

Carlos Fuentes

The Death of Artemio Cruz

TRANSLATED FROM THE SPANISH
BY SAM HILEMAN

FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX
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I WAKE . . . the touch of that cold object against my penis awakens me. I did not know that at times one can urinate without knowing it. I keep my eyes closed. The nearest voices cannot be heard: if I opened my eyes, would I hear them? But my eyelids are heavy, they are lead, and there are brass coins on my tongue and iron hammers in my ears and something, something, something like tarnished silver in my breathing; metal, everything is metal; or again,

mineral. So I urinate without knowing it: maybe during these hours—for it comes to me that I have been unconscious—I have eaten without knowing it: for hardly had it lightened when I stretched out my hand and, without wanting to, pushed the telephone off on the floor, and there I lay face down on the bed with my arms dangling, a tickling tap in the veins of my wrists. And now I am awake, but I don't want to open my eyes. Just the same, although it is not desired, something shimmers insistently near my face, something seen through closed eyes in a fugue of black lights and blue circles. I tighten the muscles of my face and open my right eye and see it reflected in the squares of silvered glass that encrust a woman's purse. I am this, this am I: old man with his face reflected in pieces by different-sized squares of glass: I am this eye, this eye I am: eye furrowed by roots of accumulated choler, old and forgotten and always present; eye green and swollen between its lids: lids, eyelids, oily eyelids. And nose: I am this nose, this nose, this earth-brown baked nose with flaring windows; and I am these cheeks, cheeks, cheek-bones where the white whiskers are born. Are born. Face. Face. Face, grimace, face that has nothing to do with the lines of age or the grimace of pain; face mouth-open and the eyeteeth darkened by tobacco, tobacco, tobacco. The moist air of my breathing fogs the mirroring glass. A hand removes the purse from the night-table.

"Look, Doctor, he's . . ."

"Señor Cruz . . ."

"In the very hour of his death he had to trick us!"

I won't speak. My mouth is full of old brass: the taste of it. But I crack my eyes and through the lashes see the two women and the doctor who reeks of antiseptic: from his sweaty hand, inside my shirt now palpating my chest, evaporating alcohol rises like a spasm. I try to remove that hand.

"Come, now, Señor Cruz, come . . ."

No, no, I won't open my lips. Or, rather, I won't open

that straight lipless line of mouth that appeared in the reflection. I will keep my arms stretched out over the sheets. The covers reach to my belly. My stomach . . . ah! And my legs remain spread with that cold object between my thighs, and my chest continues sleeping with the same dull tick-tick-tickle that taps in my wrists and that I have felt . . . have felt before, at other times, after sitting too long in a movie: poor circulation, that's what it is, that's all it is. Nothing worse. Nothing more serious. Just poor circulation. One is forced to think about one's body. But it tires a man to think about his body. His own body, that is, the only single body he has. It's tiring. Don't think. Enough that it's there: I think, witness: I—am—body, I. Body that lasts. Body that goes away, that leaves, that dissolves in nerve-ends and scaling skin and cells and globules: my body, upon which this doctor lays his fingers. Fear. I feel the fear a man feels when he thinks about this own body. And my face? Teresa's purse is gone, she took it away; I try to remember my reflection: face cut up by unsymmetrical facets of glass, the eye very near the ear and very far from its mate: a face distributed among three shimmering mirrors. Sweat trickles down my forehead. I close my eyes again and I ask, I beg that my face and my body be returned to me. I ask: but I feel the hand that is caressing me, and I would like to escape it but don't have the strength.

"Do you feel better?"

I don't look at her. At Catalina I do not look, but farther: Teresa sitting in the big armchair, a newspaper open in her hands. My newspaper, I'm sure. It's Teresa, all right, but she has her face hidden behind the spread pages.

"Open the window."

"No. You might be chilled and get worse."

"Leave him alone, Mother. Can't you see what he's pulling?"

Ah: I smell incense. Ah! His murmur in the door. Now

he enters with the holy water held in front, with his black skirts and the smell of that incense, to say farewell to me with all the rigor of a sermon. So: they have fallen into the trap.

"Has Padilla come yet?"

"Yes. He's waiting outside."

"Tell him to come in."

"But the faith . . ."

"Have Padilla come in first."

Ah, Padilla. Come closer. Did you bring the tape-recorder? If you knew what is to your advantage, you would bring it here just as you brought it every night to the house in Coyoacán. Today, more than ever, you ought to want me think that everything goes along the same as always. Don't break our routine, Padilla. Ah, you are beside me now. And the women don't like that.

"Go near, child, so that he can recognize you. Tell him your name."

"I am . . . I am Gloria."

If I could only make her face out better. If I could only be sure of her expression. She must notice this stink of dead skin; she has to see my sunken chest, the gray tangled beard, the fluid dripping from my nose, these . . .

They draw her away from me.

The doctor has been counting my pulse.

"I must consult with my colleagues."

Catalina's hand just touches mine. What a futile caress. I can't see her clearly, but I try to fix my eyes in hers. There, I have her now. I take her cold hand.

"That morning I waited for him with happiness. We rode our horses across the river."

"What are you saying? Don't talk. Don't tire yourself. I can't understand you."

"I'd like to go back there, Catalina. But how useless."

