

The Trail of Your Blood in the Snow

AT NIGHTFALL, when they reached the frontier, Nena Daconte realized that her finger with the wedding band on it was still bleeding. The Civil Guardsman, a rough wool blanket covering his patent-leather tricorne hat, examined their passports in the light of a carbide lantern as he struggled to keep his footing in the fierce wind blowing out of the Pyrenees. Although the two diplomatic passports were in perfect order, the guard raised the lantern to make certain that the photographs resembled their faces. Nena Daconte was almost a child, with the eyes of a happy bird, and molasses skin still radiant with the bright Caribbean sun in the mournful January gloom, and she was wrapped up to her chin in a mink coat that could not have been bought with the year's wages of the entire frontier garrison. Her husband, Billy Sánchez de Ávila, who drove the car, was a year younger

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and almost as beautiful, and he wore a plaid jacket and a baseball hat. Unlike his wife, he was tall and athletic and had the iron jaw of a timid thug. But what best revealed the status of them both was the silver automobile whose interior exhaled a breath of living animal; nothing like it had ever been seen along that impoverished border. The rear seat overflowed with suitcases that were too new and many gift boxes that were still unopened. It also held the tenor saxophone that had been the overriding passion of Nena Daconte's life before she succumbed to the disquieting love of her tender beach hoodlum.

When the guard returned the stamped passports, Billy Sánchez asked him where they could find a pharmacy to treat his wife's finger, and the guard shouted into the wind that they should ask in Hendaye, on the French side. But the guards at Hendaye were inside a warm, well-lit glass sentry box, sitting at a table in their shirtsleeves and playing cards while they ate bread dipped in large glasses of wine, and all they had to see was the size and make of the car to wave them on into France. Billy Sánchez leaned on the horn several times, but the guards did not understand that he was calling them, and one of them opened the window and shouted with more fury than the wind:

"Merde! Allez-vous-en!"

Then Nena Daconte, wrapped in her coat up to her ears, got out of the car and asked the guard in perfect French where there was a pharmacy. As was his habit, the guard, his mouth full of bread, answered that it was no affair of his, least of all in a storm like this, and closed the window. But then he looked with more attention at the girl wrapped in the glimmer of natural mink

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and sucking her hurt finger, and he must have taken her for a magic vision on that fearful night, because his mood changed on the spot. He explained that the closest city was Biarritz, but in the middle of winter, and in that wind howling like wolves, they might not find a pharmacy open until Bayonne, a little farther on.

"Is it serious?" he asked.

"It's nothing," Nena Daconte said, smiling and showing him the finger with the diamond ring and the almost invisible scratch of the rose on the tip. "It was just a thorn."

Before they reached Bayonne, it began to snow again. It was no later than seven, but they found the streets deserted and the houses closed to the fury of the storm, and after turning many corners and not finding a pharmacy, they decided to drive on. The decision made Billy Sánchez happy. He had an insatiable passion for rare automobiles and a papa with too many feelings of guilt and more than enough resources to satisfy his whims, and he had never driven anything like the Bentley convertible that had been given to him as a wedding gift. His rapture at the wheel was so intense that the more he drove the less tired he felt. He wanted to reach Bordeaux that night. They had reserved the bridal suite at the Hôtel Splendid, and not all the contrary winds or snow in the sky could hold him back. Nena Daconte, on the other hand, was exhausted, in particular by the last stretch of highway from Madrid, which was the edge of a cliff fit for mountain goats and lashed by hailstorms. And so after Bayonne she wrapped a handkerchief around her ring finger, squeezing it tightly to stop the blood that was still

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flowing, and fell into a deep sleep. Billy Sánchez did not notice until close to midnight, when the snow had ended and the wind in the pines stopped all at once and the sky over the pastureland filled with glacial stars. He had passed the sleeping lights of Bordeaux but stopped only to fill the tank at a station along the highway, for he still had the energy to drive to Paris without a break. He was so delighted with his big, £25,000 toy that he did not even ask himself if the radiant creature asleep at his side—the bandage on her ring finger soaked with blood and her adolescent dream pierced for the first time by lightning flashes of uncertainty—felt the same way too.

