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YOURS, WARMLY

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The sisters' names were Georgina and Alberta. They lived at the lower end of our street. On December mornings their house blended into the serene mist draping the mountain. Ever since we had moved into this town, ten years before, I'd had the impression that if there ever had been anything immutable it was this house and its two inhabitants. Both were tall, with long hair, always dressed in the colors of death—and people could hardly tell them apart, fusing them into one common appellation: the Misses Arvelo, the old maids.

The sole interaction between them and the rest of the population took place through their threads, which they made of cotton and colored in the warmly-hued dyes they prepared themselves. The two women seemed to exist solely in connection to their work, and would come up in conversation only if someone mentioned needing some thread.

As if by an unspoken agreement, no person ever trespassed the boundary imposed by the fence running the length of their property. "Miss Alberta" or "Miss Georgina," we would call from the street, requesting a spool of thread of such and such a color or type. One of them would immediately appear on the threshold. It occurred to me that they were ever alert to the possibility of a guest who never materialized.

Although at my tender age my reputation for impudence was too heavy a burden for my young shoulders to bear, and despite my own father's declared opinion that I was too fresh (he contrasted my temperament to his own gravity), it would never have occurred to me to violate the shy respect the Misses commanded. I shudder at the thought that barring the accident I would never have come to truly know them.

It seemed natural for my relatives to worry about the early evidence of quirks in my character. My peculiarities were innocent enough, however, and, when judged from the vantage point of time, quite ordinary, I think. My foremost trait was a morbid curiosity for what each day held in store. Devoid as I was of artistic inclinations or revolutionary flights of fancy, my passionate nature manifested itself through a reprehensible inclination for chasing girls; I particularly enjoyed flirting with those whose age should have compelled me to silence. My mother soon took notice of my philandering glances, which seemed transparent to her, and grew quite troubled by what she perceived as my risky propensities.

The truth was that there was nothing perverse or affronting in my budding—though perhaps excessively trusting—heart. "You're going to fall flat on your face

often enough," my Aunt Dinorah augured, "hopefully you won't crack your skull the first time around." My mother's brothers, on the other hand, encouraged my proclivities in enthusiastic unison. The love letters I wrote roused them to enthusiastic outbursts. Sometimes they borrowed them to use with slight modifications in their own amorous escapades. "This one inherited from the family the men's wickedness and the women's beauty," another one of my concerned aunts concluded.

On occasion I would ask myself why the Misses Arvelo were referred to as "old maids," an appellation never used in my house, despite the fact that in my extended maternal family—bound as it was by abnormally close ties that often proved too formidable a match for any non-relative—very few had married. In the opinion of my grandfather no man had ever garnered enough merit to deserve the hand of one of his daughters. No daughter, with the exception of my mother, had ever married. Several of the sons ventured to the altar, but had eventually abandoned their spouses under spurious pretenses and returned to the original fold, too cozy in this home that sheltered their routines, that allowed their enthusiasms to drift towards women in general, maybe because no woman could ever match their mother's generosity. War or alcohol were variables that could have upset this masculine universe. But martial combat was a thing of the past, not one among them had been galvanized by art or travel, and alcohol was forbidden: several of the kinfolk, the grandfather among them, had died of excessive mirth. This living all in a heap in a home that given its dimensions and number of inhabitants was more like a hotel seemed to encourage the proliferation of promiscuous adventures.

One afternoon, as I passed the Arvelo's house in the company of my uncle Juan, it happened that one of the women was handing some spools of thread to a client. My uncle diverted his gaze towards her, muttering: "Look, Ernesto, that one there has never seen a penis." I laughed, thinking all the while that my mother's sisters had never encountered the particular sex organ just named either.

