RAIN GOD

I said to Miguel Chico, home for
you say in your note to her?” he
her. You know, the usual.

she dissembled. It was very
uncharacteristic of her and he especially liked that she en-
joyed feigning indifference to Lola.

“Mickie,” she said, “please try not to fight with your
father this time.”

“You’re starting again, Mother.”

“What?”

“To be a mother. Stop it, I’m too old. I don’t like him
and he doesn’t like me.”

“He loves you. He just doesn’t know how to show it
very well. But you know he’d do anything for you.”

“Right.”

“He’s been very good to me in these last months.”

“That’s wonderful, Mother. It’s good to know you’re
happier now. Remember last Christmas?”

“Don’t remind me. That’s all over and I’m happy
now.” She stopped setting the table. “Except.”

“Except what?”

“I wish El Compa were alive and that he and Lola
were here with us. Remember those times?”

“Oh, Mother, you are impossible. Didn’t you ever feel
like telling her to go to hell?”

“No.”

“You’re too good to be true.”

Juanita laughed. “Tell that to your father.”

RAIN DANCER
Felix Angel, Mama Chona’s oldest son, was murdered by an eighteen-year-old soldier from the South on a cold, dry day in February. They were in Felix’s car in a desert canyon on the eastern side of the mountain, and they talked only briefly before the boy kicked him to death. Because of the mountain and the shadows it casts, it was already twilight in the canyon, but on the western side where Felix lived the sun was still setting in those bleak, final moments when he thought of his family and, in particular, of his youngest and favorite son, JoEl.

The border town where Felix spent most of his life is in a valley between two mountain ranges in the middle of the southwestern wastes. A wide river, mostly dry except when thunderstorms create flashfloods, separates it from Mexico. Heavy traffic flows from one side of the river to the other, and from the air, national boundaries and differences are indistinguishable.
search of release or fantasy and returned to their homes refreshed, respectability intact, like small-town tourists a little hung over after a week in New York or San Francisco.

But Maña Chona’s son Felix was not a respectable man. Constantly on the lookout for the shy and fair god who would land safely on the shore at last, Felix searched for his youth in obscure places on both sides of the river. He went to the servicemen’s bar regularly after work at the factory. On payday he treated everyone to a round of drinks, talked and laughed in jolly ways, and offered young soldiers a ride to the base across town, especially when he paid visits to his mother’s sister, Tia Cuca, out in the desert.

Felix had been irritable that day because of his argument with JoEl at the breakfast table. Ordinarily he approached his work and even the difficult disputes between laborers and bosses with a casual good humor his comrades at the plant appreciated. He had been a graveyard shift laborer when his daughters, Yerma and Magdalena, were very young, but after Roberto and JoEl were born he was promoted to regular shift foreman. In the last five years he had been put in charge of hiring cheap Mexican workers. He had accepted the promotion on the condition that these men immediately be considered candidates for American citizenship and had been surprised when the bosses agreed. After thirty-five years, he was content with his work at the factory.

The Mexicans he hired reminded Felix of himself at that age, men willing to work for any wage as long as it fed their families while strange officials supervised the preparation of their papers. As middleman between them and the promises of North America, he knew he was in the loathsome position of being what the Mexicans called a coyote; for that reason he worked hard to gain their affec
tion.

A person of simple and generous attachments, Felix
loved these men, especially when they were physically strong and naive. Even after losing most of his own hair and the muscles he had developed during his early years on the job, he had not lost his admiration for masculine beauty. As he grew older that admiration, instead of diminishing as he had expected, had become an obsession for which he sought remedy in simple and careless ways.

Before they were permitted to become full-time employees, the men were required to have physical examinations. These examinations, Felix told them, were absolutely necessary and, if done by him, were free of charge. He scheduled appointments for them at his sister Mema’s place across the river. The physical consisted of tests for hernias and prostate trouble and did not go beyond that unless the young worker, awareness glinting at him with his trousers down, expressed an interest in more. The opportunists figured that additional examinations might be to their advantage, though Felix did not take such allowances into account later. In those brief morning and afternoon encounters, gazing upon such beauty with the wonder and terror of a bride, his only desire was to touch it and hold it in his hands tenderly. The offended, who left hurriedly, were careful to disguise their disgust and anger for fear of losing their jobs. He could not find words to assure them. In most cases, however, the men submitted to Felix’s expert and surprisingly gentle touch, thanked him, and left without seeing the awe and tension in his face. It did not occur to them that another man might take pleasure in touching them so intimately.

Later, after the men were secure in their work, the more aware among them joked about the *examinaciones* and winked at each other when Felix passed by on his way in and out of the office. None but the most insecure harbored ill will toward him, because his kindness, of which they took advantage on days when they were inexcusably late or absent, was known to all. A few, feigning abdominal pains, returned for more medical care and found themselves turned away. Most forgot the experience, occasionally referred to him behind his back but affectionately as *jefe Joto*, and were grateful for the extra money he gave them for the sick child at home.

On the day of his morning argument with JoEl, Felix had not responded to any of his men in the usual friendly manner. In an attempt to tease him out of his mood, one of them talked loudly about the phases of the moon. Felix stared at the man.

“Hey, jefe, it was only a joke.” The young Mexican pronounced the English “j” like a “y” and Felix said to him angrily, “Hey, *pendejo*, why don’t you stop being a stupid wet-back and learn English?” Then, murmuring an apology, he walked toward the man as if to embrace him, gave him a strange look, and walked away.

Any disagreement with JoEl caused Felix to be irritated with everyone, even his wife Angie toward whom he felt the kind of tenderness one has for a creature one loves and injures accidentally. He was unbearably ashamed of his remarks to the young laborer. Alone in his office at the noon hour, eating the burritos Angie had prepared for him, he choked on his shame.

The beer at the bar was good enough to restore his spirits and it began to give him the calm he needed to mull over his quarrel with JoEl. Felix loved young people and did not understand why his son did not see that. Now that JoEl was fourteen and more rebellious than ever, their arguments became nightmares during which Felix said words he did not mean. JoEl replied in curt, distant phrases that cut him off and caused anger to rise from his belly into his throat with a
Felix and his first son, Roberto, did not quarrel. Berto, who was Angie's favorite, was happy and easygoing—not a thinker like JoEl—and they all enjoyed his company. He helped his father fix the car whenever anything went wrong with it and would talk to him quietly about his problems with girls. He was dark-skinned like his mother, very "Indian," polite and shy. Felix returned his love in a steady, uncomplicated way. Only JoEl, antagonism causing his cinnamon eyes to seem darker, persistently disagreed with Felix about almost everything.

"You are just like your father," Angie told him. "Stubborn and too proud for your own good." She spoke English with a heavy Mexican accent and used it only when she wanted to make "important" statements, not realizing that her accent created the opposite effect. After his first year in school JoEl learned to be ashamed of the way his mother abused the language. The others, including Felix, loved to tease and imitate her. Their English was perfect and Spanish surfaced only when they addressed their older relatives or when they were with their Mexican school friends at social events.

"Come on, Mother, say it again," Magdalena pleaded.

"No seas malcriada," Angie said and waved her hand close to Lena's cheek.

"No, Ma, not in Spanish. Say it in English." Lena and her summer boyfriend were on the front porch, seated side by side hardly touching, swinging slowly back and forth. Every night at exactly nine-thirty, Angie went to the screen door behind them and said, "Magdah-leen, kahm een." Lena shrieked with delight; the sad boyfriend smiled apprehensively.
"Oh, Mamá, just a few more minutes." She said "mamá" in the Spanish way.

"No, señorita. Joo mas kahm een rye now." More howls, as the boy said an embarrassed good night and slipped from the swing and the porch into the dark. Lena barely noticed. She was too taken up by her mother, whom she adored.

Of his two girls, Lena was more like his wife, small and dark, with eyes like JoEl's. From his room in the back on those hot desert nights, Felix loved hearing the women talk and laugh after the boyfriends left, and he followed them in his reveries before sleep as they walked arm in arm from the living room to the kitchen spraying mosquitoes and turning off lights.

Angie had painted the rooms brilliant colors to annoy Felix's sisters, knowing that Jesus Maria and Eduviges disapproved of her and thought her a "lower class Mexican." She had also chosen the colors for their names: Perico Tropical and Sangria del Rey. Felix agreed to buy the paint because he could refuse her nothing and because he knew that she would keep her word and paint the rooms without anyone's help. Her daughters had long since despaired of teaching Angie the good taste they learned in their home economics classes at school.

"But Mother, the colors are too bright." Yerma, her older and more prudish daughter, was shocked as she walked in the door after school.

"I dun't care," Angie said in her best English. "I dun't like white rooms. They give me the suzie creeps."

"The what?"

"Joo know, the suzie creeps." When Yerma figured out that her mother had combined current slang with a French dessert, she was too amused to insist on a subdued version of the colors already drying on the walls. From then on, anything white they disliked gave them all the "suzie creeps." And Yerma, who secretly loved white, painted her own room a lighter version of the tropical parrot in the living room.

Angie and Lena walked through that room, then the purple dining room, and into the bright yellow kitchen to set the table for the next morning. Felix heard them getting ready for bed and fell asleep. Lena and Angie now slept in the same room, he and JoEl in the back porch they had walled in with cinder blocks, and Yerma in the front bedroom on the double bed where all but she had been conceived.

Berto slept on the living room sofa. When JoEl was ten Felix bought him a bed of his own, but until then they had slept together.

From the time he was very young, JoEl had dreamed vividly. He had often come to his parents' bed and stayed there until at dawn he fell asleep out of fatigue, his terror diminished by the light and the warmth of his mother and father on either side of him. When his son's dreams were very bad, Felix learned not to ask him about them. Instead, he allowed JoEl to weep away his terror while he and Angie took turns rocking him. At first they had attempted to exorcise JoEl's demons by asking him to describe them, but they saw that this made him even more frightened and inconsolable. Gradually they arrived at the better solution, but it was difficult because his fear was monstrous in relation to his size and frightened them. The first time he awakened the household with his screams, Angie wept out of frustration because he could not tell her what he saw.