They had been married three days before and ten thousand kilometers away, in Cartagena de Indias, to the astonishment of his parents and the disillusionment of hers, and with the personal blessing of the archbishop. No one except the two of them understood the real basis or knew the origins of that unforeseeable love. It had begun three months before the wedding, on a Sunday by the sea, when Billy Sánchez's gang had stormed the women's dressing rooms at the Marbella beaches. Nena had just turned eighteen; she had come home from the Châtelaine school in Saint-Blaise, Switzerland, speaking four languages without an accent, and with a masterful knowledge of the tenor saxophone, and this was her first Sunday at the beach since her return. She had stripped to the skin and was about to put on her bathing suit when the panicked stampede and pirate yells broke out in the nearby cabanas, but she did not understand what was going on until the latch on her door splintered and she saw the most beautiful bandit imaginable standing in

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front of her. He wore nothing but a pair of fake leopard-skin string briefs, and he had the peaceful, elastic body and golden color of those who live by the ocean. Around his right wrist he wore the metal bracelet of a Roman gladiator, and around his right fist he had coiled an iron chain that he used as a lethal weapon, and around his neck hung a medal with no saint, which throbbed in silence to the pounding of his heart. They had attended the same elementary school and broken many piñatas at the same birthday parties, for they both came from the provincial families that had ruled the city's destiny at will since colonial days, but they had not seen each other for so many years that at first they did not recognize one another. Nena Daconte remained standing, motionless, doing nothing to hide her intense nakedness. Then Billy Sánchez carried out his puerile ritual: He lowered his leopard-skin briefs and showed her his respectable erected manhood. She looked straight at it, with no sign of surprise.

"I've seen them bigger and harder," she said, controlling her terror. "So think again about what you're doing, because with me you'll have to perform better than a black man."

In reality not only was Nena Daconte a virgin, but until that moment she had never seen a naked man, yet her challenge was effective. All that Billy Sánchez could think to do was to smash the fist rolled in chain against the wall and break his hand. She drove him to the hospital in her car and helped him endure his convalescence, and in the end they learned together how to make love the correct way. They spent the difficult June afternoons

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on the interior terrace of the house where six generations of Nena Daconte's illustrious ancestors had died; she played popular songs on the saxophone, and he, with his hand in a cast, contemplated her from the hammock in unrelieved stupefaction. The house had countless floor-to-ceiling windows that faced the fetid stillwater of the bay, and it was one of the largest and oldest in the district of La Manga, and beyond any doubt the ugliest. But the terrace with the checkered tiles where Nena Daconte played the saxophone was an oasis in the four-o'clock heat, and it opened onto a courtyard with generous shade and mango trees and banana plants, under which there was a grave and a nameless tombstone older than the house and the family's memory. Even those who knew nothing about music thought the saxophone was an anachronism in so noble a house. "It sounds like a ship," Nena Daconte's grandmother had said when she heard it for the first time. Nena Daconte's mother had tried in vain to have her play it another way and not, for the sake of comfort, with her skirt up around her thighs and her knees apart, and with a sensuality that did not seem essential to the music. "I don't care what instrument you play," she would say, "as long as you play it with your legs together."

But those ship's farewell songs and that feasting on love were what allowed Nena Daconte to break the bitter shell around Billy Sánchez. Beneath his sad reputation as an ignorant brute, which he had upheld with great success because of the confluence of two illustrious family names, she discovered a frightened, tender orphan. While the bones in his hand were knitting, she and Billy Sánchez

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learned to know each other so well that even he was amazed at the fluidity with which love occurred when she took him to her virgin's bed one rainy afternoon when they were alone in the house. Every day at the same time, for almost two weeks, they caroused, passionate and naked, beneath the astonished gaze of the portraits of civil warriors and insatiable grandmothers who had preceded them in the paradise of that historic bed. Even in the pauses between love they remained naked and kept the windows open, breathing the air of ships' garbage wafting in from the bay, its smell of shit, and listening in the silence of the saxophone to the daily sounds from the courtyard, the single note of the frog beneath the banana plants, the drop of water falling on nobody's grave, the natural movements of life that they had not had the opportunity to learn before.

