

tary impeded that. Democracy would crawl forward at the slow and zigzagging pace of the crab.



PAULA CAME TO MY ROOM AGAIN LAST NIGHT. I HEARD HER ENTER WITH her light step and the striking grace that was hers before the ravages of her illness; in her nightgown and slippers, she climbed onto my bed and sat at my feet and talked to me in the voice she used to exchange confidences. "Listen, Mama, wake up. I don't want you to think you're dreaming. I've come to ask for your help. . . . I want to die and I can't. I see a radiant path before me, but I can't take that first step, something is holding me. All that's left in my bed is my suffering body, degenerating by the day; I perish with thirst and cry out for peace, but no one hears me. I am so tired! Why is this happening? You, Mama, who are always talking about your *friendly spirits*, ask them what my mission is, what I have to do. I suppose there is nothing to fear, death is just a threshold, like birth. I'm sorry I can't keep my memory, but I have been detaching myself from it, anyway; when I go I will go naked. The only recollection I'm taking with me is of the loved ones I leave behind; I will always be with you in some way. Do you remember the last thing I was able to whisper to you before I slipped into this long night? 'I love you, Mama,' that's what I said. I'm telling you again, now, and I will tell you in dreams every night of your life. The only thing holding me back a little is having to go alone; if you took my hand it would be easier to cross to the other side—the infinite loneliness of death frightens me. Help me one more time, Mama. You've fought like a lioness to save me, but reality is overpowering you. It's all useless now; give up, stop the doctors and medicines and prayers, because nothing will make me healthy again, there will be no miracle, no one can change the course of my destiny and I don't want it anyway; I have lived my time and I want to say goodbye. Everyone in the family understands that but you; I am eager to be free, you're the only one who hasn't accepted the fact that I will never be as I was before. Look at my wasted body, think of how my soul wants to escape and the terrible

bonds holding it back. Oh, *vieja*, this is so hard for me, and I know it is for you, too. What can we do? In Chile, my grandparents are praying for me and my father is clinging to the poetic recollection of a spectral daughter, while on the other side of this country Ernesto is floating in a sea of ambiguity, still unaware that he has lost me forever. Actually, he is already a widower, but he can't weep for me or love another woman as long as my body is breathing here in your house. In our brief time together, we were very happy; I am leaving him so many good memories that he won't have years enough to exhaust them. Tell him I will never forsake him, he will never be alone; I will be his guardian angel, as I will be yours. The twenty-eight years you and I shared were happy, too; don't torture yourself thinking about what could have been, things you wish you had done differently, omissions, mistakes. . . . Get all that out of your head! After I die, we will stay in contact the way you do with your grandparents and Granny; I will be in you as a constant, soft presence, I will come when you call, communication will be easier when you don't have the misery of my sick body before you and you can see me as I was in the good days. Do you remember that time we danced the *paso doble* in the streets of Toledo, leaping over puddles and laughing in the rain beneath our black umbrella? And the startled faces of the Japanese tourists taking pictures of us? That's how I want you to see me from now on: two best friends, two happy women defying the rain. Yes, I had a good life. . . . It's so hard to let go of the world! But I can't bear the misery of the seven years Dr. Shima predicted; my brother knows that, and he is the only one with enough courage to set me free. I would do the same for him. Nicolás has never forgotten our old complicity, and he has clear ideas and a serene heart. Do you remember how he defended me from the shadows of the dragon at the window? You can't imagine how much mischief we hid from you, how we fooled you to protect each other, how many times you punished one for something the other had done, without our ever telling. I don't expect you to help me die, no one can ask that of you, only that you not hold me back any longer. Give Nicolás a chance. How can he give me a hand if you never leave me alone? Please don't grieve, Mama. . . ."

"Wake up, you're crying in your sleep!" I hear Willie's voice

coming from a great distance, and, without opening my eyes, I try to sink farther into the darkness so my daughter will not disappear: this may be her last visit, I may never hear her voice again. "Wake up, wake up, it's a nightmare. . . ." My husband is shaking me. "Wait for me, Paula! I want to go with you!" I scream, and then he turns on the light and tries to put his arms around me, but I push him away brusquely because she is smiling at me from the doorway, lifting one hand to wave goodbye before vanishing down the hallway, her white nightgown floating like wings and her bare feet barely brushing the carpet. Beside my bed are her rabbit fur slippers.