Yes: the priest kneels beside me. He murmurs, as Padilla

plugs in the tape-recorder. I hear my voice, my words. Ay, with a cry. Ay, I cry out! Ay, I survived! Two doctors appear in the door. I survived. Regina, I hurt. I hurt, Regina, I discover that I hurt. Regina, soldier: I hurt, embrace me. They have nailed a cold long dagger in my stomach. And someone, someone else has driven a spike into my guts. I smell that incense and I'm tired. I let them do what they will, let them lift me heavily while I moan. I don't owe life to any of you. I can't stand it, I can't, I didn't choose this, my feet are cold, the pain doubles me up, I don't want these dying fingernails, these blue fingernails. But aaahhh, aaaahhh, I survived! What did I do yesterday? If I think about what I did yesterday, I'll stop thinking about what is happening now. That's a lucid thought. Very lucid: think yesterday. You're not so crazy, you don't suffer so much, you can think yesterday, yesterday, yesterday. Yesterday Artemio Cruz returned to Mexico City from Hermosillo. Yes: yesterday Artemio Cruz . . . before becoming ill, yesterday Artemio Cruz . . . no, he didn't become ill, no, not Artemio Cruz. No: someone else, someone different, someone in a mirror in front of his sickbed, the bed of someone else. Artemio Cruz: his twin. Artemio Cruz is sick, he does not live. No, he lives! Artemio Cruz did live once. He lived several years. Years, not years. No, he lived several days. Days, not days. His twin, Artemio Cruz, his double. Yesterday Artemio Cruz, he who lived only a few days before dying, yesterday Artemio Cruz, who is . . . I am I, and yesterday

YOU, YESTERDAY, did the usual things, just as any day, You don't know if it's worth remembering. You would prefer to remember, there lying in the half-darkness of the bedroom, not what has happened already but what is going to happen. In your half-darkness your eyes would prefer to

look ahead, not behind, and they do not know how to foresee the past. Yes: yesterday you will fly home from Hermosillo. Yesterday, the ninth of April, 1959, you will fly back in the regular flight of the Compañía Mexicana de Aviación, leaving Sonora's capital and its infernal heat at exactly ninety-five in the morning, and arriving in Mexico City at exactly four-thirty in the afternoon. From your reclining seat in the four-motor plane you will look down on a gray flat city, on a belt of adobe walls and galvanized steel roofs. The stewardess will offer you chewing gum wrapped in cellophane, and this you will recall because she will be a very lovely girl, and you will always have an appreciative eye for a trim figure, though your years condemn you to merely imagining things rather than doing them (the words are wrong: clearly, you will never feel "condemned" even though all you can do is imagine). The luminous words—NO SMOKING, FASTEN SEAT BELTS—will just have come on when the plane, entering the Valley of Mexico, will abruptly drop, as if suddenly it has lost the power to sustain itself in that thin air, and then, immediately, will dip sharply to the right, and coats and jackets and bundles and bags will cascade down and there will be a common cry, a common shout cut off by low sobbing as flames will begin to hiss from the outside right motor; and everyone will shout again and only you will remain calm and motionless, chewing your gum and observing the stewardess's legs as she runs down the aisle trying to quiet the passengers. The fire-suppressors inside the motor will operate, and the plane will land uneventfully, and no one will have noticed that only you, an old man of seventy-one years, that only you maintained composure. You will feel proud of yourself without showing it. You will reflect that you have done so many cowardly things in your life that now courage has become easy; and you will smile and tell yourself that no, no, that isn't a paradox: it is true and almost universally true.

You will have made the trip to Sonora by car—1959 Volvo, Federal District plates 712—because several gentlemen in the state government there have decided to become difficult. That is why you will have to make that long hurried trip, to secure the situation again, to reestablish loyalties already bought and paid for: yes, bought, for you will not deceive yourself with ceremonious words: and the gentlemen will be convinced again, persuaded again, that is, bought again, receiving their bribes, another unceremonious word, as levies on the shippers of fish from Sonora and Sinaloa to the Federal District: ten per cent to each inspector, and the fish will arrive at the capital made strangely expensive by the chain of graft along the way, but you will receive more than twenty times their value in "loyalty." You will take satisfaction in thinking about this little arrangement, though at the same time it will seem possible material for a short red-ink exposé story in the newspaper you own, and now you tell yourself that thinking about it is really a waste of time. But you will insist just the same, go on thinking about it just the same, because there are things you do not want to think about, things you want to forget by remembering something else; and above all, you want to forget yourself, the man you find yourself to be now. You will exonerate yourself. You cannot find yourself. But you will meet yourself. They will take you home fainting. You will collapse in your office; the doctor will come and will say that he can't make a diagnosis for several hours; other doctors will come; they won't know anything, they won't understand anything, they will mouth long difficult words. And you will become the images of your imagination, like an empty wrinkled wineskin. Your chin will tremble. There will be a dirty smell in your mouth, a bad smell at your armpits, and above all your crotch will stink. And there you will be thrown to lie, without shaving or bathing, a collection of sweats, a residue of irritated nerves and unconscious

physiological functions. Yet just the same, you will go on insisting on remembering what will happen yesterday.

From the airport you will go to your office, crossing a city impregnated with tear-gas because the police will have just finished breaking up a demonstration in the Caballito plaza. You will meet with your editor-in-chief and discuss the front page heads, the editorials, and the cartoons, and you will feel pleased. You will receive a visit from your Yankee associate and you'll make clear to him the clear danger in these misnamed "reform" movements to clean up the unions. Afterward your administrator, Padilla, will come to your office and report that the Indians go on agitating, and you, through Padilla, will send sharp word to the manager of the *ejido*, telling him to clamp down on them, for that's what you pay him for. Oh, you will work hard yesterday in the morning. The representative of a certain Latin-American benefactor will call on you, and you will persuade him to step up the subsidy he gives your newspaper. You will phone your gossip columnist and tell her to light some squibs under that Couto who has been waging war on your interests in Sonora. You will do so much! And later, you will sit with Padilla and go over your accounts, which will be very entertaining. One whole wall of your office is covered by the map that shows the sweep and inter-relationships of your business network: the newspaper in Mexico City, and the real estate there and in Puebla, Guadalupe, Monterrey, Culiacán, Hermosillo, Guaymas, and Acapulco. The sulfur domes in Jalisco, the mines in Hidalgo, the timber concessions in Tarahumara. The chain of hotels, the pipe foundry, the fish business. The financing operations, the stock holdings, the administration of the company formed to lend money to the railroad, the legal representation of North American firms, the directorships of banking houses, the foreign stocks—dyes, steel, and detergents; and one little item that does not appear on the wall: fifteen