When her parents returned home, Nena Daconte and Billy Sánchez had progressed so far in love that the world was not big enough for anything else, and they made love anytime, anyplace, trying to reinvent it each time they did. At first they struggled in the sports cars with which Billy Sánchez's papa tried to quiet his own feelings of guilt. Then, when the cars became too easy for them, they would go at night into the deserted cabanas of Marbella where destiny had first brought them together, and during the November carnival they even went in costume to the rooms for hire in the old slave district of Getsemaní, under the protection of the matrons who until a few months before had been obliged to endure Billy Sánchez and his chain-wielding gang. Nena Daconte gave herself over to furtive love with the same frenetic devotion that

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she had once wasted on the saxophone, until her tamed bandit at last understood what she had meant when she said he would have to perform like a black man. Billy Sánchez always returned her love, with skill and the same enthusiasm. When they were married, they fulfilled their vow to love each other over the Atlantic, while the stewardesses slept and they were crammed into the airplane lavatory, overcome more by laughter than by pleasure. Only they knew then, twenty-four hours after the wedding, that Nena Daconte had been pregnant for two months.

And so when they reached Madrid they were far from being two sated lovers, but they had enough discretion to behave like pure newlyweds. Their parents had arranged everything. Before they left the plane, a protocol officer came to the first-class cabin to give Nena Daconte the white mink coat with gleaming black trim that was her wedding present from her parents. He gave Billy Sánchez the kind of shearling jacket that was all the rage that winter, and the unmarked keys to a surprise car waiting for him at the airport.

Their country's diplomatic mission welcomed them in the official reception room. Not only were the ambassador and his wife old friends of both families, but he was the doctor who had delivered Nena Daconte, and he was waiting for her with a bouquet of roses so radiant and fresh that even the dewdrops seemed artificial. She greeted them both with false kisses, uncomfortable with her somewhat premature status as bride, and then accepted the roses. As she took them she pricked her finger on a thorn, but she handled the mishap with a charming ruse.

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"I did it on purpose," she said, "so you'd notice my ring."

In fact, the entire diplomatic mission marveled at the splendor of the ring, which must have cost a fortune, not so much because of the quality of the diamonds as for its well-preserved antiquity. But no one noticed that her finger had begun to bleed. They all turned their attention to the new car. The ambassador's amusing idea had been to bring it to the airport and have it wrapped in cellophane and tied with an enormous gold ribbon. Billy Sánchez did not even notice his ingenuity. He was so eager to see the car that he tore away the wrapping all at once and stood there breathless. It was that year's Bentley convertible, with genuine leather upholstery. The sky looked like a blanket of ashes, a cutting, icy wind blew out of the Guadarrama, and it was not a good time to be outside, but Billy Sánchez still had no notion of the cold. He kept the diplomatic mission in the outdoor parking lot, unaware that they were freezing for the sake of courtesy, until he finished looking over the smallest details of the car. Then the ambassador sat beside him to direct him to the official residence, where a luncheon had been prepared. En route he pointed out the most famous sights in the city, but Billy Sánchez seemed attentive only to the magic of the car.

It was the first time he had traveled outside his country. He had gone through all the private and public schools, repeating courses over and over again, until he was left adrift in a limbo of indifference. The initial sight of a city other than his own, the blocks of ashen houses with their lights on in the middle of the day, the bare trees, the

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distant ocean, everything increased a feeling of desolation that he struggled to keep in a corner of his heart. But soon he fell, without being aware of it, into the first trap of forgetting. A sudden, silent storm, the earliest of the season, had broken overhead, and when they left the ambassador's residence after lunch to begin their drive to France, they found the city covered with radiant snow. Then Billy Sánchez forgot the car, and with everyone watching he shouted with joy, threw fistfuls of snow over his head, and wearing his new coat, rolled on the ground in the middle of the street.

Nena Daconte did not realize that her finger was bleeding until they left Madrid on an afternoon that had turned transparent after the storm. It surprised her, because when she had accompanied the ambassador's wife, who liked to sing Italian arias after official luncheons, on the saxophone, her ring finger had hardly bothered her. Later, while she was telling her husband the shortest routes to the border, she sucked her finger in an unconscious way each time it bled, and only when they reached the Pyrenees did she think of looking for a pharmacy. Then she succumbed to the overdue dreams of the past few days, and when she awoke with a start to the nightmarish impression that the car was going through water, it was a long while before she remembered the handkerchief wrapped around her finger. She saw on the illuminated clock on the dashboard that it was after three, made her mental calculations, and only then realized that they had passed Bordeaux, as well as Angoulême and Poitiers, and were driving along the flooded dike of the Loire. Moonlight filtered through the mist, and the silhouettes of

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castles through the pines seemed to come from fairy tales. Nena Daconte, who knew the region by heart, estimated that they were about three hours from Paris, and Billy Sánchez, undaunted, was still at the wheel.

