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JULIO CORTÁZAR

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'Cortázar is truly a sorcerer
and the best of him is here'
Kevin Barry

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JULIO CORTÁZAR

Julio Cortázar lived in Buenos Aires for the first thirty years of his life, and, after that, in Paris. His stories, written under the dual influence of the English masters of the uncanny and of French surrealism, are extraordinary inventions, just this side of nightmare. In later life, Cortázar became a passionate advocate for human rights and a persistent critic of the military dictatorships in Latin America. He died in 1984.

ALSO BY JULIO CORTÁZAR

A Certain Lucas

A Change of Light and Other Stories

All Fires the Fire

A Manual for Manuel

Around the Day in Eighty Worlds

Autonauts of the Cosmoroute

Blow-Up and Other Stories

Cronopios and Famas

Diary of Andrés Fava

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We Love Glenda So Much and Other Tales

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JULIO CORTÁZAR
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THE SELECTED STORIES OF JULIO CORTÁZAR

TRANSLATED FROM THE SPANISH BY
Alberto Manguel, Paul Blackburn,
Gregory and Clementine Rabassa,
and Suzanne Jill Levine

SELECTED AND INTRODUCED BY
Alberto Manguel

WITH A NEW INTRODUCTION BY
Kevin Barry

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- 1–6 *Bestiario*
- 7–9 *Las Armas Secretas*
- 10–20 *Final de Juego*
- 21–24 *Todos los Fuegos el Fuego*
- 25–27 *Octaedro*
- 28–29 *Alguien que Anda por Ahí*
- 30 *Queremos tanto a Glenda*
- 31–35 *Deshoras*

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Clementine Rabassa translated the story numbered 25

Gregory Rabassa translated the stories numbered 26–30

Introduction by Kevin Barry

Typically, Cortázar enters in a hot rush, his sentences spilling one over the other, and the narrative arrives as a cascade of turning, whirling information. But even as he wilfully discombobulates you – the dazed and bamboozled reader – you are enthralled, also, by the sense of happy chaos, by the gleeful abandon in the récit, and, very quickly, you find yourself pinned to the page and held gladly wriggling there. Cortázar proceeds then on the engines of his mad energy to squeeze a novel's worth of confusion into a dozen or fifteen pages. With a maximalist's glee, he sprays on his drive-by descriptions as if by machine gun, like the old man in 'The Gates of Heaven' 'with a handshake that felt like a live sardine', and, without ever a sense of effort, he bangs together his gloriously deranged set-ups, like the hapless correspondent besieged by an avalanche of bunnies (oh, read on, read on) in 'Letter to a Young Lady in Paris': 'They tore the curtains, the coverings on the easy chairs, the edge of Augusto Torres's self-portrait, they got fluff all over the rug and besides they yipped, there's no other word for it, they stood under a circle in the light of the lamp, in a circle as though they were adoring me, and suddenly they were yipping, they were crying like I never believed rabbits could cry.' And then there are his extravagant lurches of emotion, when he suddenly crunches down through the gears and slows the whole caboodle and allows *feeling* enter, as in the story 'Bestiary', with the child Isabel playing handball one lost hot afternoon of an Argentine summer, and 'Isabel could smell the terebinth leaves and at one moment, returning with a backhand an insidious low shot of Nino's, she felt the summer's happiness very deep inside her.' Julio Cortázar is truly a sorcerer and the best of him is here, in these hilariously fraught and almost eerily affecting stories.

Visitors to Buenos Aires will recognise in their very first hours on those fervent streets that there are two defining notes on the city's air and that they are contrary – the one is a sense of antic giddiness, and the other is the weight of melancholy that same gaiety ferries beneath itself. Though born in Brussels – in 1914, to Argentine parents – Cortázar was raised and schooled on the outskirts of Buenos Aires and the city forever defines and colours him in his

art. Every sentence that he writes contains those two contrary notes. He is a seriously funny writer, or a hilariously serious one. For most of his writing life, his stock-in-trade was the uncanny, and maybe his great achievement was to stitch it seamlessly into the apparent or surface realism of his fiction.

Coming to artistic maturity where and when he did, of course, there was a very large shadow that he needed to emerge from, that of Borges, and while the influence of the great fabulist is often present in Cortázar, it is so benignly, as a kind of permission, a permission to wildly invent and to fill his own *ficciones* with his own strange wonders. In turn, Cortázar would pass on the permits to his own generation of writers; he was a dynamic figure in the so-called Boom, the explosion of Latin American literary talent from the 1960s onwards in the work of Columbia's Gabriel García Márquez, Chile's Mario Vargas Llosa, Mexico's Carlos Fuentes, and many others. Vargas Llosa wrote that it was through Cortázar's work, especially through his ground-breaking novel *Hopscotch*, published in 1963, that other writers on the Latin American scene discovered 'that literature was an inspired way of enjoying ourselves, that it was possible to explore the secrets of the world and of language while having a great time and that, while playing, one could explore mysterious levels of life hidden to our rational mind, to our logical intelligence, chasms of experience into which no-one can look without serious risks, such as madness or death.'

Cortázar's role in the literature of his place and time seems to me very similar to that performed by Flann O'Brien in my own country's literary history. For much of the twentieth century, Irish writers laboured sombrely in the shadows cast by James Joyce and Samuel Beckett (contrary influences – one putting everything onto the page, the other taking everything off again) and it took the emergence of an O'Brien, with his mischief and roguery and spirit of sedition, to show the others that they could, in fact, lighten up just a little. Sometimes, the work of an O'Brien or of a Cortázar (of a court jester, really) is precisely what's needed to remind the rest of the field that they can have a good time with this stuff, too. (And the equation is a simple one: if the writer is not having a good time at his or her end of the process, the beloved reader is not having a good time at the far end.) It could be said also that the playfulness in both O'Brien and Cortázar can ultimately be traced (via the labyrinths laid down by Borges and Joyce) to the same primary source, namely Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*.

A condition that was of immense value to many Irish writers in the twentieth century came to be so for Cortázar, too – the condition of exile. In his 20s, in the zealot days of his writer's apprenticeship, he worked as a school teacher in the Argentine provinces but he moved to Paris in his 30s and

he would remain there for the rest of his life. His absence from the city that formed him allowed the Buenos Aires he conjured on the page to become a truly fictive realm. He could invent at will the events and the people of his imagined metropolis – Cortázar’s city would be a place unsullied by the drear restraints of reality, and it could gladly accommodate the fantastic.

But it is when he hovers just inches above the real, when he applies his blithe, his often almost breezy style to matters of true weight and significance that the measure of his accomplishment becomes apparent. Let’s zoom in from the broad view and try for a while a tighter focus, say on the story ‘The Gates of Heaven.’ Here, the matter is grief, and the story opens thus:

‘José María came at eight with the information, hardly beating around the bush at all he told me that Celina had just died. I remember that I noted the phrasing with a flash, Celina just dying, almost with the sense that she herself had decided the moment. It was almost night, and José María’s mouth was trembling when he told me.’