Juan came to participate in a two-week theological seminar. He was very busy analyzing God's motives, but he found a way to spend hours with me and with Paula. Ever since giving up his Marxist convictions to devote himself to divine studies, something I cannot put my finger on has changed in his person: the slightly tilted head, the slower gestures, the more compassionate gaze, the more restrained vocabulary—now he doesn't end each sentence with a swear word, as he used to. During this visit I plan to shake that air of solemnity a little; it would be too much if religion killed his sense of humor. My brother describes himself in his role as pastor as a *manager of suffering*; his hours are eaten up with consoling and trying to help people who have no hope, in administering the scarce resources available for the dying, the drug addicts, the prostitutes, the abandoned children, and other wrecks in the multitudinous Court of Miracles that makes up humanity. His heart cannot stretch far enough to embrace so much pain. Since he lives in the most conservative area of the United States, to him California seems like a land of weirdos. By chance, he witnessed a gay parade, an exuberant Dionysian carnival, and then in Berkeley he attended frenzied demonstrations for and against abortion, political wrangles on the university campus, and a convention of street evangelists shouting their doctrines amid beggars and aging hippies, the last remnants of the sixties, still with their shell necklaces and flowers painted on their cheeks. Horrified, Juan learned that at the seminary courses are offered in *The Theology of the Hula Hoop* and *How to Earn a Living Making Fun of the Bible*. Every time this beloved brother

comes, we mourn Paula's fortune, finding some remote corner of the house where no one can see us, but we also laugh as we did when we were young, when we were discovering the world and thought we were invincible. I can tell him even the most secret things. I listen to his counsel as I rattle pans in the kitchen to cook up new vegetarian dishes for him—a pointless labor since he barely pecks at his food: his nourishment is ideas and books. He spends long hours alone with Paula, I think, praying. He no longer wagers she will get well; he says that the presence of her spirit in the house is very strong, that she is clearing spiritual paths to us and sweeping our lives clean of trivia, leaving only the essential. In her wheelchair, vacant-eyed, motionless, pale, she is an angel opening doors to the divine so we may glimpse its immensity.

"Paula is getting ready to leave the world. She is exhausted, Juan."

"What do you plan to do?"

"I would help her die if I knew how."

"Don't even think of it! You would carry a burden of guilt for the rest of your days."

"But I will feel even more guilty if I leave her in this martyrdom. . . . What will happen if I die before she does? Imagine that I'm gone, who would take care of her?"

"That moment hasn't come, you gain nothing by getting ahead of yourself. Life and death have their time. God never sends us suffering without the strength to bear it."

"You're preaching at me, Juan, like a priest. . . ."

"Paula doesn't belong to you. You should not prolong her life artificially, but neither should you shorten it."

"How far does 'artificial' go? Have you seen the hospital I have downstairs? I control every function of her body; I measure every drop of water that goes into her system, and there are a dozen bottles and syringes on her table. And since she can't swallow for herself, if I don't feed her through that tube in her stomach, she will die of hunger within a week."

"Would you be able to withhold food from her?"

"No, never. But if I knew how to speed up her death without pain, I think I would do it. If I don't, sooner or later Nicolás will, and it isn't fair for him to take on that responsibility. I have a hand-

ful of sleeping pills I've been keeping for months, but I don't know if they're enough."

"Oh, Isabel. . . . How much can you suffer?"

"I don't know. I think I'm at the end of my strength. If only I could give her my life and die in her place. I'm lost, I don't know who I am, I try to remember who I was once but I find only disguises, masks, projections, the confused images of a woman I can't recognize. Am I the feminist I thought I was, or the frivolous girl who appeared on television wearing nothing but ostrich feathers? The obsessive mother, the unfaithful wife, the fearless adventurer, or the cowardly woman? Am I the person who helped political fugitives find asylum or the one who ran away because she couldn't handle fear? Too many contradictions. . . ."

"You're all of them, and also the samurai who is battling death."

"Was battling, Juan. I've lost."

