

The incredible and  
sad tale of innocent  
erendira and her  
heartless  
grandmother es...

[Family](#)



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Erendira was bathing her grandmother when the wind of her misfortune began to blow. The enormous mansion of moon like concrete lost in the solitude of the desert trembled down to its foundations with the first attack. But Erendira and her grandmother were used to the risks of the wild nature there, and in the bathroom decorated with a series of peacocks and childish mosaics of Roman baths they scarcely paid any attention to the wind. The grandmother, naked and huge in the marble tub, looked like a handsome white whale. The granddaughter had just turned fourteen and was languid, soft-boned, and too meek for her age. With a parsimony that had something like sacred rigor about it, she was bathing her grandmother with water in which purifying herbs and aromatic leaves had been boiled, the latter clinging to the succulent back, the flowing metal-colored hair, and the powerful shoulders which were so mercilessly tattooed as to put sailors to shame. "Last night I dreamt I was expecting a letter," the grandmother said. Erendira, who never spoke except when it was unavoidable, asked: "What day was it in the dream?"

"Thursday."

"Then it was a letter with bad news," Erendira said, "but it will never arrive." When she had finished bathing her grandmother, she took her to her bedroom. The grandmother was so fat that she could only walk by leaning on her granddaughter's shoulder or on a staff that looked like a bishop's crosier, but even during her most difficult efforts the power of an antiquated grandeur was evident. In the bedroom, which had been furnished with an excessive and somewhat demented taste, like the whole house, Erendira needed two more hours to get her grandmother ready.

She untangled her hair strand by strand, perfumed and combed it, put an equatorially flowered dress on her, put talcum powder on her face, bright red lipstick on her mouth, rouge on her cheeks, musk on her eyelids, and mother-of-pearl polish on her nails, and when she had her decked out like a larger than life-size doll, she led her to an artificial garden with suffocating flowers that were like the ones on the dress, seated her in a large chair that had the foundation and the pedigree of a throne, and left her listening to elusive records on a phonograph that had a speaker like a megaphone. While the grandmother floated through the swamps of the past, Erendira busied herself sweeping the house, which was dark and motley, with bizarre furniture and statues of invented Caesars, chandeliers of teardrops and alabaster angels, a gilded piano, and numerous clocks of unthinkable sizes and shapes. There was a cistern in the courtyard for the storage of water carried over many years from distant springs on the backs of Indians, and hitched to a ring on the cistern wall was a broken-down ostrich, the only feathered creature who could survive the torment of that accursed climate.

The house was far away from everything, in the heart of the desert, next to a settlement with miserable and burning streets where the goats committed suicide from desolation when the wind of misfortune blew. That incomprehensible refuge had been built by the grandmother's husband, a legendary smuggler whose name was Amadis, by whom she had a son whose name was also Amadis and who was Erendira's father. No one knew either the origins or the motivations of that family. The best known version in the language of the Indians was that Amadis the father had rescued his beautiful wife from a house of prostitution in the Antilles, where he had killed

a man in a knife fight, and that he had transplanted her forever in the impunity of the desert.

When the Amadis died, one of melancholy fevers and the other riddled with bullets in a fight over a woman, the grandmother buried their bodies in the courtyard, sent away the fourteen barefoot servant girls, and continued ruminating on her dreams of grandeur in the shadows of the furtive house, thanks to the sacrifices of the bastard granddaughter whom she had reared since birth. Erendira needed six hours just to set and wind the clocks. The day when her misfortune began she didn't have to do that because the clocks had enough winding left to last until the next morning, but on the other hand, she had to bathe and overdress her grandmother, scrub the floors, cook lunch, and polish the crystalware. Around eleven o'clock, when she was changing the water in the ostrich's bowl and watering the desert weeds around the twin graves of the Amadis, she had to fight off the anger of the wind, which had become unbearable, but she didn't have the slightest feeling that it was the wind of her misfortune.

At twelve o'clock she was wiping the last champagne glasses when she caught the smell of broth and had to perform the miracle of running to the kitchen without leaving a disaster of Venetian glass in her wake. She just managed to take the pot off the stove as it was beginning to boil over. Then she put on a stew she had already prepared and took advantage of a chance to sit down and rest on a stool in the kitchen. She closed her eyes, opened them again with an unfatigued expression, and began pouring the soup into the tureen. She was working as she slept. The grandmother had sat down

alone at the head of a banquet table with silver candlesticks set for twelve people. She shook her little bell and Erendira arrived almost immediately with the steaming tureen. As Erendira was serving the soup, her grandmother noticed the somnambulist look and passed her hand in front of her eyes as if wiping an invisible pane of glass. The girl didn't see the hand. The grandmother followed her with her look and when Erendira turned to go back to the kitchen, she shouted at her: " Erendira!"

Having been awakened all of a sudden, the girl dropped the tureen onto the rug. " That's all right, child," the grandmother said to her with assuring tenderness. " You fell asleep while you were walking about again." " My body has that habit," Erendira said by way of an excuse. Still hazy with sleep, she picked up the tureen, and tried to clean the stain on the rug. " Leave it," her grandmother dissuaded her. " You can wash it this afternoon." So in addition to her regular afternoon chores, Erendira had to wash the dining room rug, and she took advantage of her presence at the washtub to do Monday's laundry as well, while the wind went around the house looking for a way in.

She had so much to do that night came upon her without her realizing it, and when she put the dining room rug back in its place it was time to go to bed. The grandmother had been fooling around on the piano all afternoon, singing the songs of her times to herself in a falsetto, and she had stains of musk and tears on her eyelids. But when she lay down on her bed in her muslin nightgown, the bitterness of fond memories returned. " Take advantage of tomorrow to wash the living room rug too," she told Erendira. " It hasn't seen

the sun since the days of all the noise.” “ Yes, Grandmother,” the girl answered.

She picked up a feather fan and began to fan the implacable matron, who recited the list of nighttime orders to her as she sank into sleep. “ Iron all the clothes before you go to bed so you can sleep with a clear conscience.” “ Yes, Grandmother.”

“ Check the clothes closets carefully, because moths get hungrier on windy nights.” “ Yes, Grandmother.”

“ With the time you have left, take the flowers out into the courtyard so they can get a breath of air.” “ Yes, Grandmother.” “ And feed the ostrich.”

She had fallen asleep but she was still giving orders, for it was from her that the granddaughter had inherited the ability to be alive still while sleeping. Erendira left the room without making any noise and did the final chores of the night, still replying to the sleeping grandmother’s orders. “ Give the graves some water.”