million dollars deposited in banks in Zurich, London, and New York. Yes: you will light a cigarette, in spite of the warnings you have had from your doctor, and to Padilla will relate again the steps by which you gained your wealth: loans at short terms and high interest to peasants in Puebla, just after the Revolution; the acquisition of land around the city of Puebla, whose growth you foresaw; acres for subdivision in Mexico City, thanks to the friendly intervention of each succeeding president; the daily newspaper; the purchase of mining stock; the formation of Mexican-U.S. enterprises in which you participated as front-man so that the law would be complied with; trusted friend of North Americans investors, intermediary between New York and Chicago and the government of Mexico; the manipulation of stock prices to move them to your advantage, buying and selling, always at a profit; the gilded El Dorado years of President Alemán, and your final consolidation; the acquisition of *ejido* farm lands taken from their peasant occupants to project new subdivisions in cities of the interior; the timber concessions. Yes, you will sigh, asking Padilla for another match, twenty good years, years of progress, of peace and collaboration among the classes; twenty years of progress after the demagoguery of Lázaro Cárdenas; twenty years of submissive labor leaders, of broken strikes, of protection for industry. And now you will raise your hands to your stomach and to your head of grayed chestnut hair, to your oily face, and you will see yourself reflected in the glass top of your desk, the image of your sick twin, as all sounds will suddenly flee, laughing, from your hearing, and the sweat of men will swirl around you and their bodies will suffocate you, and you will lose consciousness. The twin in the glass will join the other, who is yourself, join the seventy-one-year-old old man who will fall, unconscious, between the swivel chair and the steel desk: and you will be here and you will not know which events of your life will

pass into your biography, or which will be suppressed and hidden; you won't know. They are vulgar facts and events, and you will not be the first man with such a page to his credit or discredit; but after all you will have enjoyed yourself, and you will not forget this, though you will be remembering other things, other days, you will have to remember them: days near, far, pushed toward forgetfulness or brought up by recollection, days of encounter and rebound, of fugitive love, of freedom, rancor, failure, of will, days that were and will be more than any names you can give them: days when destiny will sniff after you like a bloodhound and will find you and frighten you and embody you in words and actions: your complex, opaque, adipose solidity bound forever to that other, impalpable stuff that is your soul absorbed by your solidity: love of fresh quinces, ambition of growing fingernails, tedium of progressive baldness, melancholy of the sun and desert, debility of dirty plates, distraction of tropical rivers, fear of sabers and gunpowder, loss of the wind-fresh sheets, youth of dark horses, old age of abandoned sea-shores, meetings with envelopes bearing foreign stamps, repugnance of burning incense, nicotine sickness, pain of red earth, tenderness of an afternoon patio, spirit of all matter and stuff of all souls: the cutting edge of memory that separates the two halves; life's solder that welds them together again, joins them and dissolves them, follows and finds them: fruit with two halves that today will be made one again, and you will remember the half you left behind: destiny will meet you, and you will yawn: you won't have to remember now, and you will yawn: events and their feelings stand clear and free of each other and fall broken beside the long road: there, behind, there was a garden—if you could only go back to it, if you could only find it again at the last; but you will yawn: you have always held your ground, you will yawn, and so you are in the garden, but the pale leaves deny the fruit and the

dusty gullet denies the water: you will yawn: days will be different and the same, distant and present, soon they will forget their necessity, their urgency and terror, and you will yawn: you will open your eyes and see the women there with their false solicitude: you will whisper their names: Catalina, Teresa: they will not cease to hide their true feelings of betrayal and violation, their irritated disapproval transformed now by necessity into a mask of worry, affection, and sorrow: that mask will be the first sign of the transition that your illness and the presence of the doctors will impose upon them: you will yawn. You will close your eyes and you will yawn. You, he, Artemio Cruz, who will believe in your days without seeing them

[1941: July 6]

HE RODE by limousine toward his office. The chauffeur was driving, and he went on reading the morning paper, but at that moment and quite casually he happened to look up and he saw the two women entering a shop. He watched them and wrinkled his eyes, and then the car moved on and he continued reading the news from Sidi Barrani and El Alamein, looking at the photos of Rommel and Montgomery. The chauffeur was sweating in the heat of the sun and could not turn on the radio. He, in back, reflected that he had not done badly in associating himself with the Colombian coffee-growers when the war in Africa began, and the two women entered the shop and the shop-girl asked them please to be seated while she advised the proprietress (for she knew who they were, this mother and daughter, and her instructions were to inform the proprietress the moment

they entered): the shop-girl walked silently over the carpets to the room where the proprietress was addressing invitations spread on a green leather table, and she, when the shop-girl entered and said that the señora and her daughter were there, let fall the spectacles that hung from a silver chain, and sighed and said: "Ah, yes, ah, yes . . . the date is nearing now," and she thanked the girl for having informed her, and patted her violet hair and pursed her lips and put out her mentholated cigarette, and in the shop saloon the two women had taken seats and they did not speak until the proprietress came into sight; then the mother, who had this notion of appearances, pretended to be carrying on a conversation that had never been begun, and said in a loud voice, but that one seems to me much the more beautiful. I don't know what you think, but that is the one I would choose if the choice were mine. Really, it's very lovely. Her daughter nodded, accustomed to these conversations that were not directed to her but to the person now entering, who took the daughter's hand but not the mother's—because the mother did not offer her hand—and greeted them with an enormous smile and with a bob of her violet head. The daughter started to slide to the right so that the proprietress might sit on the sofa too, but the mother stopped her with a glance and a finger wagging near her chest, and the daughter looked with sympathy at the woman with violet hair who had remained standing and now was asking them if they had decided yet. No, said the mother, no, they were still undecided, and for this reason they would like to see the gowns again . . . on this choice so much depended, everything else, such details, that is to say, as the colors of the flowers, the gowns of the ladies, and all that, but I'm sorry to cause you so much work. I would like . . .

