



THE CITY  
OF PALACES

A NOVEL

Michael Nava

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BY MICHAEL NAVA



*Para mis abuelos*

Ángelina Trujillo Acuña (1902-1974)

Ramón Herrera Acuña (1905-1980)



We Mexicans are the sons of two countries and two races.  
We were born of the conquest; our roots are in the land  
where the aborigines lived and in the soil of Spain.  
This fact rules our whole history; to it we owe our soul.

— *Justo Sierra*

Those who serve the revolution plough the sea.

— *Simón Bolívar*

BOOK 1  
THE PALACE OF THE GAVILÁNS



1897 – 1899





## CHAPTER 1

**T**he first time Sarmiento saw the woman who would become his wife he thought she was a nun. She rushed toward him across one of the fetid courtyards of Belem prison where he had gone to find his father. She was clad in a long, dark dress he assumed was a nun's habit and her face, also like a nun's, was veiled. She called out to him urgently, "Señor, señor, are you a doctor?" He raised his medical bag in assent as she reached him, breathless. It was then he realized her costume was not that of a religious order because, although drab, the material was rich; the dress a shimmering silk of midnight blue, the veil in the same shade dropped like a curtain from her bonnet and was a finely woven lace mesh that revealed only the shadowy contours of her face. Her appearance in the courtyard had attracted the attention of the inmates – dirty, barefoot men in tattered clothes, dark faces shaded by the broad brims of their high-peaked sombreros. They left off their fighting and dice to shout crude epithets at her.

“Señora,” Sarmiento said. “This is not a safe place for a lady.”

“A woman inmate is dying in childbirth,” she said. “The midwife is late. Please, come quickly.”

There was a quality in her voice that, notwithstanding her distress, was singularly soothing and the voice itself was soft, husky, musical. Through the heavy veil he detected the liquid emerald of her eyes. She must be beautiful, he thought, and that as much as the urgency of her errand persuaded him to take a detour from his search for his father.

“Take me to her,” he said.

He followed her through a series of squalid courtyards. Open privies spilled their reek and a few mangy dogs lapped brackish water from fountains where nuns had dipped their pails when Belem had been a wealthy convent in the seventeenth century. México City was then the crown jewel of New Spain. So regal were the edifices the Spanish had built on the ruins of the Aztec capital, Tenochtitlan, that a visitor had christened it the City of Palaces. Now, as the nineteenth century drew to a close, the ancient palaces had been abandoned, converted to mercantile uses or, like Belem, were in near ruins. In their place were the garish new public works of the government of the dictator, Porfirio Díaz, all shiny brass and Carrera marble.

They came to a small courtyard less filthy than the others. On either side were the tiny cells that had housed the convent’s servants. The veiled woman led Sarmiento into one of them where, on a straw mat, a naked woman screamed in agony while two other women held her down. The smell of blood and ordure drove him back a step but the veiled woman plunged forward, into the dimly lit room, and said to him, “Please, doctor, come.”

Sarmiento had amputated limbs and cut holes into the throats

of diphtheria patients so they could breathe, but, out of preference, he had rarely delivered children. Even the sight of pregnant women stirred painful memories of the girl he had killed and now, as he entered the room, raw images of Paquita's death agonies made his fingers tremble and his heart race. He hesitated and looked wildly around the room as if for an escape hatch.

The veiled woman extended a gloved hand to him and said, in her calm, soothing voice, "Doctor, two lives hang in the balance."

"*Claro,*" he said, shaking himself out of his paralysis.

He knelt at the feet of the screaming woman and saw a tiny, red foot emerging from her womb. He knew immediately what he must do. He opened his bag, found the bottle of antiseptic and had the veiled woman pour it on his hands. Then he carefully pushed the tiny leg back into the womb and reached into the woman to turn the child. The woman shrieked and jerked back.

"Calm her down," he said tightly to the veiled woman.

The veiled woman knelt beside the woman and murmured a stream of comforting words. In a moment, the woman's body relaxed a little and Sarmiento continued to probe her. With exquisite care, he moved the child so that its head faced downwards.

"Now get her to push," he said. "Yes, like that. Push! Push!"

Slowly, the child – a boy – emerged, gray-faced and silent. Sarmiento extracted him, severed the umbilical cord, and slapped his back. The child made a choking sound and then a thin wail issued from the tiny body.

"Something to wrap him in," he commanded.

The veiled woman gave him a bundle of fine linen, incongruous in these dank surroundings. He wrapped the child and handed him to

her. He gazed sadly at the infant in her arms and then examined the ashen-faced mother. She knelt beside the mother and gently placed the bundled child beside her. "See my dear. A son."

Sarmiento beckoned her to the doorway and in a low voice asked, "What will become of the infant? Clearly, he cannot remain here."

"For a day or two," the woman replied, "and then I will take him to Lorena's sister and husband who have agreed to watch over him until she is released."

"What is . . . Lorena doing in this pit?"

The woman answered quietly, "She killed the father of the child in a quarrel because he had abandoned her for another and left her begging on the streets. Will she recover?"

"Yes, she should be fine," he said to the veiled woman. "My father is here, I must see to him. Will you be able to care for her now?"

"Yes. Thank you. God bless you. What is your name, doctor?"

"Miguel Sarmiento," he said. "And you, señora, who are you?"

"Alicia Gavilán," she replied.

At that moment a stout woman appeared at the doorway, out of breath and murmuring apologies. The midwife. She bustled into the room, shoving Sarmiento aside.

"Go to your father now, doctor," Alicia Gavilán said. "We will be fine, here."

Sarmiento grabbed his bag and left.

He found his father in a spacious room in the wing of the prison reserved for journalists who criticized the government and opposition politicians. Here they were kept for a few days or a few weeks in

relative comfort until the dictator remembered them and ordered their release. There was no official censorship in México and the Constitution of 1857, which his father had helped write, guaranteed freedom of speech. The government tolerated the minimum of dissent required to satisfy the need of foreign observers for the illusion of a democratic México. Sometimes, though, a journalist or a politician took the promise of free speech too seriously and found himself picked up by *la seguridad*, Díaz's secret police, and deposited in one of these cells, like an impertinent child sent to his room.

Sarmiento's father was sitting at a table covered with sheets of paper, scribbling fiercely with ink-stained fingers. His black suit was shiny with age, he was unshaven and his white hair was disheveled from his habit of twisting strands of it between his fingers when he was thinking. Rodrigo Sarmiento was, like his son, a physician. He had long ago given up medicine in favor of writing manifestos against the government, printed at his own expense, that he posted all over the city. Sarmiento sometimes stopped and read one of his father's broadsheets but he rarely got to the end. While they began rationally, even eloquently, they quickly degenerated into paranoid rants against Don Porfirio and his government.

His father's fury at the despot who had governed México for almost thirty years was as much a personal vendetta as the product of an abstract allegiance to democratic principles because his father and Don Porfirio had once been comrades-in-arms. When the French had invaded México in 1862, forcing the elected president, Don Benito Juárez, from the capital, his father had accompanied him as his personal physician and close advisor. Díaz had been one of Don Benito's generals and his string of victories against the vastly superior

French army had helped finally drive them out of México. After the execution of the puppet Emperor, Maximiliano, and the restoration of the Republic, Sarmiento's father had promoted Díaz as the logical successor to the presidency upon Don Benito's retirement. But Díaz had little patience and, after Juárez was reelected in 1871, unsuccessfully attempted to overthrow him. To Sarmiento's father, the failed coup was a betrayal of the democratic principles that he had believed he and Don Porfirio shared. That was only to be the beginning of his disillusionment with Díaz. In 1876, after a second revolt against the government, Díaz installed himself in the presidency to which he had been repeatedly reelected, with increasingly improbable majorities, ever since. Díaz, who continued to call his political organization the Liberal Party, paid lip-service to the principles of free speech, effective suffrage and separation of church and state while suppressing the former and ignoring the latter. Rodrigo Sarmiento had tried to reason with, cajole and shame his old comrade, privately at first and then in opposition newspapers until these were closed, one by one, and his only recourse was through his broadsheets.

The attitude of the dictator toward Sarmiento's father was one of amused contempt. It was an attitude mirrored in the government's newspapers where his father became an object of ridicule: deranged Doctor Rodrigo. One newspaper cartoonist caricatured him as a latter-day Martin Luther nailing a scroll to the door – of an outhouse. The caption explained that the paper on which he wrote his screeds could serve a useful purpose for those entering the facility. Yet, even the most disrespectful account of his father's antics reminded its readers that he was a hero of the resistance to the French invasion. Only his heroic past kept Rodrigo Sarmiento out of even danker prisons than

Belem, the nightmare facilities where the dictator's real enemies were sent to their deaths. It had also been intimated to Sarmiento by his father's remaining friends that his father was permitted to post his rants because it was useful to the regime that its most vocal opponent could be dismissed as a lunatic. He suspected that the mockery drove his father – a man of rigid integrity and a committed democrat – ever deeper into irrationality. It grieved Sarmiento that he was helpless to draw his father out of his mental darkness and he feared that it would one day overwhelm him completely.

“Father,” he said loudly, stepping into the room.

The old man looked up. “Eh, what are you doing here?”

“Your brother told me you had been arrested,” he said. “I’ve come to take you home.”

“My brother!” he spat. “That fathead. Bootlicker.”

Sarmiento let the statement pass. His Uncle Cayetano, unlike his father, had remained in Díaz’s good graces and had been rewarded with a seat in the Senate.

His father, however, was just warming to the subject. “My brother followed me here from Spain forty years ago after I had made a place for myself and he is still riding my coattails.” He glared at his son. “I made Sarmiento an illustrious name in this country, and now my brother defiles it by collaborating with the dictator.”

At moments like this, Sarmiento had learned to detach himself and regard his father as if he were simply a particularly choleric patient. He observed that the old man’s hands were trembling and his face was drawn.

“When did you last eat?” Sarmiento asked.

“When I was last fed,” his father replied, sharply.

“Gather your things, father, and I will take you home.”

“No,” he said, with more petulance than anger. “I am a prisoner of conscience and here I will remain until I am charged, tried and vindicated.”

“Father,” Sarmiento replied patiently. “There will be no charges and no trial. You were arrested because you insist on posting your broadsheets on the doors of the National Palace. Your brother has secured your release.”

“You understand nothing,” his father said. He gestured at the paper strewn table. “Go away, Miguel. I have work to do.” He sank back into his chair and began to write and mumble. “I must rouse México against the tyrant. This tyrant . . .” He stopped, looked at his hands as if he were seeing them for the first time and then gazed at his son with the same expression. In a calm, concerned voice, he said, “I worry about you, Miguel.”

Sarmiento had become accustomed to these abrupt shifts in his father’s moods, when the cloud of mental confusion dissipated for a moment, and he was his old self. Looking into his father’s eyes he saw, not the crazy old man he had become, but the parent he had once been – stern, demanding, even frightening, but always gruffly loving.

“Why is that, father?”

“I can smell the alcohol on your breath and it’s what? Ten o’clock in the morning? Your drinking accelerates and we both know why. To wash away . . . the memory. But that’s all it is, Miguel, a memory. What cannot be changed is best forgotten.”

“How can I forget, father? I killed that girl, that child. My child. You said so yourself. You called me a murderer.”

“I was angry,” he said, regretfully. “I thought you had thrown your

life away.”

“Didn’t I? I spent a decade in exile. That changes a man.”

“You are still young and now that you have come home, you can start again.”

“Home,” he said. “This place does not feel like home to me. I am a stranger here, father, as I am a stranger everywhere.” He shrugged. “I only returned to México for you, but even you refuse my help.”

“I am not in need of help. I know I am mocked, but I am mocked for a reason. A man must live his life in service of something, Miguel. Without a cause, existence is pointless. Whatever the stupid Christians may believe, the real hell is a life without purpose or meaning. You must find yours. ”

“I am a criminal who evaded justice,” Sarmiento said. “A life without purpose or meaning is my punishment.”

“You could find redemption in service to a cause greater than your private sentiments.”

“Redemption is a Christian concept and, like you father, I am a non-believer.” Taking advantage of his father’s lucidity, he said, “Let me take you home.”

The old man shook his head. “No, son. I think I will stay here for a bit longer. It’s quiet here. I can rest.” He put his head in his hands. “There is so much noise sometimes, Miguel, so much noise. Go. I will be fine. ”

“Yes, father,” he said, reluctantly. He kissed the top of the old man’s head, leaving him there to quarrel with voices only he could hear.

As Sarmiento trudged through the prison courtyards, he thought he heard female voices but when he looked he saw they belonged to men, made up and dressed like women, hanging coquettishly on the arms of their grizzled *novios*. He thought of the veiled woman – Alicia Gavilán – of her lovely voice and the green flicker of her eyes. Since his return to México a year earlier, he had developed a practice among the society women living in the newly built baronial mansions off the Paseo de la Reforma. It suited them to have the handsome young doctor with his European medical degrees come around to their houses, where they lived lives of luxurious boredom, and listen to their imaginary ailments. Now and then, one of them would present a marriageable daughter for his inspection or, more discreetly, offer herself. Sarmiento fended off their advances as tactfully as he could. The daughters, far too young, were either facetious or coy, and the mothers lived in romantic fantasies of salvation through passion fueled by too many French novels.

His part in Paquita's gruesome death had dispelled any notions of his own romantic capacity. He quelled his physical needs with brief, clinical visits to one of the city's better whorehouses. It had been years since he had allowed himself to be curious about a woman, but as the day wore on he could not put Alicia Gavilán out of his mind. She was clearly a woman of breeding and quality; courageous, too, to have set foot into the squalid swamp of Belem without a male escort. Who was she? Why was she there? What husband would have allowed it? He assumed she had worn the heavy veil to avoid attracting the crude attentions of male prisoners. He found himself imagining what she must look like – a lovely face framed by abundant, dark hair, green eyes flickering, lips soft and full. He caught himself remembering the

husky musicality of her voice. He wanted to hear that voice again, to know her story. If she had any status in society, there was one person who would know her, because he knew everyone, his cousin Jorge Luis.

An old but elegant rockaway, drawn by two fine horses with braided manes, carried Doña Alicia Gavilán through the narrow streets behind the *Zócalo* – the city’s immense central square – east to the ancient *plazuela* of San Andrés. In the curtained carriage, she removed her hat and veil and inspected her dress. Its dark folds were stained with blood and afterbirth for which she would hear a lecture from the laundress, Alfonsina. She would have return to Belem in a day or two to take Lorena’s son from her and give him to his aunt for safekeeping until such time, if ever, that Lorena was released. The thought of removing a child from his mother sent a singular pang of sadness through her as she remembered her own child. At least, she reflected, Lorena would be able to see her son, if only when he was brought to visit her in the prison. Her own child, she would never see again, not in this existence.

She parted the curtain slightly and gazed out the window finding solace in the familiar scenes of her beloved city. Beneath tattered muslin awnings, Indian women sold peanuts by the piece and slices of sweet potato grilled in small, ceramic wood-fire ovens. *Agaudores* pushed their way through the crowded streets bearing the enormous clay jars filled with water that they carried from the city’s central fountains to sell in the makeshift tenements filling in the edges of the city. A *cargador* carried a steamer trunk on his back from the train

station to a downtown hotel. The barefoot, smudged-faced children hawking lottery tickets paused in their cries to watch her sleek coach pass.

The distinctive face of the church of San Andrés, where she had been baptized, confirmed and expected to be buried, came into view. Deep green walls – unusual in a city of reds, tans, and ochers – enclosed the carved façade that still earned the church a place in the tourist guides. Above the portal was an immense panel composed of *tezontle*, the light volcanic stone that had been the building blocks of the colonial city. Most of the carvings were the typical and dizzying churrigueresque ornamentations – fruits and cherubs, saints and lions, prophets and penitents, figures and forms piled one atop the other like a mad sermon in stone. But in the center of the panel was an immense cross carved with a profusion of flowers; daisies, roses, lilies and other blossoms that had evidently existed only in the imagination of the mason. There was nothing else like this cross in the entire city of México. Her ancestor who had commissioned the façade two hundred years earlier was ordered by the archbishop to remove it. To the archbishop, the absence of the figure of the crucified Christ on so public a symbol of the Catholic faith rendered the cross suspect, if not heretical. The proud Marqués de Guadalupe Gavilán, rather than admit he was ignorant as to the meaning of the cross, refused. The archbishop – who was, after all, a cousin – eventually withdrew his writ after the marqués agreed to increase his contribution to the building of the cathedral. And so the church of the flowering cross – *la iglesia de la cruz florecimiento* – remained one of the city's mysteries.

The rockaway came to a stop before the great doors of the palace of Gaviláns. Carved in stone above the portal was the family's coat of

arms and its motto, God Alone Commands Us. A niche above the crest held a statute of the family's patron saint, the warrior archangel, Michael. Other decorations carved into the façade and set atop the finials continued the theme of arrogance and belligerence adopted by the first Marqués. But three centuries of rain and wind had beat against the walls, cracking ornaments, chipping tiles and covering the walls with dust and silt; floods had eaten into the wood of the great doors and earthquakes had brought down half the parapets; the King of Spain who had conferred upon the Gaviláns their lands and title when México was his property was dust in the tombs of the Escorial; the lands were long gone, sold off, abandoned or expropriated. All that was left to the family were its titles and its residence. The palace had become the mausoleum of an antiquated kind of privilege valued solely for its ornamental value.

The porter hurried from his cell to hold open the carriage door. Alicia settled her hat on her head, drawing down the veil, and descended. The porter let her into the palace while the carriage was driven around to the stables. As soon as the doors closed behind her, Alicia again removed her hat and handed it to a servant girl who was waiting for her in the first of two large courtyards.

"Thank you, my dear," she murmured as she stood and allowed her treasured residence to welcome her return.

Each of the two courtyards was enclosed by two floors of archways. The many rooms of the palace were set back from the courtyard by broad corridors of polished tile. Along the corridors of the bottom floor of the first courtyard were large planters in which the cooks grew herbs for the house and bamboo cages filled with songbirds. The rooms on this floor housed the kitchens, laundry and

workshops. On the second floor were the quarters where the servants lived. In the middle of the courtyard was a three-tiered stone cantera fountain reached by pathways that cut through flowerbeds thick with geraniums, lilies and musk roses. The exterior walls were painted a deep pink-red and each archway was outlined in limestone. The paint was faded and the stone was pitted with age. The fountain, too, gave the appearance of great age and even the flowers seemed to issue a perfume from a distant time.

A towering wrought-iron gate separated the second courtyard from the first. Through the gate was visible a similar layout of arched corridors surrounding a garden with a fountain. The second courtyard, however, was larger than the first by half. The flowerbeds in its garden were more luxuriant, the fountain taller and more ornate and it fed a pond adorned with clusters of blue-flowered papyrus and water lilies. The limestone facings around the archways were carved with acanthus leaves and on the keystone of each arch was the family crest. This was the family's residence. The first floor held public rooms – salons, a formal dining room, the library, the chapel – while on the second floor were the private apartments of the family. Beyond the second courtyard was another gate from which could be glimpsed an enclosed garden.

At its height, the palace had vibrated like a self-contained village with the comings and goings of the servants and the lords and ladies of the house. But now, most of the rooms were unused and many were bare except for mice and cobwebs. The remaining servants performed their negligible duties in a hushed atmosphere of an infirmary.

Alicia followed the scents of spices and bread into the vast kitchen. Inside were the familiar iron wall racks holding generations

of ladles, spoons and whisks, pine cabinets filled with mortars, molds, and presses; mahogany and rosewood cabinets where the family plate was kept under lock and key; long plank tables covered with baskets holding fruit and vegetables, herbs, breads and tortillas; and shelves of spices and preserves. The cooks and kitchen maids were busy at the *brasero* and the *horno* where they were cooking the main meal of the day, the *comida corrida* for the ten servants of the house and the only remaining family members – Alicia and her mother.

Chepa, the head cook, seeing Alicia enter the room exclaimed, “Doña Alicia, I heard the carriage. Sit, let me bring you some coffee, a crust of something sweet.”

“No, my dear,” she replied. “I only stopped to ask if my mother is awake.”

“She called for her chocolate a few minutes ago. I was about to send the girl up with it.”

“Give me the tray,” Alicia said. “I will take it to her.”

Chepa looked dubious. “You carry food? *Pues, no es costumbre!* Let the girl carry the tray and you can accompany her.”

“You are correct, of course,” she said. Addressing a young maid, she continued, “Come, Dolores, let us go up and sweeten my mother’s disposition.”

From behind the door of her mother’s bedroom came a muffled, mechanical whine that, when the door was opened by Manuelita, her mother’s maid, was the voice of a woman singing. The song was an aria from Rossini’s *La Cenerentola*, played on her mother’s gramophone, a cylindrical device mounted on a rosewood box to which was attached

a great brass horn. It had a place of honor on a marble pedestal at the foot of a capacious bed. A chambermaid stood beside the machine; her sole function was to change the tinfoil recording cylinders and turn the crank. There was a scattering of books on the great lady's bed, the French and English romances she read far into the night. On the walls of her rooms were paintings of Venice, Paris, London, Rome – cities she had never visited except in art, music and literature.

A tiny figure emerged from a pile of luxurious linens, Alicia's mother, María de Jesus. Her mother many titles – acquired through the intermarriage of aristocratic families – were the stuff of society legend. In her own household, however, the Marquesa de Guadalupe Gavilán, had always been known simply as *la niña*, the girl. Propped up on a cloud of silk-sheathed pillows, in a voluminous white nightgown, tufts of white hair visible beneath a lace cap, *la niña* could have been mistaken for a wizened, pink-faced child until one saw her hands, age-spotted and thick-veined, and the reptilian cast of her eyes in which childhood innocence had long ago been extinguished.

“Good morning, mother,” Alicia said, as the kitchen maid laid her tray on the bedside table. She removed the embroidered towel to reveal a demitasse of chocolate and a slice of warm bread with butter and honey.

The old woman glanced at her daughter, picked up the cup and sipped. “Where were you this morning, the orphanage, the hospital or the prison?” She sniffed the air. “That smell! The prison. And what are those stains on your dress? Really, Alicia, do you care nothing at all for your family's standing in this city?”

She declined to be drawn into their old quarrel about the propriety of her charitable activities and asked, instead, “What is this music? I

don't recognize it."

"Adelina Patti," she said. "Your brother-in-law obtained it for me. The banker, not the baker or the candlestick maker. Of course, listening to the diva on this machine is like imagining the sound of the ocean by holding a shell to one's ear, but still." She closed her eyes for a moment. "When she performed at the Nacional in eighteen seventy-seven, the President of the Republic placed a gold crown on her head. We went mad! We were still applauding the empty stage an hour after the last notes of *Sempre libera* had faded."

Alicia lifted from the pile of books on her mother's bedside table a well-worn copy of George Sand's novel, *Consuelo*. "You live in dreams, mother."

"Perhaps," she replied. "But certainly for women of our family better that than to haunt the poorhouses and orphanages like *la llorona* searching for her children."

"Only you know how truly unkind that statement is."

The old woman raised her pale eyebrows. "Sometimes I think that your great display of virtue is simply a very cunning form of revenge you take on me for what I did with you and that boy."

"I have long since forgiven you," she replied.

"Phew! There is nothing to forgive. My actions were entirely proper."

She went to her rooms where she changed her dress and then sat at her vanity and loosened her hair. She studied her reflection in the mirror. To the city, she was Doña Alicia Gavilán, the *solterona* of her noble family whose old maid eccentricity took the form of practicing to a fault the Works of Mercy required of all Christians: feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, sheltering the homeless, visiting the sick

and the imprisoned. Her ministrations, while admirable in principle, required a level of familiarity with the destitute that her aristocratic peers found repulsive in practice. She was nothing like the fabled noble lady who, upon being accosted by a beggar as she was leaving a lavish charity ball, dismissed him without a centavo, exclaiming, "But I have already danced my feet to the bone for you!" But then, of course, it was whispered, given what had happened to her, what other path was open to Alicia Gavilán?

Alicia ran her fingers along her pitted cheek. She had once met an American girl, red-haired with fair skin, whose face was covered with freckles. Alicia had never seen freckles before and had at first imagined they were scars, like hers. But the American's freckles were on the surface of her skin, a distinctive and charming feature of her lovely face, like her straight nose and brilliantly white teeth; something a man would remember fondly. Alicia's scars were nearly as extensive as the American girl's freckles, but not superficial. It was as if her face had been soft wax and the pox a seal that stamped itself deeply into her flesh over and over, obliterating all traces of the pretty child she had been

She chided herself for indulging in self-pity. The smallpox had taken her looks, but had spared her life, unlike the infant who had died in her arms before Alicia had even had a chance to name her. For the second time that day, a tremor passed through her heart. The old sadness came so rarely now that she could almost welcome it like a long absent friend with whom she had shared the most intense moments of pain and love that had ever wracked her soul; an instant when God seemed simultaneously infinitely remote and unbearably present. The God who had been deaf to her pleas to save her child

had nonetheless released a torrent of love in her for that child, a love so deep, so fierce, so all-consuming that the experience had changed her forever.

Convalescing at the palace after her daughter's death, she had felt the change but did not understand its meaning. She knew only that where she might have experienced emptiness, grief, anger, shame, there was instead peace, stillness, expectancy. She had never demonstrated more than the conventional interest in her faith, but now she asked for a Bible. She read the New Testament with a surging sense of identification that culminated when she reached the words of Saint John: "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love." It was as if the letters were being written in flames on her heart.

God is love was the answer to the question that her life had become after her illness and her child's death. God is love was her instruction, her vocation, her purpose, and had been so from that moment she had stumbled across those words when she was fourteen years old. She lifted her eyes to her ruined face in the mirror and thought, "What is there to regret?" Her deformity had humbled her, closed the doors to a conventional life of marriage and children, and led her to a life devoted to what her mother scornfully called her "good works."

She knew other women in her circle, including her own sisters, wondered why she had not simply become a nun. But she had had no desire to lock herself away in a palatial cloister with the old maid daughters of other affluent families to dwell in aimless comfort. She felt called to a life of service, not contemplation. Over the years, she had created for herself a circuit that took her among the poorest of

the city where she gave whatever material and spiritual assistance she could.

When she had first set out, shyly, uncertainly, she had had no idea what to expect of herself or of those whom she wished to help. Her deformity relaxed the suspicion of the poor towards people of her class because in their eyes her scars rendered her as poor, in her way, as they were in theirs. There was never any question of her being one of them – she wasn't and would never be – but in time they trusted her enough to be who they were in her presence, a wounded and vibrant people, the truest Mexicans of México. She loved them in their all their imperfections. She loved the life force that sustained them even as the world – her world – ground them into the dust. She loved that they forgave her for coming from that world and accepted her as she was. She felt most alive among them and closest to the faith that had broken her open when John's letters of light had entered her heart.

And yet no matter how intensely alive she felt among these friends, how grateful she was for the love she felt for and from them, she remained a solitary woman. This sense of her solitude had grown upon her as the time slipped away when, had life been different, she would have been a wife and mother. She often felt her thoughts returning to that un-lived life and sometimes, as this morning, when she had helped to deliver Lorena's child, the thoughts could not be banished with prayers for strength and acceptance.

Recalling the events of the morning, she found herself thinking with some guilt about Miguel Sarmiento. She recognized his name as soon as he said it – society women friends of her sisters were among his patients and her sisters had repeated the gossip about him. They said he was the only child of crazy Doctor Rodrigo and he had departed

México abruptly a decade earlier under a cloud. The particulars of the scandal were unknown but the subject of endless, tittering speculation, all of it involving love gone awry. He had returned a year earlier, a full-fledged physician, handsome and unmarried and as mysteriously aloof as a Heathcliff or a Mr. Darcy. The association with a character from an English romantic novel was heightened by his fair skin, pale green eyes and chestnut-colored hair: "Pure Spanish stock," her sisters said approvingly. "Not a drop of Indian in him."

Gossip bored Alicia and she had only half-listened to her sisters' breathless accounts of Miguel Sarmiento. Even so, a mental picture of him had formed in the creases of her mind: a cold, proud *macho*; a rooster. She knew she was being unkind but as she had no expectation of ever meeting the man except perhaps in passing, her unkindness seemed a venial sin at best. But now that she had met him, the injustice of her judgment shamed her.

When she had rushed through the courtyards of Belem to see if the midwife had arrived, all she had consciously noticed about him was that he was carrying a doctor's black leather satchel. Only later, after he had left, had she sifted through her other impressions. He was as handsome as advertised, but disheveled in a way that suggested to her an absence of vanity. His black suit was dusty, his collar had seen better days, his hair was somewhat greasy and there were patches on stubble on his face indicating that his morning ablutions had been performed in haste or indifference. She had detected the stale smell of alcohol on his breath and his eyes were red-rimmed and weary. She also remembered the look that had flickered across his face as he stood in the doorway of Lorena's cell; it was akin to shock, as if the scene recalled some private horror. Nonetheless, once he began

to attend to her, it was without hesitation or doubt. He knew what he had to do and he did it. He had saved Lorena's life and her child's life. Afterwards, when he looked at the baby in Alicia's arms, another surprising expression passed across his face – sadness. Why, she wondered, would the birth of a child he had saved from death be the cause of grief?

She understood now why he inspired the gossips; there was something paradoxical about Miguel Sarmiento. He *should* have been the rooster she had imagined him to be – handsome, accomplished, arrogant – but instead he seemed like a man who was lost in the corridors of a private sorrow. She had felt her heart open spontaneously toward him, her compassion flow. She resisted. Miguel Sarmiento was not one of the poor to whom she could bring practical assistance – food, clothing, consolation. It was absurd to think she could help him and yet she could not help but hope to see him again.



## CHAPTER 2

Sarmiento sat at a window table at the Café Royale watching a barefoot *pelado* herd a flock of turkeys down the center of Calle de los Plateros. The Indian, cinnamon-skinned and malnourished with a mop of inky hair was, like most Indians to Sarmiento's eyes, of indeterminate age – perhaps twenty, perhaps sixty. He wore a tattered, long-tailed shirt, and in apparent ignorance of a recently passed city ordinance commanding the wearing of undergarments, a soiled breech cloth tied around his waist and loosely looped around his genitals. The bobble of his penis was disgracefully visible to passersby as he made his way down the narrow road. Expertly, he kept the squawking turkeys in a straight line with a long stick to rein them in when they began to wander. The birds were small and stringy, but their plumage was as darkly iridescent as a ball gown. Sarmiento assumed the turkeys were on their way to one of the city's markets and that day's end would find them defeathered, cut up and boiled beneath a layer of *mole poblano*.

In Europe, where Sarmiento had lived for the past decade, the incursion of the country into the city would have been deemed picturesque. But in the city of México, the reflection of a peasant in the plate glass windows of shops that sold French wines and English frock coats reproached the pretensions of the *nouveau riche* who shopped there and they were not amused. Even now, a police officer – whose blue uniform aped the Parisian gendarmerie right down to the short cape – bestirred himself from his corner post. A moment later, the Indian and his birds had been harshly directed to a side street and away from Sarmiento's view.

Across the capital the church bells tolled ten. The shops would not open for another hour. The city would not fully awaken until the sifted gold light that now filled its streets achieved the transparency that made a stroll through them a walk into a dream. During his exile, Sarmiento had often tried to explain México's quality of light but words, in whichever of the four languages he spoke, always failed him. The light's lucidity was partly a matter of altitude – at eight thousand feet the air was so thin that visitors gasped for breath upon first arriving. Then too, the city lay at the lowest point in a valley ringed by volcanoes creating a canopy of the sky. Whatever the cause, the light poured down with a purity that made every object it touched seem both immediately present and illusory, like something simultaneously seen and remembered.

This effect was heightened by the phantasmagorical nature of the city itself. The ancient stones of the Spanish colonial city sat upon the even more ancient stones of the Aztec city, Tenochtitlan. The Spanish had razed the Aztec's island capital and dumped its palaces and temples into the vast lake that had ringed it. The great native

cypresses – *ahuehuetes* – still grew in the park at Chapultepec where they had shaded the summer palace of the last Aztec emperor. When the light poured through their leaves, it was as if ten-thousand green, translucent eyes looked with unimaginable grief upon the slain city of Tenochtitlan which the Aztecs had called the navel of the earth.

This is what Sarmiento had been unable to explain to the Romans he befriended on his travels. In their city, the imperial ruins were like the abandoned rooms in the family *palazzo*, places where their ancestors had lived lives different only in degree, not kind. But in México, the stones beneath the hulking churches and palaces of the Spanish were the gravestones of an alien race whose men had been murdered and its women raped. The Conquest had also robbed that race of its vitality. Each generation following the Conquest was more servile and lethargic than the last until the Aztecs had devolved from plumed emperors to turkey herders in soiled loincloths. When Sarmiento told his Roman friends that his country was the product of rape, they had laughed gaily and replied, “But all nations are.” Perhaps so, he thought, but in México the memory was burned into the stones and the air.

“*Primo*, why the ‘brown study’?”

Sarmiento smiled up at his cousin, Jorge Luis. “*Primo*, I didn’t really expect you’d awaken to meet me at such an early hour.”

The younger man sat in a quick, tight motion. It could not have been otherwise — his French-cut suit fit him like a straight-jacket, constraining his movements, emphasizing his slenderness. Above the stiff collar and black-and-red silk cravat, loomed his large head. His eyes were like molten chocolate flecked with cinnamon and his lips were thick and soft. His black, curling hair was only partly subdued by

the liberal use of lavender-scented pomade. There was an ever-present flush beneath his dark skin; he was as lovely as a girl. Perhaps aware of this, he compensated for his prettiness with a cynical attitude, an unkind wit, and a tone of voice that implied the knowledge of scandal. Officially he held the position of secretary to his father, Sarmiento's senator uncle, Cayetano, but spent his days writing verse and his nights in what passed for debauchery in the capital – drinking, gambling at the Jockey Club, patronizing the better brothels – with a cohort of other young men whose only purpose in life was the pursuit of pleasure. Ennui was part of Jorge Luis's affectation but sometimes Sarmiento imagined that his cousin's boredom with this pointless circuit of cheap sensations and easy amusements was real and that, beneath his cultivated image of frivolity, a man of substance was struggling to emerge.

Jorge Luis arranged himself, as best he could, in a languid posture. He withdrew an English cigarette from a silver cigarette case and lit it. "Awaken? I have not yet been to bed. Coffee!" he shouted to no one in particular. "And you? Why did you insist on meeting at this uncivilized hour?"

"I always wake early," Sarmiento said. "A habit from my student days in Germany. Nothing clears one's head of last night's wine more quickly than cutting into a cadaver in a freezing room at seven in the morning while an elderly professor screams instructions in German."

Jorge Luis shuddered. "I don't know what is more appalling about that story, the cadavers or the Germans. My 'grand tour' of the continent will begin and end in Paris."

The waitress appeared with Jorge Luis's coffee. She was a plump, pretty Indian girl who moved uncomfortably in her

starched, striped shirtwaist and dark skirt; her braids were piled atop her head and her broad feet were shoved into narrow boots. She caught Sarmiento's eye and he smiled encouragingly at her. She carefully set down the cup and saucer, napkin, spoon, pot of heated milk, and a bowl of sugar cubes. When she finished, she nervously wiped her hands on her apron and murmured, "Anything else, sir?"

Jorge Luis flicked his fingers at her dismissively.

"My God," he said to Sarmiento, "did you see her fingernails? Filthy. I don't know why you come here. The Café de l'Opera employs French waiters not the local 'niggers.' "

The American word dropped from his cousin's lips with a harsh contempt that amazed Sarmiento since Jorge Luis was nearly the same shade of brown as the waitress. Like most Mexicans, Jorge Luis was a *mestizo*, in whose veins ran a mixture of Indian and Spanish blood. His mother, Sarmiento's aunt by marriage, had been a full-blooded Indian, a country girl who his uncle had married during the war against the French. She died giving birth to Jorge Luis who had, therefore, no memories of her. But Sarmiento, seven years older than his cousin, recalled her with affection. It surprised him that his quick-witted cousin seemed oblivious of the irony of his contempt for the Indian poor of the city but, Sarmiento had observed, it was an obliviousness shared by most of the city's *mestizo* upper class who also disdained the *pelados*. Sarmiento imagined that Jorge Luis had imbibed this attitude with the absinthe he drank in the Frenchified bars and cafés with the other young men of his set who were desperate to be mistaken for Europeans.

"There you go again, Miguel, disappearing on me," Jorge Luis complained. "You're the host here, remember?"

“I’m sorry, *primito*,” Sarmiento replied. “Listen, I want to ask you about a woman.”

Jorge Luis widened his eyes in mock surprise. “A woman! Are you thinking of leaving the priesthood, Miguel?”

Sarmiento shook his head. “You exaggerate.”

“Do I? In all the time we have spoken since you returned, you have never before asked about a woman. Who is this paragon who tempts you from your vow of chastity?”

“Her name is Alicia Gavilán.”

This time Jorge Luis’s surprise was genuine. “You’re joking.”

“I am not.”

His cousin burst into laughter. “No, really, this is a joke.”

Impatiently, Sarmiento said, “If you don’t know the lady, fine, but I am completely serious.”

Jorge Luis exclaimed, “But Miguel, the Gorgon!”

His face flushed with anger. “Really, *primo*, you go too far.”

Jorge Luis gathered himself. “You *are* serious,” he said with wonder. “All right. I know the lady, by reputation only, for one seldom sees her out in society. Alicia Gavilán, Condesa de San Juan de Aguayo. The youngest of the four daughters of Don Alphonso, Marqués de Guadalupe Gavilán.”

Sarmiento managed a shocked, “A countess? Are you sure?”

“Oh, yes. The family’s titles go back to colonial times. Of course, I suppose she and her family should properly be called ex-nobles since we are a proper republic now,” he said, placing a mocking hand over his heart. “After the French invasion their titles and an old palace were all they had left. The old marqués – that traitor – sided with the French and their puppet emperor, Maximilian. He was lucky he wasn’t shot.

Instead, his properties were confiscated and he was ruined. I hear for a while they were so hard up they were eating beans off of gold plate. But the old man was able to marry off his eldest daughters to various rich friends of our beloved President," he continued. "Nothing makes new money respectable more swiftly than a wife with a title and an old name. Sadly, he could not find any takers for the Condesa de San Juan."

"Why was that?"

"Did you see her face?"

"She was wearing a veil."

"I have never seen her without one," he said. "She had smallpox as a child. Evidently she is hideously scarred."

Sarmiento was stunned into silence.

"She devotes herself to charity," Jorge Luis continued. "A most worthy lady, but," he shrugged. "I'm sorry to be the bearer of bad news, Miguel."

"You yourself have never seen her face," Sarmiento said. "So you are only repeating gossip."

His cousin raised an eyebrow. "Miguel, the lady is nearly thirty, has never married, rarely goes into society and never without covering her face. The smallpox story is universally known and accepted. If it were untrue, there would be other explanations for her unusual behavior." He yawned. "My God, I am exhausted. Forgive me, *primo*, I must go home and get some sleep. I have a full night ahead of me at the gaming tables at the Jockey Club."

"You're incorrigible," Sarmiento said.

With more melancholy than he had perhaps intended, his cousin replied, "Sadly, you are correct."

His cousin's tale about Alicia Gavilán and her family only whetted Sarmiento's curiosity about the lady. The smallpox story was a plausible explanation for her mysterious appearance but Sarmiento reasoned that a vaccine would have been available to a woman of her age when she was a child. He casually inquired of a few of his well-bred women patients about whether they had been vaccinated against the pox and was appalled to discover that, to a woman, they had not.

"But why?" he asked a flirtatious chatelaine in her pink and gold salon. "Didn't your doctor insist?"

"Dear old Don Octavio?" she replied with amusement. "*Mais non!* He was a traditional doctor. He never laid a hand on me except to take my pulse and even then my mother and a maid had to be present. That he should penetrate me with a needle was unthinkable." Her eyes flashed naughtily. "Of course, if you wished to do so, I would willingly submit."

"You are past the age when smallpox is a threat to your health," he replied.

"No penetration, then? *Quel dommage!*" she said, smiling. "Now, dearest Doctor Miguelito, I am still suffering from the most excruciating headaches. Won't you give me a little more laudanum for my pain? Just a few more pills?"

As discreetly as he knew how, he asked a few of his patients about Alicia directly. They repeated the same story his cousin had told him; a catastrophic childhood encounter with smallpox had ruined her face and her prospects so she had thrown herself into charitable works. The tone of the telling varied – some of the ladies spoke pityingly, others admiringly – but all implicitly agreed that Alicia Gavilán's fate was a sad one. He wondered about that because Alicia Gavilán's misfortune

had evidently given her a license to move about in the world that none of his grand ladies enjoyed. His patients could not leave their homes except on the arm of their husbands unless it was to attend Mass or to shop. Even then, more than one woman complained, she could not enter unescorted any of the new department stores that had sprung up in the city. Propriety demanded that she remain in her closed carriage while female clerks brought items for her inspection. It was unimaginable that he would have encountered one of his ladies roaming through the courtyards of the prison at Belem. Did Alicia Gavilán appreciate her mobility, he wondered, or did she regard the necessity of performing her good works at places like Belem yet another mark of her misfortune? That seemed unlikely. In contrast to his unhappily self-absorbed patients languishing in the lap of luxury, Alicia Gavilán had not appeared to him in their brief encounter to be unduly concerned with herself. She had completely given herself over to the messy task at hand, staining her costly gown with blood and afterbirth. The more he thought about her, the greater his desire to meet the lady again, but he could not imagine the circumstances that would permit an unmarried woman and an unmarried man to renew their accidental acquaintance without causing a scandal.

A bemused Sarmiento stood in a corner of the anteroom in the Church of the Flowering Cross that sheltered the baptismal fount. The smells of incense, oiled wood, candle smoke and human musk sent him back in memory to Sunday Mass with his mother, who had died when he was seven. His father, a militant atheist, mocked her church going and Sarmiento had eventually adopted his father's view of religion,

albeit without his belligerence; faith seemed to the rational Sarmiento simply unintelligent. Still, those hours at Mass with his mother, his hand wrapped in hers, were among the warmest memories of his childhood. This was the first time since her funeral that he had been in a church for a religious service. He was aware of a faint luminosity in the scented air that, had he been religious and believed such things, he would have said was his mother's spirit hovering beside him.

He had come at the invitation of Alicia Gavilán to witness the baptism of the infant whom he had delivered at Belem prison. Her note had reminded him the child was being cared for by the mother's sister and her husband but, she had written, the mother had chosen the boy's name to honor the man who had saved both their lives: Miguel. Doña Alicia thought Sarmiento might wish to present at his namesake's christening. Rationally, he knew, that she could have had no idea of the emotions her invitation had stirred in him, reminding him, as it did, of his own lost son. Yet he could not help but imagine that the purpose of her invitation was assuage some part of the secret grief for his son he had carried around with him for over a decade. As he stood in the church, watching the ritual proceed, remembering his mother and his son, the sadness that clouded his heart was softened by nostalgia.

The young mother, her braided hair covered by her *rebozo*, held the squirming infant in her arms while a bespectacled priest in an elaborate lace vestment poured water over the child's head and intoned, "Miguel Ángel, I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."

In a white gown and a broad-brimmed hat with a heavy white veil, Alicia stood behind the parents, acting as the boy's godmother.

At the moment the water splashed the child's forehead, he howled, his cries dispersing like wisps of incense as they rose to the vaulted ceiling. His tiny dark face darkened to purple as he wailed. The priest, glanced with displeasure at the young father, a homely boy uncomfortable in his Sunday best. He tried to shush the child, to no avail.

Alicia said, "Father, he is frightened, let me calm him."

"Daughter, the time," the priest said pointedly. Sarmiento guessed the priest was thinking of his lunch and his glass of *amontillado*.

But Alicia had taken the wriggling infant from the mother and carried him beneath a fresco depicting the baptism of Jesus. She began to sing to the child, but not in Spanish. Sarmiento recognized a few words of Nahuatl, the language of the *pelados*. Where, he thought wonderingly, had this aristocratic lady learned the language of the slums? After a moment, the child's cries ceased and Alicia returned the child to his mother.

"We can continue now, Father."

The priest completed the rite by which Miguel Ángel Trujillo was received into Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church. Alicia slipped the priest a small brocade purse that he received with satisfaction. No paper currency for a Gavilán, Sarmiento thought. The old families still dealt in gold coin.

She turned to Miguel, "Señor Doctor, come and be properly introduced to your namesake."

He stepped forward toward the parents who greeted him with downcast eyes and shy smiles.

"This is the doctor who brought your nephew into the world," Alicia said. "Let him hold the boy, Remedios."

The girl surrendered the now-passive infant to Sarmiento who

took him reluctantly, fearing that he would see his dead son's face and be unable to contain himself. But when he took the child and looked at him he saw only a baby with big shining eyes, stray tufts of hair and the bland expression of an animal on a face in which human consciousness had not yet fully dawned. After a moment, Sarmiento handed the child to his aunt.

"I think I will wait outside," he said to Alicia, "and then, if I may, I will see you to your home."

"Yes," she said. "I will only be a minute."

He left her in conversation with the child's aunt and he saw her slip the girl a purse that was fuller than the one she had given the priest.

He stood on the steps of the church which faced the *plazuela* of San Andrés. San Andrés was typical of the old colonial neighborhoods that lay northeast of the *Zócalo*, the great plaza anchored by the cathedral and the National Palace that was the heart of city and the nation. In the center of the *plazuela* was an old fountain that had been the neighborhood's water source for centuries; women still came to dip their clay pots into its brackish stream. Around the fountain was an open-air market where, beneath tattered muslin awnings, Indians sold everything from slices of candied pumpkin to rat traps and children's shoes. Street peddlers lumbered by, their goods attached to their bodies with poles and straps – one of them carried a dozen bamboo cages filled with songbirds – singing the merits of their wares: "Such excellent sweets! The saints themselves desire them!" "Who can resist my roasted corn? Not you, not you, not you!" The *plazuela* was bounded on the south by an old mercantile arcade. Beneath its arches, men in shabby frock coats sat at rough tables that held fountain pens,

jugs of ink and sheaves of colored paper. They were the *evangelistas*, scribes who for a few pesos composed letters for the illiterate poor of the city. To the south of the little plaza was the bulk of a massive colonial palace that Sarmiento now knew was the ancestral residence of the Gaviláns.

It was a scene that deepened the nostalgia he had felt in the church because this was the city he remembered from his childhood and the city he had carried in his heart during the years of his exile. Yet now that he was back, he felt like a tourist, a stranger as if his long sojourn in Europe had irreparably broken the cord that had tethered him to home. He drifted through old neighborhoods like this one and the flashy new neighborhoods of Don Porfirio's modern city feeling like a ghost.

He sensed her presence before he heard her speak. "Thank you for coming, Doctor," she said, pausing beside him. "I do not think you are a regular churchgoer."

"No, I'm not a believer, Doña Alicia," he said. He glanced upward at the massive, flower-covered cross. "I must say, though, I have seen many churches but never one with this particular decoration."

"The flowering cross? It is unique, in the city at least," she replied. "One of my ancestors commissioned it, and even he did not understand its meaning."

"Do you?"

"Yes," she said. "I will tell you as you walk me to my residence."

He extended his arm, and she slipped hers through it. He was aware of the scent of rose water. The white veil was more translucent than the dark veil she had worn at the prison and he could more clearly make out the contours of her face which seemed covered by a

thick layer of powder. He turned his eyes away, not wishing to stare.

She was aware that he was making an effort not to stare at her. Perhaps, she thought, she should simply raise the veil and let him look, but then all he would see was the white mask she had composed of creams and powders. She felt a pang of sadness, but then composed herself and told him the story of the flowering cross that she had first heard as a child in the kitchens of the palace.

She could not remember a time when she had not sought out the dark, fragrant warmth of the kitchens and the company of women and girls who labored there at the tiled stoves and ovens and the big tables where chickens were plucked, corn was ground, and fruit and vegetables chopped. When she had first begun to appear in the kitchen as a child in pigtails, the cooks tried to bribe her to leave with sweets and, when that failed, she was scolded, ignored and reported to her mother. “*No es la costumbre,*” her mother told her – it is not customary – in what would become a refrain of her childhood. She did not argue or defend herself, but simply returned to the kitchen again and again until, by sheer, silent persistence, she overcame all objections. Her post was a tall, three-legged stool near where the head cook, Chepa, commanded her realm. Although she was not allowed to do any of the work – that was far beyond the pale for a daughter of the house – she learned by watching. One morning, the *molendera* failed to appear, causing consternation as she was the only one who knew the exact formula of the morning chocolate for the lady of the house. Alicia took up the mortar and pestle, ground the cocoa herself and added the proper amounts of cinnamon and sugar. The maid returning with

the empty cup also brought a coin from the mistress to the *molendera*. Alicia gave the coin to the maid. After that, although her rank was never forgotten, it no longer created an inviolable distance between her and the other women. They no longer talked around her, but with her, and to her, and they shared their stories, which were as old and complex as the stories of her own family.

The flowering cross, for example. Graciela the baker, with hands like leather from decades of reaching into stoves, told Alicia that the stonemason who carved the cross had been from a wild tribe in the far north called the Yaquis. “Nahautl, like us,” she explained, “but when the rest of us came to Tenochtitlan, the Yaquis stayed behind in a river valley that was like the Garden of Eden. They worshipped the deer who gave up his life to give them meat to eat and hides for clothes. When the priests came and told them about Jesus, well, to the Yaquis, Jesus and the deer were the same and they converted.

“Flowers are sacred to the Yaquis,” Alicia told Sarmiento, repeating the words Graciela had told her. “They call heaven the flower world. They say that when Jesus was on the cross, where his drops of blood touched the earth, flowers sprang up. That’s why the artist carved flowers on the cross. For him they are the blood and resurrection of Jesus.”

“The Yaquis?” Sarmiento said, “The same tribe the government is fighting up in the north?”

“I was not aware we were at war with them,” she said. “What caused the conflict?”

“Settlers have moved into land the Yaquis claim as their own.”

“I’m sure it is my ignorance,” she said, as they reached the immense doors of the palace, “but could the land not be apportioned

in a way that would satisfy both groups?"

"A good question, Doña," he replied. "Not one I imagine the combatants bothered to ask themselves before they took up arms. Men never do."

From a small room attached to the palace at the side of the door, a porter emerged, and, with a suspicious glance at Sarmiento, asked, "Doña Alicia, is everything all right?"

With a smile in her voice, she said, "Yes, Pablito. I will enter in a moment." To Sarmiento she asked, "What do you mean when you say men never do?"

"Only that men are thoughtless creatures," he replied. "Their first impulse is always to take action, however rash or misguided. Or fatal."

After a long, considering silence, she said, "Do you speak from experience, Señor Doctor?"

The kindness in her lovely, low voice was as palpable as a warm hand laid on his. The sadness and nostalgia he had felt since entering the church clutched at his heart and squeezed tears from him. He hastily wiped his sleeve across his face and said, "Well, one has made many mistakes in life, of course."

He was afraid she would comment on his tears, but she said, "Yes, that is true of all of us. But one need not become imprisoned by one's errors."

"How does one avoid that?" he asked.

"For a believer, there is confession," she said.

"A few Hails Marys and it all goes away?" he replied.

She retreated into silence and he thought he had offended her, but then she said, "The value of confession for me is not in the penance

but in saying aloud the things I would keep secret in my guilt and then having my confessor put them in their proper place for me. To give them – what is the word artists use? Perspective. For in my guilt, my sins loom large and I can see little else. Another person, disinterested but sympathetic, can look and see things as they are, not as I imagine them to be.”

Again, he felt her kindness like a physical balm and it was all he could do not to spill his secret then and there about Paquita and his son.

“But, as I said, Doña Alicia, I am a non-believer. Who would hear my confession?”

“I would,” she said, simply. “Won’t you come in and have a cup of something warm, a bit of something to eat?”

Longing and fear fought in his heart; a longing to confess his faults to her and a fear that, once she heard them, she would turn away from him in revulsion. Fear won out.

“Thank you, Doña, but I must take my leave. I have my rounds, patients to see.” Yet he found himself reluctant to go. “Perhaps,” he added, “I could call on you another time?”

“Of course,” she replied graciously. “You need only send me a message and I would be happy to receive you.” She touched his hand. “Good-bye, Doctor Sarmiento. God go with you.”

“Doña,” he said with a little bow, and rushed away before she could see that the tears had reappeared in the corners of his eyes.

As the rest of the household slumbered, Alicia made her way into the garden, an overgrown wilderness of orange and lemon trees, heavy

swags of climbing roses that spilled over the garden walls, clumps of calla and trumpet lilies, heliotrope, rose geranium and jasmine. A rosace-shaped pond in the center of the garden was anchored by a fountain carved with the symbols of the evangelists – a lion, an eagle, an ox and a man. The fountain, too, was in disrepair and only a brackish trickle now reached the pond. At the far end of the garden was a mirador made of marble. Over the entrance of the small pavilion was carved the date 1702 and the family crest.

She sat on the bench in the pavilion and removed her veil so that she might better inhale the heavy fragrance of the flowers in the still, autumn air. She thought of Miguel Sarmiento, and the sadness with which he had looked at the infant when she had given him the baby to hold; the same sadness she had seen in the birth room. She recognized it as the sadness of loss, a loss to which he remained unreconciled. That pain she saw in his eyes was not unknown to her. She closed her eyes. Mingled with the scent of flowers were the smells of the stables on the other side of the garden wall. Now and then came the muffled whinny of a horse or the voice of a groom or stable boy.

“Anselmo.”

Her eyelids fluttered open and she looked around the garden to see who had spoken that name. There was no one else in the garden but a little black cat hunting lizards.

“Anselmo.”

That voice, that name, again. And then, with a small gasp, she realized that it was she who had spoken. Her voice speaking that name which she had not openly uttered in many years.

She spoke his name again, consciously, deliberately. “Anselmo.”

The cat looked up, distracted from its hunt by the weeping

woman.

She had been tolerated in the kitchen because it was the domain of women performing women's work, but when Alicia began to wander into the stables, she was brought before her father, a rare and frightening event. The marqués received her as if she were an errant servant. With scarcely a glance at her, he said, "Henceforth, you will stay out of the stables."

"I only wanted to see how they braid the horses' manes."

He looked at her sharply. "Were you asked to speak?"

Trembling, she replied, "No, Señor Marqués."

"Go."

She had run into the garden, weeping.

"Why are you crying?"

She looked around for the questioner. A boy's head appeared above the wall that was common to the garden and the stables. It was Anselmo, one of the grooms. He had been her guide on her excursion to the stables, telling her about the horses and how he took care of them. Now he jumped the wall and came into the garden.

"Did your papá hit you?" he asked.

He was two or three years older than she – fifteen or sixteen – a slender, cinnamon-colored boy with golden eyes. He smelled soothingly of straw and liniment.

"No," she said. "He has forbidden me from visiting the stables. Now I will never see how you braid the manes."

He sat beside her on the bench and took a strand of her long hair. "I could braid your hair. Do you want me to?"

His fingers in her hair, the whispered question, the lustrous sun and the sweet smells of the garden produced in her a thrill that raised goose bumps on her then flawless skin and, without understanding why, but knowing she must, she pressed her lips to his. His mouth opened – her shock was quickly followed by the delicious sensation of his warm, wet tongue and the heat of his body radiating from beneath his thin shirt. As they pressed their bodies tightly together, she did not know whether it was his heart or hers that beat like a bird flapping its wings against its cage.

On the warm autumn nights, he lay his *zarape* in the clearing among the roses to dispel the chill from the earth. Then too, their naked bodies generated a heat so intense that curlicues of steam rose from them. She learned he was from Coahuila and had come with his family to the city looking for work when their small farm was taken from them by a friend of the Governor. He was vague on details, saying only, “The sheriff came with some papers. My papá said we had to leave.” She related her own uneventful history – she had lived her entire life within the walls of the palace, except for the hours she was at school or at church. He had four brothers and three sisters and they lived with his parents in two rooms in the *colonia* of La Merced, but he lived in the stables, visiting home only on Sunday. She told him about her three sisters, all much older than she, the two eldest married, the third engaged. He told her he missed his family and his descriptions of his loneliness gave her a name for her own feelings of solitude.

He could not read or write. One night she brought pencil and paper. Guiding his hand, she showed him how to write his name and then he insisted that she teach him how to write hers as well. After

that, he practiced by writing their names with his fingertips on her flesh. She loved his touch. His tongue rasped her small nipples and told her she tasted like apple. The skin of his scrotum was as plush as velvet in her hands and the two stones it sheathed were fascinating to her, hard yet spongy; more than once he yelped when she pressed too hard. Each time he penetrated her, her first feeling was of separation – his body clearly divisible from hers – but then as he continued, his thrusts were like pebbles tossed into a pond. The ripples spread and deepened across and inside her body and, as they both sank into the same swamp of sensation, she could no longer tell her flesh from his. He was the first to say, “*te amo*,” but said it only sparingly after that, as if the phrase was a jewel, the only one he would ever be able to give her. She was freer with “I love you,” because it resounded in her mind all day and to prevent herself from saying it aloud when he was not present, she had to give it voice when he was. They undressed and dressed by moonlight. “Our moon,” he told her. One night he brought her a pearl, a single pearl that he said he had bought at the *Monte de Piedad*, the city’s pawnshop. It was yellowing with age, like the autumn moon.

Alicia was neither as alone nor as insignificant in her family as she imagined. *La niña* noticed the change – the combination of swooping and inexplicable happiness alternating with expressions of gnawing melancholy as she mumbled to herself. She instructed her personal maid to spy on her daughter. Manuelita followed her into the garden and watched, from a distance, as the two children made love. They were beautiful together and Manuelita pitied them for what was to come. She reported to her mistress. Anselmo was gone by nightfall. Within a month, Alicia began to show signs of pregnancy.

Her mother immured her within her rooms and, borrowing from her favorite novel *La Dame aux Camélias*, let word go out that Alicia suffered from consumption. When she was about to deliver, Alicia was secretly transported to the foundling home where she gave birth to a daughter in the *Departamento de Partos Ocultos* – the Department of Hidden Births. It was there, as she was recovering, that she was infected with the smallpox virus, as was the child she was nursing. Her daughter died.

Fifteen years had passed but the garden was much the same as it had been the last night she and Anselmo had parted. She dried her tears. She remembered, during the confrontation with her mother, she had cried out, “But Mamá we are no different than *Romeo et Juliette!*” Her mother, narrowing her eyes, had replied, “Romeo was a nobleman, not an Indian from the slums, and at any rate, that was a fairy tale.” “But I love him, mamá.” “I assure you, you will forget,” her mother said. “As Juliette would have forgotten Romeo, had she lived. Time defaces every memory. You will see.”

Now, reflecting upon that encounter, she thought that her mother’s choice of “defaces” was deliberate. Her mother had not expected that Alicia would forget Anselmo, but rather that as she reached maturity, she would appreciate the absurdity of the romance between the princess and the stable boy. It would devolve from a tragedy into a farce, and passion would be replaced by embarrassment. Her mother was wrong.

The love she had felt for Anselmo had been the portal through which Alicia had discovered her capacity for love, and love had

become her vocation. The loss of her own daughter – the only child she knew she would ever bear – had made her the mother to all children she encountered. Her mother could cruelly jest that Alicia was like *la llorona* – the woman of legend who had drowned her children and, after her death, was condemned for eternity to search for them along the waterways of México, weeping and shrieking – but there was perhaps a grain of truth in her words. For in each child she encountered, Alicia saw traces of her own child and she loved them as she would have loved her own.

Then abruptly, Alicia understood something about Miguel Sarmiento's expression of sorrow as he had held the baby Miguel in his arms and about the tears he had wiped away so she would not see them. Doctor Sarmiento had also lost a child! And if he had lost a child and was unmarried, then there had also been a woman. He had come very close to telling her the story as they stood before the gates of the palace. Would he tell her if they met again? Plainly, whatever the details, his tale had left him with a heavy burden of guilt. Too heavy for a man whose essential goodness shone was clear to her. Miguel Sarmiento might not believe in God, but God – her God, the God who was love – hovered around the man waiting to be invited in but prevented by his guilt and shame. Was it vain and foolish of her to believe that she might be the instrument through which God would relieve the doctor's burden and release him to do the good work he was undoubtedly intended for? *No*, she thought, *not me!* But a voice that was not hers whispered its reply, *Yes, daughter. You*



### CHAPTER 3

A servant led Sarmiento through the palace of the Gaviláns in stiff shouldered, disapproving silence. In Europe, he had met members of the nobility and they had received him at their residences, older and more elaborate than the colonial mansions of México, but in Europe he was a tourist collecting experiences as if they were postcards. México was home and its streets and buildings were resonant for him in a way the castles and museums of Europe had never been. The colonial palaces had awed him when he was a boy, an awe that was not lessened by his republican father's fulminations against the aristocrats who inhabited them. They might well be "parasites," but to a small boy they were also marvelous as they swanned about the city in their beautiful carriages and led mysterious lives behind immense carved doors.

Now he was inside one of the great houses. In contrast to the Baroque palaces of Italy and France, the interior was plain, a reminder that it had been intended to be as much a military fortress as a residence. The decorative work – the acanthus carvings on the archways, the delicate Ionic columns that ran the length of the second floor – was exquisite, but the true luxury was simply the space itself. Amidst the bustling city whose natives jostled in forced intimacy on the streets, sidewalks and markets, and where most of the population lived in tenements and shanties, was this stone leviathan. The noise of the city did not penetrate its thick walls and its inhabitants breathed, not the city's miasmatic air, but the perfumed scents of its gardens. Here there was light in plentitude and a contemplative stillness in which fountains murmured and doves cooed. It was their possession of privacy that was the real wealth of the rich.

He was led into a great salon. As was the custom in Mexican houses, the furniture was pushed against the walls leaving large, empty spaces. The accretion of three hundred years of possessions – rosewood and mahogany furnishings from the Philippines, blue-and-white Chinese porcelains, an enormous carpet woven in Persia, Spanish cabinets inlaid with ivory and mother-of-pearl – seemed insufficient to fill its vastness. On the wall behind a long couch upholstered in pink damask were life-sized portraits of a ruff-collared aristocrat and his wife.

“Wait here,” the servant commanded before turning on his heel and marching out.

He prowled the room nervously. At his last meeting with Alicia Gavilán he had felt she had looked into him and seen his secret. Unable to bear the scrutiny, he had run. Later, however, recalling the

kindness in her low, musical voice he had been filled with a longing to see her again and to unburden himself. Impulsively, he had sent her a note asking if he might see her again. He had been encouraged by the invitation she had extended to him when they had stood at the doors of the palace for it had been offered without conditions and out of her kindness. But, perhaps, he thought, as he penned the note her kind impulse would cool when confronted by his actual request. For he was as aware as she must be that, unless he was offering himself as her suitor or as her physician, there was no social precedent for the private meeting of an unmarried man and an unmarried woman. Nonetheless, he was heartened by her prompt reply. Yet now, as he stood in this great room, surrounded by the bric-a-brac of her aristocratic lineage and uncertain of the propriety of their meeting, he could not help but feel out of place and intimidated. He paced the room, trying to allay his urge to flee.

“Señor doctor.”

He turned to greet her. She was unveiled and her face was bare of powders and cream. He was grateful for his medical training because it allowed him to suppress his shock at the extent of her scarring. Her face was a mask of lesions and pustules in which the lovely emerald eyes flickered like the eyes of one imprisoned.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t here to greet you when you arrived,” she said. “Shall we sit? I’ve asked for tea and coffee to be brought.”

She arranged herself on a settee and with an elegant wave of her hand invited him to sit beside her.

“Thank you for receiving me,” he said. “Your residence is quite beautiful.”

“Ah,” she said. “It is drafty and inconvenient. My ancestors stored

their clothes in chests, so there are no closets, and they feared the night air, so there are few windows. And of course the only lighting is candles and oil lamps. In my sisters' homes, you touch a button on the wall and the entire room is brilliantly illuminated."

He recognized the deprecation for it was, an aristocrat's mild reproach for his comment about the beauty of her house. He had encountered this attitude among his noble acquaintances in Europe where, to compliment such things, implied surprise that they should be other than of the highest caliber. It reminded him that, for all her kindness, she was a member of an ancient nobility which, even if superannuated in modern México, remained fully intact within itself.

Two servants appeared, weighted down with silver trays that held urns, cups, saucers, pitchers and plates of pastries. They set them down on a low table before Doña Alicia. As the servants arranged the repast, he stole a glance at his hostess. The first shock had passed and he studied her with the dispassion that was not only the fruit of his medical training but in his nature as well. The scarring had not obliterated the structure of her face and he saw that she would have been beautiful. She was like a princess in a fairy tale consumed by a dragon. Her hair, piled in braids atop her head, was heavy, dark and scented with attar of roses. Her neck was long, lovely and to his surprise unscarred. He glanced at her hands and they, too, bore no scars. Only her face appeared to have been affected; a medical anomaly that, under different circumstances, would have excited his professional interest. But he could not imagine asking her to submit to an examination or to the intrusive questions of a clinician.

"I hope you are not too repulsed by my appearance," she said

quietly when the servants had left.

“Doña Alicia, I am trained as a doctor to see past physical afflictions to the person who bears them.”

There was sadness in her eyes when she glanced at him, but all she said was, “Will you take coffee or tea?”

“Coffee, thank you,” he said.

She poured him a cup of coffee, added milk and sugar. Their fingers touched as she handed him the cup. “I rarely have visitors here,” she said. “Because I would feel I must spare them the shock of my appearance with veils or cosmetics but in my own home I wish to be free of those disguises and to be myself.”

“I am honored that you have received me,” he said.

“All of us need a place where we are free of our burdens,” she replied. “A refuge where we are accepted as we are. This is my place. And yours, doctor? Where is the place where you lay down your cross?”

The words of confession formed in his mind, but he could still not bring himself to say them, so he temporized. “What weight do you think I carry on my back?”

“I think you carry the weight of a child,” she said. “And a woman.”

He was shocked. Only his father knew Sarmiento’s secret. How could she have guessed? He shot her a look. She raised her cup to her lips calmly and sipped her tea, waiting for him to reply, but he could not. Not yet.

“Who lives here with you?” he asked, abruptly.

“Only my mother,” she replied, concealing with perfect manners any surprise at his clumsy deflection of the conversation.

“Where is the marquesa?”

“On Tuesday afternoons she goes to Chapultepec palace to attend a luncheon of the Daughters of Jerusalem, a charitable group founded by the President’s wife.”

“You do not attend?”

“Not today,” she said. “I thought on this occasion you might wish to speak to me alone.” When he failed to reply, she said, “Doctor, I see I have been too forward. My sincerest apology.”

“No,” he replied, hesitantly. “You need not apologize. You have offered me the opportunity to confide in you and for that I am most grateful, but if I did, Doña Alicia, you would regret your generosity. You see, there’s a difference between your burden and mine. Yours was visited on you through no fault of your own. Mine is of my own making.”

She glanced at him. He grasped the cup in his hands so tightly she worried it would shatter. Her hand began to move impulsively toward his, but she stopped herself. Whatever troubled him would not be soothed by a friendly hand on his or a few kind words, no matter how sincerely meant. She sensed that his wounds were as deep, pervasive and complex as the scars that disfigured her face. She chided herself for her clumsy approach because it had cornered him and left him no graceful way to retreat from the conversation. She must give him a way out.

“I understand from my friends who are your patients that you only recently returned to México,” she said. “Where were you?”

His fingers relaxed their grip on the cup. “I spent the last decade in Europe, studying at the medical faculties in Paris and Heidelberg.”

“You did not study at our own school of medicine?” she

prompted.

“I began my studies here,” he replied, “and I would have continued, but –” he paused uncomfortably. “My father felt it would be beneficial for me to study in France and Germany which are the modern centers of so much important medical research.”

“Like Louis Pasteur?” Alicia offered.

“Yes,” he said, evidently grateful to be at last on safe conversational ground. “Pasteur in France, Koch in Germany.”

“Did you ever meet him? Monsieur Pasteur?”

“I had the pleasure of attending a dinner at which he spoke two years before his untimely death,” the doctor replied, reverently. “I shall never forget his remarks. He said, ‘Science knows no country, because knowledge belongs to humanity, and is the torch that illuminates the world.’ ”

“Is that your also your creed, Doctor Sarmiento?”

“It must be the creed of every real scientist,” he said. His face was animated and even more striking than when in repose. “The principle of all existence is cause and effect. Scientific knowledge illuminates causes so that men are not condemned to go on living ignorantly in effects. In my own field of medicine, one disease after another has been yielded the secrets of its causes, thus diminishing human suffering.”

“That is a noble objective,” she said.

His face lapsed into melancholy. “Yes, it is, but I’m afraid I do very little toward its accomplishment by spending my days prescribing laudanum to unhappy women.”

“Are there no venues for you to do the kind of work you would find more fulfilling?” she asked.

“Notwithstanding Don Porfirio’s superficial improvements to

the city, México lags behind Europe in achieving true modernity. Electric streetlamps along the Paseo de la Reforma are one thing, but a real center for medical and scientific research is another and we do not have that nor does it seem the government is very interested in creating one.”

“Oh, I see,” she said. “Still, if you have an interested in improving the health of the people, I may be able to help you with that, at least.”

He leaned back and looked at her. “How, Doña? Are you in need of a physician?”

Her smile – heartbreaking, incandescent – exposed the latent beauty beneath the monstrous flesh.

“I have only been ill once in my life,” she said. “God evidently thought once was enough. No, not for me, but for the people I try to help. Many of them suffer from the diseases of the poor and I am useless to them. But you, señor doctor, you could heal them and perhaps in that small way diminish the human suffering you speak of.”

His first thought was that if he accepted her proposal he would be able to spend more time in her company. This alone would have reason enough to accept even without the prospect of being able to practice actual medicine as opposed to administering panaceas and placebos to the bored rich women of México City.

“I would be honored,” he said.

She remained in the salon after he left as Dolores cleared the table. The maid loaded the tray and asked, “Is there anything else you would

like, Doña Alicia?”

“No, my dear,” she replied. “Thank you.”

“He is very handsome,” the girl said, lifting the tray. “*Su novio.*”

“Yes, only he is not my suitor, but my friend,” she said. “You must be careful not to start any gossip about our meeting.”

“Yes, Doña,” she said somewhat skeptically and left Alicia to her own thoughts.

What she had told him was true. She do go unveiled at home, but only when family alone was present. As she had sat at her vanity before he arrived with her jars and pots of creams and powders, preparing to make her face into a mask to receive him as she did with other visitors, a thought had stayed her hand: *Let him see me as I am.* She had learned to distinguish between her personal thoughts and those thoughts that came to her like messages from a deeper source than her own personality. These deeper messages were sometimes consoling, but more often they had a challenging and unsettling quality. Her first impulse was always to resist them as she had when it had occurred to her she might help relieve his burden of sadness. Yet as always happened the thought simply repeated itself until she was forced to examine her reasons for rejecting it. She looked into the mirror and searched herself.

The reason, she discovered, was simple. She wanted him to fall in love with her and that fantasy required her to conceal her face from him. Because it was a fantasy and not merely because she could not hide her face from his gaze forever. It was also a fantasy because her life excluded the possibility of such things. Alicia had long accepted that the usual path of happiness open to women – marriage and children – was closed to her. In its place she had cultivated a different

path, a life of service that repaid her in love for her modest efforts to ameliorate the sufferings of others. This was her happiness. She must accept that, embrace it, and abandon the dreams of what was not possible for in those dreams, which could not be fulfilled, she would find only unhappiness and ingratitude. She sealed the jars of cream and powders, rose from her vanity, and went down to meet him with her naked face.

As he steered his buggy through the narrow streets of San Andrés, Sarmiento's habitually lucid mind was jumbled. All that was clear to him was that no woman had ever made as powerful an impression on him as Alicia Gavilán. What confused him was whether the impression was due to her magnetism or her tragedy, if they could even be separated. Would she have been the same woman had the misfortune of a preventable disease not ruined her appearance? Was the kindness at the core of her personality so profound it would have guided her life even if she had grown into the beautiful woman he glimpsed beneath the mask of sores, scars and lesions? Or would she have become another unhappy rich lady pacing her mansion on the Paseo de la Reforma waiting for a handsome doctor to relieve her boredom? And why did it matter to him? Because – the thought formed hesitantly, reluctantly – he felt for her the stirrings of personal affection. But what kind of affection, that of a friend for a friend, or of a man for a woman? In Europe, where such things were permitted in society, he had had purely platonic friendships with women but what Alicia Gavilán provoked in him was deeper than those cordial feelings. But the other, a man's passion for a woman? With her? With

her – her face as it was? He could not imagine . . . A beggar boy ran in front of his buggy, forcing him to rein in his horse and allowing him for a moment to set aside his mental agitation.

At precisely 10 a.m., Alicia Gavilán's landau came to a halt in front of his apartment building where he was waiting with his bag. It was a fine old coach, the black body polished to a high gloss, the family crest emblazoned on the door in red and gold. The curtains were drawn. The driver cast a wary look at him as he turned the silver handle and pulled open the door. The interior was filled with food, clothing and children's toys; Alicia sat in a corner with a bit of embroidery in her lap. As she had when he had first seen her, she wore a silk gown of midnight blue and a lace hat surmounted with feathers; a veil was fixed to the brim but up, revealing her face. He wedged himself in and sat beside her.

“Good morning, Doña,” he said.

“Good morning, Señor Doctor,” she replied. “Thank you for joining me today.”

“Where, precisely, are we going?”

“To visit my godchildren,” she said. She pulled a gold cord that ran above the door. A bell chimed and the carriage began to move.

Her godchildren were scattered in the poorest neighborhoods of the city, places he knew only by name but into which he had never ventured: San Sebastián, Carmen, Tepito, San Lázaro. They were

shanty towns that had grown up around crumbling colonial churches which had once been the center of tiny Indian villages swallowed up by the city. Now they housed the tens of thousands of poor who had flocked to the city looking for work after Don Porfirio's land reforms had squeezed country people off their ancestral lands to create the massive ranches of his favored friends. The more fortunate lived in tiny adobe houses that faced narrow, dirt roads where naked children played in the dust and packs of rabid-looking dogs scavenged piles of debris. The less fortunate lived in *vecindades* which were tenements carved out of old colonial mansions where a single windowless room might house a family of six or more. The least fortunate lived, as far as Sarmiento could tell, on the streets. The air reeked of raw sewage and sour *pulque*, the milky liquor of the agave that kept half the *pelados* in a state of pleasureless, semi-inebriation. The poor had existed only on the periphery of his vision as servants, laborers or beggars, indistinguishable one from another, with their muddy skin and inky hair, torn clothes, averted eyes, soft voices. This was the city of the dregs – the city of the *pelados*, the *léperos* – concealed within the city of the palaces which was, he realized, the city where he lived.

Alicia Gavilán, even more than he, belonged to the wealthy city superimposed on the city of misery through which the Gavilán carriage made its way, stopping before a whitewashed adobe hut or perhaps a former monastery now carved into a warren of hovels. These were places he would have hesitated entering, but Doña Alicia crossed the thresholds cheerfully, familiarly, calling out the names of her godchildren. He followed, doubtfully and behind him came the coachman loaded with food and clothes, candy and toys. Wherever they went, Doña Alicia was received with joy and guided to the single

chair in the tiny rooms where babies and children piled into her lap. After the gifts were distributed she would talk to the father or, more often, the mother of the family, picking up the threads of what it seemed to him were long-standing conversations. For he observed that she came not as an aristocratic benefactress distributing alms, but a beloved friend, guide, and confidant. She was treated with respect but not servility. Her godchildren addressed her not with the formal *usted* but the familial *tú*. They joked with her, poured out their hearts to her, complained about drunken husbands and short-changing shopkeepers, worried with her about their children and begged her to remember them in her prayers. Meanwhile, she sat with a child in her lap listening, encouraging, admonishing, praising. Her face was unveiled, her disfigurement freely exposed and evidently unremarkable.

But then, he thought, if there was anywhere in the city where she might have passed almost unnoticed, it would have been in the city of the poor. The filthy streets of its *colonias* teemed with men and woman who, without access to the most basic medical services, labored beneath disfigurements and deformities: a man missing both legs pushing himself along with his hands on a makeshift cart, a woman with an enormous goiter on her neck, a blind child begging on a corner, men and women whose faces bloomed with violent skin diseases or some, like Doña Alicia, bearing the scars of smallpox.

When she introduced him to her godchildren, they received him courteously, more for her sake than his, he quickly surmised, and politely declined his offers of medical assistance. Even Doña Alicia's gently cajolery could not persuade the shy mother to part with her sick child and in the end Sarmiento was simply an observer, greeted

and then ignored.

“How is it you acquired so many godchildren?” he asked her as they bumped along a dirt road in a nameless neighborhood at the northern edge of the city.

“Most of them were foundlings at the Casa de Niños Expositos who were in need of a godmother so they could be baptized,” she replied. “A priest at the cathedral where the orphans are taken knows he can always call on me to perform that function.”

“But some of these people we’ve seen are adults now,” he said. “Have you continued your bond with them all these years?”

“One is a godmother for life,” she said. “It is my responsibility to bear witness to my faith through my words and my actions as long as I live and they live.”

“You do more than that,” he pointed out. “You assist materially.”

She smiled. “A very wise priest I know, Padre Cáceres, once told me that the word of God is best heard on a full stomach.” After a moment she asked, tentatively, “Do you truly have no faith?”

“I do not wish to be disrespectful of your beliefs, but in my view religion is no more than superstition, a way to explain natural phenomena for which there are now rational and scientific explanations. Those superstitions may have served their purpose once, but their time has passed. The longer they persist, the more pernicious they become.”

“What do you mean, natural phenomena?”

“Disease, for example. It is not caused by demons nor is it divine punishment. Nor was the world created in seven days and seven nights, nor man from dust or woman from his rib. The creation of the world, the emergence of humans, those were geological and biological

processes that took millennia. There is no heaven in the sky, there is no hell beneath the earth's crust. I apologize if I offend you, Doña Alicia, but you asked and I should like to be direct with you in all matters."

"I envy your education," she said. She smiled again. "Mine ended with embroidery and piano lessons. There is so much more I would like to have studied but as my mother would say that is not our custom. So I cannot contest your opinions of religion with equal erudition. I can only tell you there is more to my faith than superstition."

"What is that, Doña?" he asked.

She gazed out of the carriage for a long time collecting her thoughts. "You see what my life is," she said, finally. "Bounded by custom on one hand, by my disfigurement on the other. My space is very small, Señor Doctor. Like a cell in the prison at Belem. I do not imagine that this sense of imprisonment is special to me. We are all bounded in one way or another and my cell is comfortable, unlike those unfortunates who starve in the streets. We are all birds in cages but some of us find reason to sing. My faith is my reason to sing. I sing and my song is answered. "

"By whom?"

"By others singing from their cages and by the birds of the air, the spirits of those who have been released from their cages, and by the one who came to free us all from our cages by bursting his own, my Lord Jesus Christ."

"You ascribe to your faith what are your own inherent virtues," he said. "I don't know whether I think you are being foolish or humble. But it doesn't matter what I think. The world is a better place because you are in it."

“You, too, Miguel,” she said, using his given name for the first time.

He shook his head. “All I have done today is frighten children with my stethoscope and quarrel with an old woman about herbal remedies.”

She shook her head, still gazing out the window at the streets of the poor. “There is a place for you in this world. I feel it.”

*A place with you.* The thought came unbidden but once it had formed in his mind, it seemed both improbable and true.

“Ah, here you are last!” his cousin said with a mock bow. He had risen from his seat at a marble-topped table beneath the stained glass dome of maidens gathering lilies which had given the café its name, Los Lirios. The dome like the mahogany bar that curved between Corinthian columns had been imported from France.

Sarmiento sat down. “I’m sorry to be late. I was delayed.”

A white-jacketed waiter in a red fez approached to take their orders. When he had departed, Jorge Luis said, suspiciously, “There is something different about you, Miguel.”

Sarmiento shrugged and answered, “No, I don’t think so.”

“You seem unusually hale,” Jorge Luis continued. “Not the pale ghost I have become accustomed to.” He made a show of inspecting Sarmiento’s face. “Your eyes are clear. Have you stopped drinking?”

“You just heard me order a whisky,” he replied with a smile.

“By this time of the afternoon you would already have had several whiskies, but not today. There are only two causes for sobriety, *primo*, God or a woman, and since you are an atheist, I must assume there is

a woman.”

Jorge Luis paused to allow the waiter to set their drinks on the table. He lifted his glass of absinthe, touched it to Sarmiento's and said, “Who is this paragon, Miguel? Presumably not the little French girl at Silvestre's place I recommended last time we met. She's lovely, but falling for a whore requires more imagination than you have ever demonstrated.”

“Do you never tire of being clever?”

“Don't change the subject,” he said, lifting the glass of green liquor to his lips. He paused, stared at Sarmiento and blurted out, “No! It can't be. Not Alicia Gavilán!” Sarmiento felt his face flush. “It is! My God, Miguel . . .”

He grabbed Jorge Luis's wrist and said, in an angry whisper, “Will you keep your voice down!”

“Then rumors are true,” he marveled. “Beauty and the beast, the gossips call you, the roles inverted of course. You the beauty and –”

“Do not dare complete that sentence,” Sarmiento said, his voice tight with fury.

Jorge Luis fell back in his chair as if he had been struck. He swallowed his drink and lay the empty glass on the table. “But this is unbelievable, Miguel,” he said in a quiet, serious voice. “What does the lady say?”

Sarmiento's hand fluttered helplessly.

“You haven't shared your sentiments with her?” his cousin asked.

“How can I, when I am uncertain of their meaning or their cause?”

“Surely, their cause is the lady and as for their meaning –”

Sarmiento swallowed some whiskey. “I have seen her without her

veil. I cannot feel toward her the ordinary physical attraction one feels for women and yet, *primo*, when I am with her, her very presence gives me a feeling of peace and well-being as if every sordid and wasteful thing I have ever done has been forgiven. Is that love? Is it gratitude? Do I want her to be my wife or my mother? Is my feeling of being forgiven an illusion that would shatter once she knew —” He stopped and raised his glass to the waiter.

“Once she knew what, Miguel?” his cousin asked when the waiter had come and gone.

“I have lived less than an exemplary life,” he said. “Let’s leave it at that.”

Their drinks came and they finished them and the next round in silence.

When the fourth round came, Jorge Luis said, “Listen, Miguel, let’s not be glum. You want to know whether or not you are in love with the lady? Perhaps I can help you answer that question.”

“How so?”

“The President’s wife is throwing a charity ball on Saturday evening. Come with me and we will see how strong your sentiment is for the *Condesa* Alicia when you are surrounded by all the available beauties of the city.”

“A charity ball? Which charity?”

Jorge Luis smirked. “I offer you a garden of earthly delights and you worry about which charity is being feted? Really, Miguel, first things first. In any event, the charity is entirely respectable. It’s the foundling home. Lady Carmen’s pet project. You know she is as barren as the Sahara herself so she likes to go and coo at the babies that have been abandoned there by their slattern mothers. You must come.”

Sarmiento shrugged. "I do not wish to meet other women."

"The come because your Doña Alicia may be there."

"How do you know that?"

"She also is a patron of the orphanage."

"Yes," Sarmiento acknowledged, thinking of Alicia's many godchildren. "That's true. She is."

"I will be at your apartment Saturday night at nine on the point. Be dressed and ready." He gulped his drink and stood up. "*Hasta sábado, primo.*"

"Until then," Sarmiento said.

Alicia and her three sisters took tea with their mother in her yellow salon every afternoon. Alicia arrived first, followed by her sisters, and then her mother. So, when she entered the room today she was surprised to find *la niña* already present. Under her mother's gimlet-eyed gaze, the servants nervously set out the tea service and hastily retreated. Her mother glanced up and her and said, "Who is this man in whose company you have been seen by half the city?"

Alicia sat down on a gilded chair from the reign of Louis XV. "You are referring, no doubt, to my friend, Doctor Miguel Sarmiento."

Her mother looked at her with hooded eyes, like an ancient bird of prey. "Your friend? An unmarried reprobate? Do not imagine, my good daughter, that your unfortunate condition puts you beyond the reach of scandal."

"I assure you, mother, Miguel Sarmiento is no reprobate," she replied hotly. "He is a sensitive, honorable man who assists me in my charity."

"He is a lunatic's son who was forced to leave México a decade ago

under a cloud.”

“He went to study medicine in Germany and France.”

“That isn’t what the gossips say,” her mother observed.

“Since when do you listen to the gossips?”

Her mother frowned. “When they are gossiping about my daughter.” She raised a hand to prevent Alicia from replying. “Listen to me daughter. I have permitted you unusual freedom to do your good works but there is a limit to my liberality.”

“Will you lock me up in my room?” Alicia asked, coolly.

“Don’t be a fool!” her mother snapped. “You have become the laughingstock of the city, throwing yourself like a lovelorn girl at a man who has no interest in you. I am merely attempting to save you and this family from further embarrassment.”

Alicia’s face burned from shame. “Is that what the gossips say? That I am throwing myself at him?”

“Like a hideous witch pursuing a handsome prince,” her mother replied. “That is what they say.” *La niña* sighed. “I am sorry to repeat it, but I want you to hear what is whispered behind your back.”

“But it is not true, mother. I am not pursuing him. He is my friend,” she said, sounding pitiable even to herself like a little girl begging to be allowed to keep a stray kitten.

“Yet you have seen fit not to introduce me to this friend of yours,” her mother replied.

Alicia, remembering how carefully she had arranged Miguel’s visit to the palace when her mother would be out, had no satisfactory response.

Her mother, noting her discomfiture, continued. “I do not blame you for wanting the attentions of a man. You are normal, after all,

notwithstanding your misfortune. But what you are doing with this doctor is not permitted, Alicia. It is also unnecessary. Even as you are, there are men who would gladly have you as their wife in exchange for the social prestige you would bring to them.”

“Even as I am,” Alicia said bitterly. “What you are describing is not marriage, but barter.”

“My dear,” she said. “Except in the novels of the Brontës that is what marriage is. I worry what will become of you when I die. A woman alone has no place in the world. Your brothers-in-law will undoubtedly wrest control of your inheritance, paltry as it will be, and appropriate it to their own uses. You will end up living on their sufferance.”

“My sisters would not allow that.”

“They are entirely dependent on their husbands for everything but the air they breathe. I would not look to them for help.”

“Then Christ will be my help,” Alicia said.

“Oh, him,” *la niña* replied. “A man like other men. What was Jesus’s mother to him but nine months’ food and lodging? Seriously, daughter, think of what I have said.”

“You know, as no one else does, where I am truly scarred,” Alicia replied. “What man knowing that would have me – even as I am.”

“He need never know.”

“On our wedding night he would know.”

The old woman raised her eyebrows. “There are plausible explanations. It is time you grew up, Alicia, and accepted the world as it is, not as you wish it to be. You need a husband and we shall procure one for you. You will accompany me to the first lady’s ball wearing my finest jewels.”

“Why not simply hang a for sale sign around my neck?”

“Don’t be vulgar. You are a daughter of this ancient house, a *condesa*. Let society pay attention to that. I want you noticed, not pitied. In the meantime there will be no further assignations with this Sarmiento. Do you understand?”

Alicia bowed her head in resignation and assent.