“ Yes, Grandmother.”

“ And if the Amadises arrive, tell them not to come in,” the grandmother said, “ because Porfirio Galan’s gang is waiting to kill them.” Erendira didn’t answer her any more because she knew that the grandmother was getting lost in her delirium, but she didn’t miss a single order. When she finished checking the window bolts and put out the last lights, she took a candlestick from the dining room and lighted her way to her bedroom as the pauses in the wind were filled with the peaceful and enormous breathing of her sleeping grandmother. Her room was also luxurious, but not so much as her

grandmother's, and it was piled high with the rag dolls and wind-up animals of her recent childhood. Overcome by the barbarous chores of the day, Erendira didn't have the strength to get undressed and she put the candlestick on the night table and fell onto the bed. A short while later the wind of her misfortune came into the bedroom like a pack of hounds and knocked the candle over against the curtain.

At dawn, when the wind finally stopped, a few thick and scattered drops of rain began to fall, putting out the last embers and hardening the smoking ashes of the mansion. The people in the village, Indians for the most part, tried to rescue the remains of the disaster: the charred corpse of the ostrich, the frame of the gilded piano, the torso of a statue. The grandmother was contemplating the residue of her fortune with an impenetrable depression. Erendira, sitting between the two graves of the Amadisés, had stopped weeping. When the grandmother was convinced that very few things remained intact among the ruins, she looked at her granddaughter with sincere pity. " My poor child," she sighed. " Life won't be long enough for you to pay me back for this mishap."

She began to pay it back that very day, beneath the noise of the rain, when she was taken to the village storekeeper, a skinny and premature widower who was quite well known in the desert for the good price he paid for virginity. As the grandmother waited undauntedly, the widower examined Erendira with scientific austerity: he considered the strength of her thighs, the size of her breasts, the diameter of her hips. He didn't say a word until he had some calculation of what she was worth. " She's still quite

immature," he said then. " She has the teats of a bitch." Then he had her get on a scale to prove his decision with figures. Erendira weighed ninety pounds. " She isn't worth more than a hundred pesos," the widower said. The grandmother was scandalized.

" A hundred pesos for a girl who's completely new! " she almost shouted. " No, sir, that shows a great lack of respect for virtue on your part." " I'll make it a hundred and fifty," the widower said.

" This girl caused me damages amounting to more than a million pesos," the grandmother said. " At this rate she'll need two hundred years to pay me back." " You're lucky that the only good feature she has is her age," the widower said. The storm threatened to knock the house down, and there were so many leaks in the roof that it was raining almost as much inside as out. The grandmother felt all alone in a world of disaster. " Just raise it to three hundred," she said.

" Two hundred and fifty."

Finally they agreed on two hundred and twenty pesos in cash and some provisions. The grandmother then signaled Erendira to go with the widower and he led her by the hand to the back room as if he were taking her to school. " I'll wait for you here," the grandmother said.

" Yes, Grandmother," said Erendira.

The back room was a kind of shed with four brick columns, a roof of rotted palm leaves, and an adobe wall three feet high, through which outdoor disturbances got into the building. Placed on top of the adobe wall



were pots with cacti and other plants of aridity. Hanging between two columns and flapping like the free sail of a drifting sloop was a faded hammock. Over the whistle of the storm and the lash of the water one could hear distant shouts, the howling of far-off animals, the cries of a shipwreck. When Erendira and the widower went into the shed they had to hold on so as not to be knocked down by a gust of rain which left them soaked. Their voices could not be heard but their movements became clear in the roar of the squall. At the widower's first attempt, Erendira shouted something inaudible and tried to get away.

The widower answered her without any voice, twisted her arm by the wrist, and dragged her to the hammock. She fought him off with a scratch on the face and shouted in silence again, but he replied with a solemn slap which lifted her off the ground and suspended her in the air for an instant with her long Medusa hair floating in space. He grabbed her about the waist before she touched ground again, flung her into the hammock with a brutal heave, and held her down with his knees. Erendira then succumbed to terror, lost consciousness, and remained as if fascinated by the moonbeams from a fish that was floating through the storm air, while the widower undressed her, tearing off her clothes with a methodical clawing, as if he were pulling up grass, scattering them with great tugs of color that waved like streamers and went off with the wind. When there was no other man left in the village who could pay anything for Erendira's love, her grandmother put her on a truck to go where the smugglers were.

They made the trip on the back of the truck in the open, among sacks of rice and buckets of lard and what had been left by the fire: the headboard of the viceregal bed, a warrior angel, the scorched throne, and other pieces of useless junk. In a trunk with two crosses painted in broad strokes they carried the bones of the Amadis. The grandmother protected herself from the sun with a tattered umbrella and it was hard for her to breathe because of the torment of sweat and dust, but even in that unhappy state she kept control of her dignity. Behind the pile of cans and sacks of rice Erendira paid for the trip and the cartage by making love for twenty pesos a turn with the truck's loader. At first her system of defense was the same as she had used against the widower's attack, but the loader's approach was different, slow and wise, and he ended up taming her with tenderness. So when they reached the first town after a deadly journey, Erendira and the loader were relaxing from good love behind the parapet of cargo. The driver shouted to the grandmother: " Here's where the world begins."

The grandmother observed with disbelief the miserable and solitary streets of a town somewhat larger but just as sad as the one they had abandoned. " It doesn't look like it to me," she said.

" It's mission country," the driver said.

" I'm not interested in charity, I'm interested in smugglers," said the grandmother. Listening to the dialogue from behind the load, Erendira dug into a sack of rice with her finger. Suddenly she found a string, pulled on it, and drew out a necklace of genuine pearls. She looked at it amazed, holding it between her fingers like a dead snake, while the driver answered her grandmother: " Don't be daydreaming, ma'am. There's no such thing as

smugglers.” “ Of course not,” the grandmother said. “ I’ve got your word for it.” “ Try to find one and you’ll see,” the driver bantered. “ Everybody talks about them, but no one’s ever seen one.” The loader realized that Erendira had pulled out the necklace and hastened to take it away from her and stick it back into the sack of rice.

The grandmother, who had decided to stay in spite of the poverty of the town, then called to her granddaughter to help her out of the truck. Erendira said good-bye to the loader with a kiss that was hurried but spontaneous and true. The grandmother waited, sitting on her throne in the middle of the street, until they finished unloading the goods. The last item was the trunk with the remains of the Amadis. “ This thing weighs as much as a dead man,” said the driver, laughing. “ There are two of them,” the grandmother said, “ so treat them with the proper respect.” “ I bet they’re marble statues.” The driver laughed again.

