In Those Words

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Preface

When I began writing the short novel that follows, I had minimum experience in creative writing, and it had been twelve years since I had last done an academic course. My work over the last decade or so always involved some kind of writing, but writing whose sole purpose was to tell what had happened, was happening, or might happen, and to analyse real or hypothetical events. Emerging from years of working days in which I produced monthly chronologies, fortnightly updates, weekly situation reports, daily faxes -- which frequently amounted to NTR, or Nothing to Report -- it took a great deal of effort to break free from a productivity whose purpose and pinnacle was to get information across in the clearest and quickest manner possible. The first step for beginning to write creatively was to learn to take liberties. (Some of my drafts will attest that it was often hit-and-miss whether I used that freedom to the writing's advantage.) During revisions, I seemed to swing between one extreme of clarifying the text (analysing and synthesising, excising anything that could be done away with); and the other extreme of inventing almost absurdist scenarios as a way of learning to play.

At the same time, I was not prepared to venture far from what I knew intimately. I was more interested in developing a sensibility and some rudimentary tools for constructing (eventually, creating) an engaging story than I was in experimenting with more radical or adventuresome fictions. And, I confess, there was a degree to which I wanted the opportunity to work through, in the slightly detached context of fiction, the intensity of certain stories and vignettes in which I had taken part, as a way of transforming them into

something outside my own experience. I had plenty of raw material which made for interesting story-telling, and I was curious to know if it could work as a background to fiction.

If one of my aims was to free my writing from the obligation to recount, I may well have courted disaster by choosing to write such an apparently autobiographical novel. Like the protagonist of *In Those Words*, I am an American woman who went to live in El Salvador during the war. Also like her, I went a bit naively and longed to belong; and I lived very intimately the drama of the war, both directly and through others I knew, respected or loved. A couple of episodes in the novel are so close to autobiographical that I did, in fact, find it extremely difficult to tinker with them: even when set down as the character's experience, not mine, I could not obtain sufficient distance from the feeling of the events to revise or re-invent them. But most of the events and characters are either radically altered, or invented out of that mysterious blue that is consciousness. In some ways the protagonist is no one I ever knew; in other ways she is someone I was at one time.

Fairly early during the process of composition, I switched from first person to third person narration, in part to distance myself from autobiography, and to make the protagonist viable in, and as, fiction. The transition was not easy and is not yet complete: as my advisor has pointed out on more than one occasion, there remains some ambiguity about whether it is only the protagonist's point of view that is used, or if there is some external narrator intervening. I tried to 'fix' some of the more obvious gashes in the text, but some scars of the ambiguity remain. In order to achieve a seamless narrative, I would have to send the manuscript into hibernation now, allowing it to re-emerge only at the end of a long winter.

It was much later in the writing of the manuscript that I finally brought myself to name and describe the country in which it was all situated. One of the most difficult sections of the work to realise was that which tries to give an idea of what El Salvador is, or what it represented, to me and to a great number of

foreigners who came to know it during the tumultuous and terrifying months (which extended to years) as the war approached its apex. The place inspired a kind of veneration that makes writing about it agnostically seem pale and false. In retrospect, the novel I was writing could not have unfolded anywhere but in El Salvador, and a great deal of whatever strength or beauty it could have is derived from the reality of that country, and from the specific ways that it formed me. I wonder now how the novel would have been written had I *accepted* that fact from the beginning rather than thinking that I might fudge it or camouflage it somehow, as though anonymity might make the story more 'universal'. This was another instance of finding it difficult to know how to use the freedom that fiction offers.

The years that have elapsed since I was part of the 'reality' reflected in the novel have also helped me to gain some distance from my own experience in El Salvador. The world has changed so dramatically since the events of late 1989 and 1990 (the fall of the Berlin Wall, the release from prison of Nelson Mandela, the defeat of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, the army's killing of six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper and daughter in El Salvador, to name just a few) that the late 1980's, when the novel is set, appear almost antediluvian. In writing this novel now, at least I was not trapped by the chronicler's need to report on current events, which is often driven by the hope to influence those events. I was still in danger of being lured by the historian's or the memoirist's compulsion to record and interpret. It was, and remains, a question to me whether the fact of having lived through certain extraordinary or traumatic events can lend weight, depth and complexity to creative work; or if those events provoke such compulsive attachment to some version of 'reality' that it becomes extremely difficult to release oneself into the invented worlds of fiction. I ask this question mostly philosophically, as my own direct experiences are mild in comparison to many writers' shocks.

Living in Mozambique also had consequences for my writing. It was an advantage to be at such great distance from anything remotely Latin American

(only the sparsest of news blurbs in the daily paper - Castro, hurricane, Pinochet, cocaine), as that saved me from the kind of immersion that often drowns a novice writer. There were some technical difficulties in Maputo -- power cuts, waterlogged phone lines that interfered with e-mail connections, difficulties in obtaining books or receiving mail. English was just one of five languages I heard, or four that I spoke, every day, and that tended to corrupt its purity -- or extend its borders, depending on one's view of language. I had to rely on books rather than conversation to 'settle me into' English, the language in which I wrote.

More important was the fact of living in comfort in one of the world's poorest countries during one of that country's worst natural disasters. The immediate demands of flood, malaria and accident victims around me made writing about former times of crisis in a distant country seem nostalgic somehow, or less urgent. The glaring presence of calamity put pressure on my attempts to create productive pockets of solitude. There were actions I felt I had to take, which required my time and whittled away at my limited hours for writing. But even when I was able to extract myself and be alone at a desk, scenes of crisis and mourning vied with my imaginative powers for the attention I intended to devote to fiction.

My young daughters -- or rather, my own desire to be with them -- also exerted both physical and psychic limits on my time for solitude and thus for writing. I don't think the writing would necessarily have been better or been done more quickly if that were not the case, but it certainly made the time away from my desk, and the weeks and months of this year, go by quickly.

In fact, the various pressures I cite also heightened my appreciation of each uninterrupted hour of relative lucidity available to me. In that way, it is entirely possible that the pressures were inadvertently useful, and served to prevent me from squandering this opportunity to write under supervision.

The composition and revision of this work has been very slow, and not at all steady: earlier proposals, outlines and drafts bear little resemblance to what is

presented here. I am grateful to have been allowed the time it took me to get this far, to eliminate so much prosaic and flabby writing. It was (and is) appalling for me to see how awful some of my early drafts were, and surprising to realise how obstinate some elements are once they have appeared in the text. I had to struggle to banish images, cherished but cryptic or tortuous turns of phrase, steps in the actions, even characters and full episodes, which had somehow taken up residence in the work, and aggressively, with little right to do so, staked their claims. Faced with these obnoxious squatters, at times I was tempted to abandon the building and start again on a new plot of land. To take *that* metaphor to its limit, I was even tempted to give up trying to be the builder at all, and instead rent a fully-furnished place on a short-term contract. That is, why use my crude tools to knock together something no one, myself included, might ever want to read, when instead, I could pick up a perfectly executed work of fiction whose language, plot, structure and achievement were already there, fully formed? The effort of trying to engender some of my own writing greatly enhanced my respect, at times reverence, for the writing of others. I no longer see why I thought reading great works and doing my own writing should be comparable, let alone mutually exclusive.

There were times during the drafting of the bare bones of the novel, and during certain desperate hours of its revision, when I thought it would be comforting to have some more easily-achieved tasks along the way to provide guideposts of my progress: those familiar weekly assignments, mid-term papers, syllabi of carefully-selected master works, red ink in the margins of a composition. But I think now that such tasks, while they might have helped to channel some dispersed energy, would have truncated a crucial, if at times amorphous, process of invention, digression, dreaming, exploring and experimenting. They also might have made it more tempting to linger on "technical" aspects of the writing -- how often sentences start with the subject, how to vary the rhythm, whether paragraphs are too long, etc. -- which can become an addictive form of procrastination when the thing as a whole is not

emerging or moving along.

Now that I have come this far, I appreciate that my advisor -- always present through virtual connections -- did not take charge, even when there must have been doubts about whether I was still out there, and that he trusted, apparently, that I would move the work along without continual abetment. My relative isolation in Maputo allowed me to imagine I was writing of my own accord, and, by extension, that I would one day continue to write, even in the absence of this crucial (at least until now) element: the expectation of a master writer's patient attention and careful criticism.

I have been nudged toward submission of the accompanying short novel. Writing this preface helps me to take the difficult step of relinquishing that work to new readers, a step that feels a bit like sending a baby-turned-child off to her first day of school, handing her over reluctantly to the public and her peers when the impulse is still to shield her from exposure. I hope it goes well; I'll have to learn to do without her for a time.

♦ In Those Words ♦

I

Without really knowing how it happened, Greta ended up living in what she liked to picture as the upper left hand corner of the country. Seattle was beautiful, a city on the sea, full of parks and mountain views; and it was safe, easy to navigate on a bike or bus, and full of small coffee houses and old style cinemas. It was a long way from the dead centre of the map, where she had grown up, and even further from the east coast, where a couple of years earlier she had finished college. She had attended to her studies with more enthusiasm than direction, and was still a bit adrift, or, as she preferred to think of it, following a mostly uncharted course.

She was working part-time at the city library's reference desk, a job she found to be comfortable, if uninspiring. During her first weeks at work, she faced the trove of books and periodicals at her fingertips as a challenge, and she would often stay on through the following shift just to mine another new section. Her tendency to load a haystack of associations and miscellany around a visitor's request for plain facts became a liability in that work, because she was supposed to sort and condense piles of information into the neatest categories possible, favouring ease of access over complexity. Some modest inquiry -- say, a map of today's Yugoslavia – would lead her to suggest a stack of books on the subject as though it were an artefact to be discovered through excavation.

Visitors became impatient with the length of time it took her to do the searches, while she found the type of information in the reference books increasingly unsatisfying. She groped to define what she felt was missing, because it was a vague longing, nothing she could put a finger on: something that would lend significance to all the data. During her free time she was taking a course in Arabic, deciphering unfamiliar sounds and learning to read from right to left.

On most Saturday mornings, she rose early, caught a city bus near her house in a solid but unpruned old neighbourhood, and headed to the large public market

down by the water where she wandered between the collections of fruits and flowers, vegetables, seafood and miscellaneous shops.

One Saturday in early summer, she boarded the bus and found a seat next to a white-haired woman with a book in her lap. The woman nodded at her and Greta smiled in return, letting her eyes stray across the palm-size book the woman held open to a hand-drawn portrait of a seashell, framed with a thin inked border and accompanied by a single word in French. She watched her turn the pages slowly, fingering them as though reading by feel, and occasionally gazing out the window. Each page was a similar drawing, accompanied by some French word or phrase, not uniform enough to be a label but not quite poetry either.

Greta habitually avoided striking up conversations with strangers – the obligatory introductions and formalities bored her – but on this occasion she hazarded, "Excuse me, that is an unusual book. Are you learning French?"

"You could say so," the woman responded in an English that was not that of a native-born speaker, but did not betray an accent or intonation. "I like the look of it, but I have no use for it."

She seemed to find that explanation sufficient. Greta, more curious now, continued, "Where did the book come from?"

"My son sent it," she replied, not looking up, touching the binding lightly. "He sends me books, sometimes a note, but I have not seem him for many years." Greta now found the information disconcerting, but the woman sounded matter-of-fact, and continued, "Now I must send him the cinnamon tea they sell at the market here."

"I know the shop where they sell it, it smells good," Greta responded lightly, inadvertently becoming the one to divert the conversation toward pleasantries: the ordinariness of Saturday purchases.

"Ach, it is terrible," the woman said with unexpected vigour, and Greta wondered if she meant the tea or the fact that she must send it, or whatever it was that kept her son away. "What can you do?" she finished, but there was not a sigh, and she did not sound resigned.

The bus, packed full now with passengers, had pulled up to the market. "Do come with me," the woman said, in a tone somewhere between an invitation and a command. Though Greta didn't know exactly where it was she was being asked to go, she was happy for the prospect of such unexpected company on her outing, and thought maybe the elderly lady was a little frail and needed assistance. The two squeezed their way to the exit and onto the street.

The market was full of Saturday crowds and ringing with shouts from the white-aproned fishmongers and with irritated admonitions from fruit sellers not to finger their wares. They worked their way down the stalls toward the shop at the far end of the market, stopping halfway to choose a wet bouquet of sweet peas from a farmer who convinced Greta to add a handful of his pungent cilantro to her fistful. By the time they got to their destination the company of fragrances in Greta's hand had won her over, and cinnamon tea seemed less appealing. For the first time, she actually sampled the brew in the pot, whose smell she had blithely said was good. It was bitter; maybe even something her companion would call "terrible".

"If you are willing to walk, we will head back together," the woman stated more than asked, and Greta, unaccustomed to such directness, followed.

As they walked along what Greta had always thought of as ordinary streets, the woman -- Clara was her name, she pronounced it with an open "a" and a light "r" -- pointed out scenes Greta might never have noticed: Portuguese tiles in the shade of a house's eaves; a postage-stamp garden of bonsai trees by an old shed; a keyhole view down an alley revealing one peak in the mountain range; a grocery store cart on a porch turned wheels-up as a cage for a guinea pig. Greta learned that Clara had emigrated from Armenia as a teenager, "after it was all over". When Greta asked what she meant by "all over", Clara said only, "Many things, too many things, there was nothing left anymore." This and several other things she said, combined with the pace of her walking, soon made it clear to Greta that frailty was a characteristic she had mistakenly assigned to Clara.

They took further joint outings on Saturday mornings, often to complete some task for which Clara preferred to have company. Greta liked to think she was helping her somehow, and she like to hear her talk. She gathered the elements of Clara's life that emerged incidentally in conversation, and tried to work them into a mosaic, but there were large chunks of the pattern that she could not piece together. Perhaps that is how a life may take shape, Greta thought. Not plotted, not moulded, but collected, a piece at a time, and later, laid out, arranged into some sort of order. Some pieces would inevitably be missing, possibly misplaced, or forgotten.

A few weeks later, walking toward home, Clara proposed that Greta accompany her on a short trip she was to take the following week. "I will need to communicate in Spanish," she said simply, "and you are the only person I know who is able to do so. Your expenses will be covered, of course, though it is not a service for which you are being *hired*."

Greta thought the prospect sounded enticing, a welcome break in her routine. She arranged with a colleague at work to trade shifts with her so she wouldn't have to use up any of her leave.

They flew to a city near the border with Mexico. A group of refugees from Guatemala and El Salvador had gathered there after working their way across Mexico, where they almost blended in with the hungry, unskilled, unmonied people there who helped them or tried to steal their things. Finally they had burrowed across a well-defended border into America. Greta could only guess how they had done it, wading a river, squeezing through a fence, hiking in a desert.

On this side of the border they were also illegal and unwelcome but they had happened to come into the care of some law-abiding Americans willing to defy particular laws on behalf of the refugees. Clara was one of the defiant, accompanying what officials called *illegal aliens* to less hostile places further north. The act of accompaniment itself was illegal. The movement called it sanctuary, recalling epochs when the church provided shelter, a sacred place.

Greta knew nothing about the plight of the refugees, or about the countries from which they had fled. She was merely Clara's assistant, and during the first three days of the journey, her language was utterly adequate to the tasks at hand.

"*Mucho gusto*", a refugee woman said, nodding as she shifted a baby from one arm to the other.

"Pleased to meet you," Greta relayed to Clara.

"*¿Tienen hambre?*" Greta would ask on Clara's behalf, and could provide the response, "No, thank you, we ate well this morning."

On the fourth evening a man, flanked by a woman and two children, was called upon to describe to an assembled group how they had come to be refugees, and Greta was unexpectedly pressed into service as interpreter for the public. As the account began, she remembered to maintain the tempo of the English version, not to pause with doubt and get left sentences behind – like playing duets on the piano, she thought, or like reading music but transposing it into a different key as she played. When her mind worked fast enough to avoid a false cognate it was like remembering to play E-flat instead of E, and she could avoid the jarring of a missed note.

She had seen interpreting done once previously, in a court hearing, when the interpreter had transformed the speaker's voice from first person voice to a distant third. "I was surrounded" became "He was surrounded" and then, "He *says* he was surrounded". The interpreter's tale so distorted the defendant's that it should have called forth an arbiter to hold up a red card bringing the exercise to a halt. The judge understood nothing of the gap, and in any case was not interested in the stories told by any person who could not speak his language. Greta was determined not to distance this speaker from these listeners, and trained her mind on the refugee's words.

The narrative Greta translated began innocently enough, with a description of the corn-covered highlands of the homeland and the houses made of rough planks of pine and sticks in which extended families lived. As she

listened and spoke, Greta's mind began to conjure the men and robust women out in the fields or at the river washing, the elderly and the very young staying close by the house, grinding corn, or cooking over a fire, or rocking gently in the hammocks which suspended bodies out of pecking distance of the chickens that wandered in and out from the packed earth yard. She narrated, in step with the descriptions she heard, how on a particular day there had been rumours of the presence of soldiers in the area, and so the able-bodied had withdrawn from the houses to be closer to the shelter of the woods, while they trusted that even strangers would recognise that the home-bound were both innocent and helpless. The soldiers did come, there were shots and then crackling and then a dark blanket of smoke. The soldiers withdrew. *We returned home and found only bodies, smouldering.*

She heard the words only as they emerged from her own mouth, transformed already into English: *my grandmother, my mother, my father who was not well, my sister who was to give birth in a week, my sister-in-law with her baby, my aunt, all dead, sprayed with gunfire and lit on fire. The bodies of my family were lying in a pile. This is the first time I speak of it without tears, we have cried for two months now.*

A voice from the back of the large modern church used as a community hall for the gathering shouted, "Speak up!" and she took a deep breath to send her voice – her own words -- further into the crowd.

The story continued: *We fled from there, worked our way over rocky terrain and down ravines, hid in troughs dug in damp ground, picked our way along from our village toward the north, into Mexico. We saw many more bodies, I can't say how many,* un monton *of bodies.*

Here she faltered, confused by the context of that familiar word, and, struggling to keep abreast of the story, stammered, "A mountain. A mountain of bodies." Before she could wonder whether such a thing existed, and if that was what the narrator had intended, the next Spanish sentence was almost complete. Seeing it slither away from her, she retrieved it from underneath her

layer of wondering and spoke it in English. *Tempo,* she told herself. *Keep up, stop wondering about phrasing, this is the first time through.*

That story concluded, a young man alone stood up to tell his own story. Again, she tripped along to follow the pace. A theatre group – performances on the street – arrests (not *captures,* she thought, her mind starting to wander off, but why not?) – questioning (or was it interrogation? Her mind was tempting her to lose her way), then, "They put a *capucha* on me."

This time, her pause made her stumble. *Capucha,* a word she had never heard. She scanned in a panic her crystal-clear memory of vocabulary lists drummed into dull heads by a high school teacher who had worked his way from migrant onion-picker through college on a wrestling scholarship, and ran his classes like a field overseer. She thought of short stories read for assignments, novels dissected in classes: nothing. The man cupped his hands over his hair. "On my head," he clarified. "Hat?" she ventured. "HOOD!" someone barked out of the sea of faces in front of them, and the image of a child bundled up with a drawstring hood appeared incongruously before her. "They put a hood on my head," she recited mechanically. *Had it been cold in this prison, why a hood?*

The stumble in the narrative bruised her badly, and she hobbled through the rest of the story, searching the darkness before them for suggestions of words, for corrections. Afterwards, she sank onto a step by the platform, distraught for the mess she had made of it. She was supposed to have been the story's projectionist, imperceptible as it rolled on, but her mistakes had jammed the film in the projector until the audience hooted impatiently. *I never said I was qualified,* she said to herself, *I shouldn't have been the one there, it wasn't my fault, had I known I would have refused.*

One of the refugee children came to her side and touched her hair gingerly, a look of timid curiosity on his face. "*Parece oro*", he whispered. "It looks like gold." "*Oro, no,*" she whispered back. "*Maiz. El color de maiz.*" A

sister, only slightly older, pulled him by the arm and hissed at him like a grandmother.

The teller of the hood story finished talking to a man from the audience and came to sit next to her. "Thank you," he said in a gentle, familiar Spanish. "It's not easy to translate like that, you did well."

She shook her head and, strangely, felt indebted to him, and all of a sudden wished she could offer him something he needed. She asked him to tell her why they offered him a hood. The hood, he said, was made of rubber, cut up from old tires and fixed somehow into a pointed triangle. They didn't offer it to him, they slipped it over his head and down over his face and pulled it tight until he couldn't breathe. An alternative to plunging his head into a vat of water, same effect. He was lucky, he went on, since his hood wasn't dusted on the inside with fertiliser, a fine white powder that made you cough and choke and burn. And lucky because when he passed out, they loosened it.

I see, she muttered. Hood. A *capucha* is a Hood.

Over the next several days the stories were repeated many times, and she got more adept at the telling. She would remember that "*monton*" was closer to "a large pile", or just, "a lot". The word "hood" came easily, too, but she would often pause just after it while her brain slipped off on a detour, which got longer and more intricate each time she pronounced the word.

Their mission completed, Greta and Clara returned to their lives in their own city. Greta felt bewildered, with the same sort of stunned amazement of an unsuspecting man who has had a love affair sneak up on him while he is away from home, on a chance encounter, apart for a time from his everyday life, when it is easier to lose your footing and fall over the abyss into the life of the other. An unexpected intimacy arose with her telling the refugees' tales, and it meant that parting from them was a loss, and one with unpredictable consequences:

would memories of that intimacy tug her attention when she least expected, or, on a chance meeting, would the intensity of the initial discoveries have survived the parting?

She and Clara saw little of each other as the summer produce and flowers thinned to tubers and hardy herbs. She knew that Clara remained close to the refugees, helping them to find accommodation and learn some English and, for the time being, work odd jobs. Clara told her that they were settling as well as could be expected, that they were helping the more recent arrivals to adjust.

Her contact with the refugees was Greta's first exposure to the effects of cruelty. Cruelty had always been abstract, as had need, and mourning. The shock of the raw footage had not made her recoil, or shield herself with indifference. She was hit straight on and had not shattered: instead, the blow set off a low steady resonance which echoed in her, and eventually dissipated into the empty space around her when she was absorbed into her old routine.

Two months later, Clara called on Greta again. She showed her a notebook smuggled from a prison and transported north, of crude pencil-drawn sketches depicting the Hood, and the Vat, and a curious Swing to which a person could be attached at various points of his – and, more pointedly, her – body, and Car Battery Cables, attached at one end to a battery, at the other to a body. When Greta saw the cables, she remembered the way unresponsive cars shudder into life on frigid mornings when operated on by those oversized clips. She strained to imagine their use inside a building where no cars entered, and recoiled.

I see, she thought again, as the memory of *capucha* was fanned to life. Hood, Vat, Swing, Cables. Before, I didn't know the words, I couldn't tell those stories. I could begin to, now.

She offered up her services as a mouthpiece for refugees who continued to arrive in the northern city bedraggled, safe, in shock and, she learned to her surprise, aching to go back. Her relation to the stories she translated was

disconcertingly intimate again, a bond formed out of nowhere. She could not hold an interpreter's distance; their accounts tumbled out of her without forming a membrane. She felt the breathing of the person to whom these things, unimaginable, had happened, and as the other said the words, her own voice spoke horrors she could not have invented. She began to confuse herself with the original speaker, lost in the role of one who had survived such things and now felt compelled to relate them. The tales, leaden with pain, were handed to her for an instant as she opened her mouth to the audience, and they left traces in her after they had been spoken.

The vocabulary became very familiar and she could soon tell certain stories, the stories of others, by heart. She took them on as responsibilities, with the earnestness of the converted and the zeal of a preacher. As new stories were bestowed upon her, she accepted them as small treasures. If the original voices were lost – to her, through distance, or if they had been lost to the world, through violent and often ghastly deaths – the stories remained relics of those who had vanished.

After she had accumulated a certain number of these treasures, Greta found that she was straying from her former life and its routine. The telling was no longer a detour; it had become a new course. It was leading toward a place she knew only through the snatches she had, by chance, been able to touch, as the proverbial blind man knows the elephant.

But little by little she was starting to distinguish the parts of what had not so long ago been an amorphous section of Continent. Latin America, Central America, each of its countries: Honduras (one huge banana plantation), Costa Rica (called the Switzerland of Central America), Nicaragua (still euphoric with post-victory revolutionary vigour), Guatemala (rich material for anthropologists, it shared a border with Mexico's Chiapas), and El Salvador (where the beaches were said to be long and white).

She concentrated on Guatemala and El Salvador, the refugees' countries of origin. She pieced together the firsthand stories she translated, with books – guidebooks, history books, academic theses – consulted during her hours at the library, and pamphlets produced by churches and support groups, and descriptions she coaxed from travellers who had ventured recent visits. The pasting together of these sources formed a chaotic collage of images. Both countries were known, now, for their death squads, hit teams with scrawled lists of suspects in hand, moonlighting for the military to hunt down communists, subversives, sympathisers and associates, and kill them without questions. They were close to the United States, and called America's Backyard, viewed as prizes to be seized by Free World America or Communist Russia.