Difficult times. Weeks of such anxiety that I don't want to see anyone; I can barely speak or eat or sleep; I write for hours on end. I keep losing weight. Until now, I was so busy fighting Paula's illness that I could deceive myself, imagine that I could win this battle of Titans, but now that I know Paula is going, my efforts are absurd. She is worn out; that's what she tells me in dreams at night and when I wake at dawn and when I am walking in the forest and the breeze carries her words to me. On the surface, everything seems more or less the same—except for those urgent messages, her ever-weaker voice asking for help. I am not the only one who hears it, the women who help me care for her are beginning to say their adieus. The masseuse decided it was not worthwhile to continue her sessions because, as she said, "Our girl is not responding." The physiotherapist called, stammering, tongue-tied with apologies, until finally he confessed that Paula's incurable illness was affecting his energy. The dental hygienist came, a young woman Paula's age, with the same long hair and thick eyebrows, so much like her they could pass for sisters. Every two weeks, she cleans Paula's teeth with great delicacy, so she won't hurt her, then hurries away without letting me see her face, trying to hide her emotions. She refuses to

charge anything; up till now, there's been no opportunity for her to hand me a bill. We work together, because Paula becomes rigid when anyone tries to touch her face; only I can open her mouth and brush her teeth. This visit I noticed the hygienist was worried; no matter how carefully I do the daily cleaning, there are problems with Paula's gums. Dr. Shima often comes by on the way from work and brings me messages from his I Ching sticks. We stand close to the bed, talking about the soul and accepting death. "When she leaves us, I will feel a great void," he says. "I'm used to Paula now, she's very important in my life." Dr. Forrester seems uneasy, too. After her last examination, she was silent for a long time while she thought over her diagnosis, and finally she said that from a clinical point of view little had changed; nevertheless, she said, Paula seems less and less with us: she sleeps too much, her eyes are glassy, she doesn't react to noises anymore, her cerebral functions are diminished. But in spite of everything, she is more beautiful: her hands and ankles are finer, her neck longer, her pale cheeks dramatically emphasize her long black eyelashes. Her face has an angelic expression, as if finally she had obliterated all doubt and found the divine fount she had sought so resolutely. She is so different from me! I can't recognize anything of me in her. Or of my mother or my grandmother—except the large, dark, slightly melancholy eyes. Who is this daughter of mine? What accident of chromosomes navigating from one generation to the next in the most recondite spaces of the blood and hope determined this girl?

Nicolás and Celia keep us company; we spend much of the day in Paula's room, closed now against the cold. In the summer, the children played on the terrace in their plastic pool littered with dead mosquitoes and bits of soupy cookies while our invalid rested beneath a parasol, but now that autumn is gone and winter is beginning, the house has drawn into itself and we all gather in Paula's room. Celia is a consummate ally, generous and stable; she has been acting as my assistant for several months. I don't have the heart to work, and without her I would be crushed beneath a mountain of paper. She usually has a child in her arms or dangling on a hip, and her blouse unbuttoned to nurse Andrea. This granddaughter of mine is always happy; she plays by herself and falls asleep on the floor sucking the corner of

a diaper, so quiet that we forget where we put her and, unless we're careful, could step on her. As soon as I learn to live with sadness, I will take on my grandmotherly duties. I will think up stories for the children, bake cookies, make puppets and colorful costumes to fill the theater trunk. I need Granny; if she were here she would be nearly eighty, a slightly dotty and eccentric old lady with only a handful of hair on her head, but with her talent for raising children intact.

It seems this year will never end, yet I don't know where all the hours and days have gone. I need time. Time to clear away confusion, heal wounds, and renew myself. What will I be like at sixty? Not one cell of the girl I was remains in the woman I am today, only memory, enduring and persevering. How long will it take to travel through this dark tunnel? How long to get back on my feet?

I keep Paula's letter in the same tin box that contains Memé's relics. I take it out sometimes, reverently, like a holy object, imagining that it contains the explanation I long for, tempted to read it but also paralyzed by superstitious fear. I ask myself why a young, healthy, deeply in love woman in the middle of her honeymoon would write a letter to be opened after her death? What did she see in her nightmares? What mysteries lie hidden in the life of my daughter? Sorting through old snapshots, I see her again fresh and vital, always with an arm around her husband, her brother, or her friends; in all of them, except her wedding pictures, she is in blue jeans and a simple blouse, her hair tied with a kerchief, without adornment. That is how I must remember her, but that smiling girl has been replaced by a melancholy figure submersed in solitude and silence. "Let's open the letter," Celia urged for the thousandth time. In the last few days, I have been unable to communicate with Paula; she is not visiting me now. Before, the minute I stepped through the door I perceived her thirst, her muscle cramps, the variations in her blood pressure and temperature, but now I can't sense her needs in advance. "All right, let's open it," I agreed finally. I went to get the box; shakily, I broke the wax seal, opened the envelope, and took out two pages written in Paula's precise hand, and read aloud. Her clear words came to us from another time.