He put the trunk with bones down carelessly among the singed furniture and held out his open hand to the grandmother. “ Fifty pesos,” he said.

“ Your slave has already paid on the right-hand side.”

The driver looked at his helper with surprise and the latter made an affirmative sign. The driver then went back to the cab, where a woman in mourning was riding, in her arms a baby who was crying from the heat.

The loader, quite sure of himself, told the grandmother: “ Erendira is coming with me, if it’s all right by you. My intentions are honorable.” The girl intervened, surprised:

“ I didn’t say anything!”

“ The idea was all mine,” the loader said.

The grandmother looked him up and down, now, to make him feel small but trying to measure the true size of his guts. “ It’s all right by me,” she told him, “ provided you pay me what I lost because of her carelessness. It’s eight hundred seventy-two thousand three hundred fifteen pesos, less the four hundred and twenty which she’s already paid me, making it eight hundred seventy-one thousand eight hundred ninety-five.” The truck started up.

“ Believe me, I’d give you that pile of money if I had it,” the loader said seriously. “ The girl is worth it.” The grandmother was pleased with the boy’s decision.

“ Well, then, come back when you have it, son,” she answered in a sympathetic tone. “ But you’d better go now, because if we figure out accounts again you’ll end up owing me ten pesos.” The loader jumped onto the back of the truck and it went off. From there he waved good-bye to Erendira, but she was still so surprised that she didn’t answer him. In the same vacant lot where the truck had left them, Erendira and her grandmother improvised a shelter to live in from sheets of zinc and the remains of Oriental rugs. They laid two mats on the ground and slept as well as they had in the mansion until the sun opened holes in the ceiling and burned their faces. Just the opposite of what normally happened, it was the grandmother who busied herself that morning fixing up Erendira. She made up her face in the style of sepulchral beauty that had been the vogue in her youth and touched her up with artificial fingernails and an organdy bow that

looked like a butterfly on her head. " You look awful," she admitted, " but it's better that way: men are quite stupid when it comes to female matters."

Long before they saw them they both recognized the sound of two mules walking on the flint of the desert. At a command from her grandmother, Erendira lay down on the mat the way an amateur actress might have done at the moment when the curtain was about to go up. Leaning on her bishop's crosier, the grandmother went out of the shelter and sat down on the throne to wait for the mules to pass. The mailman was coming. He was only twenty years old, but his work had aged him, and he was wearing a khaki uniform, leggings, a pith helmet, and had a military pistol on his cartridge belt. He was riding a good mule and leading by the halter another, more timeworn one, on whom the canvas mailbags were piled. As he passed by the grandmother he saluted her and kept on going, but she signaled him to look inside the shelter. The man stopped and saw Erendira lying on the mat in her posthumous make-up and wearing a purple-trimmed dress. " Do you like it?" the grandmother asked.

The mailman hadn't understood until then what the proposition was. " It doesn't look bad to someone who's been on a diet," he said, smiling. " Fifty pesos," the grandmother said. " Boy, you're asking a mint!" he said. " I can eat for a whole month on that." " Don't be a tightwad," the grandmother said. " The air mail pays even better than being a priest." " I'm the domestic mail," the man said. " The airmail man travels in a pickup truck." " In any case, love is just as important as eating," the grandmother said. " But it doesn't feed you."

The grandmother realized that a man who lived from what other people were waiting for had more than enough time for bargaining. "How much have you got?" she asked him. The mailman dismounted, took some chewed-up bills from his pocket, and showed them to the grandmother. She snatched them up all together with a rapid hand just as if they had been a ball. "I'll lower the price for you," she said, "but on one condition: that you spread the word all around." "All the way to the other side of the world," the mailman said. "That's what I'm for." Erendira, who had been unable to blink, then took off her artificial eyelashes and moved to one side of the mat to make room for the chance boyfriend. As soon as he was in the shelter, the grandmother closed the entrance with an energetic tug on the sliding curtain. It was an effective deal. Taken by the words of the mailman, men came from very far away to become acquainted with the newness of Erendira.

Behind the men came gambling tables and food stands, and behind them all came a photographer on a bicycle, who, across from the encampment, set up a camera with a mourning sleeve on a tripod and a backdrop of a lake with listless swans. The grandmother, fanning herself on her throne, seemed alien to her own bazaar. The only thing that interested her was keeping order in the line of customers who were waiting their turn and checking the exact amount of money they paid in advance to go in to Erendira. At first she had been so strict that she refused a good customer because he was five pesos short. But with the passage of months she was assimilating the lessons of reality and she ended up letting people in who completed their payment with religious medals, family relics, wedding rings, and anything her bite could prove was bona-fide gold even if it didn't shine. After a long

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stay in that first town, the grandmother had sufficient money to buy a donkey, and she went off into the desert in search of places more propitious for the payment of the debt.

She traveled on a litter that had been improvised on top of the donkey and she was protected from the motionless sun by the half-spoked umbrella that Erendira held over her head. Behind them walked four Indian bearers with the remnants of the encampment: the sleeping mats, the restored throne, the alabaster angel, and the trunks with the remains of the Amadis. The photographer followed the caravan on his bicycle, but never catching up, as if he were going to a different festival. Six months had passed since the fire when the grandmother was able to get a complete picture of the business.

“ If things go on like this,” she told Erendira, “ you will have paid me the debt inside of eight years, seven months, and eleven days.” She went back over her calculations with her eyes closed, fumbling with the seeds she was taking out of a cord pouch where she also kept the money, and she corrected herself: “ All that, of course, not counting the pay and board of the Indians and other minor expenses.” Erendira, who was keeping in step with the donkey, bowed down by the heat and dust, did not reproach her grandmother for her figures, but she had to hold back her tears. “ I’ve got ground glass in my bones,” she said.

“ Try to sleep.”

“ Yes, Grandmother.”

She closed her eyes, took in a deep breath of scorching air, and went on walking in her sleep.