"JoEl, what's the matter? What is it? Tell me." It was clear that JoEl, eyes open, did not see her, and the more she begged him to name his monsters the louder he screamed.
He did name them once when he was just learning to speak. The week before, Yerma and Lena had been teaching him the words for bugs in Spanish and English. JoEl was fascinated by the sugar ants that created roadways in the kitchen every summer, and which Angie could never bring herself to poison. They had begun crawling over his legs as he sat on the floor observing them, and only Yerma saw that he was hypnotized by fear and not curiosity. She could tell by the color of his face, pale yellow with a blue cast under the eyes, which was also its color during his nightmares. She brushed the ants from his legs, saying their diminutive Spanish name, "Hormiguitas, hormiguitas. JoEl," and tickling him at the base of his spine in an attempt to make him laugh. He neither laughed nor cried, but the natural color returned to his face.

"Molecas," he had said, "molecas."

"Molecas," he had repeated seriously.

Sitting up in bed in the desert night, frantically brushing over his legs and arms in rigid, measured gestures that awed the family as they stood around him, JoEl screamed, "Molecas."

Watching him, Felix's heart broke with the knowledge that his son was a poet. He motioned Angie not to touch him until the gestures stopped and the eyes lost their unearthly sheen. He then lifted JoEl from the cot with great tenderness and took him to their bed.

As the three of them slept more frequently together, Felix lost his passion for Angie, and he would wake during the night cradling JoEl on his side of the bed. His protective feelings for the child perplexed and disoriented him because they seemed stronger than his desire for his wife. In the beginning, Angie paid no attention and was touched deeply by Felix's love for their son. Slowly, without intending it, she stifled her own desires and lay awake watching her husband and son in their timeless embrace. In the summer the crickets kept her company and in the winter she listened to the wind.

Finally, she set up the cot for herself in Lena's room, helped Yerma move their double bed into the front room when she started high school, and never disturbed Felix again. "He's a good man," she confessed to her priest in Spanish. "I have my children, my house, enough to eat. What more do I need?" The priest said nothing.

She remained thin and small with the beautiful arms of a medieval madonna; but she forgot to dye her hair at times and laughed with the irony of the sexually deprived. Her own desire for Felix cooled and, loving both her husband and son, she knew her son's strength and sided with her husband whenever they quarreled.

Felix ordered another beer as a North American ballad the children liked to sing began playing on the jukebox. Yerma, Lena, and JoEl had good voices and serenaded him and Angie ofien, though lately JoEl had stopped joining in.

He and his son began to quarrel after JoEl had been in school for two years. "Leave me alone," JoEl had said to him one evening when Felix tried to see what he was reading. "Can't I have any privacy in this house?" The whole idea was preposterous to Felix, as he was not prepared to believe that his youngest child could understand the full meaning of
those words in English or Spanish. The more Felix hounded him, the more JoEl retreated into his private world of books. Felix knew he was wrong to be envious of that world, but he could not help himself.

"JoEl, you read too much. You're going to ruin your eyes. Let's go for a ride." He had just bought a new Chevrolet. JoEl did not look up from his book.

Their fights wounded Angie most of all, and Felix saw how careful she was not to intrude. She watched them, however, ready to spring between him and JoEl when Felix's frustration led him to begin undoing his belt. After those occasions, when he and Angie sat alone in the kitchen, she attempted to soothe him by talking to him quietly. She told him that she hid from JoEl's laughter when the belt buckle struck him. Only later, when she heard the boy crying to himself, was she reassured that they had not lost him. She understood that a father's pride did not allow him to apologize to his son, but couldn't he allow JoEl some freedom to do what he wanted?

"What freedom?" Felix asked her in Spanish. "Freedom to turn into a delinquent or to become a selfish little brat? He belongs to a family and he must learn to share. I know what they're teaching kids in those schools. How to disobey parents and how to act like grownups when they're only children. And they also teach them to be ashamed of where they come from!"

Angie defended JoEl by reminding Felix that he was only eleven years old, very intelligent, and most of the time a good son. But even while defending him, Angie agreed with Felix about the schools. Unlike Berto and the girls, JoEl did not come to her for comfort. He disdained it from all of them, and she attributed his distance to the ideas he was learning from the younger Anglo teachers. When JoEl taunted her sarcastically for putting up with Felix's injustices, she did not understand what he was doing. They did not seem injustices to her but simply the rights of a husband and father. Her duty was to suffer from his arbitrary nature so that she might enjoy greater glory in heaven. JoEl scorned her for doing her duty. Felix noticed how icily JoEl looked at Angie after he had berated her for spending her household money in foolish ways.

"Don't look at your mother like that."
"I can look at her any way I want."
"Don't talk back to me."
"Why?"

JoEl's most effective tactic was silence. Wordlessly, he let Angie know that she deserved the pain she endured and that she was no better than a worm for letting Felix take advantage of her goodness.

"You have no respect for us," she said to him in self-defense. "Maleriado, muchacho maleriado."
"Well, you brought me up," JoEl answered.

At this point if he was present, Felix undid his belt.

"Don't talk to your mother like that."

But when the family was happy, the house sang and the sofa played music. Lena, who had perfect pitch, discovered that if you sat on it in a certain way, it played two notes. These they incorporated into the background music for their songs. Felix and JoEl laughed together in the old ways and the others became infected with their joy. After the evening meal, they sang for their parents the songs they learned in school. Angie understood that they were patriotic North American songs and praised and kissed her children even if she did not like the music.

Berto was a perfect audience because he liked everything they did. JoEl told them stories and riddles he had read or made up, or sometimes he recited poems which they
pretended to understand. He made them feel sad and Angie would look at him and wonder what was to become of her youngest child. As he grew older and turned more to himself, her fears grew with him. Sadness stuck to Joel like the smell of garlic, she said to Felix. There was no remedy. Neither lemon nor baking soda could reach his pain and she contemplated it while preparing the evening meal. This time of day—twilight—was the most melancholy time of the day to her. The aroma of the rice made her think of Joel's poems. Felix watched her stir it as he hugged her from behind.

An old romantic Mexican ballad was playing on the jukebox now and reminded Felix of the days when he was courting Angie. As usual, the singer was suffering from love and Felix smiled at the sentimentality of the lyrics. "Ay, Papa, how can you listen to such corny music?" the children asked him at home. He was not ashamed to admit that he loved all music. He and Angie had danced to this song shortly before and after they were married. After three beers, he sang along.

"Hey, Felix," asked the bartender, "what does it mean?"

"You wouldn't understand, you stupid gringo," he said. To himself he thought how only a Mexican song could mix sadness and laughter like that so that one could cry and sing at the same time. Another beer came sliding down the counter toward him.

Felix and Angie had met at school. They were among the first large group of Mexicans (or, as their teachers referred to them, "first generation Americans") to graduate from the town's high school. He was an average student with an undisciplined talent for music and literature that was discovered too late by a teacher who liked his sense of humor. She recommended that he be allowed to take college preparation courses but was told by the head counselor that it was too late for him to enroll. She knew that it was not but did not argue, seeing that Felix's family circumstances would keep him from continuing his education. His family, though proud of him, expected him to find a job right away. His sisters were anxious to see him begin fulfilling his duty as family breadwinner, for their father had died when they first crossed the border and Mama Chona had suffered much to keep them all together. Jesus Maria and Eduvigis were tired of the menial work they took on which interfered with their studies.

The week after he received his diploma, he announced to the family his intention to marry Angie. Only his youngest sister Memá shared his happiness and embraced him. His brothers were still too young to care very much one way or another. They had no desire to attend schools of any kind after their grammar school experiences and were looking forward to the day they could find jobs that would allow them to earn the money to buy a car.

Before she left the kitchen where they were all seated for lunch, Jesus Maria said to him, "How could you do this to us? After all the sacrifices we've made for you? Now you're going to marry that India and leave the burden of this household to us." Jesus Maria had light skin and anyone
darker she considered an “Indian.” She said she did not understand how Angie had even gotten through school. Obviously she belonged to that loathsome group of Indians who were herded through the system, taught to add at least since they refused to learn any language properly, and then let loose among decent people who must put up with their ignorance. Jesus Maria knew that her family was better than such illiterates and she would prove it by going on to college.

“Don’t worry, Jessie. I’ll still help. You’ll see, we’ll work things out.” He tried to put his arms around her, but she pushed him away and left the room. Felix faced his mother now. Mama Chona had remained silent throughout her children’s quarrel.

“Come here, son,” she said to him in her refined Spanish. “Let me kiss you.” He had not expected her to assent so readily. She stood up and continued to tell him that she wished his father were alive so that he could give Felix the family blessing. She, God forgive her, could not.

Felix watched his mother walk away from him, a small despair beginning to impinge on his love for Angie. “I don’t need your blessing, Mamá,” he said in English, knowing she understood. “With or without it, I’m going to marry her.”

And he did, five years later, after he had gotten the job at the factory and all but Mema and Miguel Grande were graduated from high school. Yerma and Lena were born in the first two years of their marriage, Berto a year later and Joél two years after him.

Mama Chona forgave Felix for marrying beneath him when she saw her granddaughter, for whom she would have felt unrestrained affection had Yerma’s skin been lighter. Angie learned quickly not to be hurt by her mother-in-law’s snobbery, but she did not like it when Mama Chona held Yerma in her arms and called her a little Indian. “Don’t worry about it,” Felix said to her. “It’s just the pot calling the kettle black.”

When Yerma was eight years old she began taking piano lessons from Mrs. Ramos, the wife of a wealthy boot manufacturer. She was a good pupil and her talent was recognized by all who heard her play on the old piano Tia Cuca had given them when she moved out to the desert on the other side of the mountain. When Mrs. Ramos raised her fee from fifty cents to two dollars an hour, Angie, who saved money for the lessons out of the household budget, was unable to afford the increase. She did not want to ask Felix for it because she knew he did not have it, so Yerma no longer made the weekly climb up the hill to the rich peoples’ part of town. She began practicing on her own with a devotion that ignored how badly out of tune their piano was, and she relied on Lena’s ear to tell her how it should sound. They commented on its steady decline. “Pretty soon, Yerma, we can transpose everything down a whole tone. I can’t wait, my ears are killing me.”

One afternoon, Angie took Yerma up to the Ramos mansion. They were met at the back door by one of the kitchen servants who led them to the music room on the ground floor. Angie, who had never been to the house because she was too ashamed of her clothes to attend the annual recitals in the living room upstairs, almost lost her nerve in the face of so many beautiful things. She had not dreamed of such furniture, and she calculated that her entire house could fit easily into this lower level. “What beauty,” she said out loud to Yerma.