"Please, señora. We are happy to serve you."

"Yes, we would like to be sure."

"Naturally."

"We don't want to make a mistake, and then later, at the last minute . . ."

"You are right. It's a wise to choose slowly and calmly, and not, later . . ."

"Yes. We want to be sure."

"I'll go to tell the girls to get ready."

They were left alone and the daughter stretched her legs and the mother looked at her with alarm and wagged all her fingers at once, for she could see the girl's garters, and at the same time she gestured for her to put a little spit on the left stocking: the daughter looked and found the place where the silk had broken, and she wet her index finger in her mouth and touched it to the budding run. She stretched again, explained I'm a little sleepy, as the señora touched her hand and they continued sitting on the rose brocade cushions, without speaking until the daughter said that she was hungry, and the mother replied that afterward they would go to Sanborn's and have breakfast, although she, the mother, would not eat because recently she had been putting on too much weight, a problem the girl did not have to worry about yet.

"No?"

"No, you still have your girl's figure. But later, watch out. In my family we all have good figures when we are young, but after forty . . ."

"You're doing very well still."

"You don't agree, that's what happens, you never agree. Besides . . ."

"I woke up hungry this morning and had a good breakfast."

"You don't have to worry now. Later, yes, be careful."

"Does child-bearing make us very fat?"

"No, that isn't the problem, that isn't really the problem. A ten-day diet and you'll be just as you were before. The problem is after forty."

Inside, preparing her two models, the proprietress knelt with a mouthful of pins and moved her hands nervously and grumbled at the girls for having such short legs, how were they going to glow like ladies of fashion with such short legs? They needed to exercise, she told them, tennis and equitation and all those other activities that serve to improve the race; and the models told her that she seemed irritated, and she said yes, those two women were very irritating indeed, the señora never gave her hand to anyone and although the daughter was friendlier, she was also a little distracted, as if no one else were there; well, to be brief, she did not know them well and so could say nothing, and as the Americans put it, the customer is always right. Now, they had to enter the salon smiling, saying cheese, cheese, cheese. She was forced to work, even though she had not been born to work, and she had grown accustomed to today's rich women. Fortunately, she and her friends could still get together Sundays, the girls she had grown up with, and she could feel herself a human being at least once a week; they played bridge, she concluded, and she clapped her hands seeing that the models were ready. Carefully she removed the pins from her mouth and stuck them into the little velvet cushion.

"Will he come to the shower?"

"Who? Your fiancé or your father?"

"Papá."

"How should I know?"

He saw Bellas Artes pass, orange dome and thick white columns, but was looking higher, straight overhead where the electric cables joined, separated, moved—not they, he with his head back against the soft gray wool cushion—parallel or at angles or connected with the tension distribu-

tors: the other Venetian façade of the Post Office Building, the leafy sculptures, distended teats and empty cornucopias of the Banco de México; he rubbed the silk band of his brown felt hat and with the point of his toe rocked the folding seat in front of him: Sanborn's blue tiles, the carved and darkened stonework of the Convent of St. Francis. The limousine stopped at the corner of Isabel la Católica and the chauffeur, removing his cap, opened the door and he put on his hat and his fingers combed the thick locks along his temples. Vendors of lottery tickets, bootblacks, women in rebazos, children with their upper lips smeared with mucous swarmed around him as he moved toward the revolving door and passed into the vestibule and adjusted his necktie in front of the glass and through it, in the second glass, which looked out on Madero, saw a man identical to himself, wearing the same double-breasted suit, but colorless, tightening the knot of the same tie with the same nicotine fingers, a man surrounded by beggars, who let his hand drop at the same instant he in the vestibule did, and turned and walked down the block, while he, for the moment a little disoriented, looked for the elevator.

Again the outstretched hands of beggars disheartened her, and she squeezed her daughter's shoulder to hurry her into the artificial coolness and the scent of soaps and cosmetics. She stopped in front of a counter to look for a moment at the beauty articles displayed behind the glass, and she found herself looking at herself, then through herself, narrowing her eyes the better to see the rows of bottles and jars on a strip of red taffeta. She asked for a jar of "Theatrical" cold cream and two lipsticks of that same color, the color of that taffeta, and looked without success for money in her crocodile purse: Here, find me twenty pesos. She received her package and change, and they entered the restaurant and went to a table for two. The waitress appeared, a woman wearing a Tehuantepec native costume, and the

daughter ordered nut-waffles and orange juice and the mother, unable to resist, asked for raisin bread with melted butter; and then they both looked around for familiar faces until the daughter asked permission to remove the jacket of her yellow suit, because the sun that fell through the skylight was too intense.

"Joan Crawford," said the daughter. "Joan Crawford."

"No, no, it isn't pronounced like that. Crow-fore. Crow-fore. They pronounce it like that."

"Crau-fore."

"No, no. Crow, crow, crow. The 'a' and 'u' together are pronounced like 'o.' I believe that's how they pronounce it."

"I didn't enjoy the picture much."

"No, it's not very good. But she was lovely."

"I was just bored."

"But you insisted on going . . ."

"They told me it was good. But it isn't."

"Well, it passes time."

"Crow-fore."

