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Excerpt from THE LAST MIST

We arrived in the city several hours ago. I can feel it hovering lifelessly around us, behind a dense curtain of mist, making the air heavy and oppressive.

Daniel's mother had the dining room opened and the chairs deliers over the long table around which we gathered, stiff and numb, lit. But the golden wine, poured for us into thick crystal goblets, warms our veins; its warmth mounts from our throats to our temples.

Daniel, slightly tipsy, promises to restore the abandoned oratory in our house. By the time dinner ends we have arranged that my mother-in-law will return to the country with us.

My pain of the last few days, a pain piercing like a burn, has turned into a sweet sadness that brings a tired smile to my lips. When I rise, I must lean on my husband's arm. I don't know why I feel so weak and I don't know why I can't help smiling.

For the first time since we got married, Daniel arranges the pillows for me. I wake up at midnight, choking. I toss for a long time between the sheets, but can't manage to fall asleep. I suffocate. I breathe in with the sensation that I'm not inhaling enough air. I jump out of bed, I open the window. I lean out and it is as if my surroundings had not changed. The mist has modulated the angles and muffled the noises, bestowing on the city the warm intimacy of a closed room.

A mad thought takes hold of me. I nudge Daniel, who half opens his eyes.

"I'm suffocating. I need to take a walk. Can I go out?"

"Do as you please," he mumbles, and lays his head again heavily on the pillow.

I dress. On my way out I grab the straw hat I wore when I

left the *hacienda*. The gate is not as heavy as I had imagined. I start walking up the street.

Sadness again flows to the surface of my being with all the violence accumulated during sleep. I walk, cross avenues, thinking: "Tomorrow we will return to the countryside. The day after tomorrow, I will hear mass in town with my mother-in-law. Then, at lunch, Daniel will tell us about the work in the *hacienda*. I will immediately visit the greenhouse, the aviary, the vegetable garden. Before dinner, I will doze by the fireplace or read the local papers. After dinner I will amuse myself provoking small catastrophes in the fire, rashly stirring the red-hot coals. Around me, the silence will soon indicate that every subject of conversation has been exhausted and Daniel will noisily rearrange the bars on the doors. Then we will go to bed. And the day following will be the same, and so will a year from now, and ten years from now; and it will be the same until old age snatches away all right to love and desire, until my body withers and my face wrinkles, and I grow ashamed to show myself bare-faced in the light of day.

I wander at random, across avenues, and keep walking.

I feel incapable of fleeing. Of fleeing, how? Where to? Death seems a more attainable adventure than flight. I do feel capable of dying. It is possible to wish to die because one loves life too much.

Between the darkness and the mist I glimpse a small square. As in an open field, I lean exhausted against a tree. My cheek seeks the dampness of its bark. Very close to me, I hear a fountain unstringing a necklace of heavy drops.

The white light of a streetlight, a light transformed by the fog into a vapor, bathes my hands, making them seem pale, lengthening a confused silhouette at my feet, my shadow. And so it is that, suddenly, I see another shadow next to mine. I lift my head.

There's a man before me, very close to me. He is young; a pair of very light eyes on a tanned face and a slightly arched eyebrow give his face an almost supernatural look. A vague but enveloping warmth emanates from him.

And he is fast, violent, definite. I understand that I had been awaiting him and that I will follow him wherever he goes, wherever that leads. I throw my arms around his neck and then he kisses me; his luminous eyes keep looking at me through his eyelashes.

I walk, but now a stranger guides me. He guides me to a narrow, steep street. He forces me to stop. Behind a wall, I glimpse an abandoned garden. The stranger loosens, with some difficulty, the links of a rusted chain.

Inside the house the darkness is absolute, but a warm hand reaches for mine and invites me to follow. We don't stumble on any furniture; our steps echo in empty rooms. I feel my way up the long staircase, not needing to lean on the banister, because the stranger guides each and every one of my steps. I follow, feeling under his power, surrendering to his will. At the end of the corridor, he pushes a door and lets go of my hand. I remain standing on the threshold of a room which suddenly is full of light.

I take one step into a room whose discolored chintz curtains impart on it I don't know what antique charm, I don't know what melancholy intimacy. All the warmth of the house seems to have concentrated here. Night and its mist can beat against the glass panes in vain; they will not filter into this room a single atom of death.

My friend draws the curtains and with a slight pressure from his chest makes me retrace my steps slowly, toward the bed. I feel myself swoon in sweet anticipation, but nonetheless, a curious modesty compels me to feign fear. Then he smiles, but his smile, although tender, is filled with irony. I suspect that no nuance of feeling holds any secret for him. He withdraws, pretending in turn to want to reassure me. I remain alone.

I hear very light steps on the carpet, barefoot steps. He is again before me, naked. His skin is dark, but a light down, to which the lamplight clings, covers him from head to toe in a halo of brilliance. He has very long legs, straight shoulders, and narrow hips. His forehead is smooth and his arms hang motionless alongside his

body. The grave simplicity of his pose imparts on him a second nakedness.

Almost without touching me, he loosens my hair and begins to undress me. I quietly submit to his desire, with a throbbing heart. A secret apprehension makes me shudder when my clothes curb the impatience of his fingers. I burn with the desire to be uncovered immediately by his gaze. My body's beauty demands, finally, its share of homage.

Once naked, I remain seated on the edge of the bed. He steps away and watches me. Under his attentive gaze, I throw my head back and this gesture fills me with an intimate sense of well-being. I knot my arms behind my neck, I braid and unbraided my legs, and each gesture bears an intense and absolute pleasure, as if, finally, my arms, my neck, and my legs had a reason for being. Even if this delight were the only purpose of love, I would already feel amply rewarded!

He approaches; my head reaches to his chest, he offers it to me with a smile, I press my lips against him, and rest my head, my face. His flesh smells of fruit, of vegetables. In a new outburst of passion, I throw my arms around his body and pull his chest against my cheek once more.

I embrace him ardently and listen with all my senses. I listen to his breath rise, fly, and fall; I listen to the explosion that his heart reiterates untiringly at the center of his chest, echoing inside him, spreading in waves through his body, transforming every cell into a sonorous echo. I clasp him, I clasp him tighter and tighter; I feel the blood flowing in the veins and feel the force that crouches, latent, within his muscles vibrate; I feel the bubble of a sigh stirring. In my arms, an entire physical life, with its fragility and mystery, boils over and overflows. I begin to tremble.

He then leans toward me and we roll, embracing, to the hollow of the bed. His body covers me like a huge boiling wave, caresses me, burns me, penetrates me, wraps me, drags me swooning. Something like a sob rises to my throat, and I don't know why I begin to cry, and I don't know why it feels so sweet to cry, so sweet

the tiredness inflicted on my body by the precious cargo weighing between my thighs.

When I awaken, my lover sleeps stretched out by my side. The expression on his face is placid; his breath is so light that I must lean over his lips to feel it. I notice that, hanging on a very fine, almost invisible chain, there's a little medallion nesting in the chestnut hair on his chest, a trivial little medallion, like the ones given to children the day of their first communion. All my flesh grows tender before this childish detail. I straighten a rebellious lock glued to his temple, I rise without waking him. I dress noiselessly and leave.

I leave as I came, groping.

I am outside. I open the gate. The trees are motionless and it hasn't dawned yet. I run up the narrow street, across the square, retracing my steps down the avenues. A soft perfume accompanies me; the perfume of my enigmatic friend. All of me has been impregnated by his aroma. And it is as if he walked by me or still held me tightly in his embrace or as if he had poured his life into my blood, forever.

And here I am lying next to another sleeping man.

"Daniel, I am not sorry for you, I don't hate you, I only hope that you never hear a word of what has happened to me tonight . . ."

Why, this autumn, this obsession to have the avenues constantly swept?

I would let the leaves pile up on the grass and the paths, covering everything with its reddish and crackling carpet which moisture would later turn silent. I try to convince Daniel to let the garden go a bit. I feel nostalgia for abandoned parks, where crabgrass erases all the tracks and where neglected hedges narrow the paths.

The years go by. I look at myself in the mirror and I see, definitely etched under my eyes, all those little wrinkles that had until now only surfaced when I laughed. My breasts are losing their roundness and their green-fruit consistency. My flesh sticks to my

bones and I no longer seem slim but full of angles. But, what does it matter! What does it matter that my body is withering, if it already knew love! And what does it matter if the years go by, all alike. I had a beautiful adventure, once . . . One single memory can help one bear a long life of tedium. It can help one repeat, day in and day out, without fatigue, the same menial everyday gestures.