"You're a wild man," she said. "You've been driving for more than eleven hours and you haven't eaten a thing."

The intoxication of the new car kept him going. He had not slept very much on the plane, but he felt wide awake and energetic enough to be in Paris by dawn.

"I'm still full from the embassy lunch," he said. And he added, with no apparent logic, "After all, in Cartagena they're just leaving the movies. It must be about ten o'clock."

Even so, Nena Daconte was afraid he would fall asleep at the wheel. She opened one of the many presents they had received in Madrid and tried to put a piece of candied orange in his mouth. But he turned away.

"Real men don't eat sweets," he said.

A little before Orléans the fog cleared, and a very large moon lit the snow-covered fields, but traffic became more difficult because enormous produce trucks and wine tankers merged onto the highway, all heading for Paris. Nena Daconte would have liked to help her husband with the driving, but she did not dare even to suggest it: He had informed her the first time they went out together that nothing is more humiliating for a man than to be driven by his wife. She felt clearheaded after almost five hours of sound sleep, and she was happy too that they had not stopped at a hotel in the French provinces, which she had known since she was a little girl making countless trips

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there with her parents. "There's no more beautiful countryside in the world," she said, "but you can die of thirst and not find anyone who'll give you a free glass of water." She was so convinced of this that at the last minute she had put a cake of soap and a roll of toilet paper in her overnight bag, because in French hotels there was never any soap, and the paper in the bathrooms was last week's newspapers cut into little squares and hung from a nail. The only thing she regretted at that moment was having wasted an entire night without making love. Her husband's reply was immediate.

"I was just thinking it must be fantastic to fuck in the snow," he said. "Right here, if you want."

Nena Daconte gave it serious thought. The moonlit snow at the edge of the highway looked fluffy and warm, but as they approached the suburbs of Paris the traffic grew heavier, and there were clusters of lit factories and numerous workers on bicycles. If it had not been winter, it would have been broad daylight by now.

"We'd better wait until Paris," said Nena Daconte. "All nice and warm in a bed with clean sheets, like married people."

"It's the first time you've turned me down," he said.

"Of course," she replied. "It's the first time we've been married."

A little before dawn they washed their faces and urinated at a roadside restaurant and had coffee with warm croissants at the counter, where truck drivers drank red wine with breakfast. In the bathroom Nena Daconte saw that she had bloodstains on her blouse and skirt, but she did not try to wash them out. She tossed her blood-

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soaked handkerchief into the trash, moved her wedding ring to her left hand, and washed the wounded finger with soap and water. The scratch was almost invisible. Yet as soon as they were back in the car it began to bleed again, and Nena Daconte hung her arm out the window, certain that the icy air from the fields had cauterizing properties. This tactic proved useless too, but she was still unconcerned. "If anyone wants to find us it'll be very easy," she said with her natural charm. "All they have to do is follow the trail of my blood in the snow." Then she thought more about what she had said, and her face bloomed in the first light of dawn.

"Imagine," she said. "A trail of blood in the snow all the way from Madrid to Paris. Wouldn't that make a good song?"

She did not have time to think again. In the suburbs of Paris her finger bled in an uncontrollable flood, and she felt as if her soul were escaping through the scratch. She had tried to stop the flow with the toilet paper she carried in her bag, but it took longer to wrap her finger than to throw the strips of bloody paper out the window. The clothes she was wearing, her coat, the car seats were all becoming soaked, in a gradual but irreparable process. Billy Sánchez became really frightened and insisted on looking for a pharmacy, but by then she knew this was no matter for pharmacists.

"We're almost at the Porte d'Orléans," she said. "Go straight ahead, along Avenue Général Leclerc, the big one with all the trees, and then I'll tell you what to do."

This was the most difficult part of the trip. The Avenue du Général Leclerc was jammed in both directions, an

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infernal knot of small cars and motorcycles and the enormous trucks that were trying to reach the central markets. The useless clamor of the horns made Billy Sánchez so agitated that he shouted insults in chain-wielding language at several drivers and even tried to get out of the car to hit one of them, but Nena Daconte managed to convince him that although the French were the rudest people in the world, they never had fistfights. It was one more proof of her good judgment, because at that moment Nena Daconte was struggling not to lose consciousness.