Guatemala's landscape was tinged with dread, the volcanoes rimming the spectacular lake were carpeted with fear. The fine specimens of brightly coloured weavings were crafted by indigenous Mayan peasants who were being killed off like pests. The antique *huipiles* – intricately woven tops with patterns peculiar to each village -- were worn now by widows and now it was mostly orphans left to weave the bags coveted by tourists. In the city the Coca-Cola factory was stocked with striking workers whose leaders disappeared in the night, dragged off. Foreigners struggled to learn Spanish, but the Mayans spoke twenty-some other languages, codes so intimate there were chasms of incomprehension between one slope's community and the next. Cheap hostels were available for budget-conscious tourists who visited the old cities in search of sparks of the glory of a former colonial centre. There was beauty for a sightseer while terror was perceptible to an insider who listened for hushed tones and hurried footsteps.

Greta learned from the books that El Salvador, the "little thumb" of Central America, had few of the attractions of Guatemala. Its indigenous groups had been wiped out fifty years earlier in one grand killing spree, eliminating anthropological interest. Its volcano was gentle, not rugged, and had given up its grand fireworks displays the year the panoramic hotel was built to observe them. Every square inch of its corn- and coffee-growing terrain was claimed and toiled,

and its local handicrafts were limited to painted wooden boxes and stuffed cloth parrots. Tourists came through mostly in transit, on their way to Nicaragua and Costa Rica, unless they were surfers, in which case they came for the ocean and stayed down by the beaches.

It was from an old former shopkeeper from San Salvador, who had grown up in a smaller town in the countryside, that Greta learned other things about El Salvador. It had a spectacular sky, he said, a brilliant blue *sombrero*, which he described to her as though it were a landscape peculiar to that place. He depicted the streets, fields and roadsides teeming with the urgent industriousness of people whose resourcefulness was their only livelihood, and he both lauded and demonstrated a high-spirited friendliness and unfettered generosity. He told her that what he missed most in America was a curiosity about other people that for him was a sign of that generosity, as it was the only way to begin to enter into other lives, the problems or successes or worries or sources of pride of neighbours or strangers. Without that curiosity, there would never come the chance to help somehow, or the willingness to ask for help, but in America, it was taken for nosiness, and considered inconsiderate.

Often he would smile as he looked at some point beyond Greta's shoulder, and, insisting it was not just nostalgia for his homeland, he would say that in El Salvador there was music floating out of windows, good-natured shouting criss-crossing the streets, and complicated sign language compensating when words failed (he demonstrated these things to Greta), all part of what it meant to be accompanied, in company. The war had tightened the connections, for good or for bad – it meant being enmeshed, he said, at times trapped. It had led people to become fiercely attentive, with precisely honed instincts for survival.

The man's passion for El Salvador was fierce. "What made you leave? Was it too dangerous for you to stay?" Greta asked him one afternoon as they painted the inside of a garage to be habilitated for a family of recent arrivals.

He pulled a full brush of paint down a wall, and paused. "My niece was killed in a house she was visiting when a death squad raided it, mistaking it for a guerrilla safe house. They were friends of mine, very opposed to any unrest. Not only was it a terrible thing, it was the wrong house."

He continued to paint and Greta thought he had had enough talking, but in the middle of another stroke, he added, "We did manage to bury her, finally, in the municipal cemetery." They each concentrated on finishing one section of wall, until he came out with, "Untidy most of the year, that graveyard, not like here." He made tidy graveyards sound scandalous. "They don't hire people to cut the grass. It is an act of love, and it is usually done in company, on the Day of the Dead. When the grass has been cut with a machete and the crosses whitened with paint, you put a blanket down and have a picnic." He smiled and looked at his paintbrush, then rubbed his forehead with a shoulder and upper arm. "I went with a friend to leave flowers on the grave six weeks later, and shortly after that, he disappeared too. He must have been spotted by a man assigned to identify those who were visitors to the graves of dead suspects. Someone in intelligence thought that was a good way to find subversives."

He shook his head, stirring the paint in the can with his brush. " I realised that I was marking people, spreading the plague of subversion by association, and that I could continue to infect anyone with whom I came in contact." He let go of the brush, letting it sink into the paint. "It wasn't danger to myself, it was the danger to others that forced me to leave. I couldn't have anyone else on my conscience."

There were other things he explained to Greta, things he seemed to see more clearly now that he was in exile. A small and extravagantly rich clique had squeezed out all but its own few, claiming all land and opportunities for itself. It had thoroughly nourished the military, intending merely to buy protection, but the military was becoming an autonomous beast, independently wealthy, with interests of its own to protect, through ferocious means. The small bloc of the rich did not redeem itself on any account, according to Greta's friend, pouring its wealth into

Miami real estate and squandering it at Miami boutiques, draining the national coffers as they drank too much and bought too many new luxury cars and wore too much gold and precious stones. Their houses were sprawling, ugly fortresses. They toted guns like toys, shiny new ones, displayed on their belts like badges.

The subversion – that was his word for it, he said there was no space for what could be called opposition – had attracted not only the classic dispossessed farmers, struggling workers, idealistic students and intellectuals, but also chips of the rich (who refused to remain rich if endowed with so little nobility), the religious (who believed that God, if not the church, would be offended by their cowardice if they failed to provide accompaniment), and even those – he was one of them, he said -- who would have preferred to accept their lot, prepared to settle for next-to-nothing, except that they were given exactly nothing, and so had nothing to which to cling, and nowhere to burrow their heads. If even someone like himself became subversive, against his will, then subversion was broad enough to include almost everyone. The Cause, however it was defined at any given moment, was unassailable: it staked out a piece of sacred ground.

Greta became familiar with El Salvador's epics, the accounts of narrow escapes, long imprisonments, blood baths, sacrileges, inhumane acts, the numbers of those killed and the names of those assassinated. The stage seemed crowded with heroes, villains and martyrs. The tension was palpable, even from Greta's distance, and the country appeared coiled with the kind of pressure that might catapult it into a new era, but could also raze it to the ground, leaving it barren instead.

The grand sweep of the drama awed Greta, and she wondered how life – incidental, everyday, carrying-on life – went on anymore. She imagined that the main action would cause the minor characters to freeze in the wings: bread halfway to the mouth of this one, hand placed at the throat of this one, mouth gaping open; this one's laugh caught in mid-throat. She wanted to be there, close enough to see even those minor characters come to life on such a stage. She wanted to become the keen spectator, and to acquire a familiarity with the action

and motives that would be irrefutable. She would discover a way to help out, would lend herself to what needed to be done, serve as a sort of stagehand.

She awakened one morning from a dream whose images she could not remember, but it was enough to convince her that it was time to go.

She sent out fifteen letters, cold, offering the news editors of small publications and radio stations to send them what she could, asking in return for the right to affiliate herself with them. One day she received a letter from the editor of a church magazine offering to read what she sent, though he could not pay more than fifty dollars for a full-length piece, and the following week got a call from a radio station talk show host who kept apace of developments in the Americas. It was not much to go on. She tried calling the editor of a small weekly paper that offered critical coverage of countries affected (some said afflicted) by American policy, and after several conversations with the secretary, finally managed to get through to the editor in person.

"Marcia McKay."

"Hello? Ms McKay? This is Greta Peterson, I sent you a letter awhile, let's see, about two weeks ago, I am going to El Salvador and wondered if maybe I could send you some things that I write, if the paper might be interested in publishing them."

"Who will you be working for there?"

"Well, I was going to try doing some freelance work. I'm used to working on my own."

"What papers have you worked for before?"

"Um, I haven't worked for papers . . . "

"Then what sort of journalism experience do you have?"

"I haven't done any yet, but I took a course in college that included a bit of journalistic writing, I think I know the basics, and I can speak Spanish."

"Have you ever been to Central America?"

"No, but I know a lot of Central Americans, I've been translating and interpreting for refugees here, and . . . "

"Is this some sort of study trip, or a bit of tourism?"

Greta turned scarlet and her mouth went dry. She was relieved to be speaking by telephone instead of face to face, and took a deep breath, trying not to let her voice tremble as she responded, "Absolutely not. I am very serious about working hard to learn the ropes, I'm willing to give it a good try, and all that I'm asking is that I can say that I am working for the paper, so that I gain a little access for interviews and things."

"You know we can't offer anything like a retainer or expenses."

"I know. I have some savings to go on at the beginning."

"Send me some writing samples, and then I'll tell you whether it could be worth your while to send up some stories."

"I'll get some together and send them to you by the end of the week."

"It has to be tomorrow. I will be out of town for ten days starting tomorrow afternoon."

Greta stayed up all night perfecting the few odd writing samples she had already prepared, and sent them off from the fax centre by the university the minute it opened in the morning. Eleven days later she got through to the editor's secretary, and listened to several repetitions of electronic ditties before she got Ms. McKay on the line.

"Ms. Peterson, ah yes, let's see, hmm, here they are, let's see, uh-huh, umm, right . . . "

At first Greta thought Ms. McKay was on another line, then she realised that she was scanning her writing samples for the first time.

"How can I help you?"

"You said when we spoke that you would let me know whether I can send you some stories from El Salvador."

"Right, yes, El Salvador, could be interesting, of course, go ahead and send them, we haven't done anything on El Salvador this year."

"Can I say I work for you?"

"You can say whatever you want, but I can't give you anything in writing. If something really newsworthy happens we'll send down one of our regular reporters."

"Oh. I see. Well, thank you, I'll see how it goes. You should hear from me soon."

"Fine. Take care. It's not Acapulco, you know."

"Yes, I know. It's not Acapulco."

II

Greta arrived in El Salvador on a hot afternoon, slept in a sad bare room the first night, and soon found a room of her own to rent by the month (the abandoned bedroom of a departed daughter, in a small house in a plain neighbourhood) and started to venture onto streets and into situations without the aid of guideposts or maps (which were unavailable or misleading). Hoping to rely on empathy and occasional sparks of intuition to find her way, she began to fashion herself a journalist, reporting from the belly of the beast.

Her first story covered a trade union federation that boasted eighteen of its members in prison -- hauled in for having 'disturbed the peace'. The federation was led by a wide woman who pitched her voice toward the back of an assembly hall even when sitting across a narrow table from a single listener. The interviews she provided invariably began with an outline of the history of colonialisation on the continent and gradually led her listener -- often sympathetic but impatient -- through more recent history and toward the list of ten broad demands to be included in the next street demonstration. Greta spent a week interviewing the woman and several other people at the federation offices, checking facts, refining a short list of acronyms, writing thumbnail sketches of leaders, waiting for calls back from a police sergeant whom she hoped would confirm whether it was true that the prisoners had not been formally charged with any crime. She tried to visit the sergeant on three consecutive days and each time was asked to wait in reception for over an hour before being told that he was out. She tinkered with the structure of the written article for a couple of days, inserting quotes to liven up the 500-word piece, and headed it with a leader about a general strike planned for the following week.

She sent it off with an elated sense of satisfaction. The newspaper declined to print it. She compiled a radio clip, based on her research, complete with background sound effects of street chants and impassioned cries from union leaders during the strike, but the station's newsroom elected to summarise the

information and include it as a brief mention of "labour unrest" within its rundown of one day's news on the continent. Her subsequent stories, including longer pieces on a peasant co-operative, a consortium of church groups and secondary school unrest, were either rejected outright or reduced to unimpassioned summaries.

She tried to teach herself what she understood to be the basics: to be more efficient, more incisive, more relevant. Eager to work, she faced numerous obstacles in a country not concerned with making her days run efficiently. It took four months to get her temporary tourist visa replaced by a temporary residency permit. The process required obtaining certified original copies of her birth certificate, notarised at the municipal, county, state and national levels, in addition to letters from her editor, bank statements and copies of a lease, all translated and certified by a notary that the translations were faithful. She needed photos. Then, she counted nine tedious visits to the twelfth floor of the Interior Ministry building in the centre of town, each of which required either an expensive taxi ride or most of a morning: two bus rides inevitably spaced at long intervals. When she no longer understood what could explain the delays, she hired a lawyer recommended for his ability to get Ministry approvals. He told her outright during their first meeting in his dark musty office with stained carpets and vulgar paperweights that the amount of time it would take for her to get permission to stay in the country would depend on how much she was willing to pay. Express service – ten days, five hundred dollars. Regular service – about a month, two hundred. Greta handed over all her documents and acquiesced to shaking his hand, which felt as musty as the rugs. He seemed reluctant to release his hold.

During the same four months she had managed to file twenty news stories, but only six of those pieces were used. She got hold of Ms. McKay at the paper, and she stated bluntly that the country was of no interest until something extraordinary happened. She wondered if Greta could get interviews with the President, the head of the Legislative Assembly, a notorious colonel. I can't track

down a sergeant, Greta thought; what would make any of these people want to talk to me?

One midday news broadcast announced the scheduled hour of an army press briefing, and she tried to attend but was turned away at the door by an officious captain who asked how she could work as a journalist without an army press card. Again she needed pictures, more documents, an interview with an official, another captain, who said he couldn't give her a permit until her immigration papers were in order. On her way out of that interview, she tripped on a gap in the ageing linoleum tile and literally bumped into a reporter who had been in the lobby of the Embassy when she went to register copies of her passport. Without as much as glancing at her, he murmured *sorry*, entered the captain's office, and came out, scribbling on the notebook in his hand, all before Greta had figured out which door led out of the passage way in which she was standing.

"Getting your credentials?" she asked in a companionable tone. He was heavy and sloppy, with a bearing that showed he did not know or care that he was remarkably unattractive.

"Whazzat?" he responded, looking up from his pad impatiently.

"Credentials," she repeated. "It takes forever, doesn't it?"

"Not really. Just get a letter from your paper. Who do you write for?"

Greta told him the names of the paper and the radio station and he relaxed into what Greta recalled later as a smirk. "Won't you need more than that to live on here?"

Greta winced. He headed straight through a door that she had thought was off-limits and she followed his steps, to the midday heat outside.

She waited for a bus a block away but when the first one arrived twenty minutes later so crowded that boys were hanging three deep from the doorjambs, supported on one foot or by the fingers of one hand, she decided to splurge on a taxi to get to her lawyer's office before his long midday lunch and sleep. A month had passed since she left a deposit with him, and he had promised her a week ago

it would be ready "tomorrow". Entering through the creaky metal door into the reception room, occupied mostly by his secretary's desk adorned by bud vases sprouting roses fashioned from artificial silk, she heard voices freeze in mid-sentence. The secretary stood at the door to her boss' office, turning slightly toward Greta with the look of someone proudly wearing heels higher than the visitor's, tapping the palm of one had with a folder held casually in the other. She nodded at Greta as the conversation behind her trailed off and greeted her formally, pointedly, by name, identifying an intruder. She glanced back into the office behind her to check for a signal, then pulled the door shut as she turned to Greta and began formalities from the top.

"Hello, Miss Peet-Tear-Some," she said, pronouncing Greta's name too carefully. "How are you? How may I be of service today?"

"I'm fine, thank you. And you?" Greta tried to acquiesce to the formalities, but too impatient to wait for a reply, she pressed into, "I came to pick up my residency permit. I understand that it was to be ready three days ago."

"Ah, yes, THAT. I believe that there was a delay due to some papers missing. I was waiting for you to come so that I could explain it to you."

Greta could hardly suppress a sigh. In her best-mannered voice, she asked, "But you do have my phone number, don't you? You could have called?"

"There seem to be some problems with your number," the secretary said accusingly.

"Very strange," Greta said in a voice not yet terse. She had received calls all week. "I wonder what could be missing."

"Mmm, probably a problem with the line to your house," the secretary answered, more slyly now. " The phone company, you know, there is always - - "

"No, I mean from my application; I thought we were just waiting for approval."

"Oh, I don't know about that affair; the Doctor will have to explain, and he is busy right now."

"He is busy. When will he be available?"

"Let me see, today he sees a client . . . " ("A client!" thought Greta. "All afternoon to see a client!"), " . . . and tomorrow he goes to the Ministry in the morning and should be back about this time. Would you like to try again tomorrow afternoon?"

"TRY AGAIN!" screamed Greta inside her head. "I should TRY AGAIN??" Instead she ventured, "Maybe you could ask him what I need so that in case he's not back when I get here, you could tell me."

"Fine, fine, I'll tell him," the secretary responded, sitting down at her desk to a months-old fashion magazine. "See you tomorrow."

"See you tomorrow," Greta responded reluctantly, her head aching as she turned toward the door.

She stepped out of the office into sheets of rain that had already flooded the streets to the level of the kerb. The traffic along the main street a block away was not moving and was becoming raucous with honking; three taxis on her street passed in that direction, quadruple passengers folded shoulder to shoulder across the back seats. Her shoes were wet through, her shirt clung to her breasts and down her rib cage; the skirt she had put on for her interview wrapped cold around her thighs. A bus flew by, weighted with bodies, riddling her with muddy water. Finally a creaking taxi with no door handles coughed to a stop at the sight of her waving arm and, without bothering to agree on a price before the trip, she sank into its sagging back seat.

By this time she was living hand to mouth. If she sold one story to the newspaper it paid her enough to live for a week, provided she didn't have additional expenses such as lawyer's fees or taxi rides or fax charges, which were unreasonably high, a novelty still: together with bank fees, they could easily consume much of her occasional pay cheque. She started to raid the savings she had brought along to tide her over during dry spells, or to transport herself back home in case of emergency, in order to cover food and the month's rent.

One night she awoke with what felt like a knife blade in her side and realised only as she rolled out of bed and stumbled to the bathroom that it was her own intestines doubling up to jolt her in pain; after three hours of diarrhoea she was just able to drag herself back to bed, mouth parched, muscles flabby and flaccid. She went to a small clinic the next afternoon, the blood pounding at her temples, tiny explosions of nerves, and paid another week's worth of food to have her blood and faeces examined; amoebas were found.

She was prescribed ten days of amoebacide that flooded her system with toxins and made her tongue taste and feel like lead. NOT TO BE TAKEN BY PREGNANT AND NURSING WOMEN, proclaimed the insert, a slip of paper she had pressured the pharmacist into retrieving from a pile of discarded labels and instructions under his bench. She thought of the boxes of rat poison lined up on grocery store shelves and propped at tiny market stalls, with lurid photos of dead rats serving as vivid proof of the effectiveness of the tablets within. All living things in her intestine, laid on their sides, or belly up.

She started to view all food and water with suspicion, imagining microscopic creeping organisms wriggling on lettuce, swimming in pitchers, waiting to invade her gut. She carried boiled water in portable plastic jugs when she went out for more than a couple of hours, washed her hands at every opportunity, and made up excuses to refuse the food offered by people wherever she was a guest: offered out of custom and generosity, she refused it now out of fear, or weakness. Gradually, barely perceptibly, her permeability, which had seemed, not long ago, a

virtue that opened her up to the world, now seemed a liability, an inadequate shield.

In an attempt to arrest the erosion of her sense of self and mission, she took stock of her situation. She had finally arranged papers to stay in the country, to work legally as a reporter, to drive a car, to receive mail at a box in the post office, to enter various archives. She made a mental list of the offices she had visited, the people she had met, the information she could now piece together about the political and military situation to provide informed analysis. These were tools, assembled and ready to be put to use. She was selling a few pieces, and, supplemented now with translations and editing, it was just sufficient to maintain herself at a rudimentary level, provided she rarely got sick, never made long distance phone calls, and never ate meals out. She had collected an array of minor anthropological details ranging from modes of address and activities along the street to bizarre obituaries, and she had amassed an extensive glossary of words, peculiar to this place, which she hoped would provide clues to some of its many intrigues.

Her work seemed to amount to little more than the hunting and gathering of impressions, but that in itself began to take the shape of a vocation.

The people she interviewed for work treated her as a visiting dignitary, as though she were in a position to further their cause, and it flattered her, made her feel indebted, and encouraged her to push on. She found herself losing any sense she might have had of how to judge people by appearances; what she previously trusted as intuitions began to appear as prejudices, and false leads. One afternoon she was ushered into the office of a prim school principal who smelled of rose water, offered tea and, fiddling with her jewellery, gave a carefully-worded speech about the irrelevance of the censorship of print when poverty was a more effective weapon. As she spoke, her propriety became a thin veil over her passion, and the colour rose in her cheeks until she almost hissed, "The few people who can read wait their turn for a treasured text to pass from hand to hand, while bullets are pumped into the backs of protesters on the streets." The principal's training had

emphasised teacher attendance and discipline, but she was appalled that some faculty had not missed classes in order to participate in strikes on behalf of increased wages for workers, freedom for political prisoners, funding for education and health care.

The speech Greta had expected from that principal emerged instead from the young dance teacher at the university during an interview a week later. Black curls dangling at his shoulders, an old t-shirt slipping off a shoulder, he railed on like a schoolmarm about the lack of discipline in his university classes, cited the failure to be punctual as a sign of debauchery, lamented the persistent distraction of politics amongst his students, longed, vaguely, for a golden age previous to disorder.

Greta started to approach encounters with intentional ignorance, restraining the impulse to apply her own encyclopaedia of information and knowledge and her long-trusted intuition. She would second-guess people, wondering silently, *where do your loyalties lie, to whose predicament do you lend your sympathy, which images of these years accompany you, what fears haunt you, what is the action that you take?* She had been surprised many times by the unlikely people who took astounding risks, chose unsafe commitments, decided to collaborate, adhered to discipline and dissimulation – people whose lives might easily have been devoted solely to their own survival, to scraping by. She learned of them by accident, finding clues only through others' carelessness.

On the side of a busy street, straddling a neighbourhood of square houses and a more chaotic area of crumbling high rises, was a shack selling simple meals. There she would stop for a Coke to chat with the old women from a tiny parish who took turns attending to the boys who would pass by, most of them young and somehow more earnest than city boys. She came to know, she no longer remembered how, that the boys were from the countryside, assigned temporarily to the city by their military organisations, and that the women, old enough to be their grandmothers, had agreed to collaborate, preparing and providing food, supported only with a canister of cooking gas delivered anonymously each week.

The shack also sold beer, and was conveniently located within walking distance of an army brigade. The women listened innocently to the conversations of soldiers who drank too much on their days off, and then reported to an intermediary any word of impending movements from the city toward battlegrounds in the countryside.

Or, there was the teller from her bank, a woman dressed in the neat white blouse of the institution's uniform, with a lace bow at the neck, a narrow skirt above her knees, sheer stockings and heels so high they forced her to clip her stride. Greta opened the paper one day to see the teller's police mug shot after she had been hauled in, accused of operating a clandestine printing press in the back room of a house. Her eye was blackened; she was awaiting trial. ("Awaiting trial" sounded civil, though Greta knew it meant indefinite detention.) During one of her regular visits to the bank, Greta dared to ask another teller -- the one she had seen lending the suspect a rosy shade of fingernail polish -- where the missing woman was. The colleague had shrugged with indifference, possibly feigned, and said she had been fired. But as she counted out bills, something made her add, casually enough to be furtive, "She will get out."

Greta had expected her manicured bank teller to return home each evening to sit in her parents' tiny sitting room to watch a television programme, to stroll to the park with a friend on the weekends before window-shopping for shoes, not to spend time away from the bank following the orders of a cell leader, or leading a cell herself, printing and distributing subversive literature. Her bank teller had assumed, very effectively, the identity of someone unconcerned by the misfortunes of organisers and agitators, subversives and disrupters.

This was one part of the mystery. As far as Greta could tell, there was no simple way to identify the people who might join up. Commitment originated, at times, from a personal vendetta – revenge for a friend's murder, an uncle's disappearance, a body decomposing by one's own bus stop – and at times from a decision taken one day when the accumulation of outrages (even when committed

against unknown persons) saturated the layers of caution and feigned ignorance that people tended to accumulate for self-preservation.

She conjured up images of some huge secret guild into which one could be initiated. Once you learned the code to enter, she thought, you would look around and find yourself in company: identified, then chosen, and finally relied upon as part of the network. You would know where the whole effort was headed, and would know whom to trust, and would have the satisfaction of placing your own contribution in a collection box which could be tallied with other efforts and counted as something significant. When she imagined it, a storybook phrase came to her: "And no one was ever alone again".

Because bland exteriors masked passionate attachments, even the bland became enticing. It was hard for Greta to imagine returning to where surfaces rarely hid anything, where explanations were obvious and anomalies easily accounted for. The complexity hooked her, and led her along. Her desire to be part of whatever it was that was going on behind the appearances and veils seemed suspect to her, though, and she felt guiltily like a spy, though she reported to no one.

Her "vocation" was not limited to deciphering these codes of political commitment, which in any case would never lead to the production of useful stories for Ms. McKay. It extended to include the simple, appreciative observance of life going on. She would lie awake in the morning poised to detect the sounds that would accompany each dawn. In other cities, drones of varying pitches -- always predictable, monotonous hums – rattled her awake in the mornings. There was no droning here, nothing so regular that it would become a pattern, repeated without variation.

One morning, an old man carrying a wooden box offered to fix shoes for any passer-by on the street. He sang, then chanted, then called: a circus master inviting anyone with shoes a little worn at the heels, gaping some at the seams, to step right up, leave it to him. He perched on the kerb in front of the house, a house call for shoe repair, and pounded, cut, glued, sewed, then rubbed polish into

each shoe with a thumb, and buffed it to a high shine. Another day, what wakened her was the voice of the woman with a basket into which she had collected bananas, mangoes or pineapples to sell, whose song was less spirited, almost a lament. A street sweeper with branches wrapped neatly to the end of a wooden stick might spend an hour stirring the dust on the narrow stretch of street not far from Greta's window. The brush crackled, then paused, as he leaned on the handle to remember a conversation or to greet a woman arriving as herself, before donning a maid's uniform.