Somehow it’s the tiny visual image that concludes the paragraph – the trembling mouth – that pins us to the page, that makes the situation palpable, and that helps us take in the more abstract notion we’ve already been presented with by the narrator, the idea that Celina chose her moment, that she was wilful to the last, and already, inside the beat of just three sentences, something of her character has been brought to life.

With his usual artful impatience, Cortázar now rushes the detail onto the canvas: Celina’s has been a sudden death (the lungs; the coughing of blood; a case of tuberculosis insinuated) and her partner, Mauro, has taken it hard – he tried to beat up the doctor; he had to be held down in fact. The narrator and José María now cross the city of Buenos Aires by taxi, to Mauro and Celina’s place at Canning and Santa Fe, and there ‘the wake was already organising itself, by itself; the faces, the drinks, the heat.’ Somehow, the grimness of the grieving moment must be got through, and to do so, we can only drift into the story’s past, into its lost love, and now, as we sit with the other mourners and sip maté at the wake, the narrator belatedly and memorably introduces himself – ‘I am Doctor Hardoy, a lawyer who doesn’t fit in with Buenos Aires, not its law courts or its music or its racetracks; and I move as hard as I can in other directions, other bags’ – and he takes us out of the wake and into the past, into the lovers’ heyday:

‘All this was happening, but I was with Celina and Mauro again, the carnival, Luna Park, 1942, dancing, Celina in sky-blue which went badly with her dark color, Mauro with his Palm Beach suit, and I with six whiskeys in me and drunk as a monkey. I liked to go out with Mauro and Celina, a witness to their hard, hot happiness.’

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The city in its Noirish era and this hard, hot love are here conjoined – Cortázar is marvellous on romance, of people and of places both, and it is when he brings the two together, making a portrait of love in a particular epoch and in a particular domain, that he achieves some of his finest moments.

In an attempt to unburden Mauro from even a fraction of his grief, Doctor Hardoy, as the story progresses, takes his friend for a night on the town, but as they sit and sip Quilmes Cristal beer in a café bar, it all starts to gush from Mauro, the grief pouring out like hot wax, and ‘I hardly remember anything that he said, I think, really, it was always the same thing over again. I’ve remembered one phrase: “I have her here,” and the gesture of driving his forefinger into the center of his chest as though he was indicating where a pain was, or a medal.’

The medal – grief as ornament, as an honour to be borne – is the mark of greatness here. Anyway, they proceed to a tango club, and they sit in the smokiness among the sinuous music, and they watch the dancefloor, and now it is the past and present that conjoin, the lost, glorious nights of love seeping and seeping into this awful, grief-filled one, and quickly the madness of grief breaks loose, and now every woman on the dancefloor becomes for Mauro his beautiful, lost Celina.

Doctor Hardoy tactfully escorts us from the story as Mauro tragically prowls the nightclub, and the prose takes on a fade-out rhythm, a lovely, dying fall: ‘I stayed quiet and took my time over a cigarette, watching him coming and going, this way and that, knowing he was wasting his time, that he would come back, tired and thirsty, not having found the gates of heaven among all that smoke and all those people.’

There is a sense in all of Julio Cortázar’s work of a great nervousness – he seems to work from beneath a skin of anxiety. He is palpably, tremblingly alive to the hidden presences in objects and in still life. He considers the lives of buildings and he considers the odd music of natural things. He is fabulous on childhood, on the great dark forest of spookiness that exists at its edges. His leaning, it often seems to me, is as much in the direction of the eerie as it is towards the uncanny.

After he moved to Paris, in 1951, his work started to become more widely known, and his influence started quite early to spread. (And it has spread into our own century, too; Cortázar was a great and acknowledged influence on Roberto Bolaño.) From what we know of it, his pragmatic, day-to-day life had a somewhat antic and impatient note. He translated widely, he wrote stories and novels and poems, he played jazz and had romances – he was a gangly six foot four, and he liked to glower intensely in photographs, with a cigarette clamped fiercely between his lips. He was keenly attuned to the existential

ennui and to the attendant sense of cool that defined his epoch – two of his stories came to be the sources for Antonioni’s film *Blow-Up* and for Jean-Luc Godard’s *Weekend*.

In the last fifteen or so years of his life, his work was impacted more and more by the political situation back home. It was a time of ominous regime changes all over Latin America, a time of juntas and of coups, of a great heaviness on the political air, and the artistic response was for Cortázar’s stories to take on a still more fantastical tinge.

‘These days, my notion of the fantastic is closer to what we call reality,’ he told the *Paris Review*, late on. ‘Perhaps because reality approaches the fantastic more and more.’

In his fiction he could be cussed and tricky. He is happy to leave the awkward bits remaining in a story – the elbows and knuckles of a story – and in this way he allows life in. He is aware that life is ever hovering towards a condition of shapelessness and the only sense we can put on it is narrative sense. He reads very freshly now. His stories encountered in the present epoch seem to offer something in commentary to it. It is as if he could sense how crazy the world was going to get. His set-ups still reverberate and the dialogue still sings. You rarely catch what sounds like an antique note in this work; these stories have not with the years gathered a sepia tone. Sometimes, the note he plays in his stories is clear as a bell, and his narrative intentions are clear; at other times, he opts for a kind of woozy music, and the meaning is blurred and uncertain, but we can gather well enough that he is trying to unseat the reader, that he is teasing readerly expectation. Half the time you wouldn’t know what the rogue is up to but you’re happy to go along for the steer.

Julio Cortázar was born in 1914 under the sign of Virgo in Brussels and he died in 1984 under Aquarius in Paris and he is buried there at the Cimetière du Montparnasse.

Kevin Barry
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Introduction by Alberto Manguel

It was 1963. We were fifteen years old and in the third year of the Colegio Nacional de Buenos Aires, the vast, mausoleum-like building that had, for over a century, bred politicians and intellectuals for the consumption of the state. Here we studied Argentinian history and Spanish, Latin and chemistry, the geography of Asia through long lists of rivers, lakes and mountains, and something called Hygiene which mystified us then (and mystifies me still). For us, it was the Age of Discovery: socialism, metaphysics, the arts of bribery and counterfeiting, friendship, surrealism, Ezra Pound, horror movies, the Beatles and sex. Under the influence of a Borges story that suggested that reality was a fiction, we went around the stores close to the school asking whether they sold *fiulsos* (a word we had just made up) and to our immense delight were told at one old haberdasher's that they didn't have any right now but would be receiving some soon. It was in this welcoming spirit that one afternoon we discovered Cortázar.

One of us had found, in the bookstore across the street from school, a small volume called *Bestiario*. It was square, the size of a shirt pocket, and the cover showed a solarized black and white photograph of a woman or a cat. We took turns to read the stories: a house inhabited by an elderly couple, brother and sister, is gradually taken over by unnamed invaders; two young people on a bus discover a conspiracy of passengers carrying bunches of flowers; a live tiger roams an otherwise ordinary Buenos Aires household. What these stories meant, why they were written, what allegorical or satirical meanings they might have, we didn't know and we didn't care; their humour corresponded exactly to our mood: absurd, irreverent, nostalgic for something that hadn't yet happened.