"Yes, I believe that's the way they pronounce it. Crow-fore. I believe they don't pronounce the 'd.'"

"Crow-fore."

"Yes, I think so. At least, unless I'm mistaken."

The girl poured honey over her waffles, and when she was sure that every little cranny had its share, she cut them into small bites. Each time she filled her mouth, she smiled at her mother. The mother was not looking at her: one of her hands played with the other, the thumb rubbing the pads of the fingers and seeming to want to lift the fingernails; and she was looking at another pair of hands near her, without wanting to see the faces: how slowly he took her hand and explored it, touching every pore. No, they were not wearing rings. They must be sweethearts or something. She tried to look aside at the puddle of honey

in her daughter's plate, but involuntarily her eyes returned to the hands of the couple at the next table; she could avoid their faces, but not their caressing hands. The daughter's tongue played between her lip and her gum capturing bits of waffle and nuts, and then she cleaned her lips, staining the red napkin, but before she put on lipstick, the tip of her tongue searched for last crumbs and she asked her mother for a bite of raisin bread. She didn't want coffee, she said, though she loved coffee, because it made her nervous and she was nervous enough already. The señora touched her hand and told her that they must go, for they still had so much to do, and paid the check and left the tip, and they both rose.

Boiling water would be injected into the deposits, the North American explained, and would dissolve the sulfur, which would be carried to the surface by compressed air. He explained the process again, while his compatriot said that they were quite satisfied with the exploration, cutting the air with his hand, waving his hand very near his sunburned red face, repeating: Domes, good; pyrites, bad. Domes, good; pyrites, bad. Domes, good . . . He, at his desk, tapped his fingers on the glass and nodded, accustomed to the fact that when they spoke Spanish to him they believed he did not understand, not because they spoke it badly but because he would not understand in any language. Pyrites, bad. The North American spread the map on the desk as he removed his elbows, and the other explained that the zone was so rich that it could be exploited to the limit until well into the twenty-first century, to the limit, he repeated, until the deposits ran dry; to the limit, to the limit, to the limit, removing the fist he had pounded down on the area of green, dotted with little triangles, that indicated the geologist's findings. The North American winked an eye and said that the timber, cedar and mahogany, was also an enormous resource and in this he, their

Mexican partner, would have one hundred per cent of the profit; they, the North Americans, would not meddle, except to advise continuous reforestation; they had seen good timber-land made worthless by foolish cutting; didn't men know that trees meant money? But that was his affair, for with or without the timber, the sulfur was there. Then he, behind the desk, stood and smiled, hooked his thumbs in his belt and rolled his cigar between his lips waiting for one of them to cup a burning match and hold it to him, his lips forming an "o" until the cigar glowed. He demanded two million dollars immediately. They questioned him: to what account? For although they would cheerfully admit him as their Mexican partner for an investment of only three hundred thousand, he had to understand that no one could collect a cent until the domes began to produce. The North American geologist took a small piece of chamois from his shirt pocket and began to polish his glasses, and the other paced from the table to the window and from the window to the table, and he repeated quietly, those are my conditions, and let them not suppose that they would be paying him an advance or anything of that sort: it would merely be what they owed him for trying to gain the concession for them, and indeed, without that payment, there would be no concession: in time they would make back the present they were going to give him now, but without him, without their front-man, their figure-head—and he begged them to excuse his frank choice of words—they would not be able to obtain the concession and exploit the domes. He touched a bell and called in his secretary, who read, rapidly, a page of concise figures, and the North Americans said okay a number of times, okay, okay, okay, and he smiled and offered them whiskies and told them that although they might exploit the sulfur until well into the twenty-first century, they were not going to exploit him for even one

minute in the twentieth century, and everyone exchanged toasts and the North Americans smiled while muttering that s.o.b. under their breath.

The two women walked slowly, arm in arm, with their heads bent, stopping in front of every shop window to say how pretty, how expensive, there's a better one farther on, look at this, how attractive, until they grew tired and entered a cafe and looked for a good table, one far from the entrance, where vendors of lottery tickets could be seen and the dry thick dust swirled, far too from the restrooms, and ordered two orange Canada Drys and the mother took out her compact and powdered her nose and in the small mirror saw the two soft folds of skin that were beginning to form around her eyes, and with a snap closed the compact. They watched the bubbling of their drinks of soda and anime, waiting for the gas to escape in order to sip small swallows, and the daughter secretly removed her shoe and rubbed her cramped toes, and the señora, seated before her glass of orange pop, thought of the separate bedrooms at home, separate but adjoining, and the sounds that succeeded in passing through the closed door every morning and every night: occasional coughing, the fall of shoes on the floor, the clink of the keying on the dressertop, the creaking of the uncoiled closet door, at times even his breathing as he slept. Her back felt cold. This very morning, walking tiptoe, she had slipped close to the door and felt a chill down her back as she had reflected with surprise that all those sounds, loud or soft, were secret sounds; and then she had returned to her bed and wrapped herself in the covers and fixed her gaze on the clear sky, where a few shimmering fugitive lights played, spangled through the shadows of the chestnuts. She had drunk the remains of a cup of tea and had gone to sleep again, until the daughter came to wake her, reminding her that they had a busy day

before them. And only now, with the cold glass between her fingers, did she remember her chilled back, those first hours of the day.

He leaned back in his swivel chair until the springs creaked, and asked his secretary: was there any bank that would be willing to take the risk? Was there any Mexican who would trust him? He pointed the yellow pencil at his secretary's face: one thing was true and he, Padilla, could confirm it: not a damn soul in Mexico wanted to risk anything, and he was not going to let that wealth rot in the southern forest. If the gringos were the only ones willing to finance the exploration, well, what could he do? The secretary looked at his watch. He sighed and said, all right, it's all right, I invite you to lunch, they could eat together: did he know a new place? Yes, the secretary said, a new and very nice lunch place, very good fritters, of squash blossoms, of cheese, and of corn fungus; it was just around the corner. They could go together, then. He felt a little tired, he did not want to return to the office that afternoon; in a manner of speaking, they ought to celebrate. Well, why not? And besides, they had never eaten together. They descended in silence and walked toward Avenida Cinco de Mayo.