Palm shadows slashed the wall of the bedroom, and the passion fruit vine stretched another leaf higher over the window. Each day she left the house at a different hour. The isolation of a night alone in bed would be broken by a feast of events observed along the street outside, a marketplace collection of scenes, fully assembled at any hour of the morning. The stocky old woman held together at the middle by her apron, face grim, performed her coconut exercises: a machete extended from her lifted arm, in one swipe she sliced the top off a smooth green coconut the size of a child's soccer ball; with an elbow bent, she twisted the machete tip into the white membrane; machete at her side, she slipped a straw through to the milk. Her cart was a waist-high wooden crate with two wheels tacked at one end. Before noon she leaned into the cart and heaved it forward through the street, around holes in the asphalt, to a dusty park three blocks away where she rolled it to a halt between a bus stop and the break in a cyclone fence that was the official entrance to the park. She would sell coconuts until her cart was empty and could be pushed home with one finger.

Next door to the coconut woman's point of origin was propped the general store, a booth with a front wall which swung open from the top to form a roof for those waiting to request a carefully-measured item from its shelves: cooking oil in an odd assortment of small bottles; sugar, salt, and beans in bags the size of a week's ration; instant coffee in packets sufficient for one weak cup; one-portion parcels of baking soda and laundry powder; individual eggs, single cigarettes, one small bar of soap. The store was barely able to accommodate an economy of

paper money, and expected coins to be produced for purchases. If Greta tried to pay with a bill, a child was sent off to hunt for change. The owner then chatted with each customer made to wait for the courtesy of converting the outsider's paper to metal, and the group would observe the line at the water tap at street's edge: women, girls, or the youngest boys waited in turn, but not patiently, to fill their buckets or barrels, which at one time had held oil, milk powder, paint or even a noxious glue. The women and girls would help each other to hoist the load onto the others' heads, a rag sometimes coiled as a cushion, but the boys never used their heads for bearing, as though it were an anatomical impossibility, or shameful; they used a shoulder, or a thin hip, or staggered with it clutched in sinewy arms. Nearby there was always a child, naked, being bathed from an open oil barrel, water scooped in a plastic bowl and poured over the bowed head, down the shivering back. The dousings rarely elicited protest even in the cold. The shock was a form of excitement accompanied by a yelp and a giggle. If Greta was noticed watching, the bather waved, and the shower became a morning's show.

It was still the only place she could imagine wanting to be, but was starting to wonder why it was important for her to be the one there. No one had selected her, she was not the chosen. She had come no closer to mattering to anyone.

One day, for no reason she could discern, she remembered the self-confident journalist she had tripped into at the military barracks. Maybe she could team up with him, she thought, help him out and learn from how he did his work. Through a press office she tracked down his telephone number. An answering machine responded brusquely with, "Steve Wells, leave a message," then started beeping.

"Hello? Hello?" she repeated until one long beep told her it was finally time to start speaking. "This is Greta, I ran into you at the barracks a few weeks ago, I was just wondering . . ."

The line buzzed and went dead. She tried again and this time said simply, "Call me if you want me to do some translating, I'm at two nine two four three seven."

Three days later he called her back and told her he'd pay four dollars in cash for each page she transcribed from tapes and translated from Spanish to English. Greta was drawn by the certainty of instant and guaranteed remuneration for her work. Steve gave her two cassette tapes to start with. She bent at her rough wooden table tapping at a clumsy old laptop computer, determined to earn enough to get some things – if not her life -- in order.

The first tape Greta transcribed in translation, typing carelessly as she listened in one language and typed in another. It was an interview Steve had done with a colonel at the outer reaches of the army's territory. He had already written a piece that used just one quote of the hour and a half he had recorded, but he wanted a transcript of the entire interview as background for future reports. The sentence, which Greta would have said sounded too ridiculous to quote, was: "We live in a democracy, but it is a young democracy, and so not everyone has learned the rules, and it is the army's moral responsibility to see that the youth, especially the youth, behave in a manner that does not threaten stability." The tape recorder's microphone had been placed at one corner of the desk and the colonel's voice rose and fell as he leaned back in a creaky chair or swung forward, slamming a fist on the shaky surface.

A first, sloppy draft took Greta two days to get down. The colonel rambled on about the communist dialectic and boasted that the army's interrogation techniques had been modernised, but he didn't give enough detail about anything to make clear what he meant. Steve made occasional attempts to steer the ranting toward specific questions, but the colonel ignored him, addressing someone not there, perhaps someone or something that he imagined Steve represented. Greta was surprised that Steve had sat patiently through the interview, asking only lame questions. "So you would confirm that there is a communist threat?" "You keep

no political prisoners? Only enemy combatants?" Wasn't the reporter's job to probe and doubt?

By the time she had listened several times to each sentence, typed a quick English version of it into the word processor, reviewed the translation for sentence structure and false cognates, and printed out a finished version, she calculated her wages to be approximately that of her washerwoman's. *Well,* she thought, *it will get easier, I will get a system going.*

She took an afternoon to collect her mail at the central post office and stand in lines at crowded offices to pay the water and electrical bills. She was back in her kitchen eating a day-old roll with butter and some reheated coffee when darkness fell. She moved to the worktable in her bedroom, slipped the second tape into her recorder, balanced the scratchy foam earphones just inside her ears, and pushed the Play button. This time the voice was clear and close, a man's voice again, but steadier, resonant.

"Yes, you can say that the war has evolved, that there is a new phase. Before, the people relied on military forces, on us, to lead them; the people's army was the vanguard. But now the people have gained a momentum and forged a space that is their own. The popular militias cleared an opening, now the bases (*Well, that would be grassroots,* thought Greta, *that's a good word*) are free to construct their own movement, without such – *unbridled* repression. You know, of course, how recently there have been massacres. The militias continue to work, of course, they remain in place: they are the guarantee. Excuse me? Details, well, there is not so much more I can tell you, here, but well, yes, maybe if you . . ."

The voice tapered off into a clicking sound. Greta stopped the tape to finish typing the sentence, shuddering. If she were found with this tape, if someone like the colonel knew she had it in her possession, she would be accused of possession of subversive propaganda, press credentials notwithstanding. Or they would press her to tell where this man was, a fugitive from their justice, and to say how they could get their hands on him. She was relieved not to know who was speaking, she had no information, she knew nothing.

She turned on the tape again, and the man continued with a well-structured analysis of the political prospects of the war as seen from one side's battlefield. Greta transcribed dutifully, until the voice was cut off, there were some more clicks and then a different, voice, slightly muffled at first, began.

"You mean my personal story? I see. Well, alright, I will tell you, though there is nothing extraordinary about it, it is just what, by chance, is mine." The voice was urgent, but lightened with a tone of affection which softened the anger evident in it, and soothed Greta's anxious first hearing of a story she knew would turn grim (these stories of how people left home to fight in the hills were always grim).

"I grew up in the capital. My father was a lawyer, my mother taught at a religious high school. They weren't involved in politics, but they identified with their country. They accepted the way the society was structured, you know, the rich happen to be rich and unfortunately many people are poor, very poor. We who have something must be considerate of those who don't, each Christian should give a little, that sort of thing. They did think the government ought to represent them – 'should reflect well on us,' my mother used to say – and that it wasn't doing its duty very well. My parents' employment was the extent of their spheres of action, though; they thought that was the limit of a person's responsibility."

Steve cleared his throat on the tape, clearly impatient with the length of this answer to his standard question. He had apparently expected a condensed reply. The words did not accelerate in response to his impatience; in fact, the pace slowed dramatically.

"One day, though, when I was still a university student, a teacher at my mother's school failed to show up for classes, and his wife called the school to say a group of men had come in the night pounding on the door looking for him and had carried him off in his pyjamas. My mother suggested that my father, as a lawyer, could go on her behalf to the jails and offices of the various branches of the police to ask after him. They assumed a mistake had been made."

There was a sharp exhale, something between a cough and an ironic laugh, before the voice started in again.

"They did go, but no one they spoke to at those places had seen the teacher, nor heard of him. Two days later a maid who worked for someone at the school arrived at work in the morning saying three bodies had turned up in the corner of an empty lot near her bus stop, and that one of them was in pyjamas "like a rich man". I remember hearing that description, "like a rich man" when I heard the story told later, because my father slept in boxer shorts, and I wondered if he would have been described as a rich man if he were found in that attire."

Another pause. A match was struck, a cigarette inhaled. Steve cleared his throat pointedly again, and the voice continued, grave and low.

"So my father accompanied the teacher's wife to that place, and the body was her husband's, with his hands tied behind his back, mouth open, the whole corpse stiffened. His tongue had been sliced somehow, mutilated. My father told my mother about it when he came home, thinking they were alone. I was in the next room, studying, and overheard. He said the smell was unbearable, that it burned up through his nose and down his throat into his lungs, he couldn't get rid of it. I didn't know then what it meant for a smell to burn; now I know well the smell of death."

A clearing of the throat. "That night he coughed to rid himself of it, and he stood up to pace, and talked as if in his sleep, or to himself. I could hear him through the walls, and it terrified me, the presence of an intruder. It was not my father anymore. Every now and then my mother tried to hush him, to reassure him, finally she pleaded with him to be quiet. He wrote an open letter to the newspaper, a useless act of course, and he even signed it with his real name. Yes, yes, it seems so foolish now." A pause, a breath. "Then he called lawyer friends of his, and started to organise a formal statement of protest. They prepared legal proceedings. It turned out the teacher was just the tip of the iceberg, and my father started taking dozens of cases, and became obsessed. What did you say?"

Greta couldn't hear Steve's side of the conversation, a rumble.

"Yes, that was common. You didn't have to see it, you might not know it was all going on unless something pulled you into it." He inhaled again. Greta wondered if he had lit another cigarette.

"He was on to something, he must have alarmed some people, because, well . . . He was getting into his car outside his office at lunchtime one day, and a big square car, one of these Cherokees, the American things, pulled up, the back door opened, a semiautomatic weapon sprayed him from head to toe with bullets and the car pulled out and disappeared around the corner. His secretary told us all this later. She had been pulling shut the door to the office, leaving for her own lunch, when she heard the car pull up, and turned and saw it all. She saw the side of the face of one of the men, saw the gun, later remembered the make of the car, the colour but not the license plate number – she thought maybe it hadn't had a license plate. She could remember well the blood, and the look on my father's face. It was of surprise, she said. Puzzlement."

Silence. Greta froze. The speaker took a deep breath, Greta breathed with him. "A week after the funeral two men tried to get into our house. It was late afternoon; the maid was at the front gate buying tortillas from the lady who sells them door-to-door. They pushed past her and went to the side door, which they tried to batter with a small crowbar, but we had a dog, a German shepherd very jealous of its terrain and he came up behind them, barking furiously and knocking over the one with a gun. They cursed, and I think would have shot him, but the maid said later that they seemed terrified. The one crashed the crowbar on to the dog's back and when he yelped but didn't collapse – he was strong, maybe it looked like he was about to lunge -- they ran off. We didn't know if they were merely thieves or if they were connected to my father's killers. Everything was in confusion, our lives were in disarray."

Greta expected a pause, but instead he lit into the next sentence at a faster pace.

"That's when I left, that's when I first went underground, eight years ago. I didn't want to leave my mother alone. During the whole period when my father's

rage grew with each disappearance or capture or murder, with every new case he heard, my mother was --*beset* by fear and grieved: for her murdered colleagues (the man in pyjamas was the first of several), for the family which had become dismembered, and for this slow poisoning, by rage, of the man she had known as patient, even-tempered, gentle. Grief had been nibbling at her for many months, but after his assassination it devoured her. She wanted me to get out, too, was terrified they'd come after me and my sister. Excuse me? Yes, one sister. Older, yes, by three years. She left, too, to a different country, but I haven't heard from her, no, I can't say anything more about her. My mother? I saw her three months ago, she says she is dying of grief. I suppose she is, but she has a cancer, too. Maybe that is what her grief became. It will kill her, soon."

The tape recorder ran in silence and snapped off. Greta rewound the tape to where that voice entered, and listened again. It was company, a presence with her in the night. In all her months here, no one had used a tone as unguarded as this one with her, as intimate. It was not meant for her, but she listened as though it were, and slept with it drifting in and out of her dreams, until it felt like her own.

In the morning Greta sat at the computer to type in the English translation of the tape. The words looked flat, plain, plodding, unrelated to the voice in her ear. She was tempted to add stage directions: "Pause. Sigh. Raises voice. Voice swells with grief and anger, trembles." She knew that it would annoy Steve, that he would scratch them out before he agreed to the number of pages of work for which she could be paid, that he would send the version back to her to be edited and reprinted.

She watched a spider lower itself on its flimsy thread of silk, from the curtain rod overhead, past the window, to the shadow between her desk and the wall, where it disappeared. When her travel clock showed it was one o'clock, she turned on the palm-sized transistor radio at the corner of her desk and listened to the newscaster's version of the day's events.

Two days later, Greta slipped the tapes and transcriptions into the least ragged manila envelope she could find and took them over to Steve's office, a room on the second floor of the best hotel in the city. She knocked on his door and when she heard him grunt, "Yeah," pushed the door open, entered meekly and held the envelope out to him across his desk. He was leaning back in his chair cradling the phone between his ear and his shoulder, bending a paper clip out of shape with both hands. "Tell him Steve Wells called, have him call me as soon as he gets in. Right. Bye." He slammed down the phone at the same time that his chair crashed forward.

Greta, intimidated, shrugged. "Sorry. I just brought by the translations."

"Okey-dokey," he said in imitation of how he imagined people who didn't have their own offices talked. "Send me a bill."

Greta nodded as she stared at her envelope on his desk.

"I'll let you know when I have more work for ya." He turned back to a computer screen where a document awaited his attention in mid-sentence.

Greta nodded again, her eyes still on the envelope, and Steve, impatient that she hadn't left him alone yet, turned his head and asked, "Are we set?"

"Yes, I guess we're set," Greta responded, wavering about whether to ask after the tapes. She turned to go, then stopped and stammered, "Umm. Can I ask who those people in the interviews were?"

"You can ask, doesn't mean I'll tell you."

"I see."

He looked up at her. "Why? Got something for colonels, or are you of the opposite purse-way-shun?"

She shrugged. "Just curious. See you."

"Right. Bye," he responded, already tapping away at the keyboard.

Greta wandered down the hall, the voice of the tape still in her head, jockeying with the grating inanity of Steve's phrase "opposite persuasion". How could the two be set on the same scales: the colonel with his hammering "de-

mock-crazy"; and the son of an assassinated lawyer, driven out of the city and into another life somewhere in the hills?

One morning two weeks later she was at the grocery store, placing a carton of milk on the linoleum imitation conveyor belt that served as a checkout counter, when Steve slid behind her with a "Hey! You mind if I go ahead? I'm just getting batteries." Before Greta even understood who he was, he had caught the eye of the girl on the stool (who would be accustomed to giving men priority in everything, especially if they displayed a certain arrogance associated with the rich), slammed down his batteries and handed her some bills.

"What's the hurry?" Greta asked, annoyed that his batteries should automatically take precedence over the three items she was about to pay for.

"The usual," he drawled, "Sleet, hail, rain and slime – get the story out on time."

Greta raised her eyebrows in an attempt to mask a derisive rolling of her eyes.

"Hey, but I'm going to the countryside the day after tomorrow and could use a little help. You free?"

Greta had never been to 'the countryside' she knew Steve was talking about – territory outside the army's control – because she had never been able to acquire permission to go. "I'm free," she said immediately. "Do I need anything?"

"Get a copy of your passport and residency permit over to my office by two this afternoon. My driver will take them over to the high Command for the travel passes." He was halfway out the supermarket doors.

"Okay. How long will we be gone for?" she yelled after him as she rooted around in her bag for money to pay for her groceries.

"Depends," was all he said over his shoulder as he climbed into the jeep provided by his newspaper, which was idling outside, in the path of pedestrians.

Of course it DEPENDS, Greta thought as she transferred the meagre change from the outstretched hand of the check out girl to the young boy who had, with proud attention, packed her milk, sugar and eggs into a plastic bag and tied it with a knot so tight she would have to rip the bag to get it open again. The boy sneaked a look at the coins she had given him, and thanked her three times in a row, nodding so brightly that the sigh she had been on the point of exhaling, in exasperation, turned into a resigned, affectionate smile.

Greta took a rattling taxi home, fending off the taxi driver's questions – "Where are you from? What do you do? The situation is difficult here, what do you think? Do you need me to drive you anywhere?" They were questions she interpreted when she first arrived in the country as sincere attempts at polite conversation, which impressed her, then began to see as careless stabs at flirtation, which amused her, but was finally coming to understand were as easily questions a police informant would be paid to ask if he could then relay suspicious answers to the security forces. Now they grated her nerves and she gave monosyllabic responses.

Once inside her house, she went to her bare kitchen and made herself two hardboiled eggs and a cup of instant coffee, and ate them sitting on a footstool with her back against the outside wall behind the house, balancing the plate on her knees. She could hear the washerwoman over the wall humming along to a *cumbia* on the radio while she sloshed the clothes over washboard ridges formed in the slanted sides of cement washtubs. The washerwoman further down the line of houses hollered over the wall to her humming friend, something about expecting a boyfriend, and they laughed together, one giggling and the other cackling raucously.

Greta, listening, felt a sudden tingling in her arms, then a heaviness in her shoulders that she identified as the faint presence of loneliness. She took a deep breath and looked around at the four plaster walls of her small cement enclosure, then up to the swatch of sky overhead, brilliant blue and cloudless, always the

same clear blue, day after day. She savoured the muted sensation of her isolation, a not-bitter sadness, and was oddly comforted to know that no one would interrupt her, that the feeling would linger. It made her feel stoic, as though it required strength to live alone, and as though strength of that kind mattered.

The coffee in the bottom of her cup had turned lukewarm by the time she stood up and went inside to find her documents. She took them to a copier business a short walk away, a hole in a streetside wall barely as wide as a single photocopier with room for one person to stand behind it. In order to leave the business, the operator had to remove the paper trays from the machine and ease around the side, which he did when Greta paid him will a small bill. He excused himself to scout the neighbouring holes-in-the-wall for change and as she waited she examined a hand-written list of price calculations for copies, the same price per page, multiplied by every number from 1 to 20. Next to it was a yellowed card, curling at the corners, showing a slender and pale Virgin Mary over the announcement: "We pray to the Virgin. No Protestant Propaganda Allowed."

From there she walked toward Steve's office, the sun pressing hard and heavy on the back of her neck. She crossed the hotel parking lot to Steve's vehicle, where the driver was standing over the hood, rag in hand to flick away any dust that might settle on it. He snapped his feet together when Greta, clearly foreign even if not elegantly attired, approached, and she half expected him to salute. She told him what the papers were for, pausing at the frequent interjections, at odd intervals, of "Yes ma'am, at your command, madam". Then he did really salute, a sharp wave from the forehead, and offered, "See-you-too-maw-rrau" in such perfect imitation of Steve's twang that she felt collusion with him, an imagined shared mocking of that annoying man's ways.

On the evening of the following day Greta was at home organising mosquito repellent, a miniature flashlight and lengths of toilet paper into plastic bags when Steve called.

"Yeah, hi," he started in before she had finished saying hello. "Listen, I can't travel tomorrow, got something urgent to do, but I'll probably go the day after tomorrow, but my assistant, you know, Ana, will be back by then and I, uh, don't need you to go along."

"Oh," she stammered. It sounded as though he was talking to an answering machine.

"So, thanks anyway."

Before he could hang up, she blurted, "Steve, just a minute, um, would there be room for me to come along, just for the ride?"

"Hmm," she heard, and papers rustled. He was reading something as he talked.

"Hello?" she said pointedly, just barely polite.

"Yeah, I guess there's room. Carlos did all the travel permissions together anyway. Get here by 5:30, we'll try to do the whole thing in a day."

"Good," she breathed, and hung up, relieved that the trip had not dissolved into thin air, but feeling awkward that once again what was to have been Work – shaped by a goal, measured in pay, performed on established terms – was to be merely another Experience. It irked her that she couldn't include her daily chores and activities in a category called Employment, that her time wasn't driven by something other than her own spontaneous, whimsical decisions. Her days were free of demands, of expectations, and she often felt empty, free-falling, directionless, her energy squandered. She would feel amorphous, longing for confinement – not a jail cell, but an Occupation, a structure that would eliminate some choices and require her to act.

III

Greta rose before five on the day they were to leave, but when she got to Steve's building was dismayed to see the windows of his second-storey apartment dark, with no jeep outside. She leaned into the only working buzzer in a line to the left of the front entrance door and after several attempts, heard a window squeak open and Steve appeared overhead, groggy and irritated, peering below. When he saw Greta he groaned, "What time is it?"

"After five-thirty," Greta said with a whine. "Aren't we leaving now?"

"Yeah, yeah, just give me a minute," he said, pulling his head back in the window.

Greta sat down on a low cement wall with her scrawny canvas bag at her feet, wishing she'd brought along something to do.

The sky had lightened all of a sudden. Before Greta had been to El Salvador, she thought dawn was synonymous with the gradual transition from night to day. But here near the earth's midline, an invisible switch turned on the day, the sun screamed from overhead for twelve hours and then, at almost the same hour all year long, it went out again, snuffed. No sunrise, no twilight, just light and dark. The seasons, too, were not a cycle but a switch: "winter", with rain, and "summer", without rain, when months of dryness baked the fields to dust.

Carlos pulled up in the jeep, jumped out boisterously and then, skittering slightly at the sight of Greta, did his little heel-clicking call to attention. "Good morning, Miss Greta", he bowed. "You are here early, I believe we are to leave at six o'clock." She shrugged, resigned.

Steve finally came out at six thirty, grumbling, "Let's go, it's getting late, we still have to pick up Ana."

Carlos scuttled to get the bags in the back and unlock car doors while Steve perched in the front seat with a foot on the glove compartment, a gear bag on his lap, whistling through his teeth. It took another half an hour to pick up Ana at an

apartment block in a crowded neighbourhood. As they made their way through traffic on their way out of the city, Steve instructed Carlos to get him to the first army checkpoint by nine o'clock. They tore along the road, swerving wildly to avoid potholes and an occasional lazy cow. Carlos followed the law of the road, which was to remain oblivious to all vehicles except those larger than his, those inevitably driven by the most reckless drivers.

Ana, a sultry twenty-year-old with extravagant lips, sat next to Greta in the back and preened her sleek mane of black hair, elbows in the air. She wore a snug, meticulously ironed white T-shirt and very tight jeans, also ironed, and appeared not to notice what Greta did: that the car might, on any number of curves, simply fail to remain on the road and sail into yonder ravine. Greta imagined each potential tragedy in lurid detail. Each curve was marked with a cross of carved stone or the crude wooden marker of a back-field grave, painted with a name and an abbreviated date, and she could picture motorcycles slammed into trees, bodies hurled through windshields, buses crushed onto loads of passengers, resulting in groans, eerie silence, victims looted by passers by on foot, the relatives eventually notified. On one narrow stretch they careened past two girls, barely teenagers, walking along the side of the road with bundles of wet clothes balanced on their heads. The girls leapt out of the way at the sound of Carlos' blast on the horn, and they laughed and hooted as though their brush with death were a flirtation, a playful tease.

A winding section of the road, especially treacherous, ended in a narrow stretch of asphalt leading down to a river. A magnificent iron bridge, formerly a national monument to progress, stood high in the air off to their left, an arm arching from each bank but failing to meet since the middle had been blown out during a famous attack by rebels. A ratty Bailey bridge wide enough for one vehicle now spanned the river, hung so low the current made it hum as the jeep rattled across. They passed a line of girls with baskets balanced on heads or hoisted onto hips, pressed up against the side of an overcrowded bus. Each basket was piled with transparent sandwich bags jiggling with a cheap cola and tied closed

with a knot, to be loosened for slipping in a straw. The girls jostled for first-row places under arms straining out of windows to buy drinks during the minutes allotted before the bus driver would decide, without warning, to depart.

The colonel's brigade headquarters were in a plain, dusty town whose only spot of colour, one bright kiosk painted by cigarette company painters three months earlier, shone like a jewel in the mud, attracting peasant boys in military green who leaned at the flimsy counter drinking from mismatched glasses. Steve went inside the brigade to take care of the group's formalities by himself, but reappeared to holler across to the jeep: "C'mon!" Only Carlos responded, hurrying toward him, so Steve stomped over to the jeep window and growled, "He wants to see the face of everyone in the car." He wants to look us over, thought Greta. Will he be able to tell that I'm not on his side?

Carlos assumed himself to be irrelevant enough to be exempt from the colonel's interest, and took to scouring bugs off the windshield with a fingernail brush he kept in the glove compartment for that precise purpose. Ana finally stopped playing with her hair and tied it back, and Greta smoothed hers with both hands as they followed Steve back into the brigade, past two young men in fatigues and black round-toed boots covered in the red dust of the countryside, machine guns hanging from straps over their shoulders and caps pulled low onto foreheads over closely-shaven heads. The soldiers stood neither at attention nor at ease, but it wasn't sloppiness exactly, just a kind of languor produced by the morning heat. One had coaxed a fist-sized paper cone of peanuts from a girl selling them from her apron pockets, and he held it out to Ana as they passed. She looked him up and down in a gesture meant to humiliate him, in lieu of merely ignoring him. Greta, both repelled and intimidated by his weapon, placated him with a weak smile.

The smell as they entered the colonel's air-conditioned office was familiar, something like whiskey, perhaps after-shave, the slightly musty odour of damp rugs, an air freshener disk pressed onto the wall below the creaking, dripping air conditioner. The image of her lawyer flashed through Greta's mind and she

shuddered. The colonel leaned forward out of his desk chair to receive them, extending a hand and smiling a fawning smile; false, surely, but for what motives Greta was not entirely sure.