A small truck loaded with cages appeared, frightening goats in the dust of the horizon, and the clamor of the birds was like a splash of cool water for the Sunday torpor of San Miguel del Desierto. At the wheel was a corpulent Dutch farmer, his skin splintered by the outdoors, and with a squirrel-colored mustache he had inherited from some great-grandfather. His son Ulises, who was riding in the other seat, was a gilded adolescent with lonely maritime eyes and with the appearance of a furtive angel. The Dutchman noticed a tent in front of which all the soldiers of the local garrison were awaiting their turn. They were sitting on the ground, drinking out of the same bottle, which passed from mouth to mouth, and they had almond branches on their heads as if camouflaged for combat. The Dutchman asked in his language: "What the devil can they be selling there?"

"A woman," his son answered quite naturally. "Her name is Erendira." "How do you know?"

"Everybody in the desert knows," Ulises answered. The Dutchman stopped at the small hotel in town and got out. Ulises stayed in the truck. With agile fingers he opened a briefcase that his father had left on the seat, took out a roll of bills, put several in his pocket, and left everything just the way it had been. That night, while his father was asleep, he climbed out the hotel window and went to stand in line in front of Erendira's tent. The festivities were at their height.

The drunken recruits were dancing by themselves so as not to waste the free music, and the photographer was taking nighttime pictures with magnesium papers. As she watched over her business, the grandmother counted the



bank notes in her lap, dividing them into equal piles and arranging them in a basket. There were only twelve soldiers at that time, but the evening line had grown with civilian customers. Ulises was the last one. It was the turn of a soldier with a woeful appearance. The grandmother not only blocked his way but avoided contact with his money. "No, son," she told him. "You couldn't go in for all the gold in the world. You bring bad luck." The soldier, who wasn't from those parts, was puzzled.

"What do you mean?"

"You bring down the evil shadows," the grandmother said. "A person only has to look at your face." She waved him off with her hand, but without touching

him, and made way for the next soldier. "Go right in, handsome," she told him good-naturedly, "but don't take too long, your country needs you." The soldier went in but he came right out again because Erendira wanted to talk to her grandmother. She hung the basket of money on her arm and went into the tent, which wasn't very roomy, but which was neat and clean. In the back, on an army cot, Erendira was unable to repress the trembling in her body, and she was in sorry shape, all dirty with soldier sweat. "

Grandmother," she sobbed, "I'm dying."

The grandmother felt her forehead and when she saw she had no fever, she tried to console her. "There are only ten soldiers left," she said.

Erendira began to weep with the shrieks of a frightened animal. The grandmother realized then that she had gone beyond the limits of horror and, stroking her head, she helped her calm down. "The trouble is that

you're weak," she told her. "Come on, don't cry any more, take a bath in sage water to get your blood back into shape." She left the tent when Erendira was calmer and she gave the soldier waiting his money back. "That's all for today," she told him. "Come back tomorrow and I'll give you the first place in line." Then she shouted to those lined up: "That's all, boys. Tomorrow morning at nine."

Soldiers and civilians broke ranks with shouts of protest. The grandmother confronted them, in a good mood but brandishing the devastating crosier in earnest. "You're an inconsiderate bunch of slob!" she shouted. "What do you think the girl is made of, iron? I'd like to see you in her place. You perverts! You shitty bums!" The men answered her with even cruder insults, but she ended up controlling the revolt and stood guard with her staff until they took away the snack tables and dismantled the gambling stands. She was about to go back into the tent when she saw Ulises, as large as life, all by himself in the dark and empty space where the line of men had been before. He had an unreal aura about him and he seemed to be visible in the shadows because of the very glow of his beauty. "You," the grandmother asked him. "What happened to your wings?" "The one who had wings was my grandfather," Ulises answered in his natural way, "but nobody believed it." The grandmother examined him again with fascination. "Well, I do," she said.

"Put them on and come back tomorrow." She went into the tent and left Ulises burning where he stood. Erendira felt better after her bath. She had put on a short, lace-trimmed slip and she was drying her hair before going to

bed, but she was still making an effort to hold back her tears. Her grandmother was asleep. Behind Erendira's bed, very slowly, Ulises' head appeared. She saw the anxious and diaphanous eyes, but before saying anything she rubbed her head with the towel in order to prove that it wasn't an illusion. When Ulises blinked for the first time, Erendira asked him in a very low voice: " Who are you?"

Ulises showed himself down to his shoulders. " My name is Ulises," he said. He showed her the bills he had stolen and added: " I've got money." Erendira put her hands on the bed, brought her face close to that of Ulises, and went on talking to him as if in a kindergarten game. " You were supposed to get in line," she told him.

" I waited all night long," Ulises said.

" Well, now you have to wait until tomorrow," Erendira said. " I feel as if someone had been beating me on the kidneys." At that instant the grandmother began to talk in her sleep. " It's going on twenty years since it rained last," she said. " It was such a terrible storm that the rain was all mixed in with sea water, and the next morning the house was full of fish and snails and your grandfather Amadis, may he rest in peace, saw a glowing manta ray floating through the air." Ulises hid behind the bed again. Erendira showed an amused smile. " Take it easy," she told him. " She always acts kind of crazy when she's asleep, but not even an earthquake can wake her up." Ulises reappeared. Erendira looked at him with a smile that was naughty and even a little affectionate and took the soiled sheet off the mattress. " Come," she said. " Help me change the sheet."

Then Ulises came from behind the bed and took one end of the sheet. Since the sheet was much larger than the mattress, they had to fold it several times. With every fold Ulises drew closer to Erendira. " I was going crazy wanting to see you," he suddenly said. " Everybody says you're very pretty and they're right." " But I'm going to die," Erendira said.

" My mother says that people who die in the desert don't go to heaven but to the sea," Ulises said. Erendira put the dirty sheet aside and covered the mattress with another, which was clean and ironed. " I never saw the sea," she said.

" It's like the desert but with water," said Ulises.

" Then you can't walk on it."

" My father knew a man who could," Ulises said, " but that was a long time ago." Erendira was fascinated but she wanted to sleep.

" If you come very early tomorrow you can be first in line," she said. " I'm leaving with my father at dawn," said Ulises.

" Won't you be coming back this way?"

" Who can tell?" Ulises said. " We just happened along now because we got lost on the road to the border." Erendira looked thoughtfully at her sleeping grandmother.

" All right," she decided. " Give me the money."

Ulises gave it to her. Erendira lay down on the bed but he remained trembling where he was: at the decisive moment his determination had weakened. Erendira took him by the hand to hurry him up and only then did

she notice his tribulation. She was familiar with that fear. “ Is it the first time?” she asked him.

Ulises didn't answer but he smiled in desolation. Erendira became a different person. “ Breathe slowly,” she told him. “ That's the way it always is the first time. Afterwards you won't even notice.” She laid him down beside her and while she was taking his clothes off she was calming him maternally. “ What's your name?”

“ Ulises.”

“ That's a gringo name,” Erendira said.

“ No, a sailor name.”

Erendira uncovered his chest, gave a few little orphan kisses, sniffed him. “ It's like you were made of gold all over,” she said, “ but you smell of flowers.” “ It must be the oranges,” Ulises said.

Calmer now, he gave a smile of complicity.

“ We carry a lot of birds along to throw people off the track,” he added, “ but what we're doing is smuggling a load of oranges across the border.” “

Oranges aren't contraband,” Erendira said.

“ These are,” said Ulises. “ Each one is worth fifty thousand pesos.” Erendira laughed for the first time in a long while. “ What I like about you,” she said, “ is the serious way you make up nonsense.” She had become spontaneous and talkative again, as if Ulises' innocence had changed not only her mood but her character. The grandmother, such a short distance away from misfortune, was still talking in her sleep. “ Around those times, at the beginning of March, they brought you home,” she said. “ You looked like a

lizard wrapped in cotton. Amadis, your father, who was young and handsome, was so happy that afternoon that he sent for twenty carts loaded with flowers and arrived strewing them along the street until the whole village was gold with flowers like the sea.”

She ranted on with great shouts and with a stubborn passion for several hours. But Ulises couldn't hear her because Erendira had loved him so much and so truthfully that she loved him again for half price while her grandmother was raving and kept on loving him for nothing until dawn. A group of missionaries holding up their crucifixes stood shoulder to shoulder in the middle of the desert. A wind as fierce as the wind of misfortune shook their burlap habits and their rough beards and they were barely able to stand on their feet. Behind them was the mission, a colonial pile of stone with a tiny belfry on top of the harsh whitewashed walls. The youngest missionary, who was in charge of the group, pointed to a natural crack in the glazed clay ground. “ You shall not pass beyond this line!” he shouted.

The four Indian bearers carrying the grandmother in a litter made of boards stopped when they heard the shout. Even though she was uncomfortable sitting on the planks of the litter and her spirit was dulled by the dust and sweat of the desert, the grandmother maintained her haughtiness intact. Erendira was on foot. Behind the litter came a file of eight Indians carrying the baggage and at the very end the photographer on his bicycle. “ The desert doesn't belong to anyone,” the grandmother said. “ It belongs to God,” the missionary said, “ and you are violating his sacred laws with your filthy business.” The grandmother then recognized the missionary's

peninsular usage and diction and avoided a head-on confrontation so as not to break her head against his intransigence. She went back to being herself.

“ I don’t understand your mysteries, son.”

The missionary pointed at Erendira.

“ That child is underage.”

“ But she’s my granddaughter.”

“ So much the worse,” the missionary replied. “ Put her under our care willingly or we’ll have to seek recourse in other ways.” The grandmother had not expected them to go so far.

“ All right, if that’s how it is.” She surrendered in fear. “ But sooner or later I’ll pass, you’ll see.” Three days after the encounter with the missionaries, the grandmother and Erendira were sleeping in a village near the mission when a group of stealthy, mute bodies, creeping along like an infantry patrol, slipped into the tent. They were six Indian novices, strong and young, their rough cloth habits seeming to glow in the moonlight. Without making a sound they cloaked Erendira in a mosquito netting, picked her up without waking her, and carried her off wrapper-like a large, fragile fish caught in a lunar net. There were no means left untried by the grandmother in an attempt to rescue her granddaughter from the protection of the missionaries.

Only when they had all failed, from the most direct to the most devious, did she turn to the civil authority, which was vested in a military man. She found him in the courtyard of his home, his chest bare, shooting with an army rifle at a dark and solitary cloud in the burning sky. He was trying to perforate it

to bring on rain, and his shots were furious and useless, but he did take the necessary time out to listen to the grandmother. "I can't do anything," he explained to her when he had heard her out. "The priesties, according to the concordat, have the right to keep the girl until she comes of age. Or until she gets married." "Then why do they have you here as mayor?" the grandmother asked. "To make it rain," was the mayor's answer.

Then, seeing that the cloud had moved out of range, he interrupted his official duties and gave his full attention to the grandmother. "What you need is someone with a lot of weight who will vouch for you," he told her. "Someone who can swear to your moral standing and your good behavior in a signed letter. Do you know Senator Onesimo Sanchez?" Sitting under the naked sun on a stool that was too narrow for her astral buttocks, the grandmother answered with a solemn rage: "I'm just a poor woman all alone in the vastness of the desert." The mayor, his right eye twisted from the heat, looked at her with pity.

"Then don't waste your time, ma'am," he said. "You'll rot in hell." She didn't rot, of course. She set up her tent across from the mission and sat down to think, like a solitary warrior besieging a fortified city. The wandering photographer, who knew her quite well, loaded his gear onto the carrier of his bicycle and was ready to leave all alone when he saw her in the full sun with her eyes fixed on the mission. "Let's see who gets tired first," the grandmother said, "they or I." "They've been here for three hundred years and they can still take it," the photographer said. "I'm leaving." Only then did the grandmother notice the loaded bicycle.



“ Where are you going?”

“ Wherever the wind takes me,” the photographer said, and he left. “ It’s a big world.” The grandmother sighed.

“ Not as big as you think, you ingrate.”

But she didn’t move her head in spite of her anger so as not to lose sight of the mission. She didn’t move it for many, many days of mineral heat, for many, many nights of wild winds, for all the time she was meditating and no one came out of the mission. The Indians built a lean-to of palm leaves beside the tent and hung their hammocks there, but the grandmother stood watch until very late, nodding on her throne and chewing the uncooked grain in her pouch with the invincible laziness of a resting ox. One night a convoy of slow covered trucks passed very close to her and the only lights they carried were wreaths of colored bulbs which gave them the ghostly size of sleep-walking altars.

The grandmother recognized them at once because they were just like the trucks of the Amadis. The last truck in the convoy slowed, stopped, and a man got out of the cab to adjust something in back. He looked like a replica of the Amadis, wearing a hat with a turned-up brim, high boots, two crossed cartridge belts across his chest, an army rifle, and two pistols. Overcome by an irresistible temptation, the grandmother called to the man. “ Don’t you know who I am?” she asked him.

The man lighted her pitilessly with a flashlight. For an instant he studied the face worn out by vigil, the eyes dim from fatigue, the withered hair of the woman who, even at her age, in her sorry state, and with that crude light on

her face, could have said that she had been the most beautiful woman in the world. When he examined her enough to be sure that he had never seen her before, he turned out the light. "The only thing I know for sure is that you're not the Virgin of Perpetual Help." "Quite the contrary," the grandmother said with a very sweet voice. "I'm the Lady." The man put his hand to his pistol out of pure instinct.

"What lady?"

"Big Amadis's."

"Then you're not of this world," he said, tense. "What is it you want?" "For you to help me rescue my granddaughter, Big Amadis's granddaughter, the daughter of our son Amadis, held captive in that mission." The man overcame his fear.

"You knocked on the wrong door," he said. "If you think we're about to get mixed up in God's affairs, you're not the one you say you are, you never knew the Amadis, and you haven't got the whoriest notion of what smuggling's all about." Early that morning the grandmother slept less than before. She lay awake pondering things, wrapped in a wool blanket while the early hour got her memory all mixed up and the repressed raving struggled to get out even though she was awake, and she had to tighten her heart with her hand so as not to be suffocated by the memory of a house by the sea with great red flowers where she had been happy. She remained that way until the mission bell rang and the first lights went on in the windows and the desert became saturated with the smell of the hot bread of matins. Only then did she abandon her fatigue, tricked by the illusion that Erendira had

got up and was looking for a way to escape and come back to her. Erendira, however, had not lost a single night's sleep since they had taken her to the mission.

They had cut her hair with pruning shears until her head was like a brush, they put a hermit's rough cassock on her and gave her a bucket of whitewash and a broom so that she could whitewash the stairs every time someone went up or down. It was mule work because there was an incessant coming and going of muddied missionaries and novice carriers, but Erendira felt as if every day were Sunday after the fearsome galley that had been her bed. Besides, she wasn't the only one worn out at night, because that mission was dedicated to fighting not against the devil but against the desert. Erendira had seen the Indian novices bulldogging cows in the barn in order to milk them, jumping up and down on planks for days on end in order to press cheese, helping a goat through a difficult birth. She had seen them sweat like tanned stevedores hauling water from the cistern, watering by hand a bold garden that other novices cultivated with hoes in order to plant vegetables in the flintstone of the desert. She had seen the earthly inferno of the ovens for baking bread and the rooms for ironing clothes.

She had seen a nun chase a pig through the courtyard, slide along holding the runaway animal by the ears, and roll in a mud puddle without letting go until two novices in leather aprons helped her get it under control and one of them cut its throat with a butcher knife as they all became covered with blood and mire. In the isolation ward of the infirmary she had seen tubercular nuns in their nightgown shrouds, waiting for God's last command

as they embroidered bridal sheets on the terraces while the men preached in the desert. Erendira was living in her shadows and discovering other forms of beauty and horror that she had never imagined in the narrow world of her bed, but neither the coarsest nor the most persuasive of the novices had managed to get her to say a word since they had taken her to the mission. One morning, while she was preparing the whitewash in her bucket, she heard string music that was like a light even more diaphanous than the light of the desert.

Captivated by the miracle, she peeped into an immense and empty salon with bare walls and large windows through which the dazzling June light poured in and remained still, and in the center of the room she saw a very beautiful nun whom she had never seen before playing an Easter oratorio on the clavichord. Erendira listened to the music without blinking, her heart hanging by a thread, until the lunch bell rang. After eating, while she whitewashed the stairs with her reed brush, she waited until all the novices had finished going up and coming down, and she was alone, with no one to hear her, and then she spoke for the first time since she had entered the mission. " I'm happy," she said.

So that put an end to the hopes the grandmother had that Erendira would run away to rejoin her, but she maintained her granite siege without having made any decision until Pentecost. During that time the missionaries were combing the desert in search of pregnant concubines in order to get them married. They traveled all the way to the most remote settlements in a broken-down truck with four well-armed soldiers and a chest of cheap cloth.

The most difficult part of that Indian hunt was to convince the women, who defended themselves against divine grace with the truthful argument that men, sleeping in their hammocks with legs spread, felt they had the right to demand much heavier work from legitimate wives than from concubines. It was necessary to seduce them with trickery, dissolving the will of God in the syrup of their own language so that it would seem less harsh to them, but even the most crafty of them ended up being convinced by a pair of flashy earrings.

The men, on the other hand, once the women's acceptance had been obtained, were routed out of their hammocks with rifle butts, bound, and hauled away in the back of the truck to be married by force. For several days the grandmother saw the little truck loaded with pregnant Indian women heading for the mission, but she failed to recognize her opportunity. She recognized it on Pentecost Sunday itself, when she heard the rockets and the ringing of the bells and saw the miserable and merry crowd that was going to the festival, and she saw that among the crowds there were pregnant women with the veil and crown of a bride holding the arms of their casual mates, whom they would legitimize in the collective wedding.

Among the last in the procession a boy passed, innocent of heart, with gourd-cut Indian hair and dressed in rags, carrying an Easter candle with a silk bow in his hand. The grandmother called him over. "Tell me something, son," she asked with her smoothest voice. "What part do you have in this affair?" The boy felt intimidated by the candle and it was hard for him to

close his mouth because of his donkey teeth. " The priests are going to give me my first communion," he said. " How much did they pay you?"

" Five pesos."

The grandmother took a roll of bills from her pouch and the boy looked at them with surprise. " I'm going to give you twenty," the grandmother said. " Not for you to make your first communion, but for you to get married." " Who to?"

" My granddaughter."

So Erendira was married in the courtyard of the mission in her hermit's cassock and a silk shawl that the novices gave her, and without even knowing the name of the groom her grandmother had bought for her. With uncertain hope she withstood the torment of kneeling on the saltpeter ground, the goat-hair stink of the two hundred pregnant brides, the punishment of the Epistle of Saint Paul hammered out in Latin under the motionless and burning sun, because the missionaries had found no way to oppose the will of that unforeseen marriage, but had given her a promise as a last attempt to keep her in the mission. Nevertheless, after the ceremony in the presence of the apostolic prefect, the military mayor who shot at the clouds, her recent husband, and her impassive grandmother, Erendira found herself once more under the spell that had dominated her since birth. When they asked her what her free, true, and definitive will was, she didn't even give a sigh of hesitation. " I want to leave," she said. And she clarified things by pointing at her husband. " But not with him, with my grandmother."