They waited outside the music room in an alcove with windows looking out onto a garden filled with flowers. Angie could not believe they were real. “Imagine,” she said, “in this desert.” Yerma was afraid her mother would ask permission
to touch them and was about to insist that they go home and not bother Mrs. Ramos, when her mother’s attention focused upon the sofa. It was the most comfortable Angie had ever known, of a pale orchid color, and she dared not lean back for fear of sinking too far and disappearing altogether. Later, she said to Felix that in the Ramos mansion, everyone sat on clouds. Yerma was embarrassed by her mother’s reactions and remained silent. She did not want Angie to plead with Mrs. Ramos for anything because she was afraid her teacher would then dislike her. At the same time, she did not want to hurt her mother’s feelings by denying her the chance to bargain for the lessons. But she wished that her mother would behave differently, as one did in church, with respect and a certain lack of enthusiasm.

After all the students finished their lessons, Yerma and Angie were admitted to the music room. There were three pianos in it, two uprights and a baby grand. The students were allowed to play the magnificent full grand piano upstairs during dress rehearsals and recitals, and so four times a year Yerma lovingly touched the most beautiful object she had ever seen.

"Señora Ramos, I am Yerma’s mother," Angie began confidently in Spanish. She counted on the inspiration she had prayed for to give her the necessary words, but instead there followed a long silence that made Yerma want to cry.

Mrs. Ramos responded kindly, "How happy I am to meet you, Señora Angel." To Yerma she expressed her happiness at seeing her again. "I’ve missed you," she said warmly.

Angie, encouraged, continued in Spanish. "Señora, my daughter has practiced every day and plays well. Please listen to her."

"Of course."

Yerma sat down quickly and played a simplified version of Chopin’s “Minute Waltz” which she had mastered on her own. When she finished, Angie asked Mrs. Ramos what she thought.

"Thank you very much, Yerma, you played that very well. I’m glad you have been practicing. Please wait outside for a few minutes, I want to talk to your mother." Mrs. Ramos spoke in Spanish out of courtesy to Angie.

Afterward, Yerma told Felix that these were the most difficult moments for her. She felt ashamed yet happy that Mrs. Ramos had praised her technique, since she knew her to be a good teacher who meant what she said. A few minutes later Angie emerged from the music room, took her arm, and led her out of the house. As they walked down the hill her mother told her that she would begin her lessons again the following week, and they hurried home to give the good news to the rest of the family.

Now, after every visit to the mansion, Yerma came home to find JoEl sitting on the piano bench, waiting impatiently to learn what his sister had been taught by the mysterious lady who lived on the hill.

In the bar, Felix saw them sitting together on the bench, his oldest and youngest children, arguing and disagreeing about a phrase, humming the melodies out loud in key, and then playing them to each other on that sad old piano. He would borrow the money somehow to get it tuned for them: Food was not enough for his children. They needed music.

The beer, the ballads, and JoEl’s eyes floating through the air began to act as a balm for the irritations of the day. He wished JoEl were outside waiting for him so that they might drive out to Tia Cuca’s together. Felix could not believe that JoEl was irrevocably lost to him. Yet he knew it was
so by the way Angie had looked at him several weeks before and said, "That's enough. Let him go." How could he? To what? Who would protect him from his nightmares and his melancholy? Felix peered into the darkness of the bar for the first time in an effort to locate the young man who had entered earlier. He saw only a string of small Christmas lights, sad remnants which acted as permanent illumination for the far side of the room. He returned to his beer.

The lights on the tree, which was scraggly and already dried out after only three days, pleased JoEl. Verma and Lena had stopped bickering long enough to complete the decorating with angel's hair. It gave the lights a strange brightness that made JoEl think of heaven. He knew little about religion yet, but they had told him of heaven where he would go if he were good, and if a devil who would throw him in the fire if he were bad. He sat on the sofa in a trance while the girls finished their fussing over the tree and stood back to admire their work. Too big for them to pick up and hug and too small to help, he was content to sit and enjoy the colored lights made fuzzy by the synthetic cobwebs.

From the kitchen, the aroma of their mother's cooking reached them. She had worked a long time on the batter for the tamales, whipping it smooth and creamy so that its redolent corn smell made them want to eat it before it was cooked. "You're going to get sick," Angie always warned them, but sneaking tastes from the batter was worth the stomachache, even if it would cause your ombligo to burst. Your ombligo was where you were born, and to JoEl it was the most sacred part of the body. Often, when he was frightened or very happy, he would twist his finger in its hollow until he made small suction noises. He loved his ombligo.

They ate the tamales before midnight mass, which he was not yet allowed to attend. Verma opened his and cut it for him so that he tasted the meat and red chile inside even before he put them in his mouth. He was the official family taster.

"Is it good, JoEl?" Angie stood over him and watched as he ate the first bites. His silence and the look on his face reassured her of her accomplishment. Everyone else commented on the lightness of the dough and the especially good flavor of the chile that year, or the tenderness of the meat. Angie had saved every cent to purchase from the best butcher in town. Felix put his arms around her waist as she stood by him with more tamales and told her what a splendid cook she was. The children loved it when their parents touched each other in front of them. Angie, of course, was able to find fault with her cooking. "Next year, they'll be better. You'll see," she said, trusting that the yellow-white corn husks which were more and more difficult to find would be available the following year. She could not imagine tamales without them.

In the morning, after the gifts were opened, Felix prepared capirada. It was his annual rite in the kitchen where for the rest of the year Angie reigned. JoEl was the only member of the family permitted to watch his father prepare the rich bread pudding, and sensing the privilege from the beginning, he kept still as Felix chose the best slices of dried bread and cut them into perfect cubes.

They closely monitored the milk scalding on the stove, for if it overheated it would have to be thrown out and fresh milk brought in from the market. The brown sugar, the
freshly grated nutmeg, the cinnamon lay waiting in small, carefully measured piles. They and the sherry beside them sent out fragrances that made Joël drunk with pleasure. Sometimes their strength, particularly that of the nutmeg, made his head ache, a fact he did not mention to his father who would have ignored him. Felix went into a trance when he cooked. He shelled and chopped each pecan with precision, selected every raisin for its apparent succulence, and mercilessly discarded all of the imperfect. Looking upon their flaws with disgust, he wondered aloud what the world was coming to. “I don’t know what those cabrones think. I’m no fool.”

Who the cabrones were did not seem to matter and Joël did not ask why they ruined the raisins. Evidently they were with the devil. “Pobres cabrones,” he said with sympathy, and his father laughed long and loudly every time he remembered the story or told it to Christmas day visitors. Profanity from the mouth of a child never failed to assure him that innocence, if not perfect raisins, still existed in the world.

“Pobres cabrones,” Felix said into his empty beer glass.

“What did you say?” The young soldier, fair with light-colored eyes, stood next to him while ordering another beer.

“Cabrones?” It’s just an expression we Mexicans have. In English, you’d say something like ‘poor bastards.’”

The boy did not respond. Instead, he ordered his beer with the cockiness of someone underage, almost daring the bartender not to serve him. Felix took to him immediately and offered to pay for it. The boy looked at him without smiling and thanked him in a sweet southern drawl.

“You’re welcome,” Felix said. “Where you from?”

“Tennessee.”

The boy’s voice and his guarded, tentative answers excited Felix. He enjoyed making these shy types respond to his warmth. Even when they reacted in a surly or defensive manner, he did not give up the chase. They were his greatest challenge. Usually these encounters ended when he made them smile, talk, and even laugh openly at his bad jokes, their fear gone, their suspicions laid to rest. Once he had assured them that he was not interested in them for any perverse reason, they fell into his charming trap. Later, when he did make sexual allusions or even put his hand on their thighs while driving them to the base, they either responded according to their needs and desires or in embarrassed abrupt ways. Felix did not force them to do anything they did not want to do.

Most of all, he loved their youth and lack of guile. Even the most experienced among them had a certain purity that gravity, not worldliness, pulled down with the passing of time. They were in their prime, and when he was in their company and they permitted him to touch them, he tasted his own youth once again.

“How old are you?”

“Twenty-one.” The boy was lying. Felix knew he could be no more than eighteen.

“What’s your name?”

The boy told him and Felix observed that he had the mouth of a young girl. He had long since stopped wondering why his pursuit of the past led him to young men instead of women. He was secure in the love of his children, even when they quarreled with him, and he knew that Angie loved him. He was not looking for any of them in this boy’s mouth. He was looking for something else.

“Can I give you a ride to the base?”

“Sure. Thank you very much,” the boy replied with southern courtesy.
“It’s just about sunset. Maybe we’ll stop at the canyon on the way. It’s nice there this time of day.” The boy did not reply, and as Felix opened the door for them to walk out into the crisp winter light, he could smell the bright polish of the young soldier’s boots.

It was one of his favorite times of year, the air clean and stinging his nose as they walked to the car. He had forgotten to phone his brother Miguel and ask for the money, but he would drop by tomorrow and talk to Juanita before Miguel got home. He usually visited his sister-in-law every Friday after work. They were fond of each other and he loved to make her laugh until tears came out of her small brown eyes.

Felix drove along the mountain so that he would not waste any time if the boy agreed to accompany him into the canyon. The eastern sunset was fine now, but the color would be gone by the time they got to his special place. Soon the March sandstorms would begin and the road would be closed. He detested those storms because they made him feel buried alive, and Joel had learned not to tease him about his fear of them or the handkerchief he tied around his nose and mouth so that he would not smell the dust. He hated its bitter taste.

In the twilight there was no wind at all, and he was glad the young soldier did not smoke. They usually did. The sky was a bleached-out blue and the granite on that side of the mountain was a beige that made it difficult to distinguish planes and depths. A brilliant red-orange light outlined the edge of the mountain from the sun still setting on the other side. Off in the distance, toward the east, he saw the darkness coming at them.

“Ah don’t think ah want to go into the canyon,” the boy said.

“Oh, come on, only for a few minutes. It’s real nice in there.”

Felix took the boy’s silence as an indication of consent and he began the slow drive up the canyon road. He maneuvered the car expertly, familiar with every turn and obstacle. They reached his secret place just as a soft quarter moon rose in the eastern horizon.

“Nice moon, isn’t it?” Felix said and put his hand on the boy’s knee. The boy sat rigidly on his side staring at the windshield and not the landscape. Felix sensed his preoccupation with the hand as it stroked his thigh.

“Don’t do that,” the boy said in a quiet, even tone.