"You're very young. How old are you?"

"Twenty-seven."

"When did you receive your degree?"

"Three years ago. But . . ."

"But what?"

"Theory and practice are different."

"And that amuses you? What did they teach you?"

"A lot of Marxism. So much that I even wrote my thesis on surplus value."

"It ought to be good training."

"But practice is different."

"Is that what you are, a Marxist?"

"Well, all my friends were. It's a stage one goes through."

"Where was that restaurant?"

"Close, right around the corner."

"I don't like to walk."

"It's not far now."

They divided up their packages for easy carrying and walked slowly toward Bellas Artes, where the chauffeur was waiting. Their heads were bent and they watched the shop windows as if with antennae. Suddenly, trembling, the mother clutched the daughter's arm and let one of the packages drop: just in front of them were two snarling dogs; the dogs separated, still snarling, and then suddenly leapt at each other, biting necks until blood flowed; they ran down the street and stopped and fought again, viciously, with cold fury and razor teeth, two street dogs, a male and a bitch, mongrels. The girl recovered the fallen package and led her mother to the parking place. They sat in the car and the chauffeur asked if they wished to go back to the Lomas, and the daughter said yes, some fighting dogs had frightened her mamá, and the señora said it was nothing, just so unexpected and so close; they would return downtown that afternoon, for they still had many shops to visit, many purchases to make. There was plenty of time, said the girl, more than a month, but the mother said time flies and your father is not doing anything about your wedding, he leaves it all to us. And you have to learn to hold yourself more aloof. You can't go around shaking hands with the whole world. I want the wedding to hurry up and be over, because I believe it may make your father realize that he is now a man of responsible age. I hope it will do that. He doesn't seem to notice that he is fifty-two now. I hope that children come quickly. At any rate, he will have to stand at my side during the civil and religious ceremonies, and receive the congratulations, and see that everyone treats him like a respectable middle-aged gentleman. Maybe that will make an impression on him. Maybe.

I FEEL a hand caressing me and would like to escape its touch, but I don't have the strength. What a useless caress, Catalina. How useless. What are you going to say to me? Do you think that at last you have found those words you have never dared to pronounce? Today? How useless. Don't let your tongue move, don't permit it the luxury of an explanation. Look: learn from your daughter, Teresa. Our daughter: and how difficult, what a pointless possessive, 'our.' Teresa does not pretend. Teresa has nothing to say. Teresa sits, look at her, with her hands folded, in her black dress, and she waits, she doesn't pretend. Earlier, out of my hearing, she must have said to you: "I hope it ends quickly. He is capable of making himself sick just to mortify us." She must have said something of that sort to you, I heard something of the sort when I woke from that long and gentle sleep. I remember, vaguely, the injection last night, the narcotic. And you must have responded, for you would have wanted to give her words a different twist, "Dear God, that he doesn't suffer long." And now you do not know what twist to give the words that I murmur:

"That morning I waited for him with happiness. We rode our horses across the river."

Ah, Padilla. Come closer. Did you bring the tape-recorder? If you knew what is to your advantage, you would bring it here just as you brought it every night to the house in Coyoacán. Today, more than ever, you ought to want me to think that everything goes along the same as always. Don't break our routine, Padilla. Ah, yes, you are beside me now. And the women don't like that.

"No, Licenciado. We can't allow it."

"It's a custom we have had for many years, señora."

"Don't you see his face?"

"Let me try. Everything is ready. All I have to do is plug the machine in."

"Then you must take the responsibility."

"Don Artemio . . . Don Artemio . . . I brought the recorder this morning . . ."

So I scored a bullseye. I try to smile. The same as always. A man to be trusted, Padilla. Clearly, he merits my trust. Clearly he deserves a good part of my estate, and its administration in perpetuity. Who, unless he? He knows everything. I must pay you well. You inherit my reputation.

Teresa sits with the newspaper opened, concealing her face.

And I feel him arrive with that smell of incense, with his black skirts and holy water, to say farewell to me with all the rigor of a sermon. So: they have fallen into the trap. And that Teresa continuously weeping, now taking her compact from her purse to powder her nose in order to be able to weep again. I imagine the last moment, when the casket goes down, a multitude of women will be weeping and powdering their noses over my tomb. Well, I feel better. I would feel perfectly all right if it weren't for the stink rising from the folds of these sheets that I have stained with such ridiculous splotches. Is that spasmodic snoring my breathing? Is that how I am going to receive that black-skirted dolt and confront his office? Aaaaah. I have to control my breathing. Aaaaah. I tighten my fists, the muscles of my neck, and next to me is his floury face come to assure the veracity of the formula that tomorrow or the next day will appear in every newspaper: *with all the comforts of Sacred Mother Church*. And he puts his shaved face close to my cheeks, boiling with white hairs, and he crosses himself and whispers the "I, a sinner," and all I can do is turn my head and groan while my imagination draws images I would like to throw in his teeth: the night when that poor dirty car-