*I do not want to remain trapped in my body. Freed from it, I will be*

closer to those I love, no matter if they are at the four corners of the planet. It is difficult to express the love I leave behind, the depths of the feelings that join me to Ernesto, to my parents, to my brother, to my grandparents. I know you will remember me, and as long as you do, I will be with you. I want to be cremated and have my ashes scattered outdoors. I do not want a tombstone with my name anywhere, I prefer to live in the hearts of those I love, and to return to the earth. I have a savings account; use it to help children who need to go to school or to eat. Divide my things among any who want a keepsake—actually, there is very little. Please don't be sad, I am still with you, except I am closer than I was before. In another time, we will be reunited in spirit, but for now we will be together as long as you remember me. Ernesto. . . . I have loved you deeply and still do; you are an extraordinary man and I don't doubt that you can be happy after I am gone. Mama, Papa, Nico, Grandmother, Tío Ramón; you are the best family I could ever have had. Don't forget me, and . . . let's see a smile on those faces! Remember that we spirits can best help, accompany, and protect, those who are happy. I love you dearly.

Paula.

Winter is back and it won't stop raining; it's cold, and you are worse every day. Forgive me for having made you wait so long, Paula. . . . I've been too slow, but now I have no doubt, your letter is so revealing! Count on me, I promise I will help you, just give me a little more time. I sit beside you in the quiet of your room in this winter that will be eternal for me, the two of us alone, just as we have been so often over these months, and I open myself to pain without offering any resistance. I rest my head on your chest and feel the irregular beat of your heart, the warmth of your skin, the slow rhythm of your breathing; I close my eyes and for a few instants imagine that you are simply sleeping. But sorrow explodes within me with the fury of a sudden storm and I feel your nightgown grow damp with my tears while a visceral moan born in the depths of the earth rises through my body like a spear and fills my mouth. They assure me you are not suffering. How do they know? It may be that in the end you have become accustomed to the iron armor of paralysis, and have forgotten the taste of a peach or the simple pleasure of running your fingers through your hair, but your soul is trapped and yearns to be free. There is no respite from this obsession; I know that I have failed in




the most important challenge of my life. Enough! Just look at the ruins of what is left of you, Paula . . . dear God! This is the premonition you had on your honeymoon, and why you wrote the letter. "Paula is already a saint, she is in heaven and suffering has washed away all her sins," says Inés, your scarred Salvadoran nurse who spoils you like a baby. How lovingly we care for you! You are never alone, day or night; every half-hour we move you, to maintain what little flexibility you have left; we monitor every drop of water and every gram of food; you receive your medicines on a precise schedule; before we dress you we bathe you and massage you with lotion to keep your skin healthy. "It's incredible what you've been able to do; she wouldn't do this well in any hospital," says Dr. Forrester. "She can live seven years," Dr. Shima predicts. For what? You are like the fairy-tale Sleeping Beauty in her glass coffin, except that no prince will come to save you with a kiss; no one can wake you from this final dream. Your only exit, Paula, is death. Now I can dare think it, say it to you, and write it in my yellow pad. I call upon my sturdy grandfather and my clairvoyant grandmother to help you cross the threshold and be born on the other side; I especially summon Granny, your grandmother with the transparent eyes, the one who died of sorrow when she had to be separated from you. I call her to come with her golden scissors to cut the strong thread that keeps you tied to your body. Her photo—when she is still young, with the hint of a smile and liquid eyes—is near your bed, as are those of all your guiding spirits. Come, Granny, come for your granddaughter, I plead, but I fear that neither she nor any other shade will come to lift this chalice of anguish from me. I will be alone beside you to take you by the hand to the very doorway to death, and, if I can, I will cross through with you.