"Lovely ladies, WELCOME to my domain," he said in English, sweeping an arm across the air over two chairs facing him across a desk lined with miniature cannons. A sergeant stood frozen in salute near the door until the colonel ordered him to bring three coffees.

"So, my friend Steve has such pretty helpers with him today," he continued in an English learned on a base somewhere. "Is this your first time to our neck of the jungle?" His placid gaze betrayed neither humour nor the kind of intelligence required for irony.

"Yes it is," Greta answered in an exaggeratedly cheerful tone. "It is very pretty."

"Lordy, yes," he responded. Did he intend to sound ridiculous? Ana displayed her boredom, itching to get her elbows up and her fingers into her hair again, and the colonel seemed to find that an alluring trait. Steve leaned over the back of Ana's chair while the colonel told a rambling story about his special training in Georgia. After he finally signed his visitors' permissions, they turned down a second cup of sweet, watery coffee. He took Ana's right and Greta's left hand and held them in his moist, fleshy palms. Ana pulled hers away briskly as she would with any drunk in a bar, lifted her bag from the back of the chair she had been sitting in, and turned to go. Greta, awkward in the presence of someone both more powerful and more contemptible than anyone she had met before, drew hers away slowly and resisted the temptation to rub it clean on the leg of her jeans.

"Careful in there, and do stop again on your way home," the colonel said to them in closing, in a leering and menacing tone.

It was almost noon. Back in the jeep, Steve told them he had turned down the colonel's offer of lunch. They still had at least two hours of driving to go.

"Looks like we'll be spending the night," he announced, "so we might as well get lunch here."

The restaurant at the side of the road was serving only ox-foot soup, a greasy mixture including cabbage, which Greta found it difficult to look at and impossible to eat, although hunger was making her light-headed and distracted. She asked for fried yucca, which arrived, after a long delay, soggy and tough.

By the time they crossed the river which marked the boundary with land controlled by the guerrilla army, over a low cement bridge crumbling around rusting iron rods, it was hot and still and the air inside the jeep was a powerful soporific. Steve and Ana had dozed off, and Carlos might have done so as well if it weren't for a neatly pressed and folded handkerchief which he slipped out of his back pocket to pull across his forehead every few minutes.

The river, Greta imagined, would be under the vigilant but invisible eyes of sharpshooters. The easily-crossed stretches were booby-trapped with mines constructed of scraps -- nails, bottle shards, tacks -- with simple pressure-sensitive fuses prepared in the cities, where electricity powered the wax guns used to seal the circuits from seeping moisture. Women leaned into their laundry on the smooth flat rocks at the banks of the river, white suds streaming from their fists as they pummelled and scraped shirts, blankets, dresses. Boys hurled themselves from the rocks into the dark, churning water, delighting in the danger, observed casually by sisters and aunts with clothes to clean. The children waved at the car and giggled, then crossed skinny arms across skinny chests and shivered. The women lifted their heads to peer, their arms continuing to pump laundry.

Further up the rutted mud road the jeep passed a couple of teenagers dressed in dark blue squatting by a rock, machine guns clasped in their left hands, the butts of the guns resting in the dust. They rose to watch the jeep approach, then lifted a hand to wave it by. Further on, another couple, a boy and a girl, stepped in front of the jeep, waving it to a halt. They approached Steve's side greeted

him politely, and asked who he was as they leaned through the window and peered at the floor at his feet. Steve told them he had made arrangements with Esperanza, and they seemed satisfied with the answer but reluctant to let the car go until Steve opened the glove compartment, took out a pack of imported cigarettes and shook out two or three for each of them. They thanked him and gave an informal salute toward the vehicle as it pulled away.

Three more encounters were apparently casual as the first two, but spaced at intervals too precise to be casual. Having abandoned the colonel's territory, the travellers were now under the jurisdiction of no Government at all, and under the surveillance of well-trained teenagers. The road, which had not suffered the wear and tear of traffic for years, tilted a bit to one side or the other as it followed the topography of the land, dipping and rising over increasingly rough terrain. They swung off it onto a dirt road that wound around a hill and diminished to a path of large uneven paving stones lining the former main street of a village. They bumped past the remains of old foundations and arrived at the centre: a collection of pockmarked plastered buildings built around a simple square.

A gravel path led inward from each corner of the square to a circle of low cement benches around a patch of rough grass. Two emaciated goats were chewing there, helping to reduce the grass to dry stubble. A boy and a girl sat on a bench, elbows on their knees, in the now-familiar uniform dark blue. Their guns were set down at their sides and they were talking to two older boys, one of whom carried a transistor radio and was fiddling with the antenna and tuner. The plaster-walled houses were whitened with lime, but they had lost most of the red roof tiles that would have made the village almost picturesque. Now a combination of sheet metal, old shutters and woven mats closed the gaps to keep the buildings from disappearing into the red dirt. It had the look of towns that are shadows only, where buildings are identified by the functions they no longer fulfil -- "This is the former post office, this is where the mayor's office used to be" -- and places are named for characteristics that have disappeared -- "The plaza is called Flame-Tree

because the trees that grew there once had leaves red like fire. Mill Road leads to that building at the end there, used, at one time, for grinding corn".

Greta stared at the uniforms and rifles in full view, displaying as plain as day on whose side their bearers stood, advertising their engagement in warfare. They walked around exposed, hearts on their sleeves. Brazenly naked, a nudist colony. It was strangely exhilarating, to see how free they were to reveal themselves, and it made Greta realise how much she missed such transparency. In the rest of the country, where dissimulation was the most valuable armour, it would be a foolish show, but here it was just surprising ease.

They pulled to a stop at the edge of the square.

"Stay in the car!" barked Steve toward the back seat as he jumped down with his bulky shoulder bag.

"Why?" Greta asked no one in particular, resenting Steve's orders.

"He's probably looking for Comandante Tomas," Ana said blandly, slumped now in her seat, both knees sunk into the back of Carlos' seat ahead of her. Greta shot a glance at the back of Carlos' head -- *was he allowed to know something like that?* -- and then tried, a bit belatedly, to appear nonchalant.

"Who's Comandante Tomas?"

"Some guy, the boss," Ana responded, which was of no help at all, but Greta felt obliged to accept the answer rather than press for more information. Phrases from the transcribed tape entered her head as the beginnings of conversation, and she guessed that they were looking for the same person. She wondered if Steve would let her sit in on an interview or if she would be expected to wait in the car. After ten minutes of sitting, tired of waiting, irritated at being shouted at, Greta stepped out of the ear to stretch and look around.

She walked around the back of one of the buildings on the square and almost ran into a goat. He was tied by a long flimsy rope to the narrow pillar of a back veranda that echoed with faint rhythmic slapping. Following the rope around the pillar, she found three women standing beside a pile of stones piled in a circle to contain a fire, a huge round earthenware platter balanced over it. The

women looked at her but continued to slap cornmeal paste into the thick rounds of the countryside's oversized *tortillas*. They wore simple dresses sewn of bright flimsy cotton, aprons with pockets tied at their waists, but the floppy rubber slip-on sandals which would have completed a peasant woman's attire were replaced with socks and short lace-up boots with thick soles. Behind them three rifles were set against the wall.

Greta instinctively looked aside. "Good morning," one of them said, and then all three chuckled as she corrected herself "Good *afternoon*." The other two echoed her. "Good afternoon," Greta responded, relieved that commonplace greetings were useful even in these unlikely circumstances.

"Are you making lunch?" she asked. The oldest of the three nodded and looked pointedly at the youngest, who lay her tortilla on the scorched earthenware and turned to enter the doorway into the dimness behind her. She emerged a few seconds later with a hand in a bulging apron pocket, from which she produced an egg. She cracked it into the middle of the griddle and produced salt from the apron pocket to sprinkle from between her fingers. The older woman whispered another command and a tin plate appeared. The egg was fresh, its yolk firm and a deep shade of orange. She scooped it from the fire with a crudely carved long-handled wooden spoon, laid it over a *tortilla* on the plate and handed the plate to Greta, who stood with it between her hands, wondering how she had come to deserve such unhesitating generosity. They pressed her to eat, nudging a stool at the back of her knees. She shrugged shyly and sat, then ripped the tortilla into pieces to dip into the egg, savouring the alleviation of both her hunger and her isolation.

She was taking her third bite when she heard the clomping of footsteps and an irate Steve appeared. Without so much as a nod to anyone, he growled, "There you are. We're going, I was about to leave you behind."

Greta's mouth was too full to say anything, so she lifted her plate toward him to demonstrate that she was in the middle of a genuine meal. He turned his back and marched off. She rose with an apologetic nod to the women, reluctantly

returned the plate with the offering still steaming on it, and thanked them each twice. They cocked their heads at her, and she tripped off, waving a plaintive "See you later".

The jeep engine was running.

"Where are we going?" asked Greta, but Steve only murmured the name of a village -- Las Pilas -- which she didn't recognise. They turned onto a much rougher set of tracks of caked mud between two sets of hills, where they jolted from side to side and leapt over bumps. After passing the ruins of plastered adobe houses at the side of the road, grass growing from between dirt bricks, they came to a deep ravine three times the length of the jeep. The two sides were linked by another of the iron-rod and cement bridges that sagged in the middle, two slabs hinged at an angle by ageing bent iron. Carlos turned off the engine, pulled the emergency brake as though he meant to extract it, and jumped out to inspect the condition of the bridge's remains. Greta opened her door to follow.

"Don't step off the dirt," Steve warned. "This place is mined up the wha-zoo."

"What's a *wha-zoo*?" she heard Ana ask as she followed Carlos' steps into the mud tracks, hoping she wouldn't have to listen to Steve's explanation of the phrase. She suggested to Carlos that they walk across the bridge together to test it.

"No, no, no," he insisted, alarmed. "I'll go, you wait here, *señorita*." He took a step, setting loose some rubble. Carefully he scuttled down to the middle of the bridge along the length of one leg. The iron bars dipped slightly and held. He took a long step over the gap and worked his way up the other side. Greta followed, mimicking Carlos' movements but slipping slightly. When he saw her in such a vulnerable and undignified place, he became alarmed and strained to reach her. Grabbing her by the wrist, he hoisted her up. Then he signalled back to Steve that the ravine was impassable. She could see Steve through the windshield, cursing and banging the dashboard with the butt of his hand. The next minute he

was out of the car, bag in hand. Ana opened her door and swung sideways, then froze, peering over her toes at the mud tracks below her feet.

"We gotta walk," Steve growled.

"Walk?" asked Greta. "Where are we going?"

"I have a meeting, there's no other way to get there. If you want to wait here, you can wait here, be my guest."

Greta hesitated, thinking of joining the women with the goat, the fire, the *tortillas*, the eggs, the conversation she might have about how they got to where they were, but the prospect of what the road ahead offered was too enticing.

"I'll come, I'll come," she called. "Let me get my bag."

"Oh, well, if you come, then I don't need Ana, she can stay here with Carlos."

Greta didn't relish the thought of taking Ana's slot as Steve's assistant, but that was the choice she faced. Steve told Carlos to wait until dusk and that if they hadn't returned, to go back to the settlement to sleep and return the following morning.

"Does he have anything to eat?" Greta asked Steve.

"I will be fine, Miss," Carlos interrupted unexpectedly. Perhaps he had bananas wrapped in newsprint under the seat of the jeep or he would barter something with the women who made tortillas.

"Of course you will be, Carlos," Steve responded, obviously annoyed, while Greta reprimanded herself for her condescension toward the man. Steve tossed their bags across the ravine, then picked his way across the remnants of the bridge, exchanging places with Carlos.

Greta and Steve walked along the dwindling road, Steve muttering to himself. Greta finally thought it inoffensive to ask the obvious: "Where are we going? How long will it take to get there?"

"I don't know exactly where we're going," Steve said, looking straight ahead. "I'm supposed to be meeting Comandante Tomas, if the security situation looks okay. They told me they'd send someone along this road to meet me. They neglected to tell me about the damn bridge." He reiterated, "If you don't want to come, I'll go by myself."

"No, no I'm fine, that's fine, " Greta said in the way of any apology. "I just wondered."

As they continued on in silence along a dirt road which disuse had reduced to a wide path, Steve slipped a candy bar from his shirt pocket, ripped it open and tossed the paper into the tall grass at his side. He said, as though it were generosity, "Sorry, it's my only one." Greta shrugged and pretended to peer into the distance, until, within peering distance, a couple appeared, strolling and laughing, a courting pair in the countryside who happened to be dressed in dark blue uniforms (almost like gardeners or park workers, Greta thought sheepishly). They carried the regulation firearm and the woman had a pack with an antenna extending back over her heads and curving down again into the box.

When they saw Steve and Greta, they stopped. The young man, very slight, helped hoist the pack to the ground and the woman, older, taller and more robust, sat down on a flat rock at the side of the road, opened the radio pack and started fiddling with dials. Steve and Greta stopped, too, waiting for a signal. When she had made contact, the woman stood up, leaving the pack on the rock, and waved them over. She extended a hand in a businesslike but gracious fashion to both Steve and Greta. The attention made Greta feel how accustomed she was in all other circumstances to being ignored under the assumption that she was an auxiliary.

"How was your journey?" the woman asked them as though to an elderly aunt getting off a train.

"A piece of cake," Steve responded, in Spanish, and it didn't work in translation so he received a quizzical look.

They ended up waiting at that spot for two hours. Steve stomped around with impatience and Greta began to wish she had stayed back with Carlos to get away from Steve. Their escorts chatted, kicked at stones, shared a cigarette and laughed as though remembering something funny from the day before. The four began to walk again after dark, through hypnotising silence.

They came to a crossroads. As they turned left onto a narrower track, their guide said, "If you go straight on here, you get to El Sitio. We can go tomorrow if you like."

"We'll see," Steve responded. "There's nothing left, is there."

"Just El Sitio," the boy replied, *The Site*, and he and his companion laughed softly and reluctantly, with a hint of nervousness.

Finally they arrived at a camp set among ruins of houses: pillars standing with nothing to hold up, roofs open to the sky. To Greta it felt like days since they had left the jeep, and the city could as well have been another country. Sheets of plastic were strung between trees, anchored to the ground at one side as lean-to tents, flimsy string hammocks served as beds and as cradles for gear and, in one instance, a baby. A circle of fire had burned down to the coals. Greta and Steve sat on stumps set up as benches and temporarily vacated out of courtesy to the guests. They stretched their legs before them, aching and heavy.

Greta heard a rustling sound behind her. Steve jumped up suddenly and extended a hand into the night, almost knocking Greta off her stump. She recognised the voice that said, "Mr. Steve, you have returned. You must be pleased with our accommodations." Tomas' tall, lanky frame appeared at the edge of the circle. Greta had seen pictures of his boyish, close-shaven face, but had not imagined his stature, or how he looked when animated like this, jovial and joking.

He nodded at Greta. "Welcome. You are not Ana."

"No, I am not Ana, I am Greta."

"Ah yes, Greta. I know of you." Greta, pleased to be flattered, believed him and felt herself blushing.

"I know of you, too," she replied, as though he had been flirting. But he was already watching Steve, who dug in his bag and drew out a tape recorder, held it out to Greta without looking at her, then found his journalist's notebook and flipped it open over the spirals at the top.

"Aha, to work, to work, straightaway," Tomas said, clearing his throat. "Perhaps we should sit in the little house," he offered, indicating the woods, beyond the light of the fire.

"Yeah, that'd be good," Steve said in a Spanish that plodded along with the cadence of his native drawl. They followed Tomas and were followed in turn by a pair of younger and much shorter boys who hovered as body guards, brandishing flashlights. They came to a thatched hut built on a cement floor that had outlived the four walls and roof of the original house. Inside was a table fashioned of planks and nailed into slender trunks, surrounded by crude benches. A tin container, tapered at the top and stuffed with a rag wick, served as an oil lamp in the middle of the table. Tomas gestured for Steve and Greta to sit down, then spoke briefly to the body guards, one of whom shifted out through the doorway and returned in five minutes with a gritty black brew of surprisingly fragrant coffee in a misshapen aluminium pot.

Tomas sat at the head of the table, folded his long fingers together and leaned on his fists. "So Steve, you found me again. How is life in the capital?"

"Oh, heating up a bit," replied Steve. "I saw your friend on Monday, he told me to come see you as soon as I could. I gave him your letter, but he didn't send anything back this time."

Steve's comments were hastily, urgently stated. He was trying to win favour by demonstrating a willingness to oblige, but he was short-circuiting what Greta knew ought to be a slow process with fast talk: without pauses, without silence.

"He didn't tell you anything?" Tomas asked.

Steve's pointed glance at Greta expelled her immediately from the any trust Tomas might have extended to her.

Frustrated into a rage by her exclusion, Greta clamped her teeth together until her jaw throbbed. Steve drove his point home by changing the subject and moving to safe, public ground. "If you don't mind, I did want to get a little more information about the economic part of your plan -- for now."

Tomas obliged, but it was a cursory explanation: more loan availability for small businesses, opportunities for small farmers to acquire land and get around the distribution monopolies, investment in productive non-agricultural sectors. *Textbook*, Greta thought, not terribly original, but enough to satisfy reporters with a formula for an article, and a word limit.

He had described the steps, stages, phases and scenarios for almost an hour when another man, whom Greta guessed was, like Tomas, just over thirty, slipped in the door, set down his long gun against the wall, and crouched by the wall to listen. He was shorter, sturdy, with smooth dark skin and eyes that recorded the details of the room. Tomas nodded at him in the middle of a sentence and tipped his head sideways toward the seat at his right. He stood up, slipped his gun over his shoulder and sat next to Tomas at the table.

"This is our doctor and surgeon, Dario. Mr. Jeff, Miss Greta." The man nodded at both of them with an expression that blended courtesy with his own reasons for impatience. Tomas continued to talk, while Steve took notes and interrupted abruptly. Dario watched them with the restlessness of someone eager to talk about something more urgent or more critical. He looked down at his hands as though remembering an operation they had performed, a wound that still bled. Greta stole glances at him, softened and coaxed out of her irritation by his presence.

Tomas finished his monologue and turned to Dario, grasping a shoulder in his long hand. "And so, Herr Dokter, how are things on the medical front?" Dario smiled, just barely, and looked up at Greta, waiting for a request.

Steve shot out, "Have the casualty rates been about the same?"

Dario paused, then, appearing to concede to a demand, plodded through a roundabout history of the medical effects of malnutrition, the prevalence of respiratory diseases, the lack of vaccines, the persistence of rickets, amoebas, diarrhoea, ulcers. He moved on, slowly, deliberately, to bullet wounds, mine injuries (backfired, stepped on), grenades. He was beginning to detail after-effects of torture when Steve waved his hand to cut him off.

"Right, right. And antibiotics? Where are they coming from these days?"

Dario shrugged and looked down at his hands again. His right thumb kneaded the palm of his left hand. Tomas filled in some details, judiciously chosen so as not to compromise any government or other support network. Steve stood up brusquely, stuck his notebook away, took the tape recorder from Greta and asked where they could sleep.

"We have a place," Tomas said, standing up, and looking from Steve, who was already in the doorway, to Greta, who remained seated at the table.

"I'm not tired," Greta said, "I'll stay up awhile." Tomas glanced at Dario, said, "Find me later – there are a couple of things to go over," and left them at the table, the lamp still spewing a yellow flame streaked through with a ribbon of black.

Dario and Greta sat at the table in silence. Dario's speech had been as formulaic as Tomas', but his voice was that of the tape she had transcribed, so while they had only just been introduced, his story had shaken her before she met him, while it was still merely that of a stranger, and she knew him, illicitly, an eye at the keyhole. His presence, alluring for its swings between animated and pensive moods and the

urgency of his attentiveness, especially to her, resonated with the fascination of the voice rediscovered, embodied.

Dario was crouched slightly, his shoulders hunching with the tension of the war and of the latest casualty, another life drained out of a person whom he should have been able to save. (He could always imagine the steps necessary, he had all the technical skill, *slit open, excise, clean, sew*, but he rarely had the barest tools, *scalpel, tweezers, good light, needles, strong thread, an antibiotic* -- to perform those steps successfully. A body bleeding, expiring, hardening under his gaze.) He rubbed his thumb against the palm of his other hand: to clean it, to soften it, or to try to feel it as an outsider might.

Greta leaned her forearms on the table and folded her hands in front of her, watching Dario stare at his hands. She wanted to ask him something, or tell him something. She held her tongue and continued to watch instead, and resisted an urge to reach out her hand and run a finger along one of his. Then she looked at her own hands, unconsciously imitating him. When she lifted her head, he was smiling at her, eyebrows raised, his palms turned up on the table as if they had been playing a game together. She smiled back and shrugged, stretched her legs out under the table, crossed them at the ankles and leaned forward slightly to slide her hands between her knees. She tilted her head to one said and said, simply, "Hello".

"Hello," he answered immediately, matter-of-factly. "What are you doing here?" He slipped his gun off his shoulder and laid it out flat on the bench opposite Greta.

"What am I doing here," Greta echoed, wondering how to answer. "What am I doing here, in this little house, or what am I doing here, in this country?"

"Both. Or you choose. It is up to you to say."

"Well, I am here now because I came with the journalist."

"He is a friend of yours?"

"No, not a friend. I work for him sometimes and he let me come along on this trip."

"Aha. That is good."

"It is lucky, for me. It is not easy to get here from the capital, on my own."

"What do you do in the capital?"

"Ah, well, I am doing some documentation, writing a little bit."

"You are a journalist too."

"More or less," was all she could come up with, her head bobbing from side to side to show how equivocal the label was. "I – that is, my work -- doesn't get used very often."

"Maybe it is not the work for you."

There was a pause. Greta felt foolish that she should be the subject of the conversation, but did not want to break the spell cast by the tentative, careful tenor of their conversation, sitting there together, oil lamp smoking, the quiet of the huge countryside interrupted only by the occasional clinking of a gun shifted, boots crunching leaves in the woods around them.

"How long have *you* been here?" she finally asked, looking up at him.

"I have been here long enough to see more than I can stand," was all he said.

"Too long?" she asked in sympathy.

"No," he said, rejecting sympathy, "there is always more to do."

Greta waited, hoping he would continue, but when he didn't she asked, simply, "Would you say things are going well?"

"As well as can be expected, or perhaps better. We are lucky to have this territory, lucky there hasn't been a big army operation for three months. We have had some advances and our bases of support are strong."

She had run out of things to say, already. She wanted to know, but didn't want to ask, where he would be in a month's time, what he thought would happen next, in the war, what she ought to do to help. He could not yet entrust her with knowledge that could not be made public, and she did not trust herself with such knowledge.

She reached out a finger and drew it the length of one of his, and he caught it, playfully, in his own. "We're here. That's lucky." She took a hand in two of her own and lifted it to her cheek, lightly enough for the gesture to be accepted as an act of instinctive affection. He lifted a finger to push a lock of hair back from her face and looked at her, studying her with a faintly quizzical look. Music, incongruously cheerful, drifted in barely audible from a scratchy transistor outside the walls of the house; a *cumbia* again. It didn't make her feel lonely, this time, but it still wasn't her music, it was someone else's, overheard.

She laid his hand on the table. He peered at her again, then stood up and stepped out into the night, returning a few minutes later with a plate of beans and a *tortilla* and a cup of muddy coffee which he set in front of her on the table.

"Your journalist will sleep in a tent that has been prepared. Do you want to sleep with him there?"

"Absolutely not," she responded, too quickly. Abashed, she added, "But wherever it is most convenient for me to stay, it is up to you."

"You could sleep here, on the floor," he suggested. "I have a tarpaulin."

"That's fine, thank you."

He pulled a bulky square from his pack and laid out a sheet of heavy black plastic, smoothing it over the stubbornly bumpy dirt floor. He disappeared out the door again and brought in a renewed oil lamp to exchange for the flickering flame in front of her. "You can leave this burning," he said. "I need to see Tomas."

She ate her meal, grateful for each bite, then sat again with her hands wedged between her knees, waiting. The time passed slowly. She pulled a sweatshirt out of her small bag and slipped it over her head, lay down on the plastic and curled up, hands between her bent legs, head against the flattened end of her bag, and fell asleep at once, alone.

More scratchy, cheerful radio music startled Greta from sleep. It was dark in the house, but a thin line of light seeped through a crack in the roof, and the hum of a mosquito circled her head. A thin blanket was draped across her hips, and a body next to hers shifted. Her eyes adjusted to the darkness, and her ears to the sound of unfamiliar voices, outside. She remembered, then, where she had fallen asleep, and remembered that it must be Dario next to her. Her back ached, her legs were stiff in her jeans and she stretched them and felt her feet in socks, though she didn't remember removing her shoes. She poked around with her toes and found them, set against a pair of boots. She slipped them on and went outside through a creaky wooden door, hanging loosely on rusting hinges.

The others in the camp were recently awake, chatting and putting enough away that they could leave quickly, should they need to. Two women in uniforms and boots crouched on their haunches around a fire, patting and turning pancakes of cornmeal that they tossed on the griddle over the fire. It looked easy and Greta, hoping to demonstrate a certain humility, asked to be shown how this everyday task was performed. Her willingness to attempt it was appreciated as a sign of sympathy but her inability to even shape the dough into thick rounds was taken as evidence that, like women with maids, she had never had to learn to prepare her own food.

