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The March of the Lovers

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The March of the Lovers

LEOPOLDO N. CACNIO

HER daughters are lovely, in her innermost soul she loves them equally. And Maurina Blanco loves Andy Junior as much as any of her daughters. Being her only son didn't entitle him to special attention. Andy Junior and all her daughters except her eldest child, Norma, are mutes. Maurina knows that all her children loved their deceased father more than her. With a talent for telling funny stories, in some obscure fashion never failing to double up Norma and the mutes with laughter, and with impunity, Old Andy had made himself the children's favorite. Her deep-rooted weaknesses, she is very much aware of them. She can't make her children laugh, and she's not one for sparing the rod.

Had Andy been alive, she wouldn't be the first to know that Norma was engaged. Norma would have talked to her father first. Andy would have said something funny, Norma would have laughed; and then between them there would be mutual agreement on when to announce the engagement. She wouldn't be consulted about it.

Norma is an intelligent girl with a willful temperament. In college she was a student leader who always figured in controversial academic issues, and in her last year almost got expelled for helping organize the group which burned the dean of women in effigy. Maurina had seen one of Norma's notebooks with writings and a long bibliography on communism, and she was genuinely shocked and convinced that her daughter was a communist. Norma was not yet in her teens

when she stopped calling Maurina mother. She called her "Maurina," then "Mrs. Blanco" and she finally gave up calling her anything. She drinks and she smokes and Maurina had given up trying to make her stop. Once when Norma was fifteen Maurina caught her smoking in the bathroom. She slapped Norma so hard blood spurted from one side of her daughter's self-assertive mouth. Norma wiped the blood with bland composure and courageously stamped out of the bathroom. Maurina wept in her hands, because she had a right to see some tears in her unruly daughter's eyes.

* * * * *

In the plenitude of Maytime the carnival comes to enliven and brighten up the days of festivity in the town. Its successful but short sojourn in its temporary demesne, the large field from across the public elementary school building, is as regular and breathtaking as the staunch blossoming of the narra tree in the middle of the field. The carnival arrives three weeks before the day of the fiesta, and leaves the day after it and goes to another town. When the two Ferris wheels, canvas circus tents, merry-go-rounds, makeshift train, tents for stripteasers and snake-bearing ladies and weird creatures and bizzare beasts and so on and what-not are set up, clusters of children are present to watch the hired men nailing, sawing, plastering, installing, ending halcyon days and beginning the vivifying richness of holiday time. The uncut long grass of the field, first that under the tents and equipment, wilts and dries up in patches. The carnival customers wander cheerfully and step on the grass in the same spirit. But the grass grows again. A good pelting rain makes fresh green grass blades appear in a day or two where the grass was black and brown. By the time the children go back to school, the grass has profusely grown. With shovels and scythes and rakes and wheelbarrows, the children and their teachers go to the field to cut the grass and burn pieces of paper and narra leaves. The school holds its field day there. New children snip the grass and rake the leaves and participate in the field day each year. They remember how magnificent the last carnival was in the brilliance of garish lamps, and how depressed they were to see it torn apart. Even the shambling houses where some of

the circus performers dwelt when destroyed left trails of melancholy and despair, as though there was nothing to remember them by, in spite of damp and vagrant odors from fading narra flowers which reminded the children they had been there that year. Carnival attractions change, the circus performers are not the same each year except for the ageless man who walks on the tightrope, and the children grow up. And the young men and women who do not move to another place marry and build other houses in the town and have children, and these children, in time, go to the carnival.

Robin was not the type Norma should have fallen in love with. Norma had graduated from college that April and this young man hadn't even finished high school. He sold tickets at the guinea pig show, and sometimes went up to the microphone to give renditions of current songs in an auxiliary voice drowned out by the professional male singer's voice from a phonograph, a pretense of timing and showmanship that presupposed a lot of practice. He assisted the two homosexuals who took care of the female singers. The homosexuals wore different fashionable dresses every night, the colors of the dresses perfectly matching the color shades of their hairpieces. They had heavily painted faces, black pencilled eyebrows, puffy breasts, and they wore pendant earrings. One of them liked to sing along with Sylvia la Torre, and the other one's favorite was Connie Francis. But the latter one was just crazy about Cliff Richard and Paul Anka, and so occasionally sang along with them, too.

There were three guinea pig shows in the carnival that year. Robin and the homosexuals had the biggest crowd every night. They also had for prizes the most impressive assortment of household utensils, china, glasses, dolls, piggy banks, picture frames, vases, smoke glasses, and others. Tickets cost ten centavos each and were numbered one to fourteen, corresponding to the number of tiny houses around the circular wooden board on which the guinea pig was brought down on a pulley. The circular board was made to spin and the guinea pig instinctively went around, cheered and egged on by the

crowd to enter a particular house, before going inside one of the numbered houses. This guinea pig became popular for giving the crowd much excitement, because it would crouch into a house, with half of its body already inside it, and then back out and go straight into another house instead. The tickets with the number of the house the guinea pig went into won. There were several winners each time the guinea pig went down, because several sets of tickets were sold. And the expensive prizes could be won only after winning two or more times. In between the spinning of the circular board, the phonograph played a song, and one of the homosexuals walked to the microphone as the other one and Robin sold tickets. If there were more tickets to sell, the other one or Robin went up for more songs before the guinea pig slowly went down.

Maurina and her daughters were coming out of church that night, the first day of the novena. The jubilant rhythmic ringing of the church bells joined the harsh and clamorous explosion of fireworks in a kind of paean. The veiled women, inattentive men, and overwrought children wore their Sunday clothes. The women greeted their friends and talked in groups for a while. The mothers called out to their children not to leave the church premises and to look out for fast buses passing through the street. The children would hide from their mothers and run down the street to the field and feel a furtive joy when they looked up at the turning Ferris wheels and the full yellow-orange moon and stagnant stars in the deep blue sky. They would start counting the coins it took them a long time to save from the first moment they heard the jangled sounds of multifarious carnival music. The mothers knew exactly where to look for them, for the children had not taken their supper yet. But when the mothers found their children in the carnival they forgot they had come to take them home. Some of the mothers saw their children high up on a Ferris wheel, and they waved at their