I was going up in the elevator and just between the first and second floors I felt I was going to vomit up a little rabbit. I have never described this to you before, not so much, I don't think, from lack of truthfulness as that, just naturally, one is not going to explain to people at large that from time to time one vomits up a small rabbit.

We became Cortázar followers. We read the stories in *End of the Game*, *The Secret Weapons*, *All Fires the Fire*. We understood exactly what it meant when he spoke of the dangers of walking an unmentionable creature through the city, of attending a play and finding ourselves suddenly on the stage, of being transported from an innocent operating table to the sacrificial altar of an ancient Aztec priest. These nightmares made sense to us; we didn't know then that they were also describing something like the soul of the times.

Cortázar was born in Brussels in 1914, of Argentinian parents, and was brought up and educated in Buenos Aires. In his early twenties, working as a teacher in the provinces, he started writing his first short stories. "House Taken Over", one of the masterpieces of fantastic literature, was published by an admiring Jorge Luis Borges in 1948 in a small municipal magazine. In 1951, during Perón's dictatorship – but explicitly not for political reasons – he moved to Paris where he lived for the rest of his life, preserving in his storytelling (an exile's privilege) a Buenos Aires that no longer existed.

So much for the biography.

When I met him, he was already a celebrated writer – a couple of celebrated writers, in fact. Because in my reader's imagination there were two Cortázars, and they seemed opposed to one another. One was the author of the books that had first attracted me to him, the playful storyteller who shared the logic of Lewis Carroll and a surrealist humour. The other was the political writer, one of the "fellow travelers" sympathetic to the revolutionary cause. In certain writers (the Mexican Juan Rulfo, the Argentinian Rodolfo Walsh) both were inextricably one. Not so in the case of Cortázar.

In 1968, just after the May Revolution, during which the French students had taken over the city, I arrived in Paris and, with an introduction from the poet Alejandra Pizarnik, went to see him. The man I met was a baby-faced giant (he was almost two metres tall), immensely affable and with a grim sense of humour. Cortázar offered to guide me through the city. He showed me the archway under which Pierre Curie had been struck dead by a carriage and where Marie Curie had picked up the scattered bits of his precious brain; he took me to the Place Dauphine, the triangular opening at the tip of the Isle de la Cité, which Aragon called "the sex of Paris"; he pointed out Picasso's bust of Apollinaire across from the Café Bonaparte; he suggested I take his picture in front of his favourite May '68 graffiti: "*L'imagination au pouvoir*", "Imagination to Power".

Five years before our meeting, in 1963, he had published *Hopscotch*, the novel through which, Mario Vargas Llosa declared, Latin American writers "learned that literature was an inspired way of enjoying ourselves, that it was possible to explore the secrets of the world and of language while having a great time and

that, while playing, one could explore mysterious levels of life hidden to our rational mind, to our logical intelligence, chasms of experience into which no one can look without serious risks, such as madness or death.” As most readers now know (even those who have never read the novel) *Hopscotch* gives us explicit permission to go through the story following whatever sequence of chapters; Cortázar suggests one sequence (not the one in which the book is arranged) as if to imply that, by once ignoring the hierarchy of chapters imposed by the novelist, all other combinations are then possible. A precursor of Cortázar’s game was *Museum of the Eternal Novel* by Borges’s mentor, Macedonio Fernández, which offers the reader a number of forewords and first chapters, and no ending. “My readers,” Fernández had declared, “are the readers of beginnings – that is to say, the perfect readers.” Another precursor might have been Borges’s story, “An Examination of the Work of Herbert Quain”, in which the reader is invited to follow, not a random sequence of chapters, but a series of novels each of which chooses a different possibility stemming from the same plot. In each of these cases, what matters is the reader’s illusion of intellectual freedom (which Laurence Sterne, the master of them all, had proposed in *Tristram Shandy*). The computer games of hypertext continue and enhance this illusion.

But while Cortázar was pursuing these literary games, he was also attempting to respond to the political struggles in Latin America. Cuba’s Revolution had seemed a promise to most artists and intellectuals, and Cortázar – in spite of the warnings from Cubans exiled in Paris – gave Castro his support. For someone such as Cortázar, voluntarily distanced from the place he still called home, an artistic response didn’t seem enough; a political response was required, a *prise de position*, a badge of allegiance. Rather than write the fantastic tales for which he had become famous, he attempted a more realistic, even documentary form of writing – and failed. Those accusatory stories and his novel *A Manual for Manuel* flounder in spite (or because) of these good intentions. Cortázar himself was well aware of the dangers of a literature written from a sense of duty. Speaking in 1962 to a Cuban audience in Havana, he said that he fervently believed in the future of Cuba’s literature. “But this literature will not have been written through obligation, following the slogans of the day. Its themes will be born only when their time has come, when the writer feels the need to fashion them into stories or novels, poems or plays. Its themes will then carry a deep and true-ringing message because they won’t have been chosen for didactic or proselytizing reasons; they will have been chosen because an irresistible force will have struck the writer who, calling on all the resources of his art and craft, without sacrificing anything to anyone, will transmit this force to the reader, in the manner in which

all essential things are transmitted: from blood to blood, hand to hand, human being to human being.”

Then, all of a sudden, in the late seventies, Cortázar, still faithful to his old political beliefs but disillusioned with the possibility of rendering these in literary terms, “without sacrificing anything to anyone”, returned to his fantastic writing in his final book, *Unreasonable Hours*. Magically, a number of these stories – “Tara”, “The School At Night”, above all the masterful “Nightmares” – are not only brilliant examples of Cortázar at his fantastic best, but also among the most powerful political stories written in Spanish in this period – a period especially noted for the literature of outrage sparked by the military dictatorships throughout Latin America. In “Tara”, the leader of a group of guerrilleros who have sought refuge from the military in a poor, far-away village, finds in the word games he likes to play the revelation he seeks and which will allow him, before his death, to understand the evil he has been fighting. “The School At Night” follows the venerable tradition of a hero’s cautionary descent to the underworld where, among the horrors, he is given to see the dreadful times to come. “Nightmares”, perhaps the last story Cortázar wrote, is in many ways a companion piece to “House Taken Over”, only that here the invading presence is in the mind of a comatose woman while the outsiders – her family – can only witness the invasion from the wings. The moment of understanding overlaps with that of final destruction, when the unconscious woman’s vision coincides with an assault from the real world. Anyone familiar with the report on Argentina’s so-called “disappeared” (published under the title *Nunca Más*) will understand exactly the overlapping of both atrocious ends.

What will Cortázar be remembered for? I venture to suggest that, like one of his own characters, he will undergo a metamorphosis. The common reality that attached itself to him like a second skin – the political struggles, the difficult affairs of the heart, the messy business of literature with its passion for novelty and gossip – will quietly fade and what will remain is the shining teller of uncanny tales, tales that hold a delicate balance between the unspeakable and that which must be told, between the daily horrors of which we appear to be capable and the magical events with which we are gifted every night in the labyrinthine recesses of the mind.