It took them more than an hour just to get around the Léon de Belfort traffic circle. Cafés and stores were lit as if it were midnight, for it was a typical Tuesday in an overcast, filthy Parisian January, with a persistent rain that never solidified into snow. But there was less traffic on the Avenue Denfert-Rochereau, and after a few blocks Nena Daconte told her husband to turn right, and he parked outside the emergency entrance of a huge, gloomy hospital.

She had to be helped out of the car, yet she did not lose her calm or her lucidity. As she lay on the gurney waiting for the doctor on duty, she answered the nurse's routine questions regarding her identity and medical history. Billy Sánchez carried her bag and gripped her left hand, where she was wearing her wedding ring; it felt languid and cold, and her lips had lost their color. He stayed at her side, holding her hand, until the doctor arrived and made a brief examination of her wounded finger. He was a very young man with a shaved head and skin the color of old copper. Nena Daconte paid no attention to him, but turned a livid smile on her husband.

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"Don't be afraid," she said, with her invincible humor. "The only thing that can happen is that this cannibal will cut off my hand and eat it."

The doctor completed his examination, then surprised them by speaking very correct Spanish with a strange Asian accent.

"No, children," he said. "This cannibal would rather die of hunger than cut off so beautiful a hand."

They were embarrassed, but the doctor calmed them with a good-natured gesture. Then he ordered the cot wheeled away, and Billy Sánchez tried to follow, clutching his wife's hand. The doctor took his arm and stopped him.

"Not you," he said. "She's going to intensive care."

Nena Daconte smiled again at her husband, and continued waving good-bye until she disappeared from sight at the end of the corridor. The doctor stayed behind, studying the information that the nurse had written on a clipboard. Billy Sánchez called to him.

"Doctor," he said. "She's pregnant."

"How far along?"

"Two months."

The doctor did not give this fact as much importance as Billy Sánchez had expected. "You were right to tell me," he said, and walked after the cot. Billy Sánchez was left standing in the mournful room that smelled of sick people's sweat, was left not knowing what to do as he looked down the empty corridor where they had taken Nena Daconte, and then he sat down on the wooden bench where other people were waiting. He did not know how long he sat there, but when he decided to leave the

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hospital it was night again and still raining, and oppressed by the weight of the world, he still did not know what to do.

Nena Daconte was admitted at nine-thirty on Tuesday, January 7, as I learned years later from the hospital records. That first night, Billy Sánchez slept in the car, which was parked outside the emergency entrance, and very early the next day he ate six boiled eggs and drank two cups of café au lait in the closest cafeteria he could find, for he had not had a full meal since Madrid. Then he went back to the emergency room to see Nena Daconte, but they managed to make him understand that he had to use the main entrance. There, at last, an Asturian maintenance man helped him communicate with the receptionist, who in fact confirmed that Nena Daconte had been admitted to the hospital, but that visitors were allowed only on Tuesdays, from nine to four. That is, not for another six days. He tried to see the doctor who spoke Spanish, whom he described as a black man with a shaved head, but nobody could tell him anything on the basis of two such simple details.

Reassured by the news that Nena Daconte was in the registry, he returned to the car. A traffic officer made him park two blocks away, in a very narrow street, on the even-numbered side. Across the street was a renovated building with a sign: "Hôtel Nicole." It had only one star, and the reception area was very small, with just a sofa and an old upright piano, but the owner, whose voice was high and fluty, could understand clients in any language as long as they had money. Billy Sánchez with his eleven suitcases and nine gift boxes took the only free

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room, a triangular garret on the ninth floor, which he came to after a breathless climb up a circular staircase that smelled of boiled cauliflower. The walls were covered with a sad paper, and there was no room at the one window for anything but the dim light from an interior courtyard. There was a double bed, a large armoire, a straight-backed chair, a portable bidet, and a washstand with a bowl and pitcher, so that the only way to be in the room was to lie on the bed. Worse than old, everything was forlorn, but very clean, and with a salutary odor of recent medicine.