penter gave himself the luxury of lying upon the terrified virgin who had believed the stories and cozenage of her family and had kept the little white doves locked between her thighs, believing that doing so, she would give birth, the little doves hidden in the virgin garden, between her legs, under her skirts, and now the carpenter mounted her full of a very justified desire, justified because she must have been lovely, lovely, and he climbed upon her to the crescendo of protesting whines from that intolerable Teresa, that pale woman who gleefully desires my final rebellion, that it may be the pretext for her final indignation. And it seems incredible to see them seated there, quiet, without recriminations. How long will it last? I don't feel so bad now. Maybe I'll recover. What a blow that would be, wouldn't it? I will try to look better, to see if you two will take advantage of it and forget these gestures of coerced affection and for the last time empty your hearts of the diatribes and insults that you carry choking your throats, that you carry in your eyes and in that ugly humanity into which you have both been converted. Poor circulation. That's what it is, that's all it is. Nothing more serious, just poor circulation. It bores me to see them sitting there. Something more interesting than they ought to be within the sight of half-open eyes that are seeing things for the last time. Ah: they brought me to this house, not to the other. Hah! How discreet. I will have to rebuke Padilla one last time. Padilla knows which house is my true home. There, in the other, I would be able to enjoy myself now looking at things I love: I would open my eyes and see a ceiling of warm old beams; the gold chasuble that covers the headboard would be within reach of my hands, and the candelabra on the night table, the velvet of the chairs, my Bohemian glass. And I would have Serafin near me smoking and I would breathe her smoke; she would be neat

and calm, as I have always insisted, calm and neat, no black mourning rags, and there I would not feel old and tired: everything would be arranged to tell me that I am still a living man who rules a home, the same as before, the same, the same. Why are they sitting here, ugly sloppy false old women, reminding me that I am not what I have been? There everything is ready and there they know what to do. Here they prevent my remembering, they tell me only what I am now, not what I was. No one tries to explain anything before it is too late. Bah! How can I escape anything here, escape myself here? Yes: and now I see that they have taken pains to make it appear that I come to this room to sleep at night: in the half-open closet I see the outlines of jackets I have never worn, neckties I have never wrinkled, new shoes. I see a desk where books no one has read have been placed, papers that no one has signed. And this elegant vulgar furniture, when were its dust covers pulled off? Ah . . . there's a window. There's a world outside, there's the high wind, wind of the high mesa, wind that shakes the dark trees. I have to breathe it.

"Open the window."

"No. You might be chilled and get worse."

"Teresa, your father doesn't hear you."

"He hears me. He closes his eyes, but he hears me all right."

"Shhhhhh."

"Be quiet."

They are going to be quiet now. They are going to move away from the head of the bed. I keep my eyes closed. I remember that I went out to lunch with Padilla that afternoon. Now I remember. I've beaten them at their own game. Everything stinks, but I'm warm. I've beaten them all. Yes: the blood flows warm in my veins, soon I'll recover. Yes, it flows warm, still giving heat. I forgive them. They

haven't hurt me. It's all right, let them talk, let them chatter, I don't mind. I forgive them. What warmth. Soon I'll be well. Ah!

YOU WILL feel satisfied to have imposed your will upon them—confess it: you imposed your will so that they would admit that you are their equal: seldom have you felt happier. For ever since you began to be what you are, to learn to appreciate the feel of fine cloth, the taste of good liquor, the scent of rich lotions, all those things that in recent years have been your only, isolated pleasures; ever since then you have lived with regret for the geographical error that has prevented you from being one of them. You admire their efficiency, their comforts, their hygiene, their power, their strength of will; and you look around you and find intolerable the incompetence, misery, dirt, the weakness and nakedness of this impoverished country that has nothing. You ache because you know that no matter how hard you try, you can never be what they are but can become at most only a pale copy, a near approximation. For after all—confess it—has your vision of things, in your best and worst moments, ever been so simple as theirs? Never. Never have you been able to think in terms of blacks and whites, goods and evils, God and the devil. Confess that always, even when it has seemed otherwise, you have found in black the germ of its opposite; your own cruelty, when you have been cruel, has it not been tinged with a certain tenderness? You know that every extreme includes its contrary: cruelty, tenderness; courage, cowardice; life, death. In some manner, almost unconsciously, by being who you are and where you are and what you have lived, you know this, and therefore you can never be like them, who do not know it. Does that disturb you? Yes, it's troubling. How much more comfortable to be able to say: this is the good, and this is

the evil. Evil: you will never be able to point it out because we, less protected than they, do not wish to lose our intermediate zone of ambiguity between light and shadow, that zone where we can find forgiveness, where you could find forgiveness. Who would not be as capable as you, if for only one moment of his life, to embody good and evil at the same time, to let himself be guided simultaneously by two mysterious threads of contradicting colors that are born of the same egg, the light thread rising, the dark descending, and that nevertheless and in spite of everything both finally meet again in the same fingers? You will prefer not to think about this. You will detest the I, the part of your you, that calls it to your attention. You would like to be like them, and now, an old man, you have almost accomplished it. But only "almost," no more than "almost." You yourself will make forgetfulness impossible. Your bravery will be the brother of your cowardice and even its twin; your hatred will be born of your love; all your life will have contained and promised your death. You will not have been either good or evil, generous or selfish, faithful or traitorous. You will allow others to establish your good points and your defects; for you, yourself, how will you be able to deny that each of your affirmations will deny itself, and each of your denials affirm itself? No one will really be aware except you yourself, that your existence will be woven of all the threads in the loom, exactly as are the lives of all men. There will not be lacking, nor will there be more than, one single opportunity to make your days what you want them to be. And if you become one thing rather than another, that will be because in spite of everything you will have to choose. Your choices will not negate the possibilities remaining to you, or anything that you will leave behind by the act of choice: but those possibilities will be weakened, attenuated to the degree that today your choice and your destiny will become the same: the coin will no longer have