A dozen other people were around, milling about or watching the first *tortillas* cook over the fire. Some of the teenagers and young fighters she had seen yesterday, but today there were also men and women with the sunworn faces of peasants, born in several different decades. Two women appeared from between the trees with small tubs of water balanced on their heads, foreheads and noses beaded with sweat from having trudged up a steep path from the river. A gap in the trees revealed the curve of a low hill on the opposite river bank, stretching out into gradual slopes in three directions, a simple countryside, revealed as a shroud of mist lifted with the sun's appearance.

The mood was relaxed, almost jovial, and Greta forgot for awhile that they were a guerrilla camp, a fully legitimate target for even the most scrupulous army,

one which held itself within the rules of war which governed the acceptable targets to be bombed, strafed and ambushed. (Even if there were such an army, the one operating in this theatre was not of that sort.) Perhaps the virtue most germane in these circumstances would not be courage, after all, but patience: patience to not take action for days on end, patience to wait for orders, patience to not see the object of one's desire, for weeks and months. Patience, and a trust in leaders, trust that the higher-ups had a collective best-interest at heart and knew more than you did about how to go about achieving it, trust that the long months and years of the sacrifices of war would eventually pay off and, at the end of the whole mess, it would turn out that you had, after all, been fighting for the same ends, and that you and the others on your side had something in common.

Greta glanced around for Steve but when a tall woman as old as her mother asked whom she was looking for, she pretended it was no one and peered into the pot on the fire: beans rolling in a boil.

Steve emerged some minutes later from between the trees, dishevelled but in a boisterous mood. "Where's your bedmate?" he chirped. Greta did not find the words to answer nor a way to hide her derision, but Steve didn't wait for a response. "I'm going to get some coffee and then let's get outta here," he said in the same tone he would have used with a driver, or, for that matter, a wife.

Greta turned away from him and almost bumped into Dario who had appeared from the house they had slept in, looking as though he had merely dozed. "You slept well," he said more as a statement than a question. "You were not afraid?"

"Afraid, no, just very tired. I wanted to wait for you, but I fell asleep before you returned."

"It was very late."

"This is a beautiful spot, I can see why the refugees want to come back to it."

"And never wanted to leave in the first place," he added, not stridently, but as another outsider. "If I live to see the war end, I suppose I will miss it too."

He turned to take a plate offered to him by one of the cooks - breakfast, though indistinguishable from a plate of dinner the night before - and coffee, made from beans harvested a month early from nearby trees. He nodded at Greta to accept the same, then lifted an elbow to indicate their house.

When they had sat down at the table across from one another, now with the ease of full light, Greta asked, "Where would you go? I mean if the war ends."

She said "if" because she had never imagined the war would be over some day. She had first learned of this country (as anything other than the label on one of the many flags on a page in an atlas) through people whose identity was bestowed by war, dependent on that extreme. She had first set foot in it when the adjective used to describe it had long been "wartorn". She had become so accustomed to thinking of the country as a stage for war that she found herself expecting it to continue to exist only as long as that show was on. Governments were pouring money into the war, so it was unlikely that the local actors would be responsible for ending the production. Dario's life had been formed into its shape by war: how could he imagine *life* without it?

He took so long to answer that she wondered if it was a question she should have suppressed. But finally he began. "Who knows? It depends on how long this goes on, the turns it takes. It will be one thing if we march into the capital, you know, victorious in captured tanks, palm fronds waving, and all get swept up by the duties of government. It will be quite another if we make some sort of compromise, then it will depend how far the accord takes us. We will be free from war but will have to start almost from scratch. Either way, I don't think I'd make much of a Health Minister."

He looked at the food on his plate and took a bite of it, unconvinced. "Of course, if things turn out badly . . ." He stopped in mid-sentence, coming close to actually biting his tongue, and shrugged, consciously lightening his tone. "In any case, there will always be work to do."

This time he ate until his plate was clean. "Someday I would like to study again. It would be a good change to work with those tools doctors use when they

have a hospital or a lab." He pushed his plate away and looked at the table. "Who knows? Maybe they'll make me a diplomat and send me to Bulgaria." He looked across at her. "Do you suppose we have an embassy in Bulgaria? Would you go there?"

Greta was taken aback. "Hmm, I have no idea," she answered to his first two questions, amazed that she had been included in the last one. "I probably would."

Steve stuck his head around the door and sang "Yoo-hoo! Time to hit the road!"

"I'm coming, I'm coming," responded Greta, and waited until his eyes had surveyed the room – some detail to open his article, she imagined, or maybe just snooping -- and then retreated. She looked at Dario, who had jumped up and was waiting for her to finish eating. She regretted leaving him already, regretted not forming a link that would carry her through another spell alone in the city.

She looked up at him. "You know, if there's anything I can do in the capital, I am willing to help." She wanted to add, "I could visit your mother, to see how she is," but did not want to reveal that she knew more about him than he had told her.

He stared at his plate again. "Well, there is a friend. If you happen to be at the university, you could stop and see her, just say I sent greetings."

Greta conjured up a fondness between him and this friend, an affection intensified by absence and uncertainty. She swallowed and answered, "Of course. Where do I find her?"

"Physics, she's the only woman in the department, her name is Gabriela."

"I will look her up. Can I tell her where I saw you?"

"No, better not to say where. Just say you saw me very recently, and that I'm in good health."

"That's easy," she said. He came around the table and perched sideways on the chair next to her. She turned to reach for his hand, stroking it with her fingertips as she had seen him do to himself, absently. He had long, smooth

fingers, like a pianist (or a surgeon, she corrected herself), and surprisingly smooth skin for one who lived in the woods and carried patients in hammocks. She leaned over and kissed a finger playfully, not as lightly as the evening before. He put the back of his hand to her cheek, briefly.

"Will you come back and see us again?" he asked, standing up again.

"Yes, if I can. Will you be here?"

"I could be. If you make it in, try sending a message through the radio system saying that you're here. If I am in the area, I will find a way to meet you. Use a code name. Say that the . . . "

Steve came in again, swinging the door until it slammed against the inside wall. "Sorry to break it up, but I've got a deadline."

"I'm coming, I'm all set." She stood up and reached out a hand to Dario. "A pleasure to meet you, doctor."

He leaned forward slightly as he shook her hand. "The pleasure is mine, madam." The formality, exaggerated, became their game. "Until we meet again. I look forward to hearing from . . . Sofia?"

She nodded, assenting to his reminder of Bulgaria. "Stay well," she said with sudden gravity, and left to follow Steve, who was already yapping, "Sofia? Who's Sofia?"

Greta and Steve walked back toward the bridge where they had left Carlos and Ana. When they passed the turn off to El Sitio, Greta asked Steve if he had ever been there.

He sounded irritated when he responded, "I was there once. There was nothing to see."

Nothing to see, thought Greta. It was the site of an infamous massacre, where hundreds of townspeople had been killed in a single afternoon. Wasn't that why people went to visit such sites: to see just how much *nothing* there was, to feel the breadth of the divide between the before and the after?

Steve quickened his pace, nudging himself ahead of Greta, though the path was wide and they had been walking side by side. He added, almost gruffly, "It hasn't been corroborated that anything really significant happened there. The numbers don't add up. Could have been a skirmish. They say only one person got out, and she is in a refugee camp across the border, and she's not exactly coherent." He worked himself up, and threw up his hands. "Of course the guerrillas are bound to exaggerate what happened, to make the army look bad. But it doesn't make any sense – why would the army bother to kill all those people? There wasn't even much support for the guerrillas in that town. Who knows, maybe the guerrillas had something to do with it – revenge or something, some kind of lesson to somebody. That's what the colonel says, and the Embassy couldn't confirm or deny anything, either. They're violent people, you know. It's not like the boys in the hills are angels just because the army has made its mistakes."

Greta was staring hard at the dirt track in front of her, dumbfounded. She might have expected Steve to show disinterest, but not scorn. She had read the reports in American newspapers that appeared a month or so after the killings. A reporter and a photographer had managed to penetrate the border illegally and edge their way to the village and gape at the aftermath: bodies, some charred, some covered with a thin layer of dirt, flesh pulling away, clothing hanging like shrouds. The photographs and descriptions were detailed, gruesome and

irrefutable. Neighbours on distant plots of land, knowing there was an army operation during that week, had refused the invitation to seek "refuge" in the town. They had heard the gunfire and seen smoke rising and eventually approached. The few who dared enter did what they could to prevent circling vultures from devouring the corpses.

She had also read the more detailed reports produced later, tomes compiled by people whose work it was to document, describe, list and catalogue without comment unfathomable events in disparate locations. In this particular place's set of horrors, children had been confined to a house, were shot and then burned. Those still held in arms were found with the bodies of the women, a short distance away, in the open. Young women, girls really, were found in the surrounding woods, raped, and the men were in the village square, fallen as though they had been standing in rows. "The survivor" had been tracked down and interviewed, too, and she described the scene – not the picture described and photographed by the late-coming reporters, but a passion circumscribed by her private anguish, the sound of her own children calling to her as she fell among the dead women and rolled, in the gathering dusk, to the furthest edges of the remains, below a bush. *Not exactly coherent.* Had she been fully coherent, would that not have been evidence that she could not possibly have witnessed all that she claimed to know?

They had walked in silence now, Greta falling further behind. Steve, in closing, added, "Who knows? That was four years ago already, and anyway, that colonel's not around anymore."

Carlos was waiting for them at the bridge. He had risen before dawn, washed his face and patted it dry with his handkerchief, and found women preparing a fire in the corner of a house with no roof. He had asked for and was given a decent breakfast of coffee and day-old tortillas. The exchange was formal. His looks betrayed neither sympathy nor antipathy with their political alliance, just polite appreciation of women who provided food. When he left the settlement Ana was still asleep, and, assuming she enjoyed the status of a consort of Mr. Steve, embarrassed to wake her, he left her in the room appointed to both of them

the night before by the *comandante*'s appointee Esperanza; he himself had slept in the jeep for reasons of decorum. In the absence of more precise instructions, he arrived back at the ravine at first light, in case Mr. Steve should require his services. He waited there, tilted back slightly in the driver's seat, listening to an unfamiliar station on the car radio.

The drive back to the capital was uneventful. It was hot and muggy, and by early afternoon when Greta dumped her bag on the floor of her plain, sparsely furnished room, she was tired, hungry, stiff and aching for a shower.

And anyway, that colonel's not around anymore. Greta felt like a foreigner trying to comprehend the meaning of Steve's words. "That colonel" was dead, she knew that: his helicopter explosion was well corroborated. (Steve's trusted sources would neither confirm nor deny that it was the result of an operation planned and executed by the guerrillas.) Is that how you describe a man blown to bits, even an evil man with blood on his hands: he's "not around anymore"? And what did it matter how long ago an entire village had been shot, shocked, burned? Had some deadline passed, a statute of limitations expired? Steve would certainly tell her she was not learning the ropes of journalism at all.

IV

It took Greta a week to convince herself to look up Gabriela at the university. She thought it more respectful to allow her obsession with Dario to subside before presenting herself to the woman who had a genuine claim on him.

The physics department offices were on the second floor of a crumbling building at a corner of the university campus. Students were sitting in the stairwells with notebooks laid out between them, their backs to the graffiti on the walls, and she picked her way between them to get upstairs. The long bare corridor was lit by sunlight filtering through latticework bricks below the ceiling beams. She peered at the names pencilled on scraps of paper stuck to the doors until she came to one that said Dr. Gabriela Ramos. The door was open, and a woman sat facing it across a grey metal desk. She looked slightly familiar, attractive in a bright way, a little older than Greta. When Greta stopped at the threshold, she looked over the top of her glasses and said, "Good afternoon. Are you looking for someone?"

"Yes, good afternoon, I am looking for Gabriela."

"I am Gabriela. Please come in."

Greta had fretted so long about the encounter that she had forgotten to think about what to say. Seeing her hesitate, Gabriela indicated a chair and invited her to sit down.

"May I help you?"

"Well, I am just bringing greetings. I saw, umm, met Dario and he wanted you to know that he is in good health."

Gabriela looked down at the desk between them. "I see. Was this recently?"

"Over a week ago, I guess it was a Friday."

"Was he here, in the city?"

Greta was taken aback. Were they talking about the same person? How could she think he would come to the city?

"No, it was in . . . out in the countryside."

"Aha. Will you see him again soon?"

"Oh. I don't know. It's not easy."

"No, it's not easy."

Greta knew she was missing something, but it made her feel awkward to realise it.

"Why do you ask?"

Gabriela looked up at her briefly, and then turned her gaze to a poster on the wall, a faded announcement for a conference held three years ago. She blinked several times and took a breath that ended in a soft sigh.

"Well, if you were to see him soon, there is something he should know. Perhaps you could tell him. Please tell him that his mother has passed away."

Greta started. "Oh, that is very bad news. I am sorry to hear it. When . . . ?"

"Just three days ago. She started asking for him two weeks ago, but . . . Well, he probably couldn't have come anyway."

Greta felt a stab of guilt at not having come to Gabriela as soon as she returned to the city. She remembered what Dario had said in his interview with Steve, and asked, "Was she still teaching?"

Gabriela gave her a puzzled look. "Teaching?" She shook her head distractedly. "No, she was not a teacher."

Greta was stricken, though she could not have given all the reasons yet. She looked down at Gabriela's desk, and saw the woman's hands folded there, long elegant fingers and luminous skin. Dario's hands.

"I'm sorry," she said to her. "I am very sorry that the mother is no longer here."

Over the following weeks, Greta avoided calling Steve. Her own work was suffering from neglect as she found new ways to fill hours of indolence, and came to rely on their abundance as part of the rhythm of her life. She found a city swimming pool (constructed for some regional athletic games back when there

were loans and aid for such endeavours) where she would swim leisurely laps each morning, rolling over into a backstroke to watch birds cross the sky. She would take a roundabout walk home along back streets, greeting bored guards, street boys not yet addicted to glue fumes, maids escaping into the streets on errands, an occasional old man on a walk with a dog, parrots in cages hung from trees in front gardens. Arriving home, she would pore over the paltry newspaper, page by page, while she had breakfast. Grocery shopping at a store was replaced by a series of forays to the crowded market to look for fruit, feeling the heft of each mango and inhaling the sweetness at the base of the pineapples; to a kiosk down the street to get milk from a damp metal cooler; to a crowded bakery where she waited in line for the bread to emerge from the ovens; to the shack of a woman who kept chickens in her dirt yard and set aside fresh eggs for Greta to fetch daily.

One day outside the market she was peering at a street side table (displaying a curious combination of plastic cigarette lighters that twinkled with coloured lights when their tops were flipped open, religious icons cut from magazines and framed in cardboard, and key chains shaped like pinup girls) when she lifted her head and found herself looking at someone her age, her shade, shorter but of similar proportions, and very familiar. The woman felt Greta's eyes and when she turned to look at her, Greta recognised her as Elisa, an acquaintance from her university.

Greta and Elisa had been in a biology class together and shared a lab table where they were required to dissect a mink. They both found the task repulsive, Elisa for political reasons (the minks were donated by a farm that raised them on behalf of the fur coat industry), Greta for the greasy feel and sharp formaldehyde smell of the dead animal's flesh. A mutual friend had told Greta two years ago that Elisa was living in El Salvador, "or one of those countries down there", but hadn't been able to offer details. It turned out that Elisa had been in the country for almost two years, and had an extra room in her house, in a neighbourhood more central, and better connected to bus lines, than where Greta was living. "I'm

in and out a lot, so it would be good to have someone else there," she told Greta by way of invitation for her to stay.

In Elisa's neighbourhood the houses stood close but not attached, each with a garage along one side and a small patch of grass in the front. It was not one of the exclusive neighbourhoods where high outer walls lined the streets and fierce dogs and armed guards paced behind iron doors; and it wasn't one of the areas where each household shared thin walls with the neighbours and flimsy roofs provided easy access to thieves. It was far from the mazes of tin shacks patched with cardboard where most people lived. It was respectable enough not to draw attention from the authorities, and not so extravagant it would offend either Elisa's principles or Greta's sensibilities.

Greta moved almost immediately. "I'm sure my room will come in handy for you," she told her roommate in a note left on the refrigerator, which she cleared of perishables before loading her table, plants, a box of books and a small suitcase of clothes into the back of a taxi driver's brother-in-law's pickup truck.

Elisa was well established in the country she said she had adopted as her own. She was always busy, running off to meetings and then returning to close herself in her room with a pile of documents to translate or a report to write up. At first her vocabulary mystified Greta, dotted with acronyms for the proliferation of small organisations that supported mistreated workers, peasant co-operatives, women whose husbands, sons or daughters had been taken prisoner or simply taken away in the night, the homeless, the unemployed, the displaced, churches condemning the outrages of children abducted, houses looted, prisoners held for months without charges or trials. She was on a first-name basis with the leaders and militants of a network so extensive Greta couldn't begin to navigate her way through it. Each week Elisa would send off piles of documents to groups in other countries where people had more money to spare and fewer ways to be involved directly in anything with such immediate and dramatic consequences. They would reciprocate by donating office machines and an occasional vehicle, and by arriving in batches for tours of the drama, with Elisa as guide and interpreter.

Once when Elisa took her along on a visit to one of her contacts, a church-sponsored agricultural project, Greta was surprised at how oblivious Elisa was to the expectant faces of the gardener at the entrance, who opened the gate for them with a gesture approximating a bow; the receptionist who hastened to offer them coffee; and the timid cleaner who carried it to them on a tray. She brushed them off in pursuit of her mission to acquire information from the director, a gravely-voiced pastor who passed over three peasants waiting patiently in his cramped waiting room to attend to the distinguished foreigners.

All of Elisa's actions appeared to respond to some code Greta could not crack. She spent hours of one day driving three young men around in her rusty old jeep, venturing into the heart of a tangled neighbourhood where private vehicles normally travelled only to retrieve the very sick or the bodies of the dead, a huge inconvenience and an extravagant favour. She ushered a middle-aged woman with elegantly groomed hair to the doctor and paid all fees.

But when their cleaning woman, Luisa, missed three days of work when she had dengue fever, Elisa threatened to replace her with someone new. Greta was around the house enough to hear Luisa's tales of what life was like theses days along the railroad tracks where Luisa lived in a tin-roofed hut; knew the names and birth dates of her four living children; the cost of a school uniform and footwear and notebooks (all mandatory for attendance, if they were to learn to read as their mother never had); the length of the walk to the nearest community water tap; the frequency of the last-born son's bouts with asthma; had heard the story of the day when the father of her children had been thrown in the air by a speeding bus and how by the time Luisa got news of it he was stored in a drawer at the morgue of the Central Hospital and when she went to get his body they pulled open drawer after drawer until she found the one that looked like a beat-up version of his, with his birthmark behind the left ear. If Elisa were to get rid of Luisa, Greta would surely end up supporting her, trying to find her more work, paying for the inevitable emergencies in the mean time.

The mysterious source of Elisa's motives and instructions was, to Greta, evidence of Elisa's superior political status, a position to be desired, though it had to be earned. *Maybe I am still being tested*, she thought, *my time will come, they need to see what I am willing to give.*

Elisa did not have much time for Greta, and Greta tried hard not only to stay out of her way, but also to be useful to her. One of Elisa's myriad tasks for the groups she supported was to track news of the country, day by day, based on what could be gleaned from reports in newspapers, on radio broadcasts and on the twice-daily television news programmes. An organisation had recently arranged funding to pay someone else to do the work, in order to free Elisa for more important tasks. She told Greta flat out that she would have preferred to give the money to a local person, but it was difficult to find someone who could discern which information would be of use for lobbying and fundraising, could summarise it succinctly and type it, in correct English, and had access to a word processor (which would not be provided). Elisa asked Greta to take on the task, and to accept only part of the designated wages, so that she could pay the rest to Carmen.

Carmen was Elisa's assistant, a twenty-four-year-old woman who came to the house twice a week to clip stories from the newspapers and organise them for Elisa's files. She had been a student at the national university for a few months once several years earlier, attending classes in the evenings after she had worked all day selling plastic household goods at a stall in the central market. When Greta asked her, casually, why she had not continued, Carmen had merely shrugged. Then, a few days later, out of the blue, she told how one afternoon at the university, as she walked down an outdoor corridor with a group of friends following a lecture on structural engineering, soldiers armed with machine guns burst around a corner and forced them to lie on the ground with their hands behind their heads, then shoved and groped them looking for weapons and subversive books. A classmate, suddenly, inexplicably careless, leapt to his feet and

was quieted with a bullet in the back. His blood splattered her notebook. She had never set foot on the campus again, and her studies remained abandoned.

The wages Elisa paid Carmen helped feed three children in her care, two small ones of her own and an older boy who had been left with her until a mother or an uncle could return from some place that was never named. The father of Carmen's children had gone off to the States two years ago, but except for a small money order sent the first December after he had left, she hadn't hear from him since. Greta overheard Carmen tell Elisa that a cousin claimed the man was now living with a Mexican woman who already had a residency permit and that the two would probably get married so that he could get papers to stay there legally. Greta shared Elisa's admiration for Carmen's efficiency and diligence, and felt compassion for her struggle to raise children on her own. She had no qualms about helping to support her.

Greta trusted Elisa to know what the priorities for the cause were, so to be part of the cause herself, she abandoned her journalistic ambitions in favour of compiling and copying what was already yesterday's news. The originals were poor specimens of journalism. Their sources were thin, the print stories often incoherent and scantily researched, full of rumour and tangled strands of innuendo. She was slow to sift, distracted on every page by strange classified advertisements for spiritual healers and whores; elegies for the recently deceased and long-dead; announcements of old- fashioned high-society tea parties for a debut, a marriage, 'the sweet expectation of the stork's visit'; or odd filler articles revising a minor historical event. The television news offered an occasional surprise peep at some important story that begged for serious investigation: information would seep through, apparently accidentally, about severe army losses in a 'skirmish', an unanticipated ambush, a barely-conceded scandal. The sensuous anchorwoman provided cover for this potentially subversive information to slip out, and the long intervals of publicity for luxury cars and high society hair salons created a mood of frivolous spectacle. Every useful fact had to be painstakingly

extracted from this load of chaff. The process took days of her time, and yielded precious few kernels of useful information.

It consumed her time but paid her rent. Steve called her one afternoon with some translation work, which she fit it in between broadcasts and tasks. When she told Elisa it was for Steve, Elisa groaned and said she had made the mistake of talking to the man once at a reception offered for a visiting congressman, at which he had revealed himself to be 'a snob, a reactionary and an idiot'. (She did have to admit, however, that his articles were often useful, and the most frequent source of news on El Salvador in the mainstream media.) Greta told Elisa that it was her hope of getting invited along on another of Steve's trip that kept her on speaking terms (*grovelling terms*, she thought to herself) with him.

"But it's not hard to get permission to go there anymore - it's opened up a lot now that more refugees are coming back," Elisa told her. "I can get an NGO to do a letter for you, saying you need to do some research. That should get you past the brigade."

"But aren't nongovernmental organisations still considered front organisations?"

"Of course. But this way they get your named typed out for them, and you are associated, in writing, with that particular subversive group. They use it as evidence if they decide to haul you in."

"If I do get hauled in, let's hope it's not in the company of Steve Wells."

Almost two months after her first meeting with Dario, Greta went back to the same area to see if he could be found again. This time she went alone, driving the old pickup from the taxi driver's brother-in-law. In her bag were a few rations and several small, practical gifts -- penlights, a Swiss army knife, cigarettes, thin towels. She left the city at dawn, dreading to have to meet with the colonel alone, and spent stretches of the drive imagining herself cornered in his office full of toy cannons. As she entered the barracks this time, she tried to adopt a confident and

forthright attitude - a combination between Ana's confidence (but without the allure) and Elisa's derision (but with no hints of the motives for her scorn). Declining his offer of coffee, she claimed she had a deadline, implied that she was really there on behalf of Steve, and promised that she would report back to him upon her return. He granted his stamp of permission and she shifted her keys to her right hand to make the subsequent handshake as awkward as possible. She skipped lunch in the town this time, doled out cigarettes to the sentries along the side of the road just past the river, and arrived in the former village well before noon.

The settlement had sprouted makeshift shelters in the ruins of houses and was *peopled*. A group of returnees - peasants well-nourished from years of eating refugee camp fare while languishing with a craving for land and freedom - had inhabited the place, giving it the curious look of a movie set of extras hired to play the part of people who belonged there. Fed up with confinement in the camp, as soon as the war clouds had parted temporarily, they took the risk of crossing the border into their country, clumping together here rather than venturing to the far-flung and isolated plots of land from which they had been driven out years ago.

She parked the truck in the same spot that Carlos had stopped the jeep on the first trip, jumped down and went back around to the patio. The goat was gone, and there was no sign of a fire, women, or lunch. A cluster of children had materialised in her trail, leaving enough distance from Greta to hide when she turned to look at them. She called to them -- "Hello-o-o! Good morning!" -- but heard only a twittering of giggles until she had repeated herself three times. One girl, about five years old, hair cropped below the ears and straight over her eyebrows, popped out from behind a pillar and responded, "Good morning, Miss", and returned to the fold of children, which burst into a gaggle of giggles. Greta poked her head around the pillar and made a face that raised the pitch of the giggling to hoots.

The same girl, the youngest, and bravest, of the group – young enough to have been born in exile, after the worst was over -- stepped out again, planted her feet, hands behind her back and recited, "And what is your name, Miss?"

"My name is Greta, and what is YOUR name, Miss?"