Ulises had wasted a whole afternoon trying to steal an orange from his father's grove, because the older man wouldn't take his eyes off him while they were pruning the sick trees, and his mother kept watch from the house. So he gave up his plan, for that day at least, and grudgingly helped his father until they had pruned the last orange trees. The extensive grove was quiet and hidden, and the wooden house with a tin roof had copper grating over the windows and a large porch set on pilings, with primitive plants bearing intense flowers. Ulises' mother was on the porch sitting back in a Viennese rocking chair with smoked leaves on her temples to relieve her headache, and her full-blooded-Indian look followed her son like a beam of invisible light to the most remote corners of the orange grove.

She was quite beautiful, much younger than her husband, and not only did she still wear the garb of her tribe, but she knew the most ancient secrets of her blood. When Ulises returned to the house with the pruning tools, his mother asked him for her four o'clock medicine, which was on a nearby table. As soon as he touched them, the glass and the bottle changed color. Then, out of pure play, he touched a glass pitcher that was on the table beside some tumblers and the pitcher also turned blue. His mother observed him while she was taking her medicine and when she was sure that it was not a delirium of her pain, she asked him in the Guajiro Indian language: "How long has that been happening to you?"

Ever since we came back from the desert," Ulises said, also in Guajiro. "It only happens with glass things." In order to demonstrate, one after the other he touched the glasses that were on the table and they all turned different

colors. “ Those things happen only because of love,” his mother said. “ Who is it?” Ulises didn’t answer. His father, who couldn’t understand the Guajiro language, was passing by the porch at that moment with a cluster of oranges. “ What are you two talking about?” he asked Ulises in Dutch.

“ Nothing special,” Ulises answered.

Ulises’ mother didn’t know any Dutch. When her husband went into the house, she asked her son in Guajiro: “ What did he say?”

“ Nothing special,” Ulises answered. He lost sight of his father when he went into the house, but he saw him again through a window of the office. The mother waited until she was alone with Ulises and then repeated: “ Tell me who it is.”

“ It’s nobody,” Ulises said.

He answered without paying attention because he was hanging on his father’s movements in the office. He had seen him put the oranges on top of the safe when he worked out the combination. But while he was keeping an eye on his father, his mother was keeping an eye on him. “ You haven’t eaten any bread for a long time,” she observed. “ I don’t like it.”

The mother’s face suddenly took on an unaccustomed liveliness. “ That’s a lie,” she said. “ It’s because you’re love-sick and people who are lovesick can’t eat bread.” Her voice, like her eyes, had passed from entreaty to threat. “ It would be better if you told me who it was,” she said, “ or I’ll make you take some purifying baths.” In the office the Dutchman opened the safe, put the oranges inside, and closed the armored door. Ulises moved away from the window then and answered his mother impatiently. “ I already



told you there wasn't anyone," he said. " If you don't believe me, ask Papa." The Dutchman appeared in the office doorway lighting his sailor's pipe and carrying his threadbare Bible under his arm. His wife asked him in Spanish: " Who did you meet in the desert?"

" Nobody," her husband answered, a little in the clouds. " If you don't believe me, ask Ulises." He sat down at the end of the hall and sucked on his pipe until the tobacco was used up. Then he opened the Bible at random and recited spot passages for almost two hours in flowing and ringing Dutch. At midnight Ulises was still thinking with such intensity that he couldn't sleep. He rolled about in his hammock for another hour, trying to overcome the pain of memories until the very pain gave him the strength he needed to make a decision. Then he put on his cowboy pants, his plaid shirt, and his riding boots, jumped through the window, and fled from the house in the truck loaded with birds. As he went through the groves he picked the three ripe oranges he had been unable to steal that afternoon. He traveled across the desert for the rest of the night and at dawn he asked in towns and villages about the whereabouts of Erendira, but no one could tell him. Finally they informed him that she was traveling in the electoral campaign retinue of Senator Onesimo Sanchez and that on that day he was probably in Nueva Castilla.

He didn't find him there but in the next town and Erendira was no longer with him, for the grandmother had managed to get the senator to vouch for her morality in a letter written in his own hand, and with it she was going about opening the most tightly barred doors in the desert. On the third day

he came across the domestic mailman and the latter told him what direction to follow. "They're heading toward the sea," he said, "and you'd better hurry because the goddamned old woman plans to cross over to the island of Aruba." Following that direction, after half a day's journey Ulises spotted the broad, stained tent that the grandmother had bought from a bankrupt circus. The wandering photographer had come back to her, convinced that the world was really not as large as he had thought, and he had set up his idyllic backdrops near the tent. A band of brass-blowers was captivating Erendira's clientele with a taciturn waltz. Ulises waited for his turn to go in, and the first thing that caught his attention was the order and cleanliness of the inside of the tent.

The grandmother's bed had recovered its viceregal splendor, the statue of the angel was in its place beside the funerary trunk of the Amadis, and in addition, there was a pewter bathtub with lion's feet. Lying on her new canopied bed, Erendira was naked and placid, irradiating a childlike glow under the light that filtered through the tent. She was sleeping with her eyes open. Ulises stopped beside her, the oranges in his hand, and he noticed that she was looking at him without seeing him. Then he passed his hand over her eyes and called her by the name he had invented when he wanted to think about her: "Aridnere."

Erendira woke up. She felt naked in front of Ulises, let out a squeak, and covered herself with the sheet up to her neck. "Don't look at me," she said. "I'm horrible."

"You're the color of an orange all over," Ulises said. He raised the fruits to

her eyes so that she could compare. "Look." Erendira uncovered her eyes and saw that indeed the oranges did have her color. "I don't want you to stay now," she said.

"I only came to show you this," Ulises said. "Look here."

He broke open an orange with his nails, split it in two with his hands, and showed Erendira what was inside: stuck in the heart of the fruit was a genuine diamond. "These are the oranges we take across the border," he said.

"But they're living oranges!" Erendira exclaimed.

"Of course." Ulises smiled. "My father grows them."

Erendira couldn't believe it. She uncovered her face, took the diamond in her fingers and contemplated it with surprise. "With three like these we can take a trip around the world," Ulises said. Erendira gave him back the diamond with a look of disappointment. Ulises went on: "Besides, I've got a pickup truck," he said. "And besides that ... Look!" From underneath his shirt he took an ancient pistol.

"I can't leave for ten years," Erendira said.

"You'll leave," Ulises said. "Tonight, when the white whale falls asleep, I'll be outside there calling like an owl." He made such a true imitation of the call of an owl that Erendira's eyes smiled for the first time. "It's my grandmother," she said.

"The owl?"