A M

London, summer 1997

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House Taken Over

We liked the house because, apart from its being old and spacious (in a day when old houses go down for a profitable auction of their construction materials), it kept the memories of great-grandparents, our paternal grandfather, our parents and the whole of childhood.

Irene and I got used to staying in the house by ourselves, which was crazy, eight people could have lived in that place and not have gotten in each other's way. We rose at seven in the morning and got the cleaning done and about eleven I left Irene to finish off whatever rooms and went to the kitchen. We lunched at noon precisely; then there was nothing left to do but a few dirty plates. It was pleasant to take lunch and commune with the great hollow, silent house, and it was enough for us just to keep it clean. We ended up thinking, at times, that that was what had kept us from marrying. Irene turned down two suitors for no particular reason, and María Esther went and died on me before we could manage to get engaged. We were easing into our forties with the unvoiced concept that the quiet, simple marriage of sister and brother was the indispensable end to a line established in this house by our grandparents. We would die here someday, obscure and distant cousins would inherit the place, have it torn down, sell the bricks and get rich on the building plot; or more justly and better yet, we would topple it ourselves before it was too late.

Irene never bothered anyone. Once the morning housework was finished, she spent the rest of the day on the sofa in her bedroom, knitting. I couldn't tell you why she knitted so much. I think women knit when they discover that it's a fat excuse to do nothing at all. But Irene was not like that, she always knitted necessities, sweaters for winter, socks for me, handy morning robes and bedjackets for herself. Sometimes she would do a jacket, then unravel it the next moment because there was something that didn't please her; it was pleasant to see a pile of tangled wool in her knitting basket fighting a losing battle for a few hours to retain its shape. Saturdays I went downtown to buy wool; Irene had faith in my good taste, was pleased with the colors and never a skein had to be returned. I took advantage of these trips to make the rounds of the bookstores, uselessly asking if they had anything new in French literature. Nothing worthwhile had arrived in Argentina since 1939.

But it's the house I want to talk about, the house and Irene, I'm not very important. I wonder what Irene would have done without her knitting. One can reread a book, but once a pullover is finished you can't do it over again, it's some kind of disgrace. One day I found that the drawer at the bottom of the chiffonier, replete with mothballs, was filled with shawls, white, green, lilac. Stacked amid a great smell of camphor – it was like a shop; I didn't have the nerve to ask her what she planned to do with them. We didn't have to earn our living, there was plenty coming in from the farms each month, even piling up. But Irene was only interested in the knitting and showed a wonderful dexterity, and for me the hours slipped away watching her, her hands like silver sea-urchins, needles flashing, and one or two knitting baskets on the floor, the balls of yarn jumping about. It was lovely.

How not to remember the layout of that house. The dining room, a living room with tapestries, the library and three large bedrooms in the section most recessed, the one that faced toward Rodríguez Peña. Only a corridor with its massive oak door separated that part from the front wing, where there was a bath, the kitchen, our bedrooms and the hall. One entered the house through a vestibule with enameled tiles, and a wrought-iron grated door opened onto the living room. You had to come in through the vestibule and open the gate to go into the living room; the doors to our bedrooms were on either side of this, and opposite it was the corridor leading to the back section going down the passage, one swung open the oak door beyond which was the other part of the house; or just before the door, one could turn to the left and go down a narrower passageway which led to the kitchen and the bath. When the door was open, you became aware of the size of the house; when it was closed, you had the impression of an apartment, like the ones they build today, with barely enough room to move around in. Irene and I always lived in this part of the house and hardly ever went beyond the oak door except to do the cleaning. Incredible how much dust collected on the furniture. It may be Buenos Aires is a clean city, but she owes it to her population and nothing else. There's too much dust in the air, the slightest breeze and it's back on the marble console tops and in the diamond patterns of the tooled-leather desk set. It's a lot of work to get it off with a feather duster; the motes rise and hang in the air, and settle again a minute later on the pianos and the furniture.

I'll always have a clear memory of it because it happened so simply and without fuss. Irene was knitting in her bedroom, it was eight at night, and I suddenly decided to put the water up for *maté*. I went down the corridor as far as the oak door, which was ajar, then turned into the hall toward the kitchen, when I heard something in the library or the dining room. The sound came

through muted and indistinct, a chair being knocked over onto the carpet or the muffled buzzing of a conversation. At the same time or a second later, I heard it at the end of the passage which led from those two rooms toward the door. I hurled myself against the door before it was too late and shut it, leaned on it with the weight of my body; luckily, the key was on our side; moreover, I ran the great bolt into place, just to be safe.

I went down to the kitchen, heated the kettle, and when I got back with the tray of *maté* I told Irene:

“I had to shut the door to the passage. They’ve taken over the back part.” She let her knitting fall and looked at me with her tired, serious eyes.

“You’re sure?”

I nodded.

“In that case,” she said, picking up her needles again, “we’ll have to live on this side.”

I sipped at the *maté* very carefully, but she took her time starting her work again. I remember it was a grey cardigan she was knitting. I liked that cardigan.

The first few days were painful, since we’d both left so many things in the part that had been taken over. My collection of French literature, for example, was still in the library. Irene had left several folios of stationery and a pair of slippers that she used a lot in the winter. I missed my briar pipe, and Irene, I think, regretted the loss of an ancient bottle of liver tonic. It happened repeatedly (but only in the first few days) that we would close some drawer or cabinet and look at one another sadly.

“It’s not here.”

One thing more among the many lost on the other side of the house.

But there were advantages, too. The cleaning was so much simplified that, even when we got up late, nine thirty for instance, by eleven we were sitting around with our arms folded. Irene got into the habit of coming to the kitchen with me to help get lunch. We thought about it and decided on this: while I prepared the lunch, Irene would cook up dishes that could be eaten cold in the evening. We were happy with the arrangement because it was always such a bother to have to leave our bedrooms in the evening and start to cook. Now we made do with the table in Irene’s room and platters of cold supper.

Since it left her more time for knitting, Irene was content. I was a little lost without my books, but so as not to inflict myself on my sister, I set about reordering Pappa’s stamp collection; that killed some time. We amused ourselves sufficiently, each with his own thing, almost always getting together in Irene’s bedroom, which was the more comfortable. Every once in a while, Irene might say:

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“Look at this pattern I just figured out, doesn’t it look like clover?”

After a bit it was I, pushing a small square of paper in front of her so that she could see the excellence of some stamp or another from Eupen-et-Malmédy. We were fine, and little by little we stopped thinking. You can live without thinking.

(Whenever Irene talked in her sleep, I woke up immediately and stayed awake. I never could get used to this voice from a statue or a parrot, a voice that came out of the dreams, not from a throat. Irene said that in my sleep I flailed about enormously and shook the blankets off. We had the living room between us, but at night you could hear everything in the house. We heard each other breathing, coughing, could even feel each other reaching for the light switch when, as happened frequently, neither of us could fall asleep.