"*Yeni*. *Yeni* Argueta Ortiz," she said proudly, and Greta wondered how that name was chosen at the hour of birth. After a godmother, perhaps, maybe a foreigner working for an aid agency in the refugee camps, or for a character from a soap opera, or by father remembering a girl he had known when he worked washing dishes in a restaurant in San Antonio or Chicago.

"And *Yeni* with the big brown eyes, where are you from?"

"From Section B."

"Section B?"

"But now I live here!"

"Oh." Section B would have been a refugee camp neighbourhood and her place of origin. "Lucky you! And do you like it here?"

"Yes, yes, it is better here."

"Why is it better?"

"Because if I want a mango, I just climb a tree! The fruit grows on trees here!"

While Greta paused, pondering a child's discovery that fruit grows on trees, *Yeni* asked, "Would you like to hear a song?"

"Oh yes, sing me a song."

Yeni's timid companions had allowed their faces to appear from behind the pillar, and the mention of a song called them to attention, suddenly serious. They lined up and belted out several verses about their parents fleeing the army, going to a camp, being taken in by the internationalists, getting organised, returning on foot, a glorious future ahead of them. A ballad, but a kind of pamphleteer ballad. Steve would have seized on it immediately as evidence of Stalinist coercion. Listening to the intent enthusiasm of the children's voices, Greta recognised that the words meant no more nor less to them than those of a national anthem, or a

nursery rhyme. She pulled a tiny tape recorder from her pocket and had them sing into it, then played their voices back, mirrored. They repeated the performance and listened over and over, fascinated by who they were.

Greta asked them if they knew Esperanza. "She's my mother!" *Yeni* cried, and Greta wondered if it could be true.

"Could you take me to her?"

"I think so. Oh, but she's in a meeting, she doesn't like to be interrupted. Or are you from solidarity?"

Greta hesitated. "Well, tell her I'm from solidarity, and that I would like to have a meeting, too."

Esperanza was gathered with the village directorate and was as suspicious of Greta as the colonel had been. Greta told her how impressed she was with the progress in resettlement, showed her the letter from the organisation which had won her the colonel's permission to enter, spoke of her last trip with Steve, brought up Elisa's name, and only then realised that her disorganised enthusiasm was the precise source of Esperanza's mistrust. When she asked to speak to Esperanza alone, the cautious, disciplined young leader reluctantly excused herself from the meeting to step around a corner.

"It was Dario who suggested I speak with you."

"Dario?"

"The doctor. Dario the doctor." Esperanza's hesitation froze Greta's heart.

"You know him, don't you?" This was Greta's only practical link to him; he would be lost to her out there without Esperanza. She still did not respond. Greta's thoughts turned grim. "He's okay, isn't he, nothing has happened to him?"

Esperanza seemed not to hear her. "If you have a message for him, I can see if it is possible to relay it."

"A message? Well, actually, yes, I have a message, but I was also hoping to see him."

"Write it down for me, I'll see what I can do."

"Oh. But . . . "

Esperanza interrupted. "The directorate is waiting for me, if you need to speak, we can meet at four o'clock.

"Four?" A whole day lost. "But could you just send the message out that Sofia is here, that Sofia would like to see him?"

"That might not be possible."

Greta had overstepped again. She tried to recuperate. "I do appreciate whatever you can do, I can wait. I know there are important things to do. But the message I have for him is also important, and he should not receive it by radio or another messenger, I would like to do it myself."

"We will talk at four, wait for me here."

Greta went back to the green pickup truck and leaned against the back ledge, on the verge of tears. *Yeni* and company swarmed out from behind a wall where they had been waiting and spying. They wanted to hear themselves again, and Greta obliged, grateful to be cheered, then bought them all a warm Coke at a room on the corner of the square which had recently, miraculously, been stocked with crates of dusty bottles.

Esperanza's first words to Greta at four o'clock were an admonition. "You must not give handouts to the children. We don't want them to become beggars."

"Handouts?"

"The cola you bought for them is for a *fiesta*, when everyone can be there and have their share."

"Oh. I'm sorry, I didn't realise. It's just that it was hot, and I thought a treat . . . " Her voice trailed off as her thoughts spun, trying to reconcile this reception of her spontaneous, unconsidered gesture. Should she ask permission to speak to the children, to listen to their singing, to record their voices as well? In what other ways might she inadvertently offend the fledgling community and come in for reproof?

"Your message was sent. The area is not completely safe, but someone will try to meet you three kilometres after the broken bridge, an hour before sunset."

"I will have to walk, alone, after the bridge."

"Well, yes, if you must go. It is not something we arrange easily. If no one has come by the arranged time, it would be dangerous for you to stay there, you must return."

"And then?"

Esperanza gave no clues, and no sign of interest beyond that which comprised her duty. Greta felt she had been placed in the 'B' category: not urgent, somewhat untrustworthy, representing nothing but her own interests, of little use.

She set off in the truck. The road had disintegrated with the rains, but the rusty old vehicle had the engine of a bulldozer and got her out of some muddy ruts that would have stranded Steve's jeep. The brakes gave her a little trouble, and she had to pump them to draw to a halt before the crumbling bridge. She jumped down with her small sack in hand, slammed the door instinctively locking it, and stepped sideways onto the steep downward slant of the bridge, the surface of which had also suffered the deteriorating effects of the rains. Her insole skidded, yanking her down into the iron bars between the two halves of the bridge, spanning a ravine that she saw now was dizzyingly deep and partially filled with water. Her other leg, badly scraped from the slide down the rough cement, was forced into a painful bend and she hung, bizarrely entrapped in the crook of the giant inverted arrowhead.

She still clutched the sack in her right hand, but her palms had been neatly incised as she slid, and began now to sting and burn along with her leg. Brought to life by panic, she was soon giddy at having survived, and asked herself out loud, "What ARE you doing here?" Dario's voice was in her head,

and she answered, "You mean here in this country? Or here, lost by myself in dangerous territory, my leg stuck in a bridge not long before sunset?"

She glanced down into the ravine again and felt woozy with vertigo. Her leg throbbed. When she tried to lift herself enough to straighten her bent leg, her hands slid down the surface of the cement. She flung the sack over her head to the opposite bank, broadcasting its contents onto the road. A couple of knives failed to make it to the bank, and dropped end over end through the long empty space below her, disappearing into the shallow water: too shallow to cushion a body's fall.

At last she managed to inch her way up the other side of the bridge, which was cocked at a gentler angle than the side she had skidded down, and ease herself to the opposite bank. Sprawled there, scanning the overgrown grass for the items flung from her bag, she heard rustling nearby. She cocked her head and froze. Dario appeared from out of the bush and looked at her from a few yards away, contemplating her.

"Sofia."

"If I am Sofia -- *Wisdom* -- then you are . . . Zeus maybe, or David with a slingshot."

"But it was capitals we were imagining," he protested. "You could call me 'Santiago'. 'Havana' would be nicer, better than something like 'Marlboro'."

Lifting her head, she brushed the hair from her forehead with the back of her hand. "Sofia. Call me that and I will try to believe it." She meant to say it lightly, but it ended on a tone of self-pity that she regretted immediately, so she pressed into, "Well, I found you, or rather you found me. I didn't expect you to come this far." Her leg throbbed insistently. Looking over her shoulder, she muttered, "I, um, had some trouble getting over the bridge." He didn't answer immediately, so she babbled on involuntarily, "I slipped and got stuck there, where there is the gap, but the bars held me, then I had to work my way out, it took longer than I expected. I'm not sure how I did it, in the end."

She looked down at her leg, and saw that her jeans were ripped and bloodstained. Determined to steer the conversation away from herself this time, she raised herself and hobbled a couple of steps and, straining to sound light-hearted, said, "How are you, how have you been?"

He shook his head at her, suddenly serious. "You should not be out here alone."

"What do you mean? What was I to do?"

"I didn't know you were alone, I thought you were with the journalist again."

"I wanted to come by myself, I would have come up here sooner but I couldn't."

Still shaking his head, looking at her leg, he knelt down to his pack, pulled out the tarpaulin and motioned for her to sit down as he opened a Swiss army knife tethered on a cord to his belt loop. Greta sat feeling the blood beginning to thicken and pull taut over her wounds. He slipped his gun off his shoulder and laid it on the ground at his side, then slit her torn jeans from the bottom edge up to the knee, easing them away from her leg.

"How are you," she started to ask, again, ludicrously, but inhaled sharply when the skin tugged. Dario had assumed the look of a doctor at work. He produced a small canteen from his pack and dribbled water on the leg, mopping it with a kerchief that appeared, as if by magic, from a sleeve.

"It's lucky your leg was covered. No pebbles or dirt or gravel got in under the skin, and the bleeding should help clean it." He pressed the cool wet kerchief on a patch from which fresh blood was oozing. He shook his head again and lifted his face to look at her.

She shrugged and tried to make him smile. "Too bad about the jeans, huh."

"Right. And having to dirty my kerchief." He looked over the edge of the ravine. "It could have been worse. You have good reflexes, or you were very lucky."

Greta flushed from the combination of the thought of what 'worse' would have meant and the compliment to her instincts for survival. She tried to stand but the stinging forced a yelp out of her and she sat again.

"Rest a minute."

Greta obeyed. "And then --?"

"And then we'll worry about what to do next. Are you thirsty?"

"A bit, yes." She drank from the canteen he offered her, and finally got to ask her question, "How are you?"

He stood up to stretch his legs and looked around as if he had heard a strange noise.

"Fine, fine," he said, distractedly. "Things have been very calm, we had one incursion, there were injuries but no fatalities." He scratched to the side of his fly in a brief ritualistic reflex, as though crossing himself. "Dysentery, as usual with the rains, we've been short of soap, the old women have tried to get us to eat more garlic, that seems to keep parasites at bay." He squatted next to her. "And you, have you been well? You look thin."

"Is this the doctor speaking?"

He reached out to run the back of his index finger along her jaw line, then cocked his head to look at her as though he had just noticed her arrival.

She took his gesture as an answer, and said quickly, "I'm fine, I'm doing some work compiling news, I moved to a different house, I haven't been unwell, it's okay. I'm fine."

She looked down at her leg and couldn't bring herself to look at him again as she said, "I went to see Gabriela, to bring your greetings, over a month ago now."

Dario stood up abruptly. "I know. I had a message."

"A message? How did you get a message?" Greta had assumed for herself the exclusive right to bring him this message.

He was squinting off into the distance behind her now, then he looked down at his boots, then he turned away to peer at another horizon, hands on his hips.

"The news got through," he said simply, so quietly she had to strain to hear him. "I know that my mother . . . It was a note, not from Gabriela, but . . ." He stopped.

Greta, watching his back, managed a feeble, "I'm sorry. I'm very, very sorry."

His back was still turned. He looked over his shoulder in Greta's direction. "And Gabriela, how is she?"

"I saw her only briefly. She seemed to be fine."

"Hnf." He shrugged, took a deep breath and finally turned back toward her, still not meeting her eyes. "Well, it is almost dark. We can't spend the night here."

Greta tried again to stand up. Dario came around behind her and threaded his arms under hers to pull her up and prop her. She winced and hobbled forward, then stopped with a grimace. "Aiiii."

"Oh. I can't get you back across the ravine this way." Greta was relieved; she did not want to be dispatched so soon. "But if we stay here we're sitting ducks for anyone who comes along." He folded up the tarpaulin and slipped it back into his bulky canvas pack, then hoisted it up and held it up against Greta's back.

"Slip your arms through here," he said, guiding it onto her shoulders. She sank under the weight of it. "Now," he continued, circling around in front of her to crouch with his back to her knees. "Lean on me."

"What!" she yelped, incredulous. "How do you think you're going to stand up again?"

"We have to try. If we go about twenty minutes, we should be within radio distance and they can send some *compañeros* with a hammock."

"Maybe you should go ahead alone," she suggested, unconvinced.

"Then you'll be that much farther away by the time we get back to you, it's almost dark already, and I don't want to leave you alone out here."

She stared down on his hunched back. "Are you sure we can't stay here?"

He straightened up and turned to look at her incredulously. "Sofia, every inch of this territory is controlled. Everyone follows a plan, and every movement is structured. It was foolish of me, probably a mistake, to come this far. I should have been back at camp an hour ago. We must go."

Reluctantly she leaned into his back, draping her arms around his neck. He stumbled to standing, but knelt again to pick up his rifle, which he clutched in one hand as he rose. Greta slid down off his back onto one foot.

"You can't do this, I'll break your back!"

"We must go," he said again. This time the impatience in his tone, tinged with gruffness, pulled her up short and she re-mounted.

Night had arrived, a heavy cloak thrown over the dome of the sky. The stars flickered into life at the cupola, and began to appear in streams down the ribs. The weight of the pack tugged Greta back, forcing Dario to lean further forward until he hunched almost double under the twin burdens. Handing his gun to Greta to grasp by the strap, he wrapped his arms around her thighs. With her other hand she shone his bulky flashlight on the path ahead of them. They made their way forward, Dario breathing heavily, Greta chastened by her situation: she carried the gear of a fighter (a pack, a flashlight, a gun) along an old road in guerrilla territory, but she could not walk herself, she had to be carried.

They stumbled along until they reached the turnoff to El Sitio. There was a flat rock there to sit on, and, relieved to be free of their cargo, they rested there, side by side, passing the canteen between them without speaking. Dario made a crackling connection to base camp using his primitive walkie-talkie, then pulled

a rubbery tortilla from a pocket of his ragged pack. He tore the tough pancake in half and offered a piece to Greta. A slice of the moon had risen over them. Out of the blue Greta asked, "Is Gabriela your sister?"

Dario extracted with care a cigarette from a worn pack. He unwrapped matches from a square of ragged plastic, lit the cigarette, drew on it and sighed out smoke. "I wondered if you would guess."

"But I thought your sister was in another country."

He replied, with only a trace of sarcasm, "And did you think that my father was a lawyer, my mother a teacher? That is what I told your journalist friend."

"You lied to him?" she blurted, the urgency of her voice emerging from what she was thinking: *You lied to me?*

He looked away, smoking into the countryside, then at the ground between his bent knees, and leaned over to grind out his cigarette in the red dirt. "I suppose some people would call it lying." Leaning down again to pick up a stick, he began, "I would prefer to call it a mask -- camouflage, really -- for security." He peeled the bark from the stick as he continued, "A little like a veil, for my own . . . my own life, my account. The story I told was . . . "

He cleared his throat and spoke decisively, almost brusquely. "My father was not a lawyer, but he was a professional, and his 'conversion' was as sudden and dramatic as I described it. My mother worked, not as a teacher, but as a kind of educator, and it was through her work that they -- that politics entered the family. She was the one to bring it into the house, even if later she regretted how it stayed on and took over. In that interview I made her sound naïve, more typical or ordinary than she is - well, *was.* She was actually a very . . . sophisticated analyst." His voice dropped. "If it weren't for her, we all . . . well, she, of course . . ." He cleared a catch from his throat as he straightened his back, arching it. "Maybe I'll tell you more another time. As for Gabriela, I don't want to say more about her."

And yet you sent me to see her, Greta thought, and suddenly Dario's apparently offhand request to her during their first meeting seemed a leap of faith.

Dario's voice had indicated the end of his explanation, but he added, with renewed energy, rising to pace, "I do think I accounted for myself, truthfully, which is all your journalist was entitled to request. Parts of the story weren't mine, exactly, but they were all *true*, they did happen to people in this country, during this time, and are part of OUR story." He stopped abruptly and turned to look at Greta "If what he wanted was to trace my steps, I was not willing to collaborate in that project."

Dario finished his speech on a note of bristling irritation. But in the next instant, he was perched next to her again and they sat in silence for a few moments as the words were carried off.

"You're right." She broke the silence as though she finally understood him. "I almost forgot that you were talking to Steve. I felt, when I listened, as though you were talking to me."

A breeze rustled some leaves behind them, and they both turned to look in its direction, the direction of El Sitio.

Greta asked, "Have you ever been to El Sitio? Can you believe that Steve said there is nothing left to see there?"

"Well, he is right, in a way. By now there is nothing to see."

"I felt I ought to go some time."

"Doubting Thomas. Do you need to dig up the bones, and see the scraps of clothes that have not yet rotted?"

She blinked, lashed. "No. I thought standing there would acknowledge it; burn it into my memory. I wanted to witness it."

"I was in this area ten days after it happened. I was close enough to smell it. That is burned in my memory. I did not go in to see, or to count."

"You are not an eyewitness then. You cannot say you saw. You do not know how many."

"That is journalists' talk. 'Survivors claim they saw.' 'No eyewitnesses remain.' The digging will come later, the digging and the counting. During a war, there is very little worth seeing or worth knowing."

Greta started. "In war there is so much more to know, or that ought to be known. At El Sitio, what huge, awful --"

He cut her off. "You need to know what helps you to take the next step. We move ahead one step at a time, hoping the next footfall does not trigger a mine, or that the next morning doesn't find us waking to the sight of gun barrels trained on us."

"People are always saying, 'If only we had known'. If more could be known, sooner. Maybe if El Sitio --"

He interrupted her again. "They say that about the past, after the war is over. Then they can claim, 'I would have done something differently. I could have made the difference'. But no one wants to know about El Sitio, not now anyway:"

"But isn't it important, irresistible even, to know and to try to know?"

"What good would it do for me to know that not just my father and mother or not just ten fathers and mothers, are dead, but hundreds, even thousands? Do I need to know the numbers, now? My own father, my own mother, is enough. Too much."

"I'm talking about people who have never lost anyone. They must be told these things."

"If they have not only never lost anyone, but have never mourned with someone who has, then what will they feel? If they cannot imagine what it is to lose someone, then what will the numbers matter to them? You could as well be talking about another century, or about chickens beheaded at the processing plant."

"You don't have to feel sympathy to feel outrage."

"No matter how many more die, those people will not take one step differently. If they have done nothing yet, they will do nothing until it is all over.

"What are you saying, that El Sitio doesn't matter?"

"It matters. Of course it matters. But it doesn't matter to me to see it. No matter how many have already died, I will not take one step differently. I know too much already." His voice dropped off. "When we were kids, Gabriela used to say to me, but if only we knew what was going to happen tomorrow. We would imagine and dream, say if we were to be packed off to our grandmother's in the east, would we bring along our pet parrot? How would we say our goodbyes? Such dreaming entertained us, but it didn't change anything for us. Now I can swear that even if I were absolutely certain that today is my last day; or if I knew that I will live to have children and then outlive them: I will not choose to do other than what I am doing now, today. What good is it to know, any more than I do, merely to know?"

Greta felt her log throbbing again and lifted it with both hands, to prop on her other ankle. "I should learn to watch my step."

"You should be more careful, but not about every step, about where you are going. Does it hurt?"

"It hurts. But it's alright."Greta stretched out her fingers and turned up one hand to look at her palm, which was stinging. She didn't know what to say.

Dario leaned against her and cupped his hand under hers. "Are you trying to read something here, in the lines in your palm?"

"What I see on my palms are mostly scrapes, from my own fall."

"You see blood, but that washes away or forms scabs. These lines here remain, etched below the scrapes. This is where you look for signs of the future."

"They run off the edge of my hand and disappear."

"The signs do, yes, but they tell only a part of the story."

"They must be saying that I will fail to do enough. My sin will be one of negligence. Abandonment. Failure to stay a course."

"No. They are saying that you are spending too much time staring at your palms."

Dario lit a cigarette -- this one appeared, as if by magic, from sleeve or pocket -- lit it and inhaled it with such appreciation that Greta wondered if she should take up smoking. She tilted her head back to look at the dark dark sky, covered with more stars than she though visible from earth. It is the depth of the darkness that makes them spectacular, she thought: no light for miles. Also the fact that I have bothered to look at them.

Dario reached over to touch her leg and she flinched. "We need to wait here for the *compañeros* to arrive to carry you. I can't do it on my own again."

Greta resisted the temptation to apologise. Instead she laid the backs of her fingers against his cheek. "I'm happy to be here."

Dario started jiggling one knee, then switched to the other, then stilled them and looked away. "I don't know," he said so quietly that Greta had to strain to hear him. "There are a lot of other places I would rather be."

Three thin boys with a net hammock trudged silently out of the darkness, appearing for duty. Dario stood up and offered them each a cigarette, which they accepted gratefully but did not pause to light.

"There are *cuilios* up at Santa Elena," the front one said to Dario, and to Greta the word sounded like a species of animal -- poisonous reptiles, possibly.

"*Cuilios*! How many?"

"At least half a company."

"Do we wait until morning to move?"

"Most of the camp has just gone north, a smaller party will be circling around to the east."

"Who is left?"

"Clean-up crew, plus Augusto, Edna, Ulises, el Gordo and Luisa. They're waiting for us to get back there with you."

"Damn. Where's the transmitter gone?"

"With the first group, but they'll probably branch off toward La Ceiba before dawn."

"Shit. Why didn't they tell me over the radio?"

"It happened all of a sudden, and since we knew we would have to come anyway, there didn't -- "

"Christ," Dario interrupted. "We'll have to leave her there."

Greta went cold with fright. "Leave who? Leave me? Leave me where? What do you mean?"

"If we're on the move, we can't take you along. You won't be able to keep up, and carrying the hammock will slow us down too much."

"But can't you stay with me?"

"I have to catch up with the forward group, in case of any engagement with the enemy." He had converted back into a guerrilla.

"But what will happen?"

"We don't know. I told you we can never know with any certainty what will happen."

The three boys suspended her between them on the fishing-net hammock, one in front with both hands grasping the knotted end like a heavy sack, the other two shouldering a rough pole from which the back end was suspended. They were agile with it and their endurance was good. They had refused to let Dario support the hammock, and acceded only to his demand to carry one of their packs in his free hand. Greta could just make out the silhouette of the forward boy in the moonlight. When he turned his head to say something to his companions behind, she saw in his profile the smooth hairless upper lip of a young adolescent. *Half my age,* Greta thought. *Carried by boys half my age.*

Shots sounded from far off at the edges of hearing, two rapid-fire rounds. Each boy shifted the weight he carried while Dario lifted his nose in the air, sniffing in the direction of danger. The distant low drone of an aeroplane drifted in and out of earshot like a slow buzzing fly circling toward a hole in the

kitchen door screen. Red tracer lights dripped from the sky miles away. Then the thud: heavy, dull, distant.

"They're bombing already, damn them. Where was that?"

"Direction of El Rosario, but further on."

"Christ. We have to hurry."

Greta tried to sit up, almost tipping the litter.

"Lie down. We've got to make it as far as the camp, to eat and collect a few things. There we'll get more information, we can figure out what to do with you."

Now I am included, thought Greta, *but it is not what I expected.*

The camp had evaporated, leaving no signs of habitation. Except for the house, which had always stood there, too solid to be dismantled, Greta would not have recognised the spot. Even the oil lamps were gone, bundled up to carry, or buried quickly in a camouflaged hutch. The boys set Greta in a corner of the room and moved the table to shelter her, then went outside to check designated hiding places for messages, food, any provisions that were spared in the hasty retreat.

Two plastic cups of cold tortillas and beans were found wrapped in a valuable piece of fraying plastic, tucked in the crook of a tree branch. Below it was the stub of a candle, which they melted at one end and twisted onto the table and lit; it spread a small halo of light into one corner. The boys insisted that they had eaten, though they looked starved. They declined Dario's offers until he pressed them for a third time, when they felt, finally, it was correct to accept. As Greta ate her portion, conscious that it had forced the ration to be divided into five rather than four shares, she remembered her sack of offerings purchased in the capital. She remembered setting it down on the ground next to the flat rock at the turnoff to El Sitio, and could not remember picking it up again.

They heard bombing again, and the sharp rat-a-tat-tat of machine gun fire delivered, answered, delivered, delivered. Pause. Answered, answered, answered, answered.

"We've got to catch up," Dario said, an order. The boys were ready as soon as he spoke, and stationed themselves outside the door.

Dario crouched by Greta, his voice that of an instructor. "Listen. Your leg is certainly not broken. The bleeding has stopped, and if you're careful these scabs should hold. You must lie still for now. Spend tonight here, and wait out tomorrow. I'll try to radio through to Esperanza, but it will probably be impossible to send anyone back in here. If no one has come by tomorrow evening, sleep here again. Then, at dawn, start back. You will have to hobble, it will take a long time and will hurt, but it is what you must do. Stay on the road. If the *cuil* -- the army -- is around, stop. If they can approach you without thinking you're one of us, well, it might be a little better. You can tell them some story, I don't know, think up something while you wait, it will pass the time. I wish we could leave you something to eat, but we don't have anything else here. Remember, you're not all that far from the truck -- maybe you could even sleep there the following night."

Greta listened to his words in a daze, nodding. The thought of how slowly the hours alone would pass was starting a small flame of worry that could be fanned into a brilliant panic.

"Go, go, don't wait any longer. I will be fine, I'm sure." She cocked her head to one side. "Sorry - um, thank you. Thank you. See you next time. Take care. Take very good care. I will . . . well . . . Go now."

He set a hand on her shoulder and used it to straighten to standing. "Don't worry. A Sofia will know what to do. See you, sometime, somewhere."

He left her with the flame of the candle flickering. She strained to hear footsteps as the four slipped off to catch up with their comrades, but after the faintest clink of a buckle or gun or bag, there was not a sound. It would be as

easy for someone to appear out of nowhere, in utter silence, as the boys had just disappeared.