My uncles taught me about euphoria and risk. I learned how to bathe in deep swimming holes and conquer whirlpools of rushing waters with powerful arm-strokes. On open country, riding semi-wild beasts, or in the depths of the water, they unfurled before me their astounding self-confidence. In my solitude, however, I sometimes questioned my beloved relatives' intelligence—chasing women was an endeavor made inferior by its frequency. When they sat silent they gave me the sad impression of weariness and predictability. As they ascended in years they sought younger and younger women, and just as poor, to the extent that in the case of Juan, my eldest uncle, his last lover, a girl with eyes the color of sapodilla who looked at me with crisp interest the only time he brought me to visit her, the relationship seemed more like mutual revenge: hers, against poverty; his, against old age.

Uncle Felix, a supporter—as were the others—of my insolence and fiery temperament, was my best accomplice. As the one responsible for the family's commercial dealings with strangers he traveled frequently to the city, bringing me back old books and nineteenth-century French novels that he borrowed from a woman

friend of as limited literary refinement as his, but heiress to an extensive library she liked to share. I have no idea what criteria she used to select my readings, but gathered that she had some romantic notion of what I was like.

It was he who fancied giving me a bicycle. He thought surely that a bicycle would place me on an equal footing with the kids that rode past our house showing off their skills at the pedals. The artifact arrived on a Monday between sacks of salt, drums of oil, and other merchandise coming to supply the family-owned warehouses.

I started by practicing in our back yard. No one in my family knew how to ride, and to seek a friend's help would have only brought me down a peg; hence I managed with the sole help of my uncles, who sweated as they pushed me, now over my mother's cabbages, now over the *granadillo* vines, inciting the women's protests. I managed spells of triumphant equilibrium. Then I ventured onto the street with the notion that the faster the speed the easier it would be to remain on the seat. Looking up towards the mountain from the crest of the street, I felt a stimulating tension, like that which preludes falling in love, and plunged downhill.

Balance, brakes, direction, everything became a jumble in a flash of time. We (bicycle and man) exploded against the wooden railing. The fence surrounding the Arvelo sisters' house came crashing down. I suddenly found myself entangled in the absurd rose bushes as the women's four perplexed eyes stared at me. Between the two of them they helped me get up and disentangle myself from the net of thorns. Not only had I brought the fence down, but I had ravaged the flowering rose bushes so tenderly nurtured till then. They, however, seemed not to have taken in the damage, focusing their attention instead on my flayed arms and the numerous scratches around my eyes.

The house was a limbo. The misses were neither poor nor rich, old or young, beautiful or pleasant. The differing detail of the eyebrows caught my attention. Whereas Georgina's were intact, Alberta appeared to have tweezed them all out, replacing them with a drawn simulation, thick near her brow, too thin towards the ends. Since when and why had they installed themselves in this imperturbable bubble, tangled in rose bushes and the smell of old junk? These questions began to assail me the moment they brought me into the house whose threshold people said no man had ever crossed.

After probing my ribs with soft pressure, the youngest of the two declared without hesitation that no bones had been broken. The other one brought salt and oil, covering my cuts and bruises with the mixture.

True to my sense of responsibility, that afternoon I presented myself at the house, informing the misses from the street that I had come to repair the fence. Alberta asked me to come in. As I concentrated on my task, I felt observed from every angle. They prepared coffee. Alberta talked for the two of them; Georgina remained lost in a meditative silence, as if she were not sure of the meaning of words, her gaze lingering on me in melancholy scrutiny. "It's best to learn to ride a bike when you're four or five years old," she commented at one point. Ill at ease, I fancied her insignificant in her cloister of eyes prone to deepness. I concluded that

my presence irritated her. On her head she wore a horrible chignon which must have held at least a yard of coiled hair. Its thickness was an affront to the thin body sustaining it. The sun was setting. Its light, dense on the curtains and on the copper decorations, reinforced the room's unreality. "One skein of dyed thread," someone called from the outside. "Excuse me," Georgina said, walking over to wait on the customer. I discerned a fleeting agitation in her glance. Despite her ridiculous dress and hairdo she walked with grace.

"They belong to Georgina, she could lend them to you if you'd like," Alberta commented, noticing my eyes sliding involuntarily towards a pile of books displayed in a peculiar arrangement in a glass case: on the right side, wine glasses and various glass objects; on the left the row formed by the books' spines. They probably relegated to it articles long since out of use. She repeated the generous suggestion in her sister's presence, but the latter voiced neither acquiescence nor refusal.

To go from my house to the center of town I had to pass the Misses Arvelo's house. It was the most obvious route. Though I could avoid it by taking a detour, I didn't do so. Each time I went by, I glanced in. If my timing coincided with Alberta's gazing out onto the street, she would come to the door to greet me or to ask me to help her move a piece of furniture. She would sometimes call me, explaining: "As you're going past, could you get me three bars of scented soap?" In my own family I had never been asked to run errands. We always kept a boy around for this purpose. The first time that Miss Alberta made such a request I must have betrayed my displeasure, because she immediately added in a shy way. "Well, if you're going to the drugstore, that is, I wouldn't want you to go out of your way. Maybe you have more important things to do and I'm just annoying you. Don't worry. I'll wait for the boy who brings the milk . . . But he is so dense about buying certain things." I would remember how kind they had been to me when I destroyed their garden and would immediately offer to bring the desired articles.

If I went by accompanied by one of my uncles, the Misses would remain out of sight. I gradually resumed my habitual amusements, of which chasing girls was the most rewarding. The most seemingly trifling detail would cause my heart to overflow: the radiance of Zenda's hair (her Swedish family was admired in town for having a steam bath in the house); the fingers of Lourdes, the judge's daughter, whose hands I always recall writing; the waist of Isabel, who came from the red-light district and had been raised in the whores' slum but had more whims than a princess. But these fleeting emotions were now displaced by a sordid curiosity for what was different: the Misses Arvelo, who at close range appeared less old and more deranged.

I asked my family about them, eliciting glances of suspicion and disbelief, especially from my aunts, precisely the ones best informed, who bestowed only the most perfunctory details—"Alberta has always lived in that house," "One of them is very sick," "Georgina was away for years," "She gets her medicine through the mail," "Some misfortune befell her while she was away and she came home to bury herself alive," "Alberta used to come out before her sister's return," "Misses?"—

doled out with reluctant interest. It seemed that neither one of them had left her imprint on a soul able to convey at present either the fervor of hate or the warmth of a memory held dear. The more inconsequential they appeared in the collective memory, the more they aroused my interest. The slightest glimpse of Georgina's figure suffocated me, my feet would develop a peculiar itch, all the fluids in my body would rush forth, sometimes I feared I would pee on myself if she looked into my eyes.

I took to visiting them without any prearranged reason. At first I remained just the time required to wait for coffee or to listen to Alberta's comments on the news they had heard on the radio. Time enough to grow conscious of the unalterable ambiguity in Georgina's glances, a mixture of dismay and keen intelligence. She always watched me from a distance.

One afternoon, my visit coincided with the arrival of the post office messenger. Alberta accepted the parcel from her side of the fence, untied it at the table, and without ceasing to speak (she chatters as if she had been accumulating words for years) came into the room carrying the small jars of medicine and a supply of syringes. The wrapping had been pushed aside with the addressee plainly visible, and I could read without difficulty: "The Misses Arvelo," followed by the address. The slip of paper taken from a prescription pad that Alberta had secured under a flower vase, however, was impossible to decipher from my position. I rose, attentive to the sounds of the women's steps, and pulled it out, leaving only one corner under the vase, so I could read it as I stood by the table. "Miss Georgina Arvelo: my dear" A listing of recommendations concerning diet and changes in the dosage followed, counseling a gradual increase for a month and a corresponding decrease for another month to follow, and the noting down of the observed results. I recalled that Georgina hardly let herself be seen. I shut my eyes tightly, shamed by the lukewarm drops threatening to brim over.