Aside from our nocturnal rumblings, everything was quiet in the house. During the day there were the household sounds, the metallic click of knitting needles, the rustle of stamp-album pages turning. The oak door was massive, I think I said that. In the kitchen or the bath, which adjoined the part that was taken over, we managed to talk loudly, or Irene sang lullabies. In a kitchen there's always too much noise, the plates and glasses, for there to be interruptions from other sounds. We seldom allowed ourselves silence there, but when we went back to our rooms or to the living room, then the house grew quiet, half-lit, we ended by stepping around more slowly so as not to disturb one another. I think it was because of this that I woke up irremediably and at once when Irene began to talk in her sleep.)

Except for the consequences, it's nearly a matter of repeating the same scene over again. I was thirsty that night, and before we went to sleep, I told Irene that I was going to the kitchen for a glass of water. From the door of the bedroom (she was knitting) I heard the noise in the kitchen; if not the kitchen, then the bath, the passage off at that angle dulled the sound. Irene noticed how brusquely I had paused, and came up beside me without a word. We stood listening to the noises, growing more and more sure that they were on our side of the oak door, if not the kitchen then the bath, or in the hall itself at the turn, almost next to us.

We didn't wait to look at one another. I took Irene's arm and forced her to run with me to the wrought-iron door, not waiting to look back. You could hear the noises, still muffled but louder, just behind us. I slammed the grating and we stopped in the vestibule. Now there was nothing to be heard.

"They've taken over our section," Irene said. The knitting had reeled off from her hands and the yarn ran back toward the door and disappeared under it. When she saw that the balls of yarn were on the other side, she dropped the knitting without looking at it.

"Did you have time to bring anything?" I asked hopelessly.

“No, nothing.”

We had what we had on. I remembered fifteen thousand pesos in the wardrobe in my bedroom. Too late now.

I still had my wrist watch on and saw that it was 11 P.M. I took Irene around the waist (I think she was crying) and that was how we went into the street. Before we left, I felt terrible; I locked the front door up tight and tossed the key down the sewer. It wouldn't do to have some poor devil decide to go in and rob the house, at that hour and with the house taken over.

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Letter to a Young Lady in Paris

Andrea, I didn't want to come live in your apartment on Suipacha. Not so much because of the bunnies, but rather that it offends me to intrude on a compact order, built even to the finest nets of air, networks that in your environment conserve the music in the lavender, the heavy fluff of the powder puff in the talcum, the play between the violin and the viola in Ravel's quartet. It hurts me to come into an ambience where someone who lives beautifully has arranged everything like a visible affirmation of her soul, here the books (Spanish on one side, French and English on the other), the large green cushions there, the crystal ashtray that looks like a soap-bubble that's been cut open on this exact spot on the little table, and always a perfume, a sound, a sprouting of plants, a photograph of the dead friend, the ritual of tea trays and sugar tongs . . . Ah, dear Andrea, how difficult it is to stand counter to, yet to accept with perfect submission of one's whole being, the elaborate order that a woman establishes in her own gracious flat. How much at fault one feels taking a small metal tray and putting it at the far end of the table, setting it there simply because one has brought one's English dictionaries and it's at this end, within easy reach of the hand, that they ought to be. To move that tray is the equivalent of an unexpected horrible crimson in the middle of one of Ozenfant's painterly cadences, as if suddenly the strings of all the double basses snapped at the same time with the same dreadful whiplash at the most hushed instant in a Mozart symphony. Moving that tray alters the play of relationships in the whole house, of each object with another, of each moment of their soul with the soul of the house and its absent inhabitant. And I cannot bring my fingers close to a book, hardly change a lamp's cone of light, open the piano bench, without a feeling of rivalry and offence swinging before my eyes like a flock of sparrows.

You know why I came to your house, to your peaceful living room scooped out of the noonday light. Everything looks so natural, as always when one does not know the truth. You've gone off to Paris, I am left with the apartment on Suipacha, we draw up a simple and satisfactory plan convenient to us both until September brings you back again to Buenos Aires and I amble off to some other house where perhaps . . . But I'm not writing you for that reason, I was

sending this letter to you because of the rabbits, it seems only fair to let you know; and because I like to write letters, and maybe too because it's raining.

I moved last Thursday in a haze overlaid by weariness, at five in the afternoon. I've closed so many suitcases in my life, I've passed so many hours preparing luggage that never manages to get moved anyplace, that Thursday was a day full of shadows and straps, because when I look at valise straps it's as though I were seeing shadows, as though they were parts of a whip that flogs me in some indirect way, very subtly and horribly. But I packed the bags, let your maid know I was coming to move in. I was going up in the elevator and just between the first and second floors I felt that I was going to vomit up a little rabbit. I have never described this to you before, not so much, I don't think, from lack of truthfulness as that, just naturally, one is not going to explain to people at large that from time to time one vomits up a small rabbit. Always I have managed to be alone when it happens, guarding the fact much as we guard so many of our privy acts, evidences of our physical selves which happen to us in total privacy. Don't reproach me for it, Andrea, don't blame me. Once in a while it happens that I vomit up a bunny. It's no reason not to live in whatever house, it's no reason for one to blush and isolate oneself and to walk around keeping one's mouth shut.

When I feel that I'm going to bring up a rabbit, I put two fingers in my mouth like an open pincer, and I wait to feel the lukewarm fluff rise in my throat like the effervescence in a sal hepatica. It's all swift and clean, passes in the briefest instant. I remove the fingers from my mouth and in them, held fast by the ears, a small white rabbit. The bunny appears to be content, a perfectly normal bunny only very tiny, small as a chocolate rabbit, only it's white and very thoroughly a rabbit. I set it in the palm of my hand, I smooth the fluff, caressing it with two fingers; the bunny seems satisfied with having been born and waggles and pushes its muzzle against my skin, moving it with that quiet and tickling nibble of a rabbit's mouth against the skin of the hand. He's looking for something to eat, and then (I'm talking about when this happened at my house on the outskirts) I take him with me out to the balcony and set him down in the big flowerpot among the clover that I've grown there with this in mind. The bunny raises his ears as high as they can go, surrounds a tender clover leaf with a quick little wheeling motion of his snout, and I know that I can leave him there now and go on my way for a time, lead a life not very different from people who buy their rabbits at farmhouses.