two faces: desire and destiny will be one. Will you die? It will not be your first death: you will have lived enough dead life, enough moments of mere gesticulation, to assure that. When Catalina puts her ear to the door that separates her from you and listens to your movements; when you, on the other side of that door, move without knowing that someone hangs upon the sounds and silences of your life: who will live in that separation? When both of you know that one word would be enough, yet both hold silent: who will live in that silence? No, no, this is not what you would like to remember. You would rather remember something else: the name and face that the passing of years will wash away. But you will know that if you remember only this, though you will save yourself, your salvation will be too easy. First you must remember what condemns you, and then, saved by condemnation, knowing that the other, the apparent savior, will be the real condemnation; then, having done this, you may remember what you will. You will think of Catalina young and will compare her with the vivid woman of today; you will remember, and will remember why. You will embody what she and everyone thought then: you won't know it, you will just embody it; for you will never be able to hear, but you will always have to live, others' words. You will close your eyes: yes, you will close them. You will not smell that incense, nor hear those sobs, you will think of other things, other days, days that come by darkness to your night of closed eyes and that you recognize by voice, never by sight. You will have to trust your night blindly, without seeing and recognizing it, as if it were the God of your days: your night. And now you will be thinking that merely closing your eyes will be enough to hold your night. You will smile in spite of the pain that begins to return, and you will try to stretch your legs a little. Someone will touch your hand but you will not respond to that . . . what? Caress? Act of attention? Anguish? Guile?

No: for you will have created night by closing your eyes, and from the bottom of that inky ocean there will sail toward you a stone ship that the noon sun, hot and drowsy, will comfort in vain: ship of thick blackened walls raised to defend the Church against the attacks of pagan Indians and to unite the military and religious conquests. Toward your closed eyes they will advance, the rude Spanish, Isabeline soldiers, with a rising sound of fifes and drums; and you under the sun will cross the spacious esplanade where a cross stands in the center and open chapels, theatrical projections of the Indians' native cult, occupy corners. On the height of the church at the end of the esplanade *tezontle*-stone vaulting will repose above the forgotten Mohamadan, Christianized outlasses, sign of a different strain of blood imposed upon that of the conquerors. You will walk toward the façade, early Baroque, Spanish but rich in vine columns and aquiline-nosed keystones: the façade of the Conquest, severe yet jocund, with one foot in the dead Old World and the other in the New, which did not begin here but on the other side of the ocean: the New World arrived when they arrived; façade of austere walls to protect their avaricious, sensual, happy hearts. You will enter the nave, where all that was Spanish will be conquered by the macabre smiling lavishness of Indian saints, angels, and gods: one single enormous nave that will lead to an altar of withered gilt leaves, to the opulent shadows of masked faces and lugubrious, festive, and always compelled prayers, and also to the freedom, the only freedom granted, to decorate a church and fill it with tranquil horror and sculptured resignation and hatred of simplicity, with the dead time that had been prolonged by the deliberate delay of free craftsmen with cunning tool, and by their moments of independence in color and form far from the exterior world of whips and shackles and pustules. You will advance down the nave to the conquest of your own New World. Heads of angels will

pass, prodigal grapevines, many-colored flowers, red globular fruits captured in gold nets, mortised white saints, frightened saints of the heaven the Indian created in his own image and likeness: angels and saints with faces of the sun and moon, with harvest-protecting hands, with the index fingers of guide dogs, with the cruel, empty, useless eyes of idols and the rigorous lineaments of the cycles. Faces of stone behind kindly rose masks, ingenuous and impassive—dead, dead, dead. Create the night. Swell the black sails with wind. Close your eyes, Artemio Cruz

[1919: May 26]

HE RELATED the story of Gonzalo Bernal's last moments in Perales, and the doors of the home opened to him.

"He was always so pure," said the father, Don Camaliel Bernal. "He always believed that action contaminates us and obliges us to be false to ourselves unless it is presided over by very clear thinking. I believe that that was why he left home. Well, I think that was part of the reason, for certainly the storm sucked in all of us, including those of us who never left our places. No: what I'm trying to explain is that my son felt it was his duty to take part in the Revolution in order to offer explanations, coherent ideas; yes, I believe he went away to prevent that cause from failing, like so many causes, to stand the test of realization. I don't know. His thought was complex. He preached tolerance. I am glad to know that he died bravely. I am glad to see you here, sir."

It was not without preparation that the stranger had gone to call on the old man. He had visited certain places in

Puebla, talked with certain men, learned what it was necessary to learn. This was why now he could listen to Don Camaliel's disjointed remarks without moving a muscle of his face. The old man's head leaned back against the polished leather of his chair, presenting his profile to the yellow light that filtered through the dust of the closed library. The high shelves were heavy with volumes bound in calf and sheepskin, and a ladder's small wheels had scarred the yellow-oak floor. Thick books in English and French, geography, belles lettres, the arts, the natural sciences, whose perusal required the use of the magnifying glass that Don Camaliel held motionless between his silky veined hands without noticing that the afternoon sun was shining through the lens and focussing hotly on a fold of his carefully ironed striped trousers. The visitor watched the spot of light. An uncomfortable silence separated the two men.

"Pardon me . . . can I offer you a drink? Or better: you will stay and dine with us." He spread his hands in a gesture of invitation and pleasure, and the magnifying glass fell upon his lap. A thin old man, tight flesh stretched over brittle bones, yellowish white hair flowering around his head, at his chin, above his lips.

"These changing times don't alarm me," he had said earlier, his voice always precise and well-bred, modulated always within the range of courtesy. "What purpose would my education have"—he indicated the book-shelves—"if not to assist me to accept the inevitable nature of change? Things change, in appearance at least, whether we want it or not—why should we obstinately persist in not seeing this and in sighing for the past? Or shouldn't we term it that? You, sir—pardon me, I forget your rank . . . yes, colonel, lieutenant colonel . . . You, sir, I say, I don't know your origin nor your vocation—I esteem you because you shared my son's last hours—but what I mean is this: