

I

My grandmother had white hair rising in a wave over her forehead, which made her look irate. She nearly always carried a small bamboo cane with a gold handle like a fist, which she didn't need, because she was steady as a horse. Looking over old photographs I think I see in that hard, curdled white face, in those grey eyes with their smoky circling rings, a flash of Borja and even myself. I suppose Borja inherited her poise and her pitilessness. I, perhaps, this great sadness.

My grandmother's hands were knuckled and bony, and they had some beauty in spite of their coffee-coloured stains. On the index and ring fingers of her right hand jiggled two large, murky diamonds. After lunch she would drag her rocking chair to the window of her private drawing room (mist and gloom, the scorching, damp wind tearing itself open on the agaves or pushing the chestnut-coloured leaves under the almond trees; swollen, leaden clouds blurring the green brightness of the sea) and from there, with her old jewel-encrusted opera glasses – the sapphires were false – she would inspect the white houses on the Slope, where the tenant farmers lived, or she would peer out to sea, where there wasn't a boat to be seen, nor any trace of the horror that fell from the lips of Antonia, the housekeeper. ('They say they're killing whole families over there, shooting priests and putting out their eyes . . . throwing people into vats of boiling oil . . . May God have mercy on their souls!') My grandmother would look shocked, but her eyes would shift a little closer together, like siblings whispering dark secrets to one another, as she listened to these morbid tales. And while we anxiously waited for news, which was always unsatisfactory

(the war was barely six weeks old), the four of us – my grandmother, my aunt Emilia, my cousin Borja and myself – stewed in the heat, the boredom, the loneliness and the silence of that corner of the island, in the far-flung vanishing point that was my grandmother's house. The siesta was perhaps both the calmest and the most charged time of the day. We could hear the creaking of the rocking chair in my grandmother's drawing room, and we imagined her keeping track of the comings and goings of the women on the Slope, a grey sun flashing in the enormous diamonds on her fingers. We would often hear her say that she was ruined, and as she said it – popping into her mouth one of the infinite variety of pills lined up in little brown jars on her chest of drawers – the shadows under her eyes would deepen, and her pupils would film over with a viscous fatigue. She looked like a defeated Buddha.

I remember the way Borja would mechanically rush to pick up the little bamboo cane each time it slipped down the wall and fell to the floor. His long, brown hands with their wide knuckles – like our grandmother's – would stretch out towards it (the only bit of mischief, the only sign of protest in the exasperating stillness of a restless siesta). With the routine immediacy of a well-mannered child, he would hurry over to the rebellious cane and prop it against the wall, the rocking chair, or my grandmother's knees. When the four of us gathered in her drawing room – my aunt, my cousin and I in attendance – only my grandmother would speak, her voice a droning monotone. I don't think any of us listened to what she said, each of us caught up in ourselves or the tedium of the afternoon. I would wait for a sign from Borja, telling me it was time to escape. Aunt Emilia would often yawn, but without opening her mouth: only the contraction of her wide, milky-white jaw and the sudden tears that came into her little pink-lidded eyes gave her away. Her nostrils would dilate, and you could almost hear her teeth grind in her effort to keep her mouth shut, to stop it opening wide like the mouths of the women on the Slope. From time to time she would say, 'Yes, mother. No, mother. Whatever you say, mother.' This was my only distraction, as I waited impatiently for the tiniest flicker of Borja's eyebrows, a sign that we could leave.

Borja was fifteen and I fourteen, and we were there by force. We were bored and exasperated in equal measure, amid the oily calm and hypocritical peace of the island. Our holidays were interrupted by a war that seemed eerily unreal, at once remote and immediate, perhaps more frightening for being invisible. I don't know if Borja truly hated our grandmother, but he certainly knew how to pretend in her company. I suppose he had been taught from a young age the need to dissemble. He was sweet and gentle when he was with her, but he knew the words *money*, *inheritance*, *land* and he understood their meaning. He could be sweet and gentle, in other words, when it suited him to be so in the company of certain adults. But never have I met a more pig-headed and deceitful traitor, nor a sadder little boy, than Borja. He affected innocence and purity, gallantry and poise in the presence of our grandmother, when in reality – oh Borja, maybe only now can I begin to love you – he was weak, cruel and proud, just a good-for-nothing boy on the way to being a man.

I don't pretend that I was better than him. But I took every opportunity to show my grandmother that I was there against my will. Anyone who has not been moved around constantly between the ages of nine and fourteen, changing hands like an object, will not understand the hostility and rebelliousness that characterized me then. And in any case I never expected anything from my grandmother: I put up with her icy manner, her clichés, her prayers to an exclusive God of her own invention, her occasional and indifferent caresses, her equally indifferent punishments. Her hands with their pink and brown stains would rest protectively on my head as she talked, and sighed, about my corrupted father (*Infernal Ideas, Terrible Deeds*) and my unfortunate mother (*Better Off Dead, May She Rest In Peace*) with the two old maids of Son Lluch, on the afternoons they came riding in their wagon to our house. (Large hats full of fruit and withered flowers, like kitchen scraps, where all that was missing was a cloud of buzzing flies.)

I was then – she said – a disobedient and misguided child, expelled from Our Lady of the Angels for kicking the prioress; corrupted by a self-satisfied and decadent family environment; victim

of an ungrateful father who, when his wife died, abandoned me to an old servant woman. I was – she went on, to the malevolent interest of the Son Lluch women – the brutalized product of three years spent with that poor woman on a mortgaged farm of my father's, in a house that was falling to pieces. I had lived, in short, surrounded by mountains and wild woods and by dark and ignorant people, away from all love and protection. (At this point my grandmother would caress me.)

'We'll tame you yet,' she said, no sooner had I arrived on the island.

I was twelve, and for the first time I understood that I was there for good. My mother had died four years earlier and Mauricia – the old nursemaid who looked after me – was ill. My grandmother was taking definitive charge of me, that much was clear.

The day I arrived on the island, it was very windy in the city. Signs rattled precariously over shop doors. My grandmother took me to a dark hotel smelling of damp and bleach. My room looked onto a small patio on one side and, on the other, a narrow street leading to a promenade where palm trees rocked over a leaden sea. The complicated wrought-iron bed was as frightening as an unfamiliar animal. My grandmother slept in the room next door, and at dawn I woke with a start – as I often did – and reached for the bedside light. I clearly remember the cold of the plastered wall and the pink shade of the lamp. I sat up very still in bed, looking warily around me, surprised by the twisted lock of my own hair that stood out darkly against my shoulder. As my eyes grew accustomed to the half-light I took in the cracks in the walls, the stains on the ceiling, and most of all the tangled mass of shadows cast by the bed, which were like serpents, dragons or mysterious creatures I hardly dared look at. I leaned out as far as I could towards the bedside table, reaching for the glass of water, and that was when I saw, in the corner of the room, a line of ants marching across the wall. I dropped the glass, which broke, and buried myself under the covers. I didn't even dare poke a hand out, so I stayed like that for a long time, biting my lips and holding back my despicable tears. I think I must have been afraid. Perhaps I had realized I was

completely alone and searching for something, though I didn't know what. I tried to think of something else, to drive my imagination like a little train through forests and unknown places, to take it to Mauricia and then cling to ordinary things (the apples that Mauri would place carefully on the floorboards in the attic, which had such an intense aroma that, foolishly, I even sniffed the walls to see if they had absorbed their fragrance). And I said to myself, in desolation, 'They will be yellow and wrinkled now, and I didn't eat a single one.' Because that very afternoon Mauricia had begun to feel unwell, and after that she couldn't get out of bed, and so a letter had been written to my grandmother . . . Oh why, why had it happened? I tried to push the little wagon of my memories towards the goldenrods in the orchard, or the bright reflection of the branches in the ponds, in their many shades of green. (There was one pond in particular where a shining swarm of mosquitoes, also green, hung in the air; and I sat there while they looked for me, and I wouldn't answer when they called my name, because that was the day my grandmother came to fetch me – I saw the dust kicked up by the car on the distant road – and take me away with her to the island.) I remembered the brown shapes of the islands on the pale blue maps of my beloved Atlas. And suddenly the bed and its twisted shadows, and that column of ants marching towards them, suddenly they were stranded on a green and yellow island, surrounded on all sides by a faded sea. And the distorted shadows behind my head – the bed was about a hand span from the wall – gave me a feeling of enormous insecurity. Just as well I had hidden my little black doll Gorogó, my Chimney Sweep, under my jumper; and here he was now, under my pillow. But then I realized I had lost something. In the mountains, in the enormous, dilapidated house, I had left behind my little cardboard theatre. (I closed my eyes and saw its tissue-paper backdrops, its transparent skies, its windows in blue, yellow and pink and that black lettering on the back: Children's Theatre, Seix y Barral, telegraph code *Arapil*. First frame, number 3 . . . 'The Three Kings and the Star', 'The Spirit of the Ruins', and the great and everyday mystery of the little see-through windows. How I wished I could climb inside, clamber through

those little pieces of paper and flee through their false sweet-wrapper panes. Oh, and my albums and my books: Kay and Gerda in their garden on the roof, The Little Mermaid embracing the statue, The Wild Swans. And I felt a dull anger, directed at myself. And at my grandmother, because nobody had reminded me to bring them with me, and now they were lost. Lost, lost, like the green grasshoppers, like the October apples, like the wind in the black fireplace. And, worse still, I couldn't even remember where I had left the theatre; only Mauricia knew which cupboard it was in.) I couldn't go back to sleep and, for the first time in my life, I saw dawn break through the cracks in the blinds.

My grandmother took me to the town, to her house. And what a surprise it was the next morning when I woke with the sun and walked barefoot to the window, a dream still caught up in my lashes. (Blue and white striped curtains and the Slope below. Golden days, never repeated, the veil of the sun caught up in the black trunks of the almond trees below, headlong to the sea.) What a surprise it was to see the Slope. I hadn't realized it was there behind the house, behind the walls of the unkempt garden with its dark cherries and its silver-armed fig. I don't think I realized it then, but the Slope surprised me deeply, and it brought a premonition of great good and great pain combined. Then they took me again to the city, to board at Our Lady of the Angels. For reasons and in ways I didn't understand I felt wicked and rebellious there, as if my heart had been pierced by the little shard of glass that had also, in a single morning, transformed the little Kay. And that gave me enormous satisfaction. And so along with my memories and my vague, confused love for a lost time, I hid away anything that might be perceived as weakness, or that seemed weak to me. I never cried.

During our first holidays I didn't play much with Borja. They branded me rough and wild, a stranger from the peasant world, and they assured me they would alter my character. A year and a half later, in the very early spring – just after my fourteenth birthday – to everyone's great shame and consternation, I was expelled from Our Lady of the Angels.