Between the first and the second floors, then, Andrea, like an omen of what my life in your house was going to be, I realized that I was going to vomit a rabbit. At that point I was afraid (or was it surprise? No, perhaps fear of the same surprise) because, **Copyrighted Material** before leaving my house, only two days before, I'd vomited a bunny and so was safe for a month, five weeks, maybe six with a little

luck. Now, look, I'd resolved the problem perfectly. I grew clover on the balcony of my other house, vomited a bunny, put it in with the clover and at the end of a month, when I suspected that any moment . . . then I made a present of the rabbit, already grown enough, to Mrs Molina, who believed I had a hobby and was quiet about it. In another flowerpot tender and propitious clover was already growing, I awaited without concern the morning when the tickling sensation of fluff rising obstructed my throat, and the new little rabbit reiterated from that hour the life and habits of its predecessor. Habits, Andrea, are concrete forms of rhythm, are that portion of rhythm which helps to keep us alive. Vomiting bunnies wasn't so terrible once one had gotten into the unvarying cycle, into the method. You will want to know why all this work, why all that clover and Mrs Molina. It would have been easier to kill the little thing right away and . . . Ah, you should vomit one up all by yourself, take it in two fingers and set it in your opened hand, still attached to yourself by the act itself, by the indefinable aura of its proximity, barely now broken away. A month puts a lot of things at a distance; a month is size, long fur, long leaps, ferocious eyes, an absolute difference. Andrea, a month is a rabbit, it really makes a real rabbit; but in the maiden moment, the warm bustling fleece covering an inalienable presence . . . like a poem in its first minutes, "fruit of an Idumean night" as much one as oneself . . . and afterwards not so much one, so distant and isolated in its flat white world the size of a letter.

With all that, I decided to kill the rabbit almost as soon as it was born. I was going to live at your place for four months: four, perhaps with luck three – tablespoonsful of alcohol down its throat. (Do you know pity permits you to kill a small rabbit instantly by giving it a tablespoon of alcohol to drink? Its flesh tastes better afterward, they say, however, I . . . Three or four tablespoonsful of alcohol, then the bathroom or a package to put in the rubbish.)

Rising up past the third floor, the rabbit was moving in the palm of my hand. Sara was waiting upstairs to help me get the valises in . . . Could I explain that it was a whim? Something about passing a pet store? I wrapped the tiny creature in my handkerchief, put him into my overcoat pocket, leaving the overcoat unbuttoned so as not to squeeze him. He barely budged. His minuscule consciousness would be revealing important facts: that life is a movement upward with a final click, and is also a low ceiling, white and smelling of lavender, enveloping you in the bottom of a warm pit.

Sara saw nothing, she was too fascinated with the arduous problem of adjusting her sense of order to my valise-and-footlocker, my papers and my peevishness at her elaborate explanations in which the words "for example" occurred with distressing frequency. I could hardly get the bathroom door closed; to kill it now a significant area of heat surrounded the handkerchief, the little rabbit was extremely white and, I think, prettier than the others.

He wasn't looking at me, he just hopped about and was being content, which was even worse than looking at me. I shut him in the empty medicine chest and went on unpacking, disoriented but not unhappy, not feeling guilty, not soaping up my hands to get off the feel of a final convulsion.

I realized that I could not kill him. But that same night I vomited a little black bunny. And two days later another white one. And on the fourth night a tiny grey one.

You must love the handsome wardrobe in your bedroom, with its great door that opens so generously, its empty shelves awaiting my clothes. Now I have them in there. Inside there. True, it seems impossible; not even Sara would believe it. That Sara did not suspect anything, was the result of my continuous preoccupation with a task that takes over my days and nights with the single-minded crash of the portcullis falling, and I go about hardened inside, calcined like that starfish you've put above the bathtub, and at every bath I take it seems all at once to swell with salt and whiplashes of sun and great rumbles of profundity.

They sleep during the day. There are ten of them. During the day they sleep. With the door closed, the wardrobe is a diurnal night for them, there they sleep out their night in sedate obedience. When I leave for work I take the bedroom keys with me. Sara must think that I mistrust her honesty and looks at me doubtfully, every morning she looks as though she's about to say something to me, but in the end she remains silent and I am that much happier. (When she straightens up the bedroom between nine and ten, I make noise in the living room, put on a Benny Carter record which fills the whole apartment, and as Sara is a *saetas* and *pasodobles* fan, the wardrobe seems to be silent, and for the most part it is, because for the rabbits it's night still and repose is the order of the day.)

Their day begins an hour after supper when Sara brings in the tray with the delicate tinkling of the sugar tongs, wishes me good night – yes, she wishes me, Andrea, the most ironic thing is that she wishes me good night – shuts herself in her room, and promptly I'm by myself, alone with the closed-up wardrobe, alone with my obligation and my melancholy.

I let them out, they hop agilely to the party in the living room, sniffing briskly at the clover hidden in my pockets which makes ephemeral lacy patterns on the carpet which they alter, remove, finish up in a minute. They eat well, quietly and correctly; until that moment I have nothing to say, I just watch them from the sofa, a useless book in my hand – I who wanted to read all of Giraudoux, Andrea, and López's Argentine history that you keep on the lower shelf – and they eat up the clover.

There are ten. Almost all of them white. They lift their warm heads toward the lamps in the living room, the three motionless suns of their day; they

love the light because their night has neither moon nor sun nor stars nor streetlamps. They gaze at their triple sun and are content. That's when they hop about on the carpet, into the chairs, ten tiny blotches shift like a moving constellation from one part to another, while I'd like to see them quiet, see them at my feet and being quiet – somewhat the dream of any god, Andrea, a dream the gods never see fulfilled – something quite different from wriggling in behind the portrait of Miguel de Unamuno, then off to the pale green urn, over into the dark hollow of the writing desk, always fewer than ten, always six or eight and I asking myself where the two are that are missing, and what if Sara should get up for some reason, and the presidency of Rivadavia which is what I want to read in López's history.

Andrea, I don't know how I stand up under it. You remember that I came to your place for some rest. It's not my fault if I vomit a bunny from time to time, if this moving changed me inside as well – not nominalism, it's not magic either, it's just that things cannot alter like that all at once, sometimes things reverse themselves brutally and when you expect the slap on the right cheek – Like that, Andrea, or some other way, but always like that.

It's night while I'm writing you. It's three in the afternoon, but I'm writing you during their night. They sleep during the day. What a relief this office is! Filled with shouts, commands, Royal typewriters, vice presidents and mimeograph machines! What relief, what peace, what horror, Andrea! They're calling me to the telephone now. It was some friends upset about my monastical nights, Luis inviting me out for a stroll or Jorge insisting – he's bought a ticket for me for this concert. I hardly dare to say no to them, I invent long and ineffectual stories about my poor health, I'm behind in the translations, any evasion possible. And when I get back home and am in the elevator – that stretch between the first and second floors – night after night, hopelessly, I formulate the vain hope that really it isn't true.

I'm doing the best I can to see that they don't break your things. They've nibbled away a little at the books on the lowest shelf, you'll find the backs repasted, which I did so that Sara wouldn't notice it. That lamp with the porcelain belly full of butterflies and old cowboys, do you like that very much? The crack where the piece was broken out barely shows, I spent a whole night doing it with a special cement that they sold me in an English shop – you know the English stores have the best cements – and now I sit beside it so that one of them can't reach it again with its paws (it's almost lovely to see how they like to stand on their hind legs, nostalgia for that so-distant humanity, perhaps an imitation of their god walking about and looking at them darkly; besides which, you will have observed – when you were a baby, perhaps – that you can put a bunny in the corner against the wall like a punishment, and he'll stand there, paws against the wall and very quiet, for hours and hours).