"I have a surprise for you," Alberta told me the next day, frightening me with her enthusiasm. How could she be so unconcerned about her stricken sister? I inquired about Georgina, not making any effort to lower my voice. I knew she must be in the bedroom, or else in the small workshop next to the kitchen where they made their threads. Perhaps she was listening to our conversation. "She's working now. The school of home economics at the Lyceum has sent us a large order." She lowered her voice to inform me that I could borrow the books in the glass case or read them there in their house. I pretended to listen to her chatter but remained silent, attentive to any sound that could reveal the other sister's presence and overflowing with joy at the thought that from then on I could come to their house to read. Their house was quieter than mine, and when I read Alberta would stop talking and I could better glean Georgina's presence.

The burning desire to see her was killing me. My anxiety evolved into a boundless appetite, I devoured my own food and any left by others. When my uncles were distracted I stole boxes of chocolates from the warehouse, plus cheeses and crackers that I hid in my armoire, consuming them at night to the cadence of the reading of my favorite books, or while writing warm epistles addressed to no one

in particular. I plunged to the depths of an alluring oblivion.

I was a prisoner of my own fantasy, carried away by an image of my own creation, because otherwise I could not explain the trepidation that had descended upon me from the moment I penetrated the Misses dwelling. I thought of Georgina as a double-bottomed chest, what fascinated me was on the hidden side, which I wished to capture through her casual airs—her gaze, her walk—or else through the designs for threads or needlework which she executed with her sister. The dusty books in the glass case revealed a finely selective, and free, mind. My mother would have forbidden their reading had she been aware of their provoking contents. Even those which dealt with religion evidenced a formidable subversive instinct. There were some of naked eroticism. Surely Alberta had not bothered to leaf through them, and Georgina seemed indifferent to whatever I was reading, to the point that I came to feel a certain degree of expansion when they left me alone.

I would return home barely able to conceal my disconcerting apprehension, with an unassuageable hunger and the instinctive certainty that something harmful had taken possession of me.

My uncles grew uneasy about the frequency of my visits to the Misses Arvelo. They responded with skeptical glances to my explanations that I went there to read novels or would ask me to take them with me on a visit—you never knew, maybe they could do them the favor of . . . For an entire week I concentrated on the Lyceum and my friends. I stole some carnations from the hospital's garden to soothe Zensa. As on other occasions, she invited me to her house on Sunday. Isabel, on the other hand, would not allow me to court her, replying to my familiar flattery with words of scorn: "They say you're the Misses Arvelo's pimp," she laughed with glee, reminding me of her origins as princess of the red-light district. It was her way of scolding me for my many days of neglect or for the carnations that Zensa made sure all the girls saw. The blow left me speechless, more than anything because I was beginning to surrender to the as yet unnamed siege in my heart. At that very instant I swiftly expelled Isabel from my life and vowed never again to visit the Misses Arvelo's house.

On Saturday I woke up distressed. I went out on my bicycle early, planning to roam around town for a while. Perhaps I would venture as far as Zensa's house. Towards the bottom of the street the sun was beginning to displace the fog. As I approached the Misses's dwelling a slight shiver stirred my blood. It didn't matter, they would be asleep. "Hey . . ." I recognized Alberta's voice. "We have ginger tea for the cold." I looked up and down the street before entering, annoyed at myself for doing so.

"I have a surprise for you," she told me once I began to savor the hot beverage, going into the room and bringing out a bundle of an eye-catching red hue. "It's a bedspread, I knitted it to remind you of us when you're home." I asked after Georgina. "She's fine," she replied. Perplexed, I confessed having seen the doctor's prescriptions for her sister. "You know about that?" she blurted out, her expression almost somber. Then she added: "Don't feel pity for her. I'm the one who's ailing, but I know no one in the city, the medications are expensive, and believing they're

for Georgina they send them with no questions asked." It would be impossible for the sister not to be listening to our conversation. Why didn't she show herself?

In an attempt to break the embarrassing intimacy Miss Alberta was seeking to establish, I started to say: "Madam . . ." Her cutting gesture stopped me short. "Not Madam, Miss," she said, underscoring the last word. I rose to leave, but before I could escape the woman thrust upon me a bag of star caramels she had made for me, almost whispering in my ear: "She's selfish."