"The whale."

They both laughed at the mistake, but Erendira picked up the thread again. “ No one can leave for anywhere without her grandmother’s permission.” “ There’s no reason to say anything.” “ She’ll find out in any case,” Erendira said. “ She can dream things.” “ When she starts to dream that you’re leaving we’ll already be across the border. We’ll cross over like smugglers,” Ulises said. Grasping the pistol with the confidence of a movie gunfighter, he imitated the sounds of the shots to excite Erendira with his audacity. She didn’t say yes or no, but her eyes gave a sigh and she sent Ulises away with a kiss. Ulises, touched, whispered: “ Tomorrow we’ll be watching the ships go by.”

That night, a little after seven o’clock, Erendira was combing her grandmother’s hair when the wind of her misfortune blew again. In the shelter of the tent were the Indian bearers and the leader of the brass band, waiting to be paid. The grandmother finished counting out the bills on a chest she had within reach, and after consulting a ledger she paid the oldest of the Indians. “ Here you are,” she told him. “ Twenty pesos for the week, less eight for meals, less three for water, less fifty cents on account for the new shirts, that’s eight fifty. Count it.” The oldest Indian counted the money and they all withdrew with a bow. “ Thank you, white lady.”

Next came the leader of the band. The grandmother consulted her ledger and turned to the photographer, who was trying to repair the bellows of his camera with wads of gutta-percha. “ What’s it going to be?” she asked him. “ Will you or won’t you pay a quarter of the cost of the music?” The photographer didn’t even raise his head to answer.

“ Music doesn’t come out in pictures.”

“ But it makes people want to have their pictures taken,” the grandmother answered. “ On the contrary,” said the photographer. “ It reminds them of the dead and then they come out in the picture with their eyes closed.” The bandleader intervened.

“ What makes them close their eyes isn’t the music,” he said. “ It’s the lightning you make taking pictures at night.” “ It’s the music,” the photographer insisted.

The grandmother put an end to the dispute. “ Don’t be a cheapskate,” she said to the photographer. “ Look how well things have been going for Senator Onesimo Sanchez and it’s thanks to the musicians he has along.” Then, in a harsh tone, she concluded: “ So pay what you ought to or go follow your fortune by yourself. It’s not right for that poor child to carry the whole burden of expenses.” “ I’ll follow my fortune by myself,” the photographer said. “ After all, an artist is what I am.” The grandmother shrugged her shoulders and took care of the musician. She handed him a bundle of bills that matched the figure written in her ledger. “ Two hundred and fifty-four numbers,” she told him “ At fifty cents apiece, plus thirty-two on Sundays and holidays at sixty cents apiece, that’s one hundred fifty-six twenty.” The musician wouldn’t accept the money.

“ It’s one hundred eighty-two forty,” he said. “ Waltzes cost more.” “ Why is that?”

“ Because they’re sadder,” the musician said.

The grandmother made him take the money.

“ Well, this week you’ll play us two happy numbers for each waltz I owe you for and we’ll be even.” The musician didn’t understand the grandmother’s logic, but he accepted the figures while he unraveled the tangle. At that moment the fearsome wind threatened to uproot the tent, and in the silence that it left in its wake, outside, clear and gloomy, the call of an owl was heard. Erendira didn’t know what to do to disguise her upset. She closed the chest with the money and hid it under the bed, but the grandmother recognized the fear in her hand when she gave her the key. “ Don’t be frightened,” she told her.

“ There are always owls on windy nights.” Still she didn’t seem so convinced when she saw the photographer go out with the camera on his back. “ Wait till tomorrow if you’d like,” she told him. “ Death is on the loose tonight.” The photographer had also noticed the call of the owl, but he didn’t change his intentions. “ Stay, son,” the grandmother insisted. “ Even if it’s just because of the liking I have for you.” “ But I won’t pay for the music,” the photographer said.

“ Oh, no,” the grandmother said. “ Not that.”

“ You see?” the photographer said. “ You’ve got no love for anybody.” The grandmother grew pale with rage.

“ Then beat it!” she said. “ You lowlife!”

She felt so outraged that she was still venting her rage on him while Erendira helped her go to bed. “ Son of an evil mother,” she muttered. “ What does that bastard know about anyone else’s heart?” Erendira paid no attention to her, because the owl was calling her with tenacious insistence during the

pauses in the wind and she was tormented by uncertainty. The grandmother finally went to bed with the same ritual that had been de rigueur in the ancient mansion, and while her granddaughter fanned her she overcame her anger and once more breathed her sterile breath. " You have to get up early," she said then, " so you can boil the infusion for my bath before the people get here." " Yes, Grandmother."

" With the time you have left, wash the Indians' dirty laundry and that way we'll have something else to take off their pay next week." " Yes, Grandmother," Erendira said.

" And sleep slowly so that you won't get tired, because tomorrow is Thursday, the longest day of the week." " Yes, Grandmother."

" And feed the ostrich."

" Yes, Grandmother," Erendira said.

She left the fan at the head of the bed and lighted two altar candles in front of the chest with their dead. The grandmother, asleep now, was lagging behind with her orders. " Don't forget to light the candles for the Amadis." " Yes, Grandmother."

" Yes, Grandmother."

Erendira knew then that she wouldn't wake up, because she had begun to rave.

She heard the wind barking about the tent, but she didn't recognize it as the wind of her misfortune that time either. She looked out into the night until the owl called again and her instinct for freedom in the end prevailed over her grandmother's spell. She hadn't taken five steps outside the tent when she came across the photographer, who was lashing his equipment to the

carrier of his bicycle. His accomplice's smile calmed her down. "I don't know anything," the photographer said, "I haven't seen anything, and I won't pay for the music." He took his leave with a blessing for all. Then Erendira ran toward the desert, having decided once and for all, and she was swallowed up in the shadows of the wind where the owl was calling. That time the grandmother went to the civil authorities at once. The commandant of the local detachment leaped out of his hammock at six in the morning when she put the senator's letter before his eyes.

Ulises' father was waiting at the door. "How in hell do you expect me to know what it says!" the commandant shouted. "I can't read." "It's a letter of recommendation from Senator Onesimo Sanchez," the grandmother said. Without further questions, the commandant took down a rifle he had near his hammock and began to shout orders to his men. Five minutes later they were all in a military truck flying toward the border against a contrary wind that had erased all trace of the fugitives. The commandant rode in the front seat beside the driver. In back were the Dutchman and the grandmother, with an armed policeman on each r