At 5 A.M. (I slept a little stretched out on the green sofa, waking up at every velvety-soft dash, every slightest clink) I put them in the wardrobe and do the cleaning up. That way Sara always finds everything in order, although at times I've noticed a restrained astonishment, a stopping to look at some object, a slight discoloration in the carpet, and again the desire to ask me something, but then I'm whistling Franck's *Symphonic Variations* in a way that always prevents her. How can I tell you about it, Andrea, the minute mishaps of this soundless and vegetal dawn, half-asleep on what staggered path picking up butt-ends of clover, individual leaves, white hunks of fur, falling against the furniture, crazy from lack of sleep, and I'm behind in my Gide, Troyat I haven't gotten to translating, and my reply to a distant young lady who will be asking herself already if . . . why go on with all this, why go on with this letter I keep trying to write between telephone calls and interviews?

Andrea, dear Andrea, my consolation is that there are ten of them and no more. It's been fifteen days since I held the last bunny in the palm of my hand, since then nothing, only the ten of them with me, their diurnal night and growing, ugly already and getting long hair, adolescents now and full of urgent needs and crazy whims, leaping on top of the bust of Antinoös (it is Antinoös, isn't it, that boy who looks blindly?) or losing themselves in the living room where their movements make resounding thumps, so much so that I ought to chase them out of there for fear that Sara will hear them and appear before me in a fright and probably in her nightgown – it would have to be like that with Sara, she'd be in her nightgown – and then . . . Only ten, think of that little happiness I have in the middle of it all, the growing calm with which, on my return home, I cut past the rigid ceilings of the first and second floors.

I was interrupted because I had to attend a committee meeting. I'm continuing the letter here at your house, Andrea, under the soundless grey light of another dawn. Is it really the next day, Andrea? A bit of white on the page will be all you'll have to represent the bridge, hardly a period on a page between yesterday's letter and today's. How tell you that in that interval everything has gone smash? Where you see that simple period I hear the circling belt of water break the dam in its fury, this side of the paper for me, this side of my letter to you I can't write with the same calm which I was sitting in when I had to put it aside to go to the committee meeting. Wrapped in their cube of night, sleeping without a worry in the world, eleven bunnies; perhaps even now, but no, not now – in the elevator then, or coming into the building; it's not important now where, if the when is now, if it can happen in any now of those that are left to me.

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Enough now, I've written this because it's important to me to let you know that I was not all that responsible for the unavoidable and helpless destruction of your home. I'll leave this letter here for you, it would be indecent if the mailman should deliver it some fine clear morning in Paris. Last night I turned the books on the second shelf in the other direction; they were already reaching that high, standing up on their hind legs or jumping, they gnawed off the backs to sharpen their teeth – not that they were hungry, they had all the clover I had bought for them, I store it in the drawers of the writing desk. They tore the curtains, the coverings on the easy chairs, the edge of Augusto Torres' self-portrait, they got fluff all over the rug and besides they yipped, there's no word for it, they stood in a circle under the light of the lamp, in a circle as though they were adoring me, and suddenly they were yipping, they were crying like I never believed rabbits could cry.

I tried in vain to pick up all the hair that was ruining the rug, to smooth out the edges of the fabric they'd chewed on, to shut them up again in the wardrobe. Day is coming, maybe Sara's getting up early. It's almost queer, I'm not disturbed so much about Sara. It's almost queer, I'm not disturbed to see them gamboling about looking for something to play with. I'm not so much to blame, you'll see when you get here that I've repaired a lot of the things that were broken with the cement I bought in the English shop, I did what I could to keep from being a nuisance . . . As far as I'm concerned, going from ten to eleven is like an unbridgeable chasm. You understand: ten was fine, with a wardrobe, clover and hope, so many things could happen for the better. But not with eleven, because to say eleven is already to say twelve for sure, and Andrea, twelve would be thirteen. So now it's dawn and a cold solitude in which happiness ends, reminiscences, you and perhaps a good deal more. This balcony over the street is filled with dawn, the first sounds of the city waking. I don't think it will be difficult to pick up eleven small raw bits splattered over the pavement, perhaps they won't even be noticed, people will be too occupied with the other body, it would be more proper to remove it quickly before the early students pass through on their way to school.

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Omnibus

“If it’s not too much trouble, pick me up *El Hogar* on your way back,” asked Mrs Roberta, leaning back in the armchair for her siesta. Clara was straightening out the medicine bottles on the trolley, while at the same time inspecting the room with punctilious eyes. Nothing missing. Miss Matilde would be looking after Mrs Roberta, and the maid knew what needed doing, if need be. Now at last she could go out, have the whole Saturday afternoon to herself, meet her friend Ana for a chat, tea with lots of sugar at five-thirty, soaps on the radio and chocolates.

At two o’clock, when the wave of returning office workers finally breaks against the length of private front doors, the neighbourhood of Villa del Parque becomes luminous and deserted. Her heels clicking unevenly on the pavement, Clara walked down Tinogasta and Zamudio, enjoying a November sun broken by bars of shade which the trees of the School of Agronomy threw in her way. At the corner of San Martín and Nogoyá, while waiting for the 168, she heard a commotion of sparrows above her head, and the Florentine tower of San Juan Mar’a Vianney seemed to her ruddier than ever against the cloudless sky, high enough to give you vertigo. Don Luis the clockmaker went by, greeting her appreciatively, as if commending her tidy figure, the shoes that made her look so slender, the white collar of the cream-coloured blouse. The 168 came lumbering down the empty street, letting out a dry dissatisfied snort as it opened the door for Clara, only passenger in the quiet corner that afternoon.

Searching for coins in her bag full of things, she took time in paying for her ticket. The conductor waited with an unfriendly face, stocky and bow-legged, skilful at managing the turns and the brakes. Twice Clara said to him, “Fifteen, please”, while the man wouldn’t take his eyes off her, as if puzzled by something. Then he gave her the pink ticket and Clara remembered a childhood rhyme, that went something like this: “Please conductor, let me through; punch my ticket, pink or blue.” Smiling to herself, she looked for a seat towards the back, found empty the one marked *Emergency Exit* and sat down with the slight proprietorial feeling that a window seat always seems to give. Then she saw that the conductor was still staring at her. And at the corner of the San Martín bridge, before turning, the driver looked back and he too

stared at her, with difficulty because of the distance and yet searching until he made her out, huddled in her seat. He was a bony blond with a famished face; he said a few words to the conductor; then both of them looked at Clara, and exchanged a glance between them. With a jump, the bus raced down Chorroarín at full speed.