Can I live in your stead? Carry you in my body so you can recover the fifty or sixty years stolen from you? I don't mean remember you, but live your life, be you, let you love and feel and breathe in me, let my gestures be yours, my voice your voice. Let me be erased, dissolved, so that you take possession of my body, oh, Paula, so that your inexhaustible and joyful goodness may completely replace my lifelong fears, my paltry ambitions, my depleted vanity. To vent my suffering, I want to scream to my last breath,

rend my clothing, pull out my hair, smear myself with ashes, but I have lived half a century under rules of proper behavior; I am an expert in suppressing wrath and bearing pain, so I have no voice for screaming. Maybe the doctors are mistaken and the machines lie, maybe you are not entirely unconscious and you are aware of my state of mind; I must not distress you with my weeping. I am drowning in choked-back grief. I go outside on the terrace where there is not enough air to feed my sobs or enough rain to cry my tears. I get into my car and drive away from the town toward the hills; almost blindly, I reach the forest where I go to walk, the haven where I so often come to be alone and think. I plunge into the woods along paths made rough with winter's debris. I run, tripping over branches and rocks, pushing through the saturated greenery of this vast bosky space, so like the forests of my childhood, the ones I crossed through on muleback, following behind my grandfather. My feet are heavy with mud and my clothes are dripping and my soul is bleeding, and as it grows dark, and when finally I can go no farther after walking and stumbling and slipping and getting up to flounder on, I drop to my knees, tear my blouse, ripping off buttons, and with my arms opened into a cross and my breast naked, I scream your name, Paula. The rain is a mantle of dark crystal and somber clouds lower among the black treetops and the wind bites at my breasts, turns my bones to ice, scrubs me clean inside with its swirling, wintry tatters. I bury my hands in the muck, claw out wet clods of dirt, and rub them on my face and mouth, I chew lumps of saline mud, I gulp the acid odor of humus and medicinal aroma of eucalyptus. "Earth, welcome my daughter, receive her, take her to your bosom; Mother Goddess Earth, help us," I beg Her, and moan into the night falling around me, calling you, calling you. Far in the distance, a flock of wild ducks passes, and they carry your name to the south. Paula . . . Paula . . .

## E P I L O G U E

### *Christmas 1992*

 NEAR DAWN ON SUNDAY, DECEMBER 6, AFTER A miraculous night in which the veils that conceal reality were parted, Paula died. It was at four in the morning. Her life ended without struggle, anxiety, or pain; in her passing there was only the absolute peace and love of those of us who were with her. She died in my arms, surrounded by her family, the thoughts of those absent, and the spirits of her ancestors who had come to her aid. She died with the same perfect grace that characterized all the acts of her life.

For some time, I had sensed the end. I knew with the same irrefutable certainty with which I awakened one morning in 1963 knowing that, only a few hours before, a daughter had been conceived in my womb. Death came with a light step. Paula's senses had been closing down, one by one, during the previous weeks; I think she could not hear any longer, her eyes were almost always closed, and she did not react when we touched or moved her. Inexorably, she was drifting away. I wrote a letter to my brother describing the symptoms imperceptible to others but evident to me, looking ahead with a strange mixture of anguish and relief. Juan answered with a single sentence: I am praying for her and for you. To lose Paula was unbearable torment, but it would be worse to