There is a being I cannot encounter without trembling. I could meet him today, tomorrow, or ten years from now. I could meet him here, at the end of a tree-lined path, or in the city, as I turn a corner. Maybe I will never see him again. It doesn't matter; the world seems full of possibilities, every minute holds a promise for me, each minute has its emotion.

Night after night, Daniel sleeps by my side, as indifferent as a brother. I can shelter him indulgently because many years ago, for one long night, I lived in another man's warmth. I get up, stealthily turn a lamp on, and write:

"I knew the perfume of your shoulder, and since that day I have been yours. I desire you. I would spend my life, lying down, waiting for you to come to press your strong body against my now familiar one, as if you had been its owner since time began. The memory of my clinging to your neck, sighing in your mouth, tears me from your embrace and hounds me."

I write and I tear it up.

Some mornings I am overcome by an absurd feeling of happiness. I have the premonition that an immense happiness is going to descend upon me in the space of twenty-four hours. I spend the day in a sort of exaltation. I wait. A letter, an unexpected event? I don't know, to tell you the truth.

I walk, I venture deep into the woods, and although it's late, I slow down my steps on my return. I give time one last chance for the arrival of the miracle. I enter the drawing room with my heart pounding.

Lying on the couch, Daniel yawns, amidst his dogs. My mother-in-law is winding a new skein of gray wool. No one has

come, nothing has happened. The bitterness of disillusionment only lasts a fraction of a second. My love for "him" is so deep that it is above the pain of absence. It is enough to know that he exists, that he feels and remembers in some corner of the world . . .

The dinner hour seems endless.

My only desire is to be alone to dream, to dream as I please. I always have so much to think about! Yesterday afternoon, for example, I left a jealous scene between my lover and me in suspense.

I hate it when, after dinner, they call me for the traditional game of cards. I like to sit by the fire and withdraw into myself to search for my lover's light eyes within the flames. They shoot out abruptly like two stars and then I remain a long while engrossed in their light. The memory of the expression in his eyes is never as sharp as at moments like these.

Some days I am overcome by a deep weariness, and I vainly stir the ashes of my memories to light the spark that conjures his image. I lose my lover.

A fierce wind returned him to me the last time. A wind that brought down three walnut trees and made my mother-in-law cross herself, compelled him to call at our door. His hair was tousled and the collar of his overcoat turned up. But I didn't recognize him and I collapsed at his feet. Then he took me in his arms and carried me in a faint, into the afternoon's wind . . . He has not left me again since that day.

The pale autumn seems to have stolen this ardent sunny morning from summer. I search for my straw hat and can't find it. I search for it calmly at first, then feverishly . . . because I am afraid of finding it. A deep feeling of hope has sprung in me. I sigh, relieved, before the futility of my efforts. There's no longer any doubt. I left it behind one night at the stranger's house. Such intense happiness invades me, that I must hold my two hands against my heart so that it will not escape, light as a bird. Like all lovers, we are joined forev-

er by something besides an embrace. Something material, concrete, indestructible: my straw hat.

Translated by Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert

The day of our sisters' first ball I was happy just to watch
the fading place behind the marble balustrade of the second
floor call me down, going down the stairs with strings of
pearls, their foreheads, wearing dropped-waist dresses and
pedicures; their legs lightly and surreptitiously painted with
white. I was happy not to be a part of the ebbs and flow of
the fashion, shuffling their feet and clapping hands, as if they
were in a party.
I remember feeling that from the moment I entered the
room I was even more distant and alone. As if I were a guest
from my side forever. And I was happy to be there, but
I would dance the Charleston in the arms of one of
the men dressed in black, like undergarments, like undergarments
and under it would be, I thought, "if they were right out
of the parks, like the gentlemen in that film *Les Femmes*
dans le Sable that someday I too would be a part of that world
of the great spring upon from behind the balustrade on the
second floor.
I was very young, I said to myself and went up to the
balustrade to look at the music. From one of them I pulled out the
handkerchief that was in his pocket at the bottom. They were perfect made
of white silk.
I had never before seen the one that was white. I had the
handkerchief in my pocket and I was very happy to have it.

Excerpt from

THE HOUSE OF THE ANGEL

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