“Cretins, both of them,” Clara thought, both flattered and uneasy. Putting the ticket away in her purse, she watched, from the corner of her eye, a lady carrying a big bunch of carnations in the seat in front of her. The lady looked back at her; over the bunch of flowers, she looked at Clara sweetly like a cow looking over a fence, and Clara pulled out her pocket mirror and became immediately absorbed in the study of her lips and her eyebrows. She had a disagreeable feeling on her neck; the suspicion of yet more impertinent behaviour made her turn round quickly, really angry. Two centimetres from her face were the eyes of an old man in a starched collar, with a bunch of daisies that gave off an almost nauseating smell. At the far end of the bus, on the long green seat, all the passengers were looking towards Clara, seemingly criticizing something about her; she held their looks with a growing effort, feeling that it was becoming more and more difficult, not because of the coincidence of the eyes upon her, nor because of the bunches of flowers that all the passengers were carrying, but rather because she had expected a friendly outcome, a reason to laugh out loud as if, for example, she had a smudge on her nose (but she hadn't); and these attentive and constant eyes settled on the tip of her laughter, chilling her as if the bunches of flowers themselves were staring at her.

Suddenly uneasy, she let her body slide down a fraction; she fixed her eyes on the tattered back of the seat in front of her, examining the emergency handle and the sign *To open the door PULL THE HANDLE inwards and up*, considering the letters one by one without managing to group them into words. By this method she succeeded in creating a buffer zone, a no-man's land in which to think things over. It's normal for passengers to look at someone new coming into the bus, it's proper for people to carry bunches of flowers on their way to the Cemetery of Chacarita, and it's almost expected for everyone on the bus to be carrying flowers. They were passing the Alvear Hospital, and on Clara's side lay the vacant lots at the far end of which rose La Estrella, a zone of dirty puddles and yellow horses with bits of rope dangling from their necks. Clara found it hard to tear herself away from a landscape that the hard light of the sun failed to make cheerful, and barely once or twice did she dare glance quickly back into the bus. Red roses and arum lilies, and, further on, hideous gladioli that looked trampled and dirty, of a faded pink colour with livid spots. The gentleman seated by the third window (he was looking at her now, now he wasn't, now he was again) was carrying black carnations bunched up in one compact mass, like a wrinkled piece of skin. Two girls with cruel noses, sitting

towards the front on one of the side seats, were holding between them the “poor-man’s bouquet”, chrysanthemums and dahlias, even though they themselves didn’t look poor; they were dressed in well-cut jackets, pleated skirts, knee-high white socks, and were staring arrogantly at Clara. She tried to get them to lower their eyes, cheeky kids, but the four fixed pupils had settled on her, as well as those of the conductor, the gentleman with the carnations, and then there was the heat on her neck from all those people in the back, the old man in the starched collar so close to her, the youngsters in the last row. La Paternal: tickets from Cuenca valid only up to this stop.

No one got off. The young man climbed in deftly, facing the conductor who was waiting for him halfway down the bus, his eyes on the newcomer’s hands. The man had twenty cents in his right hand and with the other he straightened out his jacket. He waited, oblivious of the scrutiny. “Fifteen, please”, Clara heard him say. Like hers: a fifteen-cent ticket. But the conductor didn’t tear off the ticket; instead, he kept on staring at the man who finally noticed and made a gesture of polite impatience. “I said fifteen.” The young man took his ticket and waited for the change. Before receiving it, he slid gently into the empty seat next to the gentleman with the carnations. The conductor gave him his five cents, stared at him a while longer, from above, as if examining his head. But the young man didn’t notice, absorbed as he was in inspecting the carnations. The gentleman was observing him; once or twice he shot a quick glance at him and the man returned the stare; both were moving their heads almost in unison but without being aggressive, just looking. Clara was still furious with the girls in the front who now stared at her for a long while and then at the new passenger. There was a moment when the 168 started on its track along the wall of the cemetery, when all the passengers were staring at both the young man and Clara. Only that now they no longer looked at her directly because they seemed more interested in the newcomer, and yet it was as if they included her in the stare, joining both in the same scrutiny. How stupid can grown-up people be, she thought, because even the girls were not that young, each person with a bunch of flowers, going about their business, and behaving so rudely. She would have liked to warn the other passenger; she felt a growing feeling of fraternity towards him, obscure and unreasonable. To say to him: “You and I bought fifteen-cent tickets”, as if that brought them together. Touch his arm, advise him: “Ignore them, they’re so impertinent, staring from behind their flowers like idiots.” She would have liked it if he had come and sat by her side, but the young man – he was young, even though his features seemed hardened – had dropped into the first empty seat available. With a half-amused and half-bewildered gesture, he was determined to hold the eyes of the conductor, of the two girls, and the gentleman with the carnations, and now the gentleman with the red carnations had his head turned back and was staring at

Clara, staring at her with no expression in his eyes, which were as soft, opaque and buoyant as pumice-stones. Clara stared back doggedly, feeling hollow inside; she felt like getting off (but on that street, and in this area, and for no reason at all, really, for not carrying a bunch of flowers!). She realized that the young man seemed uneasy, looking this way and that, then turning round, and being startled by the sight of the four back-row passengers and the old man with the starched collar and the daisies. His eyes glanced over Clara's face, stopping for a second at her mouth, her chin, while the eyes of the conductor, the two girls, the lady with the gladioli were tugging at the young man from the front of the bus, until he turned round to look at them, as if giving in. Clara compared the hounding she had endured a few minutes earlier to the one the young man was now enduring. "And the poor thing, empty-handed," she thought absurdly. She found him somewhat defenceless, with only his eyes to stop the cold fire that was falling on him from all sides.

Without stopping, the 168 entered the dual carriageway that leads into the esplanade in front of the cemetery. The girls moved down the aisle and stood by the exit doors; the daisies, the gladioli, the arum lilies lined up behind them. Further back stood a huddled group whose flowers seemed to direct their scent at Clara, sitting quietly by her window but relieved to see how many were leaving the bus, how comfortably she'd travel in the next section. The black carnations appeared high above; the young man had stood up to allow them to get by, and now he was standing sideways, half-occupying an empty seat in front of Clara's. He was a nice-looking man, simple and candid, maybe a chemist's assistant, or a bookkeeper, or a builder. The bus stopped gently, and the door snorted again as it opened. The young man waited for the people to get off; he would now be able to choose a seat at leisure, while Clara shared his patient waiting and tried to will the gladioli and the roses to leave once and for all. When the door opened, they all stood in line staring at her and at the young man, without attempting to get off, watching them through the flowers that were shaking as if blown by the wind, by an underground wind that stirred the roots of the plants and shook the flowers in bunches. Then the arum lilies left the bus, the red carnations, the men from the back left with their bouquets of flowers, the girls, the old man and his daisies. Only the two of them were left behind, and the 168 seemed suddenly smaller, greyer, prettier. Clara found it proper and even necessary that the young man should come and sit by her side, even though he had the whole of the bus to choose from. He sat down and they both lowered their eyes and stared at their hands.

"Chacarita!" shouted the conductor.

Clara and the young man answered his urgent look with a simple formula: "We have fifteen-cent tickets." They merely said the words in their heads; it seemed enough.