If he had spent the rest of his life in the attempt, Billy Sánchez could not have deciphered the enigmas of that world founded on a talent for miserliness. He never solved the mystery of the stairway light that went out before he reached his floor, and he never discovered how to turn it on again. He needed half a morning to learn that on the landing of each floor there was a little room with a toilet that one flushed by pulling a chain, and he already had decided to use it in the dark, when he discovered by accident that the light went on when the lock was bolted on the inside, so that no one would forget to turn it off again. The shower, which was at the end of the hall, and which he insisted on using twice a day as he did in his own country, one paid for separately, and in cash, and the hot water, controlled from the office, ran out in three minutes. Yet Billy Sánchez was thinking with sufficient clarity to realize that this way of doing things, so different from his own, was in any case better than being outdoors in January, and he felt so confused and alone

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that he could not understand how he ever had lived without the help and protection of Nena Daconte.

When he went up to his room on Wednesday morning, he threw himself facedown on the bed with his coat on, thinking about the miraculous creature who was still bleeding two blocks away, and he soon fell into so natural a sleep that when he awoke his watch said five o'clock, but he could not tell whether it was afternoon or morning, or what day of the week it was, or what city, with windows lashed by wind and rain. He waited, awake in the bed, always thinking about Nena Daconte, until he confirmed that in fact day was breaking. Then he went to have breakfast in the same cafeteria as the day before, and there he learned it was Thursday. The lights in the hospital were on and it had stopped raining, and so he leaned against the trunk of a chestnut tree outside the main entrance, where doctors and nurses in white coats walked in and out, hoping he would see the Asian physician who had admitted Nena Daconte. He did not see him then, or that afternoon after lunch, when he had to end his vigil because he was freezing. At seven he had another café au lait and two hard-boiled eggs that he chose from the display counter himself after two days of eating the same thing in the same place. When he went back to the hotel to sleep, he found his car alone on one side of the street, with a parking ticket on the windshield, while all the others were parked on the opposite side. It was a difficult task for the porter at the Hôtel Nicole to explain to him that on odd-numbered days one could park on the odd-numbered side of the street, and on even-

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numbered days on the other side. Such rationalist strata-gems proved incomprehensible to a purebred Sánchez de Ávila, who almost two years before had driven the mayor's official car into a neighborhood movie theater and wreaked absolute havoc while the intrepid police stood by. He understood even less when the porter advised him to pay the fine but not to move his car at that hour, because he only would have to move it again at midnight. As he tossed and turned on the bed and could not sleep, he thought for the first time not only about Nena Daconte, but about his own grievous nights in the gay bars at the public market in Cartagena of the Caribbean. He remembered the taste of fried fish and coconut rice in the restaurants along the dock, where the schooners from Aruba moored. He remembered his house, the walls covered with heartsease, where it would be just seven o'clock the night before, and he saw his papa in silk pajamas reading the newspaper in the coolness of the terrace.

He remembered his mother—no one ever seemed to know where she was, regardless of the hour—his desirable, talkative mother, who wore a Sunday dress and a rose behind her ear when night fell, stifling with heat in the encumbrance of splendid fabric. One afternoon when he was seven years old, he had gone into her room without knocking and found her naked in bed with one of her casual lovers. That mishap, which they had never mentioned, established a complicitous relationship between them that proved more useful than love. But he was not conscious of that, or of so many other terrible things in his only child's loneliness, until the night he found him-

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self tossing in the bed of a sad Parisian garret, with no one to tell his sorrows to, and in a fierce rage with himself because he could not bear his desire to cry.

It was a beneficial insomnia. He got out of bed on Friday wounded by the evil night he had spent, but determined to give definition to his life. He decided at last to break the lock on his suitcase and change his clothes, since all the keys were in Nena Daconte's bag, along with most of their money and the address book where, perhaps, he might have found the number of someone they knew in Paris. At his usual cafeteria he realized that he had learned to say hello in French, and to ask for ham sandwiches and café au lait. He knew it never would be possible to order butter or any kind of eggs because he never would learn to pronounce the words, but butter was always served with the bread, and the hard-boiled eggs were displayed on the counter, where he could take them without having to ask for them. Moreover, by the third day, the waiters recognized him and helped when he tried to make himself understood. And so at lunch on Friday, as he was trying to set his head to rights, he ordered a veal fillet with fried potatoes and a bottle of wine. He felt so good then that he ordered another bottle, drank almost half of it, and crossed the street with the firm resolve to force his way into the hospital. He did not know where to find Nena Daconte, but the providential image of the Asian doctor was fixed in his mind, and he was sure he would find him. He did not go in through the main door but used the emergency entrance, which had seemed less well guarded to him, but he could not get past the corridor where Nena Daconte had waved good-bye.