I pedaled to Zensa's house and told her that I had come to bring her a present, immediately handing her the bedspread and candy. She took the candy but gave me the knitted spread back: "We have one just like that, knitted by the Misses Arvelo at my mother's request." I felt that everything around me was being altered in a deliberate effort to bring me to shame. But, shameless as I was, I went on to visit Isabel, the one I had dismissed from my affections, and gave her the bedspread. She was very pleased—there were no bedspreads like that in the red-light district.

From day to day I bolstered my determination to stay away from the two women. Georgina was old and ugly, I told myself, recalling that she was very likely as old as my mother, and was eccentric moreover. These thoughts briefly tempered my impulses. I never went past their house unless I was accompanied by one of my uncles, and then felt on my back the troubled eyes posted behind the broad shutters and the rose bushes.

When, sick of detours, I concluded that my absence—while a cure for the puzzling bewilderment instilled in me by one sister (I measured this by my appetite: my earnest voracity had vanished with the distance)—had also sent an unequivocal message of rejection to the unbearable tenderness of Miss Alberta, I resumed the easy route between my home and the center of town. In fact, I walked past the front of the house without seeing anyone.

One day, however, Miss Alberta called me so loudly that it would have been impossible to pretend I hadn't heard her. I cursed having once crossed that threshold no other man had ever entered. At the same time I felt a rare feeling of exhilaration: I was thinking of myself as *a man*. A term I associated with the uncontrollable urge to conquer.

Her hands were trembling: "If you could do us the favor of taking and burning this box of papers. The room is filling with termites. Georgina won't let me put it in the trash, but she has agreed to having it burned." I was moved by the deliberate distance with which she treated me. She had gained countless pounds since the last time I had seen her and looked bloated. A terrible vision burst into my perception, making me shudder cowardly. I had seen Georgina crossing from the bedroom to the kitchen. Her hair was loose, as I had imagined her many times. Her hands held a bowl. The fleeting vision of the profile. The gray hair interlaced with the black. The lace gown over her shoulders. I stood there, stunned, replying something or other, as I waited for the tall figure to retrace her steps to the bedroom, feeling frightened, as if I couldn't bear to see her again. The vision did not return. Miss Alberta had placed the box in my arms, turning her back to me.

That night, every time I managed to fall asleep, I would dream myself in love

with a dead girl with Zensa's hair and Georgina's face. I would awaken wallowing in self-loathing, prey to a rapturous bashfulness. I concluded that the nightmare was connected to the box of papers I had placed under the bed. I moved it to the armoire and succeeding in sleeping without interruption till dawn.

In the morning I determined to burn the papers at once, before the termites invaded my room. With that resolve I went to the furthest corner of the yard. My family was just beginning to rise. For the moment everyone would be too immersed in their own concerns to inquire about my whereabouts.

I emptied the contents. Notebooks, old photographs, bills, and reams of deteriorated manuscripts. I felt an urge to review it all, but the insects had accomplished a systematic destruction, and I felt, moreover, a morbid desire to rid myself of those Misses Arvelo who had so gotten into my blood. At any moment my mother would approach to snoop. I could explain, but nothing would have been more annoying than having to do so. Besides, what could I explain? The flames began their devastation.

I took only one notebook, only slightly perforated by the insects, and a few faded photographs. Seated on a stone, I started to read it distractedly, then with curiosity, and finally, in despair. I had just burned Miss Georgina's memoirs. I stared with fascination at the blazing remains, feeling that the scornful glances she had graced me with had been well earned—I had not deserved her. No person in this town had lived as ardent and bold an existence as Miss Georgina. She had exhausted all that life could offer (adventures which seemed beyond compare back then; before hers, my uncles' audacity and my own temerity were almost laughable). Her seclusion gained a new intimation of enigma. I threw the notebook into the fire.

Meanwhile, extraordinary tidings rippled from house to house on our street. The frenzy invaded our house. One of the Misses Arvelo had died at dawn. Which? I asked, gasping for breath.