She watched wax drip off the candle and thought to blow it out, to save it for when she might need it, but she remembered in the nick of time that she had no way to light it again anyway. The drops became a trickle and formed a pool at the base of the stick. She reached up to play with the rim of the candle, directing the wax by way of incisions pressed with a fingernail into the rim. It flowed and firmed again, displaced in a pool. When she touched the pool, a gentle imprint remained. Finally the wick tipped sideways and extinguished the flame.

Greta stretched out and dozed briefly. She awoke when her bladder jabbed her with alarm signals that could not be coaxed into calm. Working against the force of every other desire in her body and mind, she struggled to standing with the aid of the table, felt the blood rush to her wound, and hobbled just outside the door to relieve the pressure. The silence outside was devastating. The quiet -- which had been so spectacular as she and Dario sat on a rock by the turnoff to El Sitio, opening out into the night sky -- closed in on her now, alone, and turned menacing.

A red tracer light fell within a mile of where she stood, in the sky over the path Dario and his companions had taken. Greta saw the light before she understood that it was the drone from a small aeroplane she was hearing. Within seconds, an explosion crashed open the earth. She let out a cry as the deafening clatter of a helicopter swung over her head, the staccato cracks of machine gun fire bursting from it. The noise deafened her for an instant, and when it pulled away, she instinctively touched her leg, expecting that any blood she was to lose would gush from that same wound. The force of the noise remained steady, but further away, following the heat of bodies moving forward, in columns. She turned her head and vomited into the ground at her side, felt her head spin, and

stumbled back against the wall of the house, where she sank onto her good leg and her head slid into a state between sleep and unconsciousness.

She regained lucidity to the sound of boots clomping so loudly that she knew immediately it was the invading army of draftees rather than the cautious volunteer army of rebels which would find her first. It was still the dead of night, the moon had been extinguished, she could see nothing. *Perhaps I am invisible to them.* But she heard one say, "They were here yesterday, you can smell it," and the boots swept near her feet and the stench of her meagre vomit, expelled by fear, gave her away. She heard clinking, guns being touched, handled, lifted. A shot, a short double crack, exploded so near she could smell it and hear a high, eerie whistle. Before the same soldier could decide to let go a round of random shots to give his frightened self a boost, she tried to speak. "I am unarmed, don't shoot, shine a light if you have one," she squeaked, unconvincingly, exaggerating an American accent.

A weak beam from a tired flashlight skittered in the darkness around her. "I am here, alone, I have fallen! Civilian! Outsider! Help me! Over here!" She raised her arms in the dark.

The light found her, and was accompanied by the barrels of two M-16 machine guns. She crossed her arms in front of her face, waiting for the flash of light to be followed by the thunder of shots.

"Get up!" The barrel jabbed the air in front of her hands.

She tried to rise, groaned and sank again. "I can't . . . "

"Get up! Hands up!"

She lifted her hands and pressed against the wall behind her, inching upward with her weight on her good leg.

There were three soldiers now. They were slightly older than the boys who had carried her, and betrayed fear in the stiff way they clutched their rifles. They called to their sergeant, who butted his way between them and ordered two of them to search the area around the house.

"But don't go inside. The bastards probably mined the house."

"No, it's not --" Greta started to say, but bit her lip.

"It's NOT! It's not WHAT? Speak up! What do you know? Where are they? How many are there? Where is your gun?" He was breathing so heavily he almost grunted. He jabbed the boy on this right with an elbow, but his gun was still trained on Greta's mouth. "Concho! Tie her hands! She's a terrorist! Where are they?!"

"They -- they left, I don't know, they are not here. I am alone, I fell --"

She awoke to the pain of a rhythmic jab in her leg and side and a curious sensation of dangling like a rag doll suspended from an invisible tether, bouncing. She half-opened her eyes and saw the ground below her pulling away, the back of boots, the splotchy olive green of a military uniform under her cheek. She was slung over the shoulder of a soldier. The earliest light of dawn was starting to reveal faint outlines of objects.

"Where, what," she moaned and could just make out tones of conversation. A burst of deafening cracks assaulted her ears as a vortex of red dust swirled around her and around whoever it was that had her - captors, saviours, she was too confused to tell. A helicopter had alighted twenty yards away on a dry patch of field and its blades spun violently overhead. Greta felt the sound graze her ears as she was hauled up to it and dumped on the floor, then dragged to the middle between two soldiers crouched with guns at either open side. The beast rose, swinging into the air and reeling off at a sickening tilt.

At the brigade she was led in before the colonel, who paced his office, rubbing his palms together with a sinister combination of agitation and glee. "So, Little Miss Greta! On errands for Steve, were you! But you *stumbled* a little out of the way, didn't you! Ha, ha! The boys out there are a little weak on road works, wouldn't you say! Ooh, too bad about that truck of yours. I wonder how it will hold up when it rolls over a landmine! Or maybe it will roll into a ravine first! Now, may I

get my friend Steve's pretty assistant some coffee? Perhaps a stiff whiskey would go down smoothly?"

Greta began suddenly, irresistibly, to cry. First her eyes overflowed, then her nose began to run, soon her shoulders were heaving and she gasped for breath. She tried to pull herself in, imagining a turtle retracting all vulnerable areas inside, between edges of shell.

Her display goaded the colonel into a fury. He crashed a fist onto his desk. "NOW we are weak and helpless, are we! NOW we want a little pity! Well, my innocent little bird, it will take much more than a few tears - even those beautiful big crocodile tears of yours - to get you out of *this*. Charges have been filed against you, you are in preventive detention. Preventive! Ha!" He threw his arms in the air. "I should have held you earlier if I wanted to *prevent* any delinquency from being committed." He stopped in his tracks and turned on one foot to speak in a becalmed voice. "We might have had a nice little time together, and saved you a lot of scrapes."

"May I notify my lawyer?" Greta's request came out instinctively, but she shuddered at the thought of having to renew relations with the man.

"Oh, your LAWYER?! Yes, I almost forgot, you are from AMERICA, where you call LAWYERS to back up the criminals and let them off on technicalities!! It would have to be a very special lawyer, Miss Greta, one who works with MILITARY law, in MILITARY courts! Do you have one of those on hand? You could ask your organisation, or a CHURCH maybe! Ha, ha. 'Not just chalices and hosts', as that bishop said!" He suddenly sat down in his chair, folded his hands on his desk and straightened his back. "You have committed a military offence, Miss Greta, consorting with terrorists who are plotting to overthrow the Republic, with its democratically elected President, and its military" -- here he gave a neat little bow over his miniature cannons -- "whose duty it is to defend the Republic." He jumped up again to pace. "You know, you are quite lucky my men didn't just blow you away on the spot, that they took the trouble to contact me personally, even to bear you like slave porters to the military limousine that

brought you here! Of course, since this was a special service, it will cost you a pretty . . . penny? Heh, heh. A pretty something, of course." He stopped to lean over his desk, close to her face, with the hint of a leer. "Little bitch," he hissed. He smiled as he straightened. "Maybe your LAWYER can negotiate a special deal with me."

Greta endured the tirade as she tried to compose herself in relation to the colonel's shifting tempers. She meant to sound pragmatic when she suggested, "My embassy? May I notify my embassy?"

"Your Embassy? Ah yes, the Government of the United States of America. Why, we have a representative right her in our brigade, a very able young Marine captain, strong and well, I think you'll find him quite handsome, he has your green eyes, I think you will like him." He turned on the ball of one foot. "Oh pity, come to think of it, I believe he has the night off. Well, he has trained my men well, they will certainly behave with you."

Many hours later, after persistent, confusing questioning by young soldiers, Greta was allowed to spend several hours in the dark on a canvas cot spread with a thin scratchy blanket in a storage room the size of a cell, between the mess hall and the mid-level officers' sleeping quarters. The room buzzed with mosquitoes that gradually discovered the easy source of blood on the bed, and was home to a pair of busy rodents intent on investigating the contents of boxes piled in two corners of the room. Greta squirmed on the cot with the blanket over her face, emerging occasionally for breath. Her head went spinning through the scenes of the last hours, her leg aching, her skin crawling.

Tiny wounds laid in a perfect circle around the nipple of each breast of a woman held prisoner, interrogated with deafening seriousness and toyed with by a trail of military policeman taking turns on her in their interrogation room. "Wait and see if you boys find you so attractive NOW!" one of them had taunted, and the others had hooted. She passed out, at last, and doesn't remember more.

That is not ME, Greta thought, that happened to someone else. It was the memory of an account she had been told by a student, which had drifted into her

mind and was repeating itself now, over and over again, hounding her. Those images, remembered or imagined -- memories of an imagined scene – were working on her, reminding her what was done in places like this one, in circumstances exactly like these.

There were two things in particular she hoped to escape having to tell, the two gems of information that bore some weight. The first was that the radio transmitter, the instrument which wove all of the small guerrilla units' individual efforts into one large coherent and significant force, was with the group on the move, its caretakers ready to break away at a certain point. The second was that Dario, the skilled doctor on whom hundreds of guerrillas relied, had only one remaining family member, a sister, who lived openly in the capital; her safety meant more to him than his own life.

They were precisely the points that would most betray any sense of Cause that Greta had managed to cobble together. If she hovered over them, her barely-concealed treasures, she would reveal their existence, and lead the dogs to them. She tried to steer her mind clear of them, with the distressing effect that they became insistently, inescapably repeated in a loop inside the rickety space of her brain.

The colonel did not order the use of force with Greta, and certainly not torture. With only a little cajoling from his men that night, she told them that she had spent the night with Dario, that he called her Sofia, that they were joined by three boys, that she had been abandoned at the former camp because its former occupants were moving north. At first she hoped she was revealing only what they already knew or could easily find out elsewhere. Giving away her own pseudonym she hoped was a frivolous detail. She revealed it partly to convince herself that the sense of belonging it gave her was illusory, and insignificant: she wanted to think she could not possibly be important enough to do any harm.

By dawn, though, the colonel was still not satisfied with the first results of his men's efforts, and deemed it necessary to intervene personally in her interrogation. "You are playing, and you think that we don't know the game, Miss Greta. We've done our homework."

He picked up a manila folder from his desk and opened it to read: "You live with a Miss Elisa Baker, on Tercera Calle Poniente, Number 160, a white house with four steps to the doorway, an attached garage. Elisa owns a twelve-year-old white Toyota four by four, which she regularly drives to the offices of CCM, ORS, the Anglican church, a private residence on Décima Avenida Norte and to meetings that she attends with members of a labour union and individuals who remain under surveillance. She employs a certain Miss Carmen Gómez, who lives in Residencial F, Block 6, left side, Third Floor, 3E, with the minor son of a female political prisoner and two children of her own whose father has mysteriously disappeared from the capital. The activities of Carmen G. are also monitored."

He turned over the page and continued. "Let's see. Oh, this is amusing. The house where you reside has been visited by a José Carlos Muñoz, alias Mincho, who would appear to have amorous relations with Elisa, as they have also been reported entering a drive-in motel on a weekday afternoon. Hmm. You yourself have been seen at the grounds of the national university, which is known to house guerrilla supporters and terrorist cells."

He looked up from his folder. "You see, Miss Greta, there are many things that you do not NEED to tell me. I have other ways of finding them out; it is background. What you DO need to give me is information I don't already have, but that you do, thanks to your little unescorted excursion to the terrorists. Please, help me out, I would hate to have to request further investigation into your friends and acquaintances, it might inconvenience them to have to come in for questioning, and if things don't go well here today, I'll have to look into some bureaucratic details - residency permits, tax forms, those sorts of annoyances . . ."

Greta's mind had snagged on the detail of Elisa's visitor, whose name she had never heard. She had merely nodded at him once when, having returned to the house earlier than expected one Saturday afternoon, quite by accident, she happened to see him emerging from the bathroom, glistening, with a towel wrapped around his waist.

She sat in silence as the colonel's tactics took effect. Weary and sleepy, she was beginning to be seduced by his talk, and asked herself if collaborating might not safeguard her allies in the end. It was an intoxicating way to see things: she would be the one to talk now, to give the information, and then – it seemed to make sense -- the others, the ones who were out doing the work, and who had much more to lose than Greta, would be left alone, there would be no need to keep after them, to hound them. She would take it on herself to . . . to . . . She was woozy, and offered, "Well, I did hear them mention El Rosario and La Ceiba. Yes, I'm quite sure they were headed that way."

The colonel slammed the folder down on the desk. "You are still playing with us, Miss Greta. You might as well inform me that we are on planet earth, that there is a sky over our heads, and expect me to be grateful for the information. I will remind you that you are in custody, we can detain you, legally -- remind your *lawyer* of this, by the way -- for fifteen days - and of course fifteen nights, *ha, ha!* -- and then, well, if we need a little extension I'm sure we will arrange that, too. There are people who have been in preventive detention now for, oh, let's take a guess. Two years? Four years? Some get inexplicably sick, of course, or get into nasty brawls that leave their heads in bad shape."

He sat down, folded his hands on his desk, and continued in a grating imitation of courtesy, "So please, for your own good, Miss, get this over with quickly, co-operate with my men. I have asked them to be good to you, to restrain their impulses which of course are natural in such strong young men, especially when they are out here in this little village, so far from the streets of the capital, you must understand . . ."

The colonel's talk acted as an irritant that eroded her patience and clouded her mind. She still did not fear for her own safety. She was concerned only that she do the proper thing under the circumstances, but she had no idea what these circumstances required. She had ventured out alone, inadequately prepared, for motives that seemed murky to her now.

At what she figured must be mid-morning, she heard boots clomping down the passageway, and the Marine, in full battle gear, grunted at her door. "That's her?" he said, half to himself, half to someone behind him, then turned and grabbed the person's arm, shouting in rough Spanish, "Look at her!" He hauled Esperanza around the corner and shoved her into Greta's room. Esperanza looked straight at Greta and said coolly, "I have never seen her before," then was dragged away.

Greta heard the sounds of slapping, whipping and shoving, and Esperanza's grunts and howls. Esperanza was a warrior, and what Greta knew about warriors was that they had fierce convictions, a sense of belonging, habits of discipline, and that they were trained and poised to anticipate acts of cruelty, mock kindness, attempted humiliation and arbitrary abuse. But Greta had never imagined herself into the role of warrior and so she imagined the blows to Esperanza as they would have felt had they fallen on her own flesh and psyche. It was her fault that Esperanza was a prisoner; the fault was salt rubbed into those imagined wounds.

This weakened her to the breaking point, and when the colonel turned his attention back to her with one last threat -- "I have a team that specializes in female terrorists, they have been trained to treat them in a peculiar way" – she let her gems slip from her mouth, and told everything she knew.

A smug, deprecating smile crept over the colonel's face and he dispatched Greta with a wave of his hand. Her meagre knowledge, offered up in its entirety, plotted a point on the graph of an army operation designed to track the transmitter, which

came very close to netting it. It ended up hauling in a decoy, and the bodies of three guerrillas. The bodies were laid out in the yard – Esperanza was made to pose behind them, a rifle pressed into her hands -- and the press was invited to come and take photographs. Greta was not displayed, but the colonel wanted her to look, and he pressed her against a one-way glass overlooking the yard. The smooth-faced boy who had carried her in a hammock lay with his head turned to one side, as though he were sleeping. Greta thought how close Dario must have been during the encounter.

Greta was released -- dumped outside the barracks, drained and of no use any longer -- and managed to make her way back to the capital on a bus, perched between the seats on a makeshift wooden stool intended for the ticket boy.

V

Once back in the city, Greta wondered where to begin again. She had not only failed to support the Cause, she had unwittingly, out of the crime of ignorance, utterly betrayed the world she had set out first to discover, then to assist.

She was watched now, she was in the records, but although it scared her, it did not qualify her as a heroine. When she went out in the car, she tracked vehicles behind her in the rear-view mirror, and made periodic unwarranted detours to verify if she was being followed. If she spoke with someone on the street, she noticed for the first time in her life what others in her peripheral vision were doing, paying attention to men in casual dress reading newspapers nearby. She pared her visits and outings down to the bare minimum, conscious that contact with her was a form of contamination, and that while there were those who could simply wash their hands after seeing her, others would be tainted by her presence.

Elisa no longer invited her along to meetings or on errands, and rarely spoke to her except to consult her news tallies. When Greta hadn't returned from her trip on the expected day, Elisa had telephoned Steve. "We agreed that your whole plan was irresponsibly frivolous in the first place," she told Greta offhandedly.

One late afternoon a month after Greta was released, Carmen arrived at the front door, rattling the iron grate. Greta unbolted and swung open the sturdy wooden door, then the grate for her, expecting her usual formal greeting. But when she heard nothing, and saw the ashen look on Carmen's face, she called Elisa in from her room off the small, spare sitting room, and left them standing together near the door chittering in hushed, urgent tones for several minutes. Greta, standing

just inside the door to her own room, heard Carmen exhale a *gracias* and slip out the front door, easing it closed behind her as though it were the dead of night.

Elisa appeared at the door of Greta's room. "Could you help me pick up Carmen's kids and bring them back here? She's worried her house could be searched tonight."

Greta cocked her head to one side in a look of bewildered concern and Elisa, a bit impatient, almost hissed, "A boy she's been, well, initiating, was picked up and she's worried he'll talk."

Greta almost asked, "Initiating?" but remembered just in time that this could be a test of her discretion and courage. Instead of asking for further explanation she nodded solemnly, extracted from her bag a faded green identity document, and followed Elisa out of the house.

An hour later they had gathered Carmen's children into the car and Greta was manoeuvring it through the muddy alleys around her cement-block house. Elisa glanced at her watch, and gasped. With one hand on the door handle and the other on her bag, she elbowed the car door open, saying, "Whoops, I'll be late for my meeting. Drop me here, I'll see you about eleven, I'll borrow a car to get home." Greta again refrained from asking the questions that would have come naturally in another place. She thought of how Elisa had responded one night after Greta had innocently asked her who had taken her to dinner. "What you don't know can't be pried out of you, even under torture," Elisa had said, dramatically. It added another layer of mystery over everything Elisa did.

By the time Greta got them back to the house, two of the children were already lost to sleep. The older boy – eight years old last week, he had announced proudly – got out of the car with his hastily-assembled bundle and instructed her in a grown-up voice, "Don't worry, we'll be fine." He hoisted the youngest child awkwardly over his shoulder, and Greta imitated his gesture, draping the other child over her own shoulder. They swayed with them into the house and up a narrow flight of stairs to a musty room, empty but for a bed, broad and low, sagging almost to the floor. They rolled the sleeping bodies into the bed, and the

boy sank onto the edge of it, sighed with an exaggerated shrug of his shoulders and said, "I'm a little tired."

"Are you hungry?" asked Greta, "Can I get you something to eat or drink?"

"No, thank you, I'm just so sleepy," he replied, pulling off his each shoe with the side of his foot. He burrowed in next to the other two and was asleep by the time Greta turned off the light.

Greta went downstairs to the sitting room to watch the evening news on television. A poised young woman with carefully painted lips read primly from the pages clutched in her hands: electricity would be cut for four hours a day until the rains returned to fill the hydroelectric dam; a bus had run off a bridge, killing everyone on board; the army press offices reported that morning skirmishes in the countryside had killed a soldier and three terrorists. Greta took notes on a legal pad she pulled out from under the chair cushion; all of the information would be condensed for Elisa. She found the work tedious. Elisa had told her many times that it was useful, but she wasn't sure how. Perhaps Dario was right, and this was not the work for her.

Just before the sports news began she heard a car pull up to the garage door. Elisa would want to park inside the garage so that whatever car she had borrowed would not be seen parked in front of their house; her own vehicle would remain, as usual, on the street, where it had long been stripped of side mirrors, windshield wipers and a rear signal light. Greta dashed through the kitchen and into the garage to swing open the awkward metal doors onto the short drive. The headlights of an old minibus forced her to squint. She saw that Elisa was behind the steering wheel talking through the open window to a man whose large form was hunched close to her door. She walked toward the car door to greet her but stopped when she saw something flash in the man's gesturing hand: a gun, shiny and silver with a long glinting barrel. He swung his head to look at Greta, froze for a second and appeared to snap to attention. Barking at Elisa to get out of the car, he waved the gun in Greta's direction to shoo her through the garage. Elisa, grumbling under her breath, jumped down from the car, slammed the door and

followed Greta into the house, turning around to squeal, "What do you want, then?"

Greta, terrified, was amazed at Elisa's confident insolence. The man stumbled in on their tail, brandishing his weapon (which Greta later learned was a revolver) and growling, "Money and jewels, money and jewels, where are your money and jewels?" Elisa made an exasperated sigh and dug a ragged note out of her rumpled little bag, as if to appease a beggar. The man raised his voice to a bark. "Money and jewels, where ARE they?"

Greta instinctively tugged on her earring, matching hoops of flimsy blue metal and, as though to clear up a misunderstanding, said lightly, 'But this is our jewellery, we don't have *jewels*".

The man swung around and looked ready to hit her, dancing from foot to foot, holding the gun nervously as though he were unsure whether to set it down or shoot it off. He was broad and bulky but Elisa treated him like a child. "Now if you'll just be patient I'll look for more money, but you have to let me find it," she scolded as she went to her room, swept some papers out of a drawer and emerged with an envelope of savings which she almost threw at him. He glanced back and forth between the two, and Greta, fearing his rage, tried to appear meek and unthreatening, though she suspected she succeeded only in looking miserable and vulnerable.

Still bouncing from one foot to the other, he asked for water. Greta, breathing shallowly, led him to the kitchen where she filled a glass directly from the faucet. He downed it greedily, his eyes darting around the walls like a trapped bird, and asked for another, then another. He crashed the glass onto the table, and Greta, amazed that it hadn't shattered, watched his back as he lumbered back into the sitting room. She followed, to be near Elisa. But he ordered Elisa into her bedroom, turned off her light and yanked her door shut, hollering at her not to move. He glared over at Greta standing awkwardly in the middle of the room, and glanced at the front door. It is locked and bolted shut, Greta thought; it might as well be a wall. Seeing the open door of her bedroom in the opposite corner, he

ordered her into it. "He will close me in there," she said to herself, "and then what will he do to Elisa?"

But he hadn't closed the door, Greta would remember later, since as he barked out his orders – "Take off your clothes! Get down on the mattress! Put your hand here! Rub it! Harder! Open your mouth! Spread your legs!" – she had seen through the doorway a pool of light at the base of the stairs, and had imagined the scene that could so easily have followed, that same pool red with blood. She had wondered what would happen to her blood on that floor – would it seep, would it run, would it be sticky by morning? She had turned her head to the side, and saw the gun set carelessly on the top of her low dresser. It would be easy for this nervous, thirsty man to point that gun and pull the trigger, and that would be the end: an open wound draining into a shallow red puddle, children awakened by the shot, descending, sleepy, bewildered. If only the children stay asleep, she thought, that is the most important thing. What images would fill the dreams of children for years after seeing that colour red in that light, if they padded downstairs to see a shiny silver gun flashed by their faces? What would this intruder do, on this particular night, if the whining cry of a child, awakened with a start, grated his ears? The neighbours would not be surprised by the sound of a shot, and would not ask questions before the morning. The man would have slipped away into the night and be lost in the city.

When he finally stood up, he eyed a small tape recorder sitting on the dresser alongside his gun. He asked permission to take it, a strange formality. "Yes," Greta replied simply. "It's all yours." Without getting up from the edge of the mattress, she slipped her clothes back on and pulled her knees to her chest. "You'll excuse me now, won't you?" he said to Greta over his shoulder. Elisa appeared in the middle of the living room, squinting. He took her by the elbow and started to lead her toward the stairs.

"The children," Greta called weakly, still crouched near the floor. "They're asleep up there."

He showed no sign of hearing her, but Elisa used a stern tone to convince him. "There is nothing up there, the person who used to sleep there has gone away; it is full of dust." Greta saw him freeze with his foot on the second stair, then turn around and order Elisa out to the car as he followed.

The car, Greta thought as the two of them went into the garage, the borrowed car was in the open the entire time! And the garage doors were left open! They could raise suspicions about Elisa. She got to the driveway in time to see Elisa again at the wheel of the vehicle, craning her neck over her shoulder to back down the driveway. The car pulled away and the taillights were enveloped by darkness. Greta closed the garage door, methodically, thinking, "Now where will I find her, what will he take her away to do?"

She went upstairs to look in on the children. The boy stirred at the sound of her steps, and asked if it was morning. "Not yet," she whispered. "Go back to sleep." She went back downstairs and stared out the front window into the night, imagining Elisa rolled from the car into a ditch, the nervous man driving off, maybe returning to the house. Would he finally use the gun, would he finish them off? She thought about heading out into the night to search for Elisa, but convinced herself that she had no choice but to stay with the children.

Out of habit, it came to her mind to call the police, to look in the yellow pages for their number. But she had no idea how to call the police -- all the various forces were under the command of the military -- and she had never seen a phone book around the house. In any case, she knew that no one ever *requested* a visit from the police. If authorities were to arrive, they would be four men in clothes so plain they were more obvious than a uniform. They would take advantage of the invitation to sniff around the house, noting newspaper clippings and a file cabinet, leering slightly, waking the children to ask why they were sleeping in this house, their parents would immediately become suspect, along with the Greta, *claiming* to be a victim of an *alleged* unsolicited attack. Then they would ask her more questions and eye her, demanding she repeat and explain, practising their interrogative skills, testing her stories.

She heard a car screech up the drive, idle outside the garage, a door slam shut, the garage doors rattle open. She arrived in the garage to see Elisa pulling in the minibus. She was alone. Greta helped her close the doors again and slide the iron bar across them. Elisa breathed a huge, giddy sigh. "Whew! That's over. He just wanted to be dropped off in town. Are Carmen's kids still asleep?" She had her back to Greta, already headed to the kitchen.