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A guard with a blood-spattered smock asked him something as he walked by, and he paid no attention. The man followed him, repeating the same question over and over in French, and at last grabbed him by the arm with so much force that he stopped him short. Billy Sánchez tried to shake him off with a chain-wielder's trick, and then the guard shit on his mother in French, twisted his arm at the shoulder into a hammerlock, and without forgetting to shit a thousand times on his whore of a mother almost carried him to the door, raging with pain, and tossed him out into the middle of the street like a sack of potatoes.

That afternoon, aching with the punishment he had received, Billy Sánchez began to be an adult. He decided, as Nena Daconte would have done, to turn to his ambassador. The hotel porter, who despite his unsociable appearance was very helpful and very patient with languages, found the number and address of the embassy in the telephone book and wrote them down on a card. A very amiable woman answered the phone, and in no time Billy Sánchez recognized the diction of the Andes in her slow, colorless voice. He started by identifying himself, using his full name, certain the two great families would impress the woman, but the voice on the telephone did not change. He heard her recite her lesson by heart: His Excellency the Ambassador was not in his office at the moment and was not expected until the next day, but in any event he could be seen only by appointment, and then only under extraordinary circumstances. Billy Sánchez knew he would not find Nena Daconte by this route either, and he thanked the woman for the information

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with as much amiability as she had used in giving it. Then he took a taxi and went to the embassy.

It was at 22 Rue des Champs-Élysées, in one of the quietest districts in Paris, but the only thing that impressed Billy Sánchez, as he himself told me in Cartagena de Indias many years later, was that for the first time since his arrival the sunshine was as bright as in the Caribbean, and the Eiffel Tower loomed over the city against a radiant sky. The functionary who received him in the name of the ambassador looked as if he had just recovered from a fatal disease, not only because of his black suit, oppressive collar, and mourning tie, but also because of his judicious gestures and hushed voice. He understood Billy Sánchez's concern but reminded him, without losing any of his discretion, that they were in a civilized country whose strict norms were founded on the most ancient and learned criteria, in contrast to the barbaric Americas, where all one had to do to go into a hospital was bribe the porter. "No, dear boy," he said. His only recourse was to submit to the rule of reason and wait until Tuesday.

"After all, there are only four days left," he concluded. "In the meantime, go to the Louvre. It is worth seeing."

When he went out, Billy Sánchez found himself on the Place de la Concorde without knowing what to do. He saw the Eiffel Tower above the rooftops, and it seemed so close that he tried to walk there along the quays. But he soon realized it was farther than it appeared and kept changing position as he looked for it. And so he began to think about Nena Daconte as he sat on a bench along the Seine. He watched the tugs pass under

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the bridges, and to him they did not look like boats but itinerant houses, with red roofs and flower pots on the windowsills and clotheslines stretched across the deck. For a long while he watched a motionless fisherman, with a motionless rod and a motionless line in the current, and he tired of waiting for something to move, until it started growing dark and he decided to take a taxi back to the hotel. That was when he realized he did not know its name or address and had no idea where in Paris the hospital was located.

Stupefied by panic, he went into the first café he came to, asked for a cognac, and tried to put his thoughts in order. While he was thinking he saw himself repeated over and over and from many different angles in the numerous mirrors on the walls, saw that he was frightened and alone, and for the first time since the day of his birth he thought about the reality of death. But with the second glass of cognac he felt better, and had the providential idea of returning to the embassy. He looked in his pocket for the card with its address, and discovered that the name and street number of the hotel were printed on the other side. He was so shaken by the experience that he did not leave his room again for the entire weekend except to eat and move the car from one side of the street to the other. For three days the same filthy rain that had been falling the morning they had arrived continued to fall. Billy Sánchez, who had never read an entire book, wished he had one to fend off his boredom as he lay on the bed, but the only books he found in his wife's suitcases were in languages other than Spanish. And so he kept waiting for Tuesday, contem-

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plating the peacocks repeated across the wallpaper and always thinking about Nena Daconte. On Monday he straightened the room, wondering what she would say if she found it in that state, and only then did he discover that the mink coat was stained with dried blood. He spent the afternoon washing it with the perfumed soap he found in her overnight bag, until he succeeded in restoring it to what it had been when it was carried onto the airplane in Madrid.