watch her slowly agonize through the seven years foreseen by the I Ching sticks. That Saturday, Inés came early and we prepared the basins of water to bathe Paula and wash her hair; we set out her clothes for the day, and changed her sheets, as we did each morning. As we began to remove her nightgown, we noticed she was deep in an abnormal sopor, like a swoon, lifeless, and wearing the expression of a child, as if she had returned to the innocent age when she used to cut flowers in Granny's garden. I knew then that she was ready for her last adventure and, in one blessed instant, the confusion and terror of this year of affliction vanished, giving way to a diaphanous tranquillity. "Do you mind, Inés, I want to be alone with her," I asked. Inés threw herself on Paula and kissed her. "Take my sins with you, and try to find forgiveness for me up there," she pleaded, and she did not want to leave until I assured her that Paula had heard her and would serve as her messenger. I went to advise my mother, who hurriedly dressed and came down to Paula's room. The three of us were alone, accompanied by the cat, crouched in a corner with her inscrutable amber pupils fixed on the bed, waiting. Willie was doing the marketing and Celia and Nicolás never come on Saturdays, that's the day they clean their apartment, so I calculated we had several hours to say our farewells without interruptions. My daughter-in-law, however, woke that morning with a presentiment and, without a word of explanation, left her husband to the household chores, picked up her two children, and came to see us. She found my mother on one side of the bed and me on the other, silently caressing Paula. She says that the minute she entered the room, she noticed how still the air was, and what a delicate light enveloped us, and she realized that the moment we most feared and, at the same time, desired had come. She sat down with us while Alejandro played with his toy cars on the wheelchair and Andrea dozed on the rug, clutching her security blanket. A couple of hours later, Willie and Nicolás arrived; they, too, needed no explanation. They lighted a fire in the fireplace and put on Paula's favorite music: Mozart and Vivaldi concertos and Chopin nocturnes. We must call Ernesto, they decided, but his telephone in New York didn't answer and they concluded he was still on his return flight from China and could not be located. The petals from Willie's last

roses were beginning to fall on the night table among the medicine bottles and syringes. Nicolás went out to buy flowers, and shortly after returned with armfuls of the flowers Paula had chosen for her wedding: the smell of tuberose and iris spread softly through the house while the hours, each slower than the last, became tangled in the clocks.

At midafternoon, Dr. Forrester came by and confirmed that something had changed in her patient's condition. She did not detect any fever or signs of pain, Paula's lungs were clear, and neither was this a new onslaught of porphyria, but the complex mechanism of her body was barely functioning. "It seems to be a cerebral hemorrhage," she said, and suggested calling a nurse to bring oxygen to the house, in view of the fact that we had agreed from the beginning we would never take her back to a hospital, but I vetoed that. There was no need to discuss it; everyone in the family had concurred that we would not prolong her agony, only make her comfortable. Unobtrusively, the doctor sat down near the fireplace to wait, she, too, caught up in the magic of that unique time. She would spend all night with us, not as a physician, but as the friend she had become. How simple life is, when all is said and done. . . . In this year of torment, I had gradually been letting go: first I said goodbye to Paula's intelligence, then to her vitality and her company, now, finally, I had to part with her body. I had lost everything, and my daughter was leaving me, but the one essential thing remained: love. In the end, all I have left is the love I give her.

I watched the sky grow dark beyond the large windows. At that hour, the view from the hill where we live is extraordinary; the water of the Bay is like phosphorescent steel as the landscape turns to a fresco of shadows and lights. As night approached, the exhausted children fell asleep on the floor, covered with a blanket, and Willie busied himself in the kitchen preparing something to eat; we had only recently realized that none of us had eaten all day. He came back after a while with a tray and a bottle of champagne we had saved all year for the moment when Paula waked again in this world. I couldn't eat, but I toasted my daughter so she would awake happy in another life. We lighted candles, and Celia picked up her guitar and sang Paula's songs; she has a deep, warm voice that seems

to issue from the earth itself, and her sister-in-law loved to hear her. "Sing just for me," she would coax Celia, "sing low." A wondrous lucidity allowed me to live those hours fully, with penetrating intuition and all five senses alert, as well as others whose existence I hadn't been aware of. The warm glow of the candles illuminated my daughter—silken skin, crystal bones, the shadows of her eyelashes—now sleeping forever. Transported by the intensity of our feeling for Paula, and the loving comradeship women share during the fundamental rituals of life, my mother, Celia, and I improvised the last ceremonies: we sponged Paula's body, anointed her skin with cologne, dressed her in warm clothing so she wouldn't feel cold, put the rabbit fur slippers on her feet, and combed her hair. Celia placed photographs of Alejandro and Andrea in her hands: "Look out for them," she asked. I wrote our names on a piece of paper, brought my grandmother's bridal orange blossoms and one of Granny's silver teaspoons, and placed all of them on Paula's breast for her to take as a remembrance, along with my grandmother's silver mirror, because I reasoned that if it had protected me for fifty years, surely it would safeguard Paula during that last crossing. Now Paula was opal, alabaster, translucent . . . and so cold! The cold of death comes from within, like a blazing, internal bonfire; when I kissed her, ice lingered on my lips like a burn. Gathered around her bed, we looked through old photographs and remembered the happiest times of the past, from the first dream in which Paula revealed herself to me, long before she was born, to her comic fit of jealousy when Celia and Nicolás were married. We celebrated the gifts she had given us in life, and all of us said goodbye and prayed in our own way. As the hours went by, something solemn and sacred filled the room, just as on the occasion of Andrea's birth. The two moments are much alike: birth and death are made of the same fabric. The air became more and more still; we moved slowly, in order not to disturb our hearts' repose. We were filled with Paula's spirit, as if we were all one being and there was no separation among us: life and death were joined. For a few hours, we experienced that reality the soul knows, absent time or space.

