrogation: "Why desert your life?". I felt it was her duty to stay at her post, to be a victim all the way to the end; I felt that human dignity should have obliged her to bear the weight of her pain. By killing herself while sound of mind and body, she'd violated not only life but the future, too.

How long did I sit in front of that wide-open desk? I suddenly found Augusta beside me, making me get up, getting me to go with her.

"It's late, you need some rest. I had them bring a bit of hot broth and some fruit up to your room. Have a bite to eat and then go to bed. The funeral's tomorrow and it'll be a tiring day."

"I'm not hungry, Augusta. I'm not tired. Just stay near me; it helps to have you here. I don't want anything else."

"Yes, I'll stay with you."

Fully dressed, I lay down on the bed. Augusta sat in an armchair. We were wrapped in a silence so profound that I seemed to hear my own heartbeat. The room I'd slept in since I was born gave me no comfort, but instead something close to a sense of fear. I'd been unhappy here, I'd escaped from here, I'd come back here to confirm that my past, no matter how brief it had

been, contained nothing but mystery and misery. The things around me offered no aid. But Augusta was there, attentive, watching me with barely disguised apprehension. And it was Augusta, who'd never stepped foot in my room before, whom I hadn't even met until a few months ago, who gave me comfort. Her sympathetic silence led me to speak:

"I'm not upset about my mother's death," I said, "but about the violence she inflicted on herself, and on life, and on me. I had no sympathy for her, I never showed her affection, but she was someone I felt was mine, like I'd put her aside because I counted on being able to find her again when I needed her. She was my mother, a fixed point I was tied to by the natural fact of having come out of her womb. And she chose to cut this tie, violently; it's as if she's rejected me in the cruellest way possible. Maybe, over time, if she'd had some patience, I could have become a good daughter. But instead she decided to leave for good. Since this morning I've been going back and forth between horror and disgust. I keep asking myself why? Why did my mother kill herself?"

"Because she was tired of suffering."

"She was used to it. She'd been suffering for twenty years. If everyone who suffered killed themselves, the whole world would be a massacre."

"A logical thought. But, you know, there are weak people, and sick people, and also people who are neither weak nor sick but who reason themselves into choosing death, because they decide that life is useless, or intolerable.

"My mother wasn't one of them. Reasoning wasn't her strong suit. She was weak, then."

"And you knew this."

"It's true. I knew it, but I didn't think it was important."

"The same way you didn't think anything to do with her was important."

"Yes, that's true. I didn't think anything to do with her was important. Why, Augusta?"

"Because you're her daughter—young and strong and selfish. And unforgiving. You demand everything and aren't able to give anybody anything, at least for now."

"I demand everything? Oh, Augusta! I demand so little. All I demanded was a family that gave me a bit of peace and a bit of love. I wish I could understand, but I don't. If you could help me…."

Augusta came over, and I made room for her on the bed. She sat down, rested her back against the pillows, lifted my head as if it were an object, and placed it in her lap. I could feel the warmth of her clothes, of her skin; I could feel her hands running lightly through my hair. A caressing human touch, perhaps the first I'd ever felt, and at a time when I needed it. "My mother never held me close like this," I thought, and finally, I wept. Not convulsive sobs, but big, slow, cool tears that ran down over my neck and gave me relief.

Augusta kept stroking my hair and let me cry. Her hand was so light it seemed to be made of feathers, and it felt good to imagine it as the wings of the sparrows that flew in the garden. Little by little, I grew calm. Still lying close to Augusta, with my head on her lap, I managed to say, "you're so kind. You're showing me a world I've never known. You care about me, perhaps…"

"I do care about you."

"Why? You barely know me."

"You don't need to know someone to love them. Love is an impulse."

"Do you think so? There has to be some kind of reason behind a feeling, even an unconscious reason…"

"Well, I care about you for various reasons, if you really want to know, and the most important one is also the most obscure."

"Which is?"

"Your innocence. I've never met a woman as innocent as you. You have no instinctive cunning whatsoever, and you're ruled by the most disinterested feeling there is: hatred, a feeling that requires no emotional involvement, no satisfaction; it just consumes itself. Your innocence makes me feel . . . not maternal, which has roots in something quite different, but an urge to protect you, to give you something. I'm an old maid, and my heart's never really felt deeply for anyone, but I've become completely preoccupied with you. Despite it all, though, as you can see, there's so little I can do for you. I didn't even manage to foresee that your mother might kill herself, and God only knows how hard I've tried to guess at what might have provoked all the the things you've said and done.

"How could you possibly have foreseen such a thing? You didn't know my mother."

Anguish seized me again, the horror of those questions I couldn't answer. Augusta understood; she got up, seeking to break the words' evil spell. "Try to get to sleep now," she said. "Tomorrow will be another difficult day. Come now, go to bed. I'm going to bed as well. Good night, Antonia."

She bent over to give me a kiss; I grabbed hold of her and pressed my head against her chest. My breath was coming in gasps, I realized, as the words tumbled out: "You're all I've got, Augusta…"

She held me tightly to her and kissed my face at random; her kiss fell on one of my teary eyes. I began to cry again, watching her as she left. I undressed slowly, choking back my tears,

and got into bed. I was able to sleep.