Tuesday dawned overcast and icy, but without the rain. Billy Sánchez was up at six and waited at the hospital entrance with a throng of relatives bringing gifts and bouquets of flowers to the patients. He went in with the crowd, carrying the mink coat over his arm, asking no questions and with no idea where Nena Daconte could be, but sustained by the certainty that he would meet the Asian doctor. He walked through a very large interior courtyard, with flowers and wild birds, and on each side were the wards: women to the right and men to the left. Following the other visitors, he entered the women's ward. He saw a long line of female patients in hospital gowns sitting on their beds, illuminated by the great light of the windows, and he even thought it was all much more cheerful than one could imagine from the outside. He reached the end of the corridor and then walked back, until he was certain that none of the patients was Nena Daconte. Then he walked around the exterior gallery again, peering through the windows at the men's ward, until he thought he recognized the doctor he was looking for.

And in fact he had. The doctor was examining a pa-

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tient with some other doctors and several nurses. Billy Sánchez went into the ward, moved one of the nurses away from the group, and stood facing the Asian doctor, who was bent over the patient. He spoke to him. The doctor raised his sorrowful eyes, thought a moment, then recognized him.

"But where the hell have you been?" he asked.

Billy Sánchez was perplexed.

"In the hotel," he said. "Right here, around the corner."

Then he found out. Nena Daconte had bled to death at ten minutes past seven on the evening of Thursday, January 9, after sixty hours of failed efforts by the most qualified specialists in France. She had been lucid and serene to the end, instructing them to look for her husband at the Plaza-Athénée, where she and Billy Sánchez had a reservation, and giving them the necessary information for reaching her parents. The embassy had been informed by an urgent cable from the Foreign Office on Friday, when Nena Daconte's parents were already flying to Paris. The ambassador himself took care of the formalities for the embalming and the funeral, and stayed in touch with the police prefecture in Paris during the efforts to locate Billy Sánchez. An emergency bulletin with his description was broadcast from Friday night to Sunday afternoon over radio and television, and during those forty hours he was the most wanted man in France. His photograph, found in Nena Daconte's handbag, was displayed everywhere. Three Bentley convertibles of the same model had been located, but none of them was his. Nena Daconte's parents had arrived at noon on Saturday and sat with the body in the hospital chapel, hoping

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until the last minute that Billy Sánchez would be found. His parents also had been informed and were ready to fly to Paris, but in the end they did not because of some confusion in the telegrams. The funeral took place on Sunday at two in the afternoon, only two hundred meters from the sordid hotel room where Billy Sánchez lay in agonies of loneliness for the love of Nena Daconte. The functionary who had received him at the embassy told me years later that he himself received the telegram from the Foreign Office an hour after Billy Sánchez left his office, and went to look for him in the discreet bars along the Rue du Faubourg-Saint-Honoré. He confessed to me that he had not paid much attention to Billy Sánchez when he saw him, because he never imagined that the boy from the coast, dazzled by the novelty of Paris and wearing such an unbecoming shearling coat, could have so illustrious an origin in his favor.

On the same night when he endured his desire to cry with rage, Nena Daconte's parents called off the search and took away the embalmed body in the metal coffin, and those who saw it repeated over and over again for many years that they never had seen a more beautiful woman, dead or alive. And therefore when Billy Sánchez at last entered the hospital on Tuesday morning, the burial had already taken place in the mournful cemetery of La Manga, a few meters from the house where they had deciphered the first keys to their happiness. The Asian doctor who told Billy Sánchez about the tragedy wanted to give him some tranquilizers in the hospital waiting room, but he refused. Billy Sánchez left without saying good-bye, without anything to say thank you for, think-

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ing that the only thing he needed with great urgency was to find somebody and beat his brains out with a chain in revenge for his own misfortune. When he walked out of the hospital, he did not even realize that snow with no trace of blood was falling from the sky, in tender, bright flakes that looked like the downy feathers of doves, or that there was a festive air on the streets of Paris, because it was the first big snowfall in ten years.

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