I slipped into bed beside my daughter, cradling her against my bosom, as I had when she was young. Celia removed the cat, and

arranged the two sleeping children so their bodies would warm their aunt's feet. Nicolás took his sister's hand; Willie and my mother sat on either side, surrounded by ethereal beings, by murmurs and tenuous fragrances from the past, by ghosts and apparitions, by friends and relatives, living and dead. All during the slow night, we waited, remembering the difficult moments, but especially the happy ones, telling stories, crying a little and smiling a lot, honoring the light of Paula as she sank deeper and deeper into the final sleep, her breast barely rising at slower and slower intervals. Her mission in this world was to unite all those who passed through her life, and that night we all felt sheltered beneath her starry wings, immersed in that pure silence where perhaps angels reign. Voices became murmurs, the shape of objects and the faces of our family began to fade, silhouettes fused and blended; suddenly I realized that others were among us. Granny was there in her percale dress and marmalade-stained apron, with her fresh scent of plums and large blue eyes. Tata, with his Basque beret and rustic cane was sitting in a chair near the bed. Beside him, I saw a small, slender woman with Gypsy features, who smiled at me when our glances met: Memé, I suppose, but I didn't dare speak to her for fear she would shimmer and vanish like a mirage. In other corners of the room, I thought I saw Mama Hilda with her knitting in her hands, my brother Juan, praying beside the nuns and children from Paula's school in Madrid, my father-in-law, still young, and a court of kindly old people from the geriatric home Paula used to visit in her childhood. Only a while later, the unmistakable hand of Tío Ramón fell on my shoulder, and I clearly heard Michael's voice; to my right, I saw Ildemaro, looking at Paula with the tenderness he reserved just for her. I felt Ernesto's presence materializing through the window-pane; he was barefoot, dressed in aikido attire, a solid figure that crossed the room without touching the floor and leaned over the bed to kiss his wife on the lips. "Soon, my beautiful girl; wait for me on the other side," he said, and removed the cross he always wore and placed it around her neck. Then I handed him the wedding ring I had worn for exactly one year, and he slipped it on Paula's finger, as he had the day they were married. Then I was again in the portentous dream I had in Spain, in the silo-shaped tower filled with

doves, but now my daughter wasn't twelve, she was twenty-eight years young; she was not wearing her checked overcoat but a white tunic, and her hair was not pulled back into a ponytail but hanging loose to her shoulders. She began to rise, and I with her, clinging to the cloth of her dress. Again I heard Memé's voice: *No one can go with her, she has drunk the potion of death.* . . . But I pushed upward with my last strength and grasped her hand, determined not to let go, and when we reached the top of the tower I saw the roof open and we ascended together. Outside, it was already dawn; the sky was streaked with gold and the countryside beneath our feet gleamed, washed by a recent rain. We flew over valleys and hills, and finally descended into a forest of ancient redwoods, where a breeze rustled among the branches and a bold bird defied winter with its solitary song. Paula pointed to the stream; I saw fresh roses lying along its banks and a white powder of calcined bones on the bottom, and I heard the music of thousands of voices whispering among the trees. I felt myself sinking into that cool water, and knew that the voyage through pain was ending in an absolute void. As I dissolved, I had the revelation that the void was filled with everything the universe holds. Nothing and everything, at once. Sacramental light and unfathomable darkness. I am the void, I am everything that exists, I am in every leaf of the forest, in every drop of the dew, in every particle of ash carried by the stream, I am Paula and I am also Isabel, I am nothing and all other things in this life and other lives, immortal.

Godspeed, Paula, woman.

Welcome, Paula, spirit.