“Don’t be scared. I’m not going to hurt you. Let’s have some . . .” The blows began before he finished. They were a complete surprise to him, and the anger behind them stunned and paralyzed him. He began to laugh as he warded off the attack, then stopped when the moon took on a strange shape and color.

“Hey, come on. I was just kidding.” He was vaguely aware that he spoke through a mouthful of stones. It did not occur to him to struggle or to fight back. He forced his door open and fell to the ground, kicked sharply in the kidneys from behind. The stones in his mouth looked like teeth as he spat them out, and he turned to avoid the blows to his back. The boy stood over him. The kicking continued and he felt great pain in his groin and near his heart. Then his mouth was full of the desert and then it was not. He could no longer see the boy. The pain in his loins and along his side seemed distant, blotted out by a queer painful sensation in his left ear. He tasted the dust.

—Angie, where is my handkerchief? I hate this smell.

The biting ache in his ear began to recede and it seemed odd to be falling from a great height while lying on the desert floor. The sound of walking on stones puzzled him because he was surrounded by water. Its reflection and
the luster of the boots flashed before him in an irregular, rhythmic motion. The beautiful youth was gone. Felix had time to be afraid before he heard his heart stop.

The desert exhaled as he sank into the water.
Tia Cuca was lighter-skinned than her sister Chona. Nevertheless, like Mama Chona, she was unmistakably Mexican with enough-Indian blood to give her those aristocratic cheekbones the two sisters liked the younger generation to believe were those of highborn Spanish ladies who just happened to find themselves in the provinces of Mexico. Their Spanish was a cultivated imitation of the Castilian Spanish they believed reigned supreme over all dialects, and they despaired that anyone in Miguel Chico’s generation, because they were attending “American” schools, would ever master it. They were right.

Mama Chona and Tia Cuca were taught by nuns in Mexico before the 1910 revolution. If they did not approve of the language in which Miguel Chico and JoeI were learning to read and write, they did approve of the discipline under which they were instructed, “Listen to your teachers at school,” Mama Chona told them in Spanish, “and learn to
speak English the way they do. I speak it with an accent, so you must not imitate me. I will teach you how to speak Spanish properly for the family occasions."

Tia Cuca was more romantic about language. "Italian is the language of music," she said to the children in her lovely contralto voice. "French is the language of manners, English is the language of business, and Spanish—don't forget, children—is the language of love and romance." The only poetry she thought worth reading was that written in Spanish, "because it sings!"

Because of them Miguel Chico and his cousins learned to communicate in both languages fluently, a privilege denied the next generation, who began learning to read and write after Tia Cuca was dead and Mama Chona nearly senile. That generation understood Spanish but spoke it in ways that would have scandalized Mama Chona and her sister. "A truly educated person," Mama Chona told them, "speaks more than one language fluently."

The snobbery Mama Chona and Tia Cuca displayed in every way possible against the Indian and in favor of the Spanish in the Angels' blood was a constant puzzlement to most of the grandchildren. In subtle, persistent ways, family members were taught that only the Spanish side of their heritage was worth honoring and preserving; the Indian in them was pagan, servile, instinctive rather than intellectual, and was to be suppressed, its existence denied. Aunt Eduviges, Aunt Jesus Maria, and even Miguel Grande had learned this lesson well, taking to heart their mother's prejudices; Felix and Mema would have no part of it.

Miguel Chico's father practiced this kind of bigotry when he referred to the Mexican women who helped Juana with the housework as "wetbacks." One of those "wetbacks" helped take care of Mama Chona in her last years with the devotion and humor of those saints who dedicate themselves to poverty.

"Is the Indian here yet?" Mama Chona would ask from the heights of her sickbed, even after she had forgotten most of her own children's names. "Tell her to do the dishes." The "Indian"—the last in a long line of distinguished women from across the border to be closely associated with the family—would say without sarcasm and with a wink at the children, "I've been here for several months, Senora Angel, and the dishes are already dry. Can I get you anything?" Having forgotten her question, Mama Chona would comment grudgingly on the terrible accent of the illiterate masses.

Had she been alive in that period of Mama Chona's long act of dying, Tia Cuca would have joined her in criticizing the accent. She would not, however, have commented on any of the Indians' personal lives; no matter how often her sister asked her opinion of this or that girl who happened to be cleaning the house that year. Tia Cuca judged no one in matters of the heart.

Tia Cuca and Felix loved each other and were drawn together with the instinct of great sexual sinners. Like fat, contented cats, they enjoyed sharing a meal alone or in Mama Chona's company. Their frequent, unprovoked laughter would cause Mama Chona to ask, "What are you two up to now?" Since they were "up to" nothing, Tia Cuca, unable to resist teasing her puritanical sister, would answer, "You wouldn't understand, Chona; you've never understood anything about love." She meant "lust" and Chona knew it. Her defense was to ignore Cuca's comments except to indicate with a slight twitch of her nostrils that she had just caught the traces of a bad smell in the air. Tia Cuca and Felix laughed all the more.
Because his father was her favorite and because he was the youngest grandchild, JoEl spent more time in his childhood with Tia Cuca than did any of his older cousins or siblings, who had already served their periods of paying her their respects. He was frequently at Mama Chona's and thus it often fell to him to accompany her on the long bus ride to the house in the desert where Tia Cuca lived with a man named Davis. JoEl did not like these weekly visits, which were tediously the same, and he felt nothing for the old lady—an antipathy reinforced by his father's devotion to her.

JoEl and Mama Chona took the bus at ten in the morning when the weather was good, stayed for lunch, and returned by three to take their naps. For these visits, Mama Chona wore her formal black dress, put on black gloves, and carried her black umbrella. Puzzled, JoEl asked why she needed the umbrella, since rain fell only six or seven times a year in torrents that lasted but a few minutes. "I don't want the sun to burn my skin," she said. "It's dark enough already." JoEl looked closely at her very dark, leathery skin but asked no more questions. It was all a mystery, like her wearing even on the hottest days the black woolen dress that reached almost to the ground.

The mystery was enhanced by the atmosphere of sin that surrounded Tia Cuca's relationship with Mr. Davis. The old man, very white, tall, and skinny, reminded JoEl of a plucked pigeon, though he had a nice voice and a kind manner. Tia Cuca and Mr. Davis had lived together for as long as any of them, even his oldest cousins, could remember, and they remained together until they both died several weeks apart some time after JoEl's father was killed. Everyone knew they were lovers, but because Tia Cuca's explanations were deliberately evasive, no one knew if they had ever married. She always called him "Meester Davis," and he called her "Dolly."

Only JoEl's grandmother, his father, and his aunts Mema and Juanita visited Tia Cuca. Eduvigis and Jesus Maria used their lack of transportation as an excuse for not going—they prayed for her daily and thus fulfilled their duty in a more spiritual way, they said—and Miguel Grande always spoke of her with contempt. Tia Cuca did not seem to care what anyone thought about her "arrangement" with Mr. Davis, and JoEl eventually came to feel a measure of respect for her. When she died she left modest sums—hardly more than six thousand dollars in all—to those members of the family who had always visited her. JoEl and Yerma each got five hundred dollars, which they understood was in memory of their father, though they were told it was to help pay for their music lessons.

JoEl remembered mostly the way she smelled. All little old ladies, even Mama Chona, seemed to have that rancid odor, like dried-up sticks. He did not like touching his great-aunt or his grandmother. When he had to give Tia Cuca a hug at their arrival and departure, he closed his eyes and held his breath. But she always embraced him long enough for him to have to breathe again and inhale her sour acacia muskiness. Then she gave him a nickel and told him to hide it somewhere. In that way, when he needed money, he would remember it and be wonderfully surprised. He never hid them. What good would nickels do him in the future? Such gifts were a great sacrifice for her, but he did not think of that. He bought his chiclets and chewed them.

His grandmother and her sister were the oldest human beings he knew, except for his mother's uncle Celso, who cut JoEl's hair every three weeks and smelled of lavender and Vitalis. Mama Chona and Tia Cuca must have been
seventy and sixty-five respectively when he was born, though age was another mystery and no one ever said exactly how old they were at any given time, not even at their deaths. Rumor from his mother's side of the family calculated that Mama Chona was ninety-eight years old when she died, an estimation exaggerated to provoke Jesus Maria and Eduvigis who had stopped counting after their forty-fifth birthdays. JoEl loved it when the grownups argued about their ages. As far as he was concerned, however, Mama Chona's life had ended when she could no longer remember the names of her children, much less those of their children.

On their visits, Mama Chona always warned him not to notice Tia Cuca's lame leg. But he loved to watch her use the black cane with the pewter handle, and later the crutches, with grandeur, as if they were extensions of herself. The two old ladies would soon settle down to talk, and their conversation, unimportant and for its own sake, after a while bored JoEl. When he grew restless he could on warm days play in the small yard within sight of the living room. On cold and windy days he was permitted to look at some of the picture books Tia Cuca had brought from Mexico. He enjoyed those books and was able to recognize some of the words Mama Chona had taught him in Spanish. Sometimes he would say them, and the two old ladies commented on his brilliance with bird-like sounds and exclamations, returning then to their conversation as if there had been no interruption.

The lunches at Tia Cuca's were not filling, and after each visit JoEl went straight to Mama Chona's icebox on the back porch. "I wish your father enjoyed eating here as much as you do, JoEl," Mama Chona said. "He goes to his aunt Cuca's more than to his own mother's. It pains me greatly." JoEl did not reply. He knew that his father was her favorite, and that when she called Felix a malcriado, she did so with affection.

Although they were always poor, the old ladies retained their aristocratic assumptions and remained señoritas of the most pretentious sort. Their hands were never in dishwater, and cleaning house was work for the Indians, even if the old ladies could not afford to have them do it. Consequently, their homes were dusty, and his aunt Juanita or his father would do the weeks' collection of dishes. The only time JoEl saw Mama Chona lose her composure was when his uncle Miguel Grande scolded her for letting the cockroaches lick her plates clean on the sideboard. After his uncle left, Mama Chona held the plates one by one under the faucet in such a way that her fingers did not get wet, and she cried before, during, and after the loathsome task. JoEl's aunt Juanita, a meticulous housekeeper like his own mother, never could put up with his grandmother's ways.