"Yes," answered Greta wearily. "They slept through it all."

"Good," Elisa snapped, closing the story as she slipped through to her own room. "See you tomorrow."

Carmen arrived at the house early the next morning and Elisa took her and the children out in the car, saying they all deserved a treat. No one had gone to Carmen's house the night before after all, and the young man she had been initiating was released with just a cursory interrogation. Maybe he had been confused with someone else; in any case, he had performed well and hadn't said anything that would get anyone in trouble.

Greta wandered through the empty house, lingered in the kitchen, started to wash two water glasses, changed her mind and dropped them both in the plastic pail they used for garbage. She started to scour the sink with cleansing powder, continued up the tiles behind the sink, scrubbed the plastic dish drainer, cleared the small counter by the refrigerator and washed that, too. Then she looked at her hands, saw dirt under the fingernails and went to take a shower. She stood under the lukewarm water until it began to turn cold, then stood dripping and, seeing her clothes in a pile, realised they were the same clothes she had been wearing the previous evening. She wrapped herself in a towel, gathered the clothes in a bundle, and carried them to the kitchen where she stuffed them into the garbage on top of the glasses.

She got dressed and walked to the university to meet a student leader with whom she had made an appointment three days earlier, a boisterous fellow who

was to outline plans for a rally to pressure the government for money for the university budget. After an hour of waiting at the appointed place on the steps in front of the abandoned library, he still hadn't arrived. She stood up reluctantly and walked under a blinding white sun to an ice cream place six blocks from the university. She was starting to get woozy, so she bought herself a cone and sat down at a plastic table still sticky from the previous customers' drippings. It wasn't until the ice cream had seeped into her hand that she realised how long she had been staring at an empty bench. She got up and threw the mess into a bin by the door, then headed home to see if Elisa or Carmen needed her for anything.

Greta tried to put the sour taste of her own violation out of her mind. She was pleased with her success in concealing from everyone, and especially from Elisa and Carmen, the fact that the man's intrusion had extended to her own flesh. When a memory -- sometimes a sharp image, sometimes a vague sense of fear, repulsion, dread -- swam into her head, she tried to coax it away with an *It could have been worse.* She hadn't really been hurt. He hadn't hit her, scratched her, forced himself for too long, or done those searingly humiliating actions, like urinating on her, that many rapists included in their attacks. No blood had been shed. The dread that accompanied the attack, the imagined scene of the children coming downstairs to witness a horror, had not been realised, and that in itself was a weight lifted off her shoulders, a release. *It could have been worse.* In fact, maybe the gun had not even been loaded; maybe their lives had never been in danger.

Sometimes, though, her mind took her down another track: maybe if she had known how to act in the face of the man, as Elisa had, if she had been impudent, more courageous, he would have taken the money and a few items and gone off without touching her. Maybe what had happened to Greta was even partly her own fault, or a price to be paid for not knowing better what to do with herself. Maybe it was punishment for her betrayal to the Colonel of the secrets she should have sheltered. If it was a targeted attack, it confirmed the sinister

reach of the eyes she felt were tracking her. If it was a random attack, then she would accept it as atonement, a way of paying, privately, for her ignorance and her wrongs.

On the other hand, she would say as she saw where that track was leading her, the gun probably was loaded, and he might even have intended it use it. *It could have been much worse.* She was lucky, really, they had been let off relatively lightly. All she had to think about were the more terrible things that were being done to people around her every day. Then she would remind herself of those girls walking along the road during her trip with Steve, the car swerving and missing them. Their lucky day.

Now she had become a Victim: at least she could feel she was not skirting all the possible nasty consequences of living in this place, at this time, with all the horror, reported and witnessed, that lurked in every cranny. That hurdle over, it was time now to practice, with vigilance, the skill of not revealing. Her desire to reveal what had happened to her was a kind of hunger. Striving to curb her impulse to confide could become as exercise in self-denial, and a test of her capacity to withhold information; she would withstand it in the spirit of an ascetic. She did not want to banish the memory. She needed to feel the secret, whole and healthy and kicking inside of her, and know what to do to guard it.

After two weeks Elisa asked her one evening during a newsbreak, "What did that guy TALK about while I was shut in my room? Was he still trying to find our JEWELS? As though we'd have little velvet boxes with strings of pearls in them."

"He didn't talk much," was all Greta said, keeping her eyes on the screen, a beer commercial, resisting once more the temptation to tell.

"Son of a bitch. I'm sure he was just supposed to nose around, and figured he might as well take what he could get."

"Yeah, probably." She succumbed to adding, "I was worried what might happen to you. I didn't feel I could go out after you."

"Aw, don't worry about it. I could tell he wasn't dangerous, and I've asked an organisation to look into it: he was acting on his own. Poor Carmen, though, she was so worried about the kids."

"I was, too. I'm glad they didn't wake up."

That night she couldn't sleep and in the morning she was too restless to sit at her desk, so she took a bus to the city centre to check her post office box. Elbowing her way through a herd of money-changers and hawkers, and declining irritably to purchase clothes hangers, shower curtains, stolen watches or faded postcards, she got to the dusty box and found a slip for a certified letter. After waiting in line to be attended, and then waiting for a surly postal worker to track down her mail, she was handed a worn but official-looking envelope. The letter inside, on Ministry of the Interior letterhead, stated simply:

> Due to irregularities detected in your application for permission to remain in the country as a foreign visitor, your residency permit has been revoked. Upon receipt of this notice, you have seven days to abandon the country.

Greta stood stock-still and read the notice in her hand three times. Her residency permit was not supposed to expire for another five months. The colonel had taken care of everything. The colonel, no; the lawyer. They must know each other somehow, she thought. She wondered if she should try to go back to him.

The notice was a reminder to Greta that her position in the country was utterly tenuous. She could feel the rug slipping out from under her, every tiny gain she made dissolving into nothing. She had known for some time that she was a lousy journalist. One of the many abilities she lacked was to dissimulate convincingly, but her real weakness was that she could never keep her sights on

the events and people that news was designed to cover. Her attention always strayed to the endless detours and quirky particulars of apparently ordinary lives.

What might she do? How *had* she thought she could belong here? By joining its army, becoming one of its soldiers? But she was not, and never would be, able to use a gun. She was not conniving enough to spy, or to ferry people out of danger; she was unable to look an adversary in the face with an adequate combination of innocence and brazenness. She had already betrayed comrades without ever being one of them.

Or did she think that the way to be counted was to become one of the war's victims, adding her body to the pyre? One more body turned to ash: who would do the counting, who would do the weighing of the remains? Even if there were such a reckoning, her own tiny badge of victimhood would not register on such a scale.

Her last chance was Dario, friend and ally. He would mean to her the perfect union of intimacy and purpose that could short-circuit her into the right place: land her a role. It was the only way she could imagine anymore how to find her way. She would have to be patient. It would not be easy to find him again.

She approached Elisa that evening as she was sitting at the table reading a newspaper. "Do you think that same NGO could write me a letter to go see the refugees, or should I try a different one?"

Elisa looked up from the paper and gaped at her. "You must be joking. After what you did, that is, what happened to you on the last trip? You think you can go in again? What are you going to tell the colonel this time, that you're a church worker bringing corn to the children?"

Elisa looked back at her paper and Greta turned to go, trying to conceal her urge to cry. Elisa called her back with, "Why are you so taken with him anyway? He's just the doctor, all he does is fix up people. If what you want is a boyfriend, find someone who won't compromise this house, someone who can't burn us or

get burned himself. Or else leave the country." Elisa didn't notice that Greta was wincing, and kept on with, "Frankly, Greta, I'm a little surprised they haven't got immigration to invent a problem with your residency papers. Did you ever get your original documents back from that lawyer? You really ought to, you could use them to do the process over again, maybe in some other country."

Maybe Gabriela could help somehow, Greta thought. She did not dare to visit her personally, so she employed a boy in the neighbourhood to take her a note in a sealed envelope, asking that he return with some sign that he had left it in the woman's hands. He assumed the duty and made the trek several times, always finding her door locked and colleagues who said they had not seen her. Greta rewarded each unsuccessful attempt with a soft drink, until she finally asked for the envelope back and settled accounts by giving the boy a tee shirt that had shrunk to something near his size.

She forced herself into a routine, contenting herself with safety, which had become more valuable now that it felt so tenuous. Two weeks later as she walked back from her morning swim, she looked over her shoulder and noticed a young man half a block behind her. She stopped at a street corner where a boy had set up his table of sweets and bought one of each kind. After she paid, the man was still half a block behind her. She did not want to be alone on the street, or to enter her empty house by herself, so she stopped at a store-in-the-wall closer to home, where the woman recognised her. There she bought matches and more sweets, loitering as she waited for the man to pass her.

Instead he caught up with her and stopped to buy a single cigarette.

As she started to step away he said, "Pardon me . . . " and held out the cigarette to show he needed a light. "You look like a friend of mine called Sofia."

Greta held out the box of matches to him. Her hand trembled a tiny bit as she tried to sound offhand. "There are many Sofias, aren't there."

"Yes, but she does look like you. Is it Marlboros you smoke?"

"Marlboros? I don't smoke." She watched him light a match, then said impulsively, "But it was Marlboros I smoked at one time -- when I could get them."

"They sell them at a kiosk on Third Avenue by the Central Hospital. I know the owner. He's getting some in tomorrow morning."

"I see. I will look for them there next time."

"By nine o'clock, they should be in by nine, tomorrow morning."

"Thank you. That is very kind of you."

"You're welcome. Here are your matches."

"Please keep them. I don't really need them."

"Thank you and goodbye." He turned to walk back in the direction from which he had come. Greta lingered until he had rounded the corner, then turned and walked briskly home, where she dropped into a chair, her hands shaking and her heart beating wildly in her chest.

The next morning Greta wished, not for the first time, that she were invisible, that her presence might pass unperceived, that she could blend into the crowd milling about in front of the Central Hospital and look as though she might be waiting for news of a relative in the emergency ward, or be out buying food for a friend recovering in a ward where the rations were barely more ample than those allotted a prisoner. Instead, her height, her pale skin, her flat shoes, even her shirt -- made of a plain fibre, it contrasted with the bright dresses made of shimmering petroleum derivatives -- would set her apart and make her presence obvious even a block away, even in passing.

She could see the kiosk from the kerb in front of the hospital, could make out the bowls of one-cent sweets on the narrow shelf at the front, and the standard array of inexpensive staples lined at the back, interspersed with the simple gifts -- a plastic toy, plastic flowers, a sentimental card -- which a visitor to the hospital might seek for a patient. It was not yet nine o'clock, and as she dawdled

there, not close enough to be netted, she asked herself the question that had teased her since her chance meeting the previous day: what was she expecting to find here? The man's mention yesterday of "Sofia" and "Marlboro" identified very precisely her connection to Dario, but was this rendezvous point set up to trap her (a reconfirmation of her guilt, a reminder that she was now in the country illegally)? Or was it to provide an opportunity to link up with an emissary Dario for the next stage of their collaboration?

She remembered Gabriela asking her if she had seen Dario in the city. The thought that he had ways to get out of the war zone, and into her sphere, extended the range of her fantasies, which she allowed to roam afield now. So much to ask him: about the day he left her to trek north, if had had been hurt in the ambush, whether the radio was intact, if Esperanza was okay, how the war was going, whether he did think he would ever end up as an embassy representative somewhere, what kind of medicine he dreamed of doing, if he ever wanted to have children. And even more to tell him: how she had been interrogated, the attack at the house, her frustrations with work, whether there were other ways she could collaborate, how much she liked to be with him and how she had missed him and dreamed of him during these weeks, how much she thought they could have in common, now.

She longed for him. She longed to have him contemplate her as he did, with a certain reserved, inquiring affection, to hear him talk, to be considered a reliable confidant, to feel they were pieces of the same puzzle: he in the battle zones, working with his hands and skills; she in the city, her head down, wading through a sea of information.

His affection, his interest, his recognition, would be enough to confirm for her that she was not only where she wanted to be, but also where she ought to be. She wanted his blessing.

She also ached to touch him, to feel the backs of his long smooth fingers, to lift his hand to her cheek, to feel his heart beating at the side of his neck. They had always sat while they talked, on the ground, on a rock, on a bench. She

wanted to stretch out beside him, to feel the length of his body against hers, without boots, without belts, without shirts, without anxious listening for sounds, without worries about what might happen next. She wanted to talk and to touch and to breathe in the smell of his skin, beaded with perspiration above his lip, damp on his chest, smooth and dry on the front of his thighs, to feel his leg draped over her waist, his arm crooked above her head.

The ocean was a short drive away from the city. There, waves rolled onto empty beaches and slipped away again with a forceful undertow. One could rent spare, scrubbed rooms at the edge of the beach, where the bare feet of Sunday bathers had deposited grains of sand, and where shells collected by curious children were set and abandoned on the narrow windowsills. She dreamed: they could drive out there, lie alone in the evening, listening to the surf of the Pacific Ocean, smelling the salt wafting in from the sea. They could buy fresh oysters from a fisherman who would arrange small green lemons on a plate for them to squeeze over the flesh. They could talk their way back through how it was they had arrived, haphazardly and by design, at where they were, and could try to imagine their way forward.

Her desire to see him drove her to approach the kiosk, take sweets from the bowl, and hold out a bill while she scanned the packs of cigarettes, wondering what it would mean if she did see a red, white and black pack there.

"Nothing more?" the man on the stool inside asked, looking up from a day-old newspaper over glasses the thickness of Coke bottle bottoms perched on the end of his nose.

"Do you ever have Marlboros?" she asked, expecting to trip a cue.

"Always," he replied in a clipped voice. "How many?"

"Oh. Did they arrive today?"

The man looked at her irritably. "They are not bread, *señorita*, they do not go stale so quickly."

Stymied, Greta bought a pack.

"Matches?"

"No, thanks, I don't sm—" she started. "I've got some at home."

She turned away and looked straight into the eyes of the man who had followed her the day before. She froze, returned again to her previous state of anxiety.

"You found them, good. This is the time to be here. Would you care for a coffee with your smoke?"

"Where?" she asked, doing her best to size him up. She had learned that military men, even spies who should have known better, often wore their trousers too high, with a belt girdling their lower rib cages, and that it was difficult for them to let their hair grow as far as their ears or collars. This man did not fit that bill, but he didn't fit easily into her image of a guerrilla or organisation militant, either. He was younger than she was, shorter, not muscular, and dressed casually, wearing plain tennis shoes. His hair was not short, but neatly combed; his watch, which had beeped at a quarter hour, was one of the digital-faced electronic things whose value and significance was difficult to judge. He carried nothing, and wore no vest or light jacket where a gun could be concealed. Greta figured, partly out of her desire to take the risk, that she could hold her own against him.

"There is a place nearby that serves breakfast."

Vaguely reassured, but bracing herself to scream, dodge and run if the need arose, she agreed.

They walked around the corner in silence, entered a dingy cafeteria-style restaurant serving eggs, beans, and fried bananas, and took two dishwater coffees to a small corner table, a cheap wooden square on a wobbly base, which shifted from side to side. The man stood up to get a plastic ashtray from the next table, and Greta took it as a cue to offer him the pack of cigarettes for which she had no use.

"How is your health?" he asked as he lit one.

"Oh, mine is fine, at least for now."

"You don't need to see a doctor?"

"Well, no, I . . . No. I don't NEED to see a doctor, but some times it is not a bad idea to get a check-up." Should she be coy and continue to feign innocence?

"Because there is one in town, he's very good, I could get you an appointment."

The restaurant attendant came by with a rag to clean a nearby table, which was immaculate already, then displaced an ashtray from one table to the next, unnecessarily.

"I see. When is he -- or she -- available?"

He extinguished his cigarette in the ashtray and handed it to the attendant, an act that obliged her to move away, to carry it back toward the kitchen.

"This afternoon at five, at the same kiosk, ask for yesterday's paper. He won't have it; ask him where to look for it. He will direct you somewhere, you must go there immediately, but look around as you walk, to see if you are being followed. If you are, don't stop at the destination."

The attendant was back, this time with a stringy grey mop for dragging listlessly over a section of the floor uncomfortably near their table.

"Fine. The doctor will tell me what tests I might need."

"If any, yes." The hint of a smile betrayed complicity, and Greta allowed herself to feel slightly relieved as he said, "I must go now, here are your cigarettes." He dropped the box on the table and disappeared out the door.

"Thank you," she said to his back, then looked down at the box, her mind unexpectedly flashing her a list of places (Marlborough, Winchester, Stockholm) associated with things (cigarettes, guns, hostages). What could Marlborough and Sofia possibly have in common?

Five o'clock finally arrived, and at the kiosk the old man, no more friendly than in the morning, told her to look for the paper at a small hotel five blocks away. Greta had been to the establishment's small restaurant for coffee a couple of times over the months. It did a brisk business during daylight hours, with rouge-cheeked

women in mini skirts dawdling with bored expressions in the threadbare lobby until men on forays from offices slipped in to engage them on either side of the lunch hour. It would be quieter now in late afternoon, as the men were expected home, the working women had children to attend to in the privacy of a shack, and the hotel's night clerk would be left to snooze in the back room.

At the modest reception desk she asked for the previous day's paper and the young man directed her, without looking up, to follow the porter by the elevator. The boy, in a shabby uniform too large for his frame, led her to a door and up the dark stairwell to the building's third and top storey. There he nodded toward a room further down the corridor, and disappeared again before he could see who or what might be awaiting her.

She took a deep breath and knocked lightly on the door. There was a muffled shuffling sound, and the door cracked open to reveal a face familiar to Greta, but misplaced. It was one of the boys who had carried her hammock, the back end. He was now a Survivor, she knew, of the ambush for which she had been partially responsible, and probably of many other near misses as well. He glanced over Greta's shoulder and slipped back into the room again, easing the door open just far enough to allow her to squeeze in. To her right was the bathroom; ahead of her was a square room barely large enough for a double bed, one chair and a narrow table on which rested a nylon duffel bag of the type used by athletes, or travellers carrying few possessions. A small window, clogged at the bottom with an ageing air conditioner, faced onto a grey wall. On the garish peony-patterned bedspread, a local newspaper was opened, with familiar fingers holding the corner of the national news page, the reader hidden around the corner.

Greta stepped forward and Dario came into view, pressed against the stiff pillow, dressed in clean new jeans and a crisp white shirt. He looked up at her and the way he paled made him a stranger to her, further away than on that evening when he had slipped into the conversation in the woods, remote from the voice that had spoken in her ear from Steve's taped interview.

"Hello -- " she began, but he held up his hand immediately to halt the mouthing of his name, and with the hand still held in front of him, warding her off, he reached with the other to pick up a small block of paper and a ball point pen from the miniature bedside table by his knee. Fixing her silence with a stern look, he wrote out a prescription and handed it to her, in silence. *Do not mention my name, nor Gabriela's. I will call her Ana.*

He folded over the newspaper to make just enough space for her to perch on the edge of the bed. He signalled to the boy to switch on his small transistor radio, and a whining *ranchero* love song invaded the room.

Without a greeting, no introductory inquiry into her health, no room for her to begin one of the many conversations she had imagined while she dreamed of seeing him, he began to speak, quietly, deliberately, under the music: "I wanted you to know. Ana is not well: she has been taken" -- here he stretched his arms in front of him, clamping his wrists together as if handcuffed -- "ill, we do not know the diagnosis nor how long the treatment" -- here he held a hand to his throat, like a choke collar, jerking his chin up -- "will last."

Greta's eyes darted all over and around Dario, pelting him with a thousand questions that she would never be able to ask. She would have to make up the answers.

"There might be treatment abroad, I have agreed to be the one to go." He held up a hand again the moment her mouth formed the shape of a gasping question, which might have been *Why?* or *Who?* or *Where?* or *How long?* or *What does it mean?*

"Perhaps it will be possible for her to join me." She looked down at the paper in her hand as the questions in her head ran on. *Where is she? What will you do? Where am I in all this?* Dario's voice dropped further, a barely-discernible drone under the music. "Please tell no one you knew her, or me."

Greta felt her hand pressed against her chest, as if to measure her own heart rate, and to coax her lungs to take a deep breath, breathe in, breathe out. But it did not steady her thoughts, which were spinning, forming a vortex, sucking in

with it her dream of belonging, of doing right, of knowing what to do next and how to go about it, of approval, her dream of identity with Dario and through him, all that he stood for.

She was not only without speech, but also without voice, possibly without air. Silence could have hung in the air, but it was battered by the blare from the radio.

Dario stood up and motioned to Greta to remain seated. As if on cue, the boy stuffed the newspaper into the duffel bag, hoisted the bag by its shoulder strap onto his thin shoulder, picked up the radio and stationed himself by the door.

"Please," Dario said, one finger in front of his mouth, signalling silence. "Now, and . . . " He made a forward spiralling motion with his hand to indicate the future.

The boy clicked off the radio. Dario looked up at the corners of the ceiling and, as though speaking to hidden microphones, boomed in an artificially large and alien voice, "So, that was okay. Is this enough for the session? Wait here so no one I know sees me with you." If listening ears took her for a whore, she would be as harmless as whores are expected to be.

He looked at her, regarding her intently for a fleeting moment. Greta recognised the tenderness in his gaze, but she identified it as disappointment, perhaps pity. He ran a finger across her lips so softly it might have been a caress, but she took it as an admonition to keep them sealed.

Then they were gone, leaving her along in the dingy hotel room, engulfed in desolate, yawning silence. Greta tipped over onto the peony spread, pulled her knees up to her chest and lay on her side, clenched in a ball, wondering what there was left for her to do.

She awoke from garbled dreams to the sound of light tapping on the door. It had grown dark, and in her confusion she swung it open without first peering through

the peephole. Her eyes adjusted to the light of the corridor and took in a maid in a threadbare uniform with a bucket in her hand.

"Excuse me, *señorita*, may I clean the room now? Someone else needs to use it."

"Clean? It is not dirty. That is . . . But yes, of course. I was just leaving."

She took a different stairwell down to the ground floor and emerged from behind the coffee shop. She crossed it briskly, avoiding the curious eyes of the young waiters, and went onto the street to where taxis, of similar standing to that of the hotel, waited for customers. She had the driver drop her at the luxury hotel. She sat on the terrace to drink a five-dollar fresh-squeezed orange juice, then loitered in the corridor of plate glass windows displaying local handicrafts and imported bikinis, the *Miami Herald* and glossy magazines. She took another taxi -- this vehicle had working windows, and the door didn't rattle -- back to her house. Elisa's house, really, but she did have a room there, she reminded herself.

She entered through the garage, retracing the steps her late-night assailant had taken. Her memory of the attack no longer made her shake. Rather, it irritated her, like passing through a cobweb and having the sticky fibres drape on her face, in her hair, having to peel them from her lips and eyelashes.

Elisa was out. Greta went straight to her own unadorned room and started sorting through her possessions and the clutter of items war's scarcity had led her to hoarde. In one corner she piled everything she imagined would be useful to the washerwoman in her shack near the railroad tracks. In another she stacked documents and books that Elisa would use or donate to the appropriate institutions, along with her news summary for the month, completed through the previous day's events. Next to her bed she laid the few possessions that would fit into a suitcase: clothes, photographs, notebooks filled with encoded descriptions and unconcealed longings. On top of that pile she laid her return ticket, good for any date she might choose to quit the country.

In the morning she called the airline; there was room available on all of the daily flights out. In the face of a strong temptation to dawdle, she booked a seat

for the very next day. When Elisa got home, Greta asked her if she would take her to the airport, but Elisa replied curtly that she was going to be in a meeting at that hour, and immediately closed herself in her room. A few minutes later she reappeared and suggested, in a voice that barely masked sarcasm, "Why don't you call Steve and have him send over his driver?"

Greta walked down to a busy avenue and waved down a taxi driver and got him to promise to appear at her address in the morning. On her way back to the house, she passed a mango vendor with his cart on wheels and stopped to watch him spin a mango on the tool made just for his trade, with a crank that sliced a pile of bright curls. He scooped them into a bag, sprinkled them with salt and held it out to her, refusing her offer of money. As she walked away he called after her, proffering a prize paper napkin to clean her mouth and hands.

She clutched the gift in her hand until she reached the house. There she sat down on the front steps, looking up into the neighbours' giant mango tree. Months ago the tree's branches had grown heavy with clusters of fruit that ripened and fell all at once, laying a carpet of fruity flesh that rotted and attracted flies. It was budding again now, the fruit like small plums, still firm and full of promise.

More than a year earlier, in a different country, a man she had barely met told her what a *capucha* was. She had tried to imagine what such a hood might be, and who would use it, and even how it would feel if it closed around her neck, cutting off the air, slowly suffocating her. She knew a little more about such things now, it had been a beginning of sorts.

She looked down at the mango curls in her hand, wondering if they harboured amoebas, if her insides were hardy enough to stand up to them. She began to eat them one at a time: they were green and sour, with traces of yellow where they had ripened to a tentative sweetness.

Maybe she could stay on, give it another try. She still hadn't straightened out her immigration status, and Elisa was right that she should get her papers back. The lawyer would have to tell her what to do. It might take a long time; she would have to be patient. She could bring his secretary a little present for her

desk, maybe a magazine or a silk flower in a plastic stand like the one she'd seen in a shop window somewhere during one of her walks.

If in the morning she gathered her things and departed, it would be a long time before she ate mango like this again. She sat very still, trying to conjure words to say how it tasted.