Juanita seemed more tolerant of Tia Cuca's laziness, partly because she was lame and partly because the idea of cleaning up her place seemed hopeless, even to Juanita who would have gotten rid of the dust in the desert if she could. Until the day she died, no matter who threatened or cajoled her, Tia Cuca refused to do menial work. Her hands were small and exquisite and with great pride she said, "We may not have enough to eat, but when I go out, I put on my gloves and my hat. I am a civilized human being." She was secretly proud of having lighter skin than Mama Chona, and she made certain that the sun never touched her face and hands, the only parts of her any of them ever saw.

The succession of increasingly decrepit places Tia Cuca and Mister Davis rented, and later the house out in the desert beyond the canyon, were filled with cats. Tia Cuca fed them all—there might be ten to fifteen at a time—for his 전 and
them by name (she gave them Spanish names like *Bella Luz, Sonrisa, Zapopen, Estrella,* and JoEl’s favorite, *Platano*), and made certain that small entry doors at the front and back of the house were fixed to swing in both directions.

His aunt Juanita, terrified of cats, made JoEl laugh because of the way she sat at the edge of her chair when she visited. Tia Cuca murmured apologies, but the cats stayed, and he knew his aunt would be sick to her stomach when she got home. “Poor thing,” Juanita said to his father, “I feel sorry for her, Felix, but those cats! They smell terrible and they make me sick.”

JoEl and Mama Chona went regularly to the house in the desert for the first two years. But then he began to spend more time on his studies and with his friends, and his grandmother was beginning to get too old to make the trips. Only his father and his aunts Mema and Juanita continued to see Tia Cuca and after Felix died his aunts went less and less.

Following one period of two or three days when no one had been able to drive out, the mailman, at Tia Cuca’s request, phoned Angie’s house to inform the family that both old people were ill. Mema and Juanita then went every day to clean the house and change the linen, returning with stories that they shared with Angie in JoEl’s presence. They had found the two old people unable to get up from their beds (“Imagine,” said Juanita, “I always thought they slept in the same bed”), and because the desert had blocked up the cats’ entrance the stench in the place was overwhelming. There were animals and cockroaches everywhere. The sheets were filthy.

Somehow Mr. Davis, breathing heavily but still conscious and lucid, had been able to feed them both during those days when they were completely alone. Tia Cuca, by the time her relatives arrived, was in a coma, and Mema soon insisted that she be taken to the hospital where she might die more comfortably. She asked Mr. Davis if he wanted to go also, lying that she would arrange for them to be in the same room. He knew he was dying; Mema was certain of that.

“No, Mema,” he told her. “I know Dolly is going to die and I don’t want to see her dead.”

The day the ambulance made its way to what they all called “that shack” in the desert, Mema tried once again to get the old man to go along to the hospital. He refused and kept stroking Tia Cuca’s hands and calling her “Dolly” until they took her away.

“Do you think she felt him touch her?” Yerma asked. JoEl did not want to hear Mema’s answer but could not bring himself to leave the room.

“I doubt it,” Mema said.

Mr. Davis died of pneumonia several weeks later in a different ward of the same hospital. No one told him that Tia Cuca was already dead and buried and he did not ask.

On one of his vacations home from school, JoEl drove his father’s car out to the shack in the desert. He was beginning to look for touchstones that might release him from the terrible feelings he could only keep at bay with drugs. He drove into the canyon and stopped there for awhile, but he was too drunk to find his father’s secret place. In the desert, the roof of Tia Cuca’s house had been blown away and most of the windows were gone. Inside, everything was covered with sand and the ants were feeding on the carcasses of
rodents. A few wild cats still roamed about, but JoEl did not touch them. Instead he sat on the back porch stairs for a long time, watching the sun set and playing a game with himself. In a notebook he always carried with him he wrote down all the names of Tia Cuca's cats that he could remember and then began making up riddles about them in Spanish and English. The game and the whiskey he had brought helped him forget about the ants inside the house.

A few days later, JoEl visited a friend on the southeast side of town near the lake. His mother had not allowed him to drive, so he took a bus. He got high with his friend and, not wanting to hitchhike home after dropping some acid, went to his aunt Eduviges' house a few blocks away. He had not been invited to stay with his friend because the parents did not like him and feared his bad influence over their son. "He's a worthless, drug-addicted Mexican, even though he has fair skin and goes to college. What a waste," they said. His family shared that opinion.

Eduviges' husband Sancho was away on a fishing trip and she was alone when JoEl arrived at her door at two-thirty in the morning. She had not seen her nephew for a long time and quickly noted his premature balding and his resemblance to Felix at that age.

"Is it all right if I stay here until morning?" he asked her. "I don't have a car and the buses have stopped running."

"Of course, JoEl, come in. Can I get you something to eat?" She was shocked at how old he looked.

"No, thank you, Tia. Please go back to bed. I'm sorry to disturb you at such an hour. I'm not sleepy. I'll just sit here on the sofa and read."

"No, that's fine, JoEl. I'll sit up with you. I'm not sleepy either." It was not true. She wanted to go back to bed more than anything else in the world, but she was afraid to leave him alone, was afraid of the look in his eyes. They had a sheen to them she did not trust, a fixed, dead, yet wild look that she associated with alcohol and sexual indulgence. She was very frightened. Her sister Jesus Maria, who lived a few blocks from Felix's house, had told her that JoEl had been visiting her lately and, with his head in her lap, weeping all the while, had complained that the family no longer loved him. When he wasn't in those desperate moods, Jesus Maria told her sister, JoEl talked about love and beauty very poetically and with a serenity that impressed her very much. Eduviges saw nothing serene in his look now. She thought him a lunatic.

The two of them sat in her living room in complete silence. They both would begin talking at once and then smile stupidly at each other. Eduviges knew that Angie would be furious if she found out that JoEl was with her. She looked at her nephew and remembered being told that after Felix was killed, JoEl had not allowed anyone to help him clean up the mess in the car. It was as if her brother's battered body were there in the house with her. She even imagined that JoEl, because of whatever drug he was on, might harm her, but because he was her brother's son she could not refuse him shelter.

"Mama Chona was talking to my father when she died," he said almost to himself, though loudly enough for Eduviges to hear.

She became terrified. "Sit still, JoEl, I'm going to the kitchen to heat up some memudo for us. Don't leave, I'll be right back." She recalled at the moment she was most afraid that JoEl had loved his father's cooking. Felix had taught her how to make the tripe soup.

Alone in his aunt's living room, JoEl stared through the tunnel that led him once again to the night of his father's
death. He had not slept that night. The west wind was lifting the desert to their doorstep and March was a few weeks away. The sandstorms his father hated would begin soon. JoEl lay awake listening to the sand falling softly on the porch outside, a sound that made him think of veils sliding against each other or of the most delicate knives being sharpened—subtle, beautiful sounds which made him drowsy as he imagined each grain of sand falling.

Before going to bed he had asked Angie if Felix had taken a handkerchief with him. She did not remember. As he awaited his father's return, a terrible certainty made him open his mouth and swallow several times. It remained in his stomach heavy as a stone.

"Mamá, what time is it?"

"Eleven o'clock. Go to sleep. Your father will be here soon."

But his father was not coming home, and JoEl, struggling against his nightmare fears by not allowing himself to fall asleep, lay on his side and stared across the room at his father's bed. He felt no guilt about the morning quarrel. He knew it would resolve itself as all the others had. He felt only rocks in his belly, and his mouth was as dry as the veils and knives outside. He lay without moving for several hours until the heaviness left him as suddenly as it had come. He sat up and, leaning against the wall, continued to face his father's bed. Felix appeared to be there lying on his side, but JoEl could not see his face or hear the sound of his breathing. The wind had stopped.

In those moments, JoEl understood infinity for the first time. It was a region without dimensions which registered on one's consciousness in the same way that deaf mutes understand what others are saying to them. It was a timeless space where one is aware of movement without consequence, of a mouth uttering sounds one grasps but does not hear. All of his fears and evil dreams merged and he had no voice to cry out against them.

When Angie came in at five o'clock in the morning to tell him that someone was knocking on their front door, she thought he was in the middle of one of his nightmares. She did not touch him. "JoEl," she asked very gently, "are you all right?"

The sound of her voice brought him back. "Si, Mamá. Who's at the door?" He knew the answer.

"I don't know. Come with me."

They made their way through the house in the darkest hour of the morning without turning on lights or waking the others. Even Berto continued his innocent sleep on the sofa, despite the pounding. Before he unlocked the door, JoEl looked at his mother's lovely face in the growing light. He embraced her as he had after his childhood dreams. Angie felt his terror and his certainty, and as the knocking became more insistent she tried to stop JoEl from letting death come into her house.

"Who's there?" JoEl asked, turning the knob.

"It's Miguel. Open the door."

"It's Miguel. Open the door," JoEl said out loud.

"What did you say, JoEl?" Eduviges asked from the kitchen. "The menudo is ready. Why don't you come in here?"

Sitting down, he said matter-of-factly to her, "But it wasn't Miguel, auntie. It was death at the door." He was out of the tunnel and the aroma of the soup with hominy and squares of meat floating in it was a wonderland to devour.

"Of course, JoEl. Can you eat?" Eduviges asked.

Later that day, Angie phoned Mema who had just arrived home from her hospital volunteer work. JoEl was
hysterical and had locked himself in the bathroom. He was ten years younger than her own son, and after Felix's death Mema had made a vow to herself to be responsible for JoEl.

Standing in the hallway of Angie's house, after asking Angie to leave her alone with him, Mema called to JoEl: By then, he had fallen silent and she was afraid he might have hurt himself.

"JoEl, it's Mema, please unlock the door and let me in. Please tell me you're all right."

He began shouting, "You're not Mema. You're death. Don't lie to me."

She was relieved. The silence had made her wonder how they would break the door down. "I can talk to a crazy man," she told Miguel Chico later, "but not to a dead one."

"Don't be silly, JoEl. It's your aunt Mema and your father wants me to talk to you." He opened the door.

"I like it that you were a whore once," JoEl told her. They were sitting on the floor, Mema leaning against the tub holding him. His head was on her shoulder, and she rocked him back and forth when she sensed that the drug he had taken was making him tremble.

"Well, I wasn't exactly. Your aunts like to exaggerate other people's mistakes."

"But you did what you wanted and you didn't care what they said."

"I was very young, JoEl. And I did care what my son might think if I found him."

"But you found him, and he's turned into such a prude, auntie. Just like Mama Chona, judging everybody." When on-drugs, JoEl could tell the truth to everyone, even himself. "The ants are coming," he said and began to shake uncontrollably. Mema was strong enough to keep him from hurting himself.

"JoEl, I love Ricardo and I understand him," she said when the trembling had subsided. "Just as I love and understand you."

"No, you don't, Mema. No one in the family does anything more, not even my mother."

"That's not true. The drugs make you say things like that."

"It's not the drugs. I don't know what it is, but it's not the drugs. I want," he stopped.

"What? What do you want? Tell me." She had been through this before with him and knew that it signaled the end of his journey.

"I want to see my father." He began choking. "I want to tell him that I understand and that I love him."

"He knows, JoEl."

"I want to tell him to his face. I hate it that Mama Chona is with him. She never understood anything human."

Mema remembered her own rage and desperation when Mama Chona initially agreed to take away her son. Time and circumstance had healed the wound, but the scar remained. "She did, JoEl, before she lost the people she loved very much. She just didn't know what to do without them. Maybe your father is giving her lessons now."

JoEl was nodding and could not keep his eyes open. She barely heard him ask her to stay. After a while, she called Angie and they carried him to bed.

Gradually JoEl began to speak to them only in riddles as if all the poetry once guiding him through his nightmares
had itself turned into them. When Miguel Chico visited him in one of those halfway houses for the obsessed and addicted, JoE1 would repeat everything his cousin said and giggle, then begin an endless monologue, his eyes daring Miguel Chico to interrupt him.

"JoE1, I have to go," he said.

"No, you don't. You're afraid of me. You hate the family and it loves you. I love the family and it hates me."

Miguel Chico stood. "No, it doesn't, JoE1. You don't know what you're talking about."

JoE1's eyes kept Mickie from touching him. "Please stop punishing yourself for what happened, JoE1," he said, but already JoE1 had begun his litany, saying over and over again as Miguel Chico walked out of the room, "Malcriado, malcriado, malcriado, you've been bad, you've been bad, you've been bad." And then, even out in the hallway, Miguel Chico could hear him laughing and weeping simultaneously, "I love my father, I love my mother, I love my father, I love my mother."
When Miguel Chico returned to San Francisco after visiting his cousin in the desert, JoE1's words, like an incantation, kept waking him during the night and coloring his dreams in the greys and blacks and dark browns Mama Chona used to wear. In one of those dreams, the "monster" that had killed her said to him softly, almost kindly, "I am a nice monster. Come into my cave." The two of them were standing on a bridge facing the incoming fog. The monster held Miguel Chico closely from behind and whispered into his ear in a relentless, singsong way, "I am the manipulator and the manipulated." It put its velvet paw in Miguel Chico's hand and forced him to hold it tightly against his gut right below the appliance at his side. "I am the victim and slayer," the creature continued, "I am what you believe and what you don't believe, I am the loved and the unloved. I approve and turn away, I am judge and advocate." Miguel Chico wanted to escape—but could not. The
monster's breath smelled of fresh blood and feces. "You are in my cave, and you will do whatever I say." Although it moved away from him, Miguel Chico continued to feel its form pressed tightly against him, and the odor of its breath lingered, forcing him to gasp and struggle for air. The fog, he thought, would revive him and thus keep his back to the monster and looked down and out at the sea no longer visible.

"Jump!" the monster said with exhilaration, "jump!"

Miguel Chico felt loathing and disgust for the beast. He turned to face it. Its eyes were swollen with tenderness. "All right," he said, "but I'm taking you with me." He clasped the monster to him—it did not struggle or complain—and threw both of them backward over the railing and into the fog. As he fell, the awful creature in his arms, Miguel Chico felt the pleasure of the avenged and an overwhelming relief.

Awakened by this dream in that silent hour before dawn when he felt the whole world was his, the sense of release was very much with him. This time he did not try to go back to sleep after changing his bag but instead sat at his desk and recorded the details of the dream. He needed very much to make peace with his dead, to prepare a feast for them so that they would stop haunting him. He would feed them words and make his candied skulls out of paper. He looked, once again, at that old photograph of himself and Mama Chona. The white daisies in her hat no longer frightened him; now that she was gone, the child in the picture held only a ghost by the hand and was free to tell the family secrets.

Before they went to the "American" schools, Mama Chona had instructed her favorite grandchildren almost daily, wanting to insure that they grew up according to her standards. Malerdivado was her favorite word for a child, and to be called that by her was the worst form of censure, for it meant that one was not only misbehaved, but that one had not been properly brought up. For a member of the Angel family, that was impossible. She taught them to love listening to and telling stories or cuentos, as she called them. When she was feeling gay, she treated them to comic book versions of the classics. Miguel Chico's favorite was The Hunchback of Notre Dame and he would look at it every night and pretend that he could read the words. He loved Esmeralda's name and a torture scene that featured a wooden boot, and he was simultaneously repelled and fascinated by Quasimodo.

Part of their instruction was to accompany Mama Chona on her visits to her sister and her daughters, where, she told them, they would learn proper manners. Also they would learn which buses to take and which streets were safe so that later when they were older, they might visit their aunts and cousins by themselves.

Mama Chona held Miguel Chico's hand tightly even when they stood waiting for the next bus, and she did not let go until they were safely inside his aunts' homes. Much of the children's knowledge of the family's history as well as its scandals came from those visits. Miguel Chico learned slowly that his aunts Jesus Maria and Eduvigis exaggerated about the good and bad within the family chronicles, that Mama Chona preferred not to say much at all about their life in Mexico, and that only his aunt Mema told the truth. It was she who—while he was recovering from surgery—sent him the photograph of Mama Chona walking down the town's main street with him. "I don't know why," she wrote, "but I thought you might like to have this. I found it while sorting out that old chest of family photos and letters you used to love when you were a child." She also sent him a poem which she thought had been written out in longhand by the first
Miguel Angel in whose memory Miguel Chico and his father were named. The handwriting was beautiful, almost like calligraphy, and the poem a kind of prayer:

All the earth is a grave and nothing escapes it;
nothing is so perfect that it does not descend to its tomb.

Rivers, rivulets, fountains and waters flow,
but never return to their joyful beginnings;
anxiously they hasten on to the vast realms of the Rain God.

As they widen their banks, they also fashion the sad urn of their burial.
Filled are the bowels of the earth
with pestilential dust once flesh and bones,
once animate bodies of men who sat upon thrones, decided cases, presided in council,
commanded armies, conquered provinces, possessed treasure, destroyed temples, exulted in their pride, majesty, fortune, praise and power.

Vanished are these glories, just as the fearful smoke vanishes that belches forth from the infernal fires of Pópocatepetl.

Nothing recalls them but the written page.

- Netzahualcoyotl
  King of Texoco
  1431—1472

From Mema he had learned that the first Miguel Angel, Mama Chona's only child born of the love she had felt for her husband, was killed while walking down the streets of San Miguel de Allende at the beginning of the revolution that changed their lives and forced the family north from Mexico. A young and brilliant university student at the time, he was cut down by a single bullet while standing before the fountain he loved most on his way home from school. The friends who examined her son's body could not tell if the bullet lodged in his heart came from the government arsenal or from the camp of the revolutionaries. She did not care. Mama Chona never forgave Mexico for the death of her firstborn.

After they buried him, a delegation of revolutionaries came to her home in disguise while her husband Carlos was away to tell her they considered her son a hero. She looked at them in rage and disbelief. "Keep your hero," she said to them at the door, "give me back my son." Soon after, a letter from the general in command of the federal forces in that region praised her son for being a true patriot on the side of honor and right. The president's seal was affixed to it and she was encouraged to believe that he had signed it personally. Her husband kept the letter and it became the accepted version of the first Miguel Angel's death. Mama Chona did not care which version was told. She detested the pomposity of men at war and blamed both pro- and anti-government forces for the murder of her son.

"Just remember to have respect for your parents," Mama Chona told Miguel Chico and his cousins in her beautiful Spanish, "and everything will be all right." She said little to them about herself; she taught and admonished them. "And be careful always when you are outside of your house and away from your family." No harm, Mama Chona made them believe, could ever come from within one's own home and family.

Eight years before her first child was killed, Mama
Chona's twin girls had died. They drowned in those few moments when one of the servants let down her guard. Mama Chona taught her children to be careful and they died because they would not mind her or what they were doing. In her world, there were no accidents. Every event was divine retribution or blessing. After the deaths of her first three children, Mama Chona resigned herself to Christ and His holy Mother with a fervor she would never have admitted was born of rage, and she accepted suffering in this life without question or any sense of rebellion. She renounced all joy on the day they buried Miguel. She was thirty-two.

From then on, Mama Chona bore her children out of duty to her husband and the Church. Thinking that after a stillborn child she might be barren, she was disappointed when she gave birth to Felix. In her mind, she conceived him and the rest immaculately—an attitude which made some of her children think themselves divine—blotting out the act which caused her to become distended like a pig bladder full of air. Later in her life, in that time when Miguel Chico and Joël fell under her instruction, Mama Chona denied the existence of all parts of the body below the neck, with the exception of her hands. They were her only feature that rivaled her sister Cuca's in beauty.

"God forgive me," she said in her grandchildren's presence. "What beautiful hands I have," and she extended them, palms down, so that they might admire without touching. Mama Chona was not physically affectionate. Touching other people reminded her of her own body, and she encouraged her grandchildren to develop their minds, which were infinitely more precious and closer to God. She had given up on her own children.

Felix, Jesus Maria, Eduvigis, Armando, Mema, and Miguel Grande—dreamers and lechers were all she managed to produce. God was testing her, she knew, by having sent her such intractable souls to nourish alone in a desert far from the green and tropical place of her birth. Her husband died in 1916, as they traveled north toward the desert.

The first family scandal Miguel Chico was old enough to be aware of involved his aunt Mema. Before he was born, Mema had an illegitimate child and the family had decided that she must give him up. In protest, Mema went to live across the river with her man, which in her sisters' eyes was the same as becoming a woman of the streets. Mema did not care what they thought. She considered them pious hypocrites and she was determined to bring her son back into the family.

Six years later she found him, wandering the streets of Juarez, shining shoes and begging for his living. He had run away from the home where he had been placed and he accepted Mema's kindness at first more than her story. Her brother Felix persuaded Mama Chona to bring him back into the family legally. And so Ricardo, the bastard child, became the adopted son of his grandmother and uncle, a puzzling arrangement which the many cousins he acquired instantly were not allowed to discuss. Miguel Chico was three or four years younger than Mema's son.

Mema knew she could not afford to keep him with her, and she wanted Ricardo to be educated and brought up on the north side of the river. Mama Chona readily assented to the adoption because she saw it as a way to get her daughter away from her sinful life and back into the family. But Mema refused to accompany her son and stubbornly remained with her man. She visited Ricardo and Mama Chona regularly and brought the boy gifts paid for by any extra money she was able to set aside.
Mama Chona’s sister Cuca defended Mema’s choice. “You don’t know anything about love,” Cuca said to her. “You never have.”

“Don’t talk to me about love. I don’t see that you’ve had any children, Cuca. What do you know about it except your romantic notions that can’t sustain and feed a family? You mean lust, Cuca. Every one of my children has been ruined by it and you have not been a good example to them.”

“I can’t talk about love to anyone who doesn’t know about it,” Cuca said and ended the discussion.

So Mema’s son Ricardo came to live with Mama Chona in a two-room casita that Miguel Grande built for them in the backyard of the two-bedroom house he and Juanita had just moved into. It was the first house they owned. Mama Chona treated Ricardo kindly, even with some affection, and she did not expect of him the kind of perfection she demanded of her own children and grandchildren. Whenever he had the slightest illness, she took care of him and fed him sugar water with canela. As she taught Miguel Chico to read in Spanish, she taught Ricardo English. In them and later in Joel, she saw an intelligence worth cultivating.

By teaching Ricardo, she would also teach her daughter Jesus Maria a lesson. Jesus Maria had severely disappointed Mama Chona by marrying against her wishes. And from the moment she had learned of the plan to adopt the bastard child she had argued vehemently against it. “But Mamá,” Jesus Maria began in the elegant Spanish she had learned from Mama Chona, “how can you let that child live with you when you know from what sin he comes?”

Mama Chona and Miguel Chico were sitting in Jesus Maria’s dark, musty parlor. The shades were drawn in the summer to keep out the heat, and in the winter to keep it in. Mama Chona watched her daughter in silence, knowing that her indifference angered Jesus Maria and that she could in this way win every argument because she could always say, as she invariably did, that no one who was shrieking at her could possibly be in her right mind about any given subject. Jesus Maria, in tears and carried away by her own drama and the pitiable state of her life—which she never failed to describe in detail at all hours to her husband and children—would stop shouting, stunned by the injustice of having to deal with such an unsympathetic mother. Mama Chona would already be out the door and halfway to the bus stop with Miguel Chico by her side before Jesus Maria realized that once again she had been defeated. But not before she could complain about her mother’s unfairness.

“Mamá, you have never loved me, I who have been a good and dutiful daughter, except in marrying against your wishes. But at least I married before I had my children, as you, and the Church taught me was not only proper but necessary to remain in a state of grace.” Jesus Maria attended mass daily. “You were right about my husband. He is uneducated, coarse, but he is a good worker and he makes enough money at a decent job to feed me and the children and keep a roof over our heads.” She had married Manuel Chavez because he was handsome and had flattered her with his attention. “Every day of their lives, I teach my children not to be like their father, but to aspire to greater things and to that perfection you and the Church have taught me is the only worthy goal in life. He is ill mannered, but my sons and daughters are not. His speech is faulty, my children speak like angels. You have never appreciated them enough, Mamá. Now you tell me that Mema’s bastard is going to live with you as your son. I cannot believe it. It was a scandal that
he was born. You, you, Mama, agreed when we first discussed it to put him up for adoption. I had to go to the agency and fill out the papers and I have never felt so humiliated in my life. But I did it because the others were too weak and sentimental to see that it had to be done if we were going to retain any pride in this family. Now I think I should have murdered him, God forgive me.”

Mama Chona shifted in her chair. Only Miguel Chico, standing next to her and leaning on its arm, felt her move like the smallest of earthquakes. “Jesus Maria,” she said, “you don’t mean that. You are in such a state that you don’t know what you are saying.” She marveled at the duplicity of her daughter, who had just returned from taking Jesus to her soul and yet spoke of slaughtering innocents.

“Yes, I do know what I’m saying and I am not in any state. You have never loved me as much as Mema, who betrayed you much worse than I ever have or could possibly think of doing. But no, when it comes to your favorites, you have no eyes, no ears, no voice to see that they are wrong and that you must deny them what they want. You have always loved them more.” Jesus Maria patted her face delicately with her handkerchief, folded her hands, and looked at her mother with swollen eyes. “Mama, if you let that bastard live with you, I will not enter your house. And if you bring him here, I will not open the door to you. These things are very hard for me to say because you are my mother and I must respect you above all others on earth, but I will not stand for this insult to the family, do you hear me?” Throughout her life, Jesus Maria thought of herself as an Angel, never as a Chavez.

“The way you are shouting, Jesus Maria,” Mama Chona replied calmly and firmly, “the entire neighborhood can hear you.” She paused. “I have also taught you to love your brothers and sisters as yourself and to forgive them when they do wrong. Don’t you see that it was a miracle that Mema found her son after we allowed him to be taken away from her? It is a sign from God that we must bring him back into the family. You are too proud, Jesus Maria, and God will punish you for that. I forgive you for shouting at me, your mother, and for going against my wishes, but how can He?”

Wrapped in her shawl, even on the hottest days, her umbrella ready for the rays of the desert sun, Mama Chona made her way to the corner to wait for the bus. She knew that Jesus Maria would agonize over having been a disobedient child. She knew also that Jesus Maria’s pride would not permit her to invite her mother to wait inside until the bus could be heard. In that way, she trapped her daughter’s objections to the adoption of Ricardo between pride and guilt. Mama Chona had learned well the lessons the nuns taught.

“I hear the bus, Mama Chona,” Miguel Chico said after they had been waiting in the sun long enough for him to see the wavy lines that made him think the whole world was underwater. Her umbrella was not large enough to shelter him and there were no trees.

“Do you want to go downtown?” she asked him in Spanish.

“Oh, yes, please.” He did not like to visit Jesus Maria’s house because his cousins made fun of his ears and accused him of being a sissy. Going downtown would help him forget their taunts. Miguel Chico took her hand and helped her into the bus.

“Gracias, Miguelito,” she said after he found a place for them to sit near the front of the bus. She had taught him to avoid the rear, which was labeled the “colored section.” Once, before he understood what such labels meant, he had
rushed to a seat in the back so that they would not have to stand in the aisle. Mama Chona had wrenched him out of it, and they had stood all the way to their destination. “No one should sit there,” she told him and his cousins. “It’s an outrage.”

Mama Chona and Miguel Chico got off the bus at the downtown plaza. A small, pretentious and ugly fountain stood in the middle of the square, and the town paid hundreds of dollars a year to feed and maintain the pathetic alligators lying inert around it.

“They’ve ruined this plaza,” Mama Chona said. “You should have seen it years ago, Miguelito.” There was a rare tone of affection in her voice, and she was looking at him strangely. “There is a fountain in San Miguel de Allende,” she added, then stopped. He did not understand. Mama Chona took his hand, as she always did when they were among strangers. No one was going to shoot this child in the streets.

After her eightieth birthday, Mama Chona returned to her girlhood more often. She conquered time by denying its existence, and Mema would find her awake or asleep at odd hours of the day and night. Miguel Grande and his brothers-in-law had put enough money together to rent a small apartment, and Mema, now in her fifties, left her life across the river and came to live with her mother. Mama Chona was no longer able to care for herself and the family would not think of putting her in a nursing home.

Miguel Grande visited his mother nearly every day during her last ten years; Jesus Maria and Eduviges phoned often but seldom visited. They spoke civilly, even nicely, to their fallen sister whose assault on the family pride, more than her unforgivable sin, had wounded them deeply. That pride—never seemed affected by time either.

Even the seasons—“In the desert, there are two seasons,” Mama Chona told them, “very hot and very cold”—no longer touched the old lady. On several occasions, Mema found her mother outside without her shawl on icy days, watering the flower beds.

“Mamá, what are you doing?”

“Taking care of the flowers. Without me, everything would die.”

Another time, she startled JoEl in the dead of winter by saying, “Listen to the crickets, Felix, what a noise they make.” The grandchildren no longer attempted to correct her when she confused them with their parents. Mama Chona’s face took on a diabolical sheen in those moments and JoEl, the initial shock of his own confrontation with time worn off, learned to ignore her. He looked out the window. The land and the sky were the same texture and the day was soundless.

The family talk was now filled with stories about her strange behavior and conversation, and until the bath incident everyone regarded them with tolerance and amusement. Mema reported that Mama Chona now woke up in the middle of the night and wandered through the apartment searching for something.

“Mamá, what are you looking for?”

Mama Chona spoke only to herself, even as her daughter held her to keep her from falling in the darkness. She did reply once to Mema’s question, “I am looking for my children.” More often, she would mutter unintelligibly, as if
she were saying the rosary or reciting a school lesson learned
by rote for the nuns.

In the daytime, usually before the late afternoon
meal, she would ask, “Where is your father?” The first time
she asked, Mema, surprised, told her straight-forwardly that
he was dead. Without blinking, Chona retorted, “Yes, but
why doesn’t he come to see me? Where is he?”

Another day, sitting in the parlor waiting for a
sandstorm to blow over, Mama Chona said very seriously to
Mema, “I saw your father today. He was with that woman
Josefina. They came to see me together, can you imagine? I
knew he was seeing a great deal of her, but it was shameless
of him to bring her here when there are children in the
house. I will not forgive him for that.” It was the first any of
them had heard of Josefina—Mama Chona had always told
them what a respectable and upright man their father Jesus
was—and Mema wanted to find out more but dared not ask.

Gradually it became more and more dangerous to let
Mama Chona out of their sight, even for a few moments.
One day when Mema had let down her guard, her mother
wandered out of the house and Mema and Miguel Grande
spent hours looking for her. They found her standing on
the corner of one of the busiest intersections in the downtown
shopping district, facing toward Mexico and waving
cars to the curb in order to ask the startled passengers if they
knew where her husband was. After that she was watched
constantly by her children or grandchildren, and, on holidays,
by the Mexican women they hired from across the border.

Miguel Grande and Mema often joked with each
other in their mother’s presence as a way of coping with her
disintegration. After one of Miguel Grande’s visits, Mama
Chona asked, “Who was that chap? I like him very much.”

When Mema reported that to him, they laughed with del-
light. Jesus Maria, however, was appalled by her mother’s
fading memory and refused to be taken in by the others’
gross and flippant views of such a tragedy. She no longer
dealt with her mother directly, preferring the distance of a
phone call. Out of perversity, Mema would always ask Mama
Chona if she wished to speak to Jesus Maria before she hung
up.

“I don’t know any Jesus Maria,” Mama Chona said.
“Who are you talking about? One of your friends from
Juarez? Leave me alone, matrícula.”

Mema repeated the answer to her sister. They both
understood that when Mama Chona referred to Mema’s
“friends” from across the river, she meant prostitutes, and
the inference caused Jesus Maria to rage for the rest of the
day. Even in her witlessness, she said to her children and
nephews, their grandmother found ways to taunt her and
make life more miserable than it already was for all of them.
Nonetheless, she was quick to add, they must respect Mama
Chona and continue to pray for her health. She herself must
learn to bear her cross with joy. Bearing crosses, the children
knew, was her favorite pastime.

Five years later, Encarnacion Olmeca viuda de Angel
looked for the last time at all her children and their children.
She asked that she be raised up so that she might see their
faces, and Miguel Grande and Mema propped pillows behin
der while Ricardo, now in his twenties, held her hands
tenderly. It was strange to her that he, the scandal of the
family, was the one who comforted her most in her long and
painless act of dying. There was no doubt in her soul that at
last she was to leave the desert of thorns and ashes in which
she had lived most of her life.

Miguel Grande, who in the last few years had scolded
her a great deal for growing old, broke down as he held her. Mama Chona was as weightless as a lizard dried hollow by the sun.

—Crybaby, Miguel, you were always the most sentimental in this family. You never fooled me.

If she had not felt them touching her, Mama Chona would have floated straight to heaven where she was certain of admission. How could the heavenly hosts turn her away? It was the moment she had been waiting for all her life, a life of loss and sacrifice. Her husband and five of her children had been taken from her and she had suffered enough from the conduct of the survivors to be canonized. If there was justice in heaven, as she knew there was not on earth, the angels were preparing to welcome her with songs and jewels in their hands as offerings for the scars on her soul. Music and beautiful things had been her secret passions.

She had not believed them when they told her that Felix was dead also, killed in an accident at the factory. He was only being his silly, irresponsible self, visiting Cuca instead of her because his aunt was more entertaining and had lighter skin. Malcriado! She knew him. He was nothing but a gadabout and as worthless as the rest of her children. Who would worry over their souls after she was gone?

Eduviges had betrayed her in the last month by making her take a bath. Mama Chona had known for some time what her children were up to in their lifelong plan to torment her. First they wished to shame her and then to poison her with the bath water. She had not left the apartment or bathed for weeks, from the moment she had noticed something unnatural coming out of her womb. “Another worthless creature,” she said to her husband Jesus who had taken to visiting her, “you ought to be ashamed of yourself.” By not allowing herself to be naked, she had successfully denied the existence of the monster. She lost her temper the day Eduviges made preparations to get her into the tub.

“Mamá, I'm going to bathe you,” she said.

“No. I don't want a bath. Leave me alone, please.”

“But, Mamá, you haven't had a bath in a long time. What's the matter? Are you afraid?”

“I'm not afraid. I know what you and Mema are doing. You want to poison me. You've never had any respect for me, malcriadas, and now you want to kill me. Well, I'm still the head of this family and I won't let you.”

This was too much for Eduviges, who prided herself on being Mama Chona’s most obedient, least bothersome child. To be accused of wanting to murder her own mother was the final insult. But Mema had warned her, and now she had to clutch Mama Chona by the arm and lead her forcibly—they were the same size—into the bathroom. The water was drawn and steaming, and the clean, perfumed towels lay waiting in neat piles. Eduviges had worked very hard to make the ordeal appealing.

“Take off your clothes,” she ordered with as much menace as she could find in her heart for the old lady. Mama Chona grabbed the towels and threw them into the water with unexpected quickness, screaming that her daughter was poisoning her, struggled wildly, and scratched Eduviges’ cheek. She slapped Mama Chona and sat her down on the toilet seat. “If you don't stay right here until I come back, Mamá, I will kill you,” she said. She ran down the hall to phone Miguel, the only member of the family who could make their mother obey. It was just after six in the morning.

Miguel Grande, awakened by her call, could not make out what his sister was shouting about. Hysterical women made him more impatient than anything else in the world.
"What the hell is going on? It's six o'clock and Sunday morning."

"I know what time it is," she screamed.

"Calm down and tell me what's going on."

After he understood, he told Juanita to get up and the two of them drove across town to his sister's house. Sancho was away on a hunting trip, not wanting to be involved in the plot to bathe his mother-in-law.

When Miguel and Juanita walked into the bathroom, Eduvigis and Mema were holding Mama Chona and Miguel Grande was amused by his mother's fighting spirit. He had no idea the old woman had that much strength left in her.

"Mamá!" he shouted. "Be still!"

He yelled ferociously at her, knowing from their experiences with her in the last two years that this made her calm and submissive. The first time he had used this tone with her, Juanita had wept at the disrespect and violence he was showing his mother. She had not cared much for Mama Chona, but she did not like to see anyone treated like a criminal.

Encarnacion quieted down and stared at her husband, her eyes wide and shining with a scorpion's fury. Her breath came in short, wheezing noises, and she was fighting to force her soul out of her body. In a harsh, loud, and steady voice, her husband was telling her that as soon as he left the bathroom, the women were going to undress her and give her a bath. That if she refused to let them do so, he would do it himself. That he was ashamed of a woman who allowed herself to become so unclean that her odor was unpleasant to the people who loved and respected her. That she was being foolish and behaving like a child, and that if she continued to misbehave, he would commit her to a hospital and order the doctors and nurses there to clean her up.

"Si, Jesus," she said, assenting like the child her husband always made her feel she was.

In a chair outside the bathroom door, sipping the instant coffee he had made for himself and reading the newspaper, Miguel Grande heard soft splashing sounds and a quiet conversation between his sisters and his wife that he did not heed. He grinned to himself, the image of his mother about to take a swing at his sister Eduvigis still before him. "What a woman," he said affectionately into his coffee cup, wondering why his mother had begun calling him by their father's name. Juanita came out first, her clothes drenched and her face sweaty from the steam. She was as pale as if she were going to be sick. "What's wrong?" he asked her. "What's the matter now?"

"Miguel, call Dr. Ahrens right away. Your mother is very ill. Her uterus is falling out and she's bleeding a lot."

The monster between her legs was almost out and Mama Chona was glad that it showed no signs of life. All the better for it. It had not bothered her and she did not understand why everyone else was making such a fuss over it. One should ignore those parts of the body anyway. Filthy children, all they ever thought about was the body.

Propped up in a strange bed in an unfamiliar and sterile room, Mama Chona saw her children around her, weeping quietly. Even their husbands and wives were with them. They were inundating her with their grief, which she considered false and silly. She wanted them to go away and let her die in peace and she pretended to sleep, hoping they would leave.

Ricardo was holding her hands still and she did not have the strength to push him away. He spoke softly to her in Spanish, telling her who was in the room in a voice that was pleasing to her.
—Ricardo, you are a good boy. But how can I leave the family to you, the bastard son?

"Mamá," he said to her, his head almost next to hers on the pillow. "We are all here. Your sons and daughters, your grandsons and granddaughters, all the family. You gave us life and we will make you proud of us after you have gone to heaven. We respect and love you very much. You need not be afraid."

—Afraid? Afraid of what? She had known death all her life. Her existence had been a long dying fall. She welcomed death. Even in her imperfection, she knew that Jesús and His Mother would take her to them and comfort her for all eternity. He, at least, was a good son, though sometimes she had had her doubts when she thought about the suffering He had caused His Mother. Mary, children aren't worth the trouble. Sweet and loving, as babies, they turn into monsters who cast you aside and compete with one another to see which of them can cause you the most pain. Your Son alone was worth the trouble, but He made you suffer a great deal. Still, He made you queen of heaven. But my children, mother of God, have not been worth the trouble.

"What did you say, Mamá?" Jesús María asked. They had all taken turns saying a few words to her at the bedside. She was the last. "Mamá, it's Jesús María. Can you hear me?"

—Jesús María! the child she had named for her beloved Jesús and Mary.

"Mamá, forgive me." Jesús María, allowing herself to weep in front of her mother for the last time, choked out her apologies and sang the litany of the disobedient child. Even Miguel Grande, usually contemptuous of his sister's hypocrisy, felt moved and looked with some pity at her humiliation before the family. Jesús María, carried away with her performance, took advantage of the allotted time and chided herself publicly for having been a trial to the poor mother now lying defenseless before their eyes.

Mama Chona opened her eyes and looked at her daughter with full recognition. "It's about time," she said for all to hear and closed her eyes once more. Jesús María stopped crying instantly and retreated to her husband's side.

Days passed during which Mama Chona heard and smelled rainstorms passing over the desert. She longed to see the yucca and ocotillo in bloom, to breathe in their fragrance and praise them for their thorniness and endurance. If only human beings could be like plants. In one of her daydreams, she saw the desert sand filled with verbenas and blooming dandelions, and with the first Miguel by her side, she discovered wild roses. The mourning doves accompanying them were the color of twilight. "Look," she said to her son, "look!" She opened her eyes and saw that she was still in that strange room with all the family waiting for her to die.

—Why do they weep? Why don't they go away? I'll speak to them.

"Children," she said, after Mema helped her take a few sips of water, "children, don't weep. I am happy to leave this valley of tears because I know the life awaiting me will be much, much better. Please don't cry any more. Leave me in peace with Jesús and His Holy Mother."

Slowly, the weeping noises subsided and the room became completely silent. After a few moments, Mama Chona opened her eyes abruptly. Mema later swore she heard them click. The old woman looked at them for the last time.

Even Felix had finally come to visit her. He was standing between Miguel Chico and Joel. She reached out to them but was unable to lift her arms.

Miguel Chico felt the Rain God come into the room.
—Let go of my hand, Mama Chona. I don’t want to die.

"La familia," she said.

Felix walked toward her out of the shadows. "Mamá," he called in a child’s voice that startled her.

"All right," she said to the living in the room, "if you want to, you can cry a little bit."

To Felix, she said, "Where have you been, malcriado?"

He took her in his arms. He smelled like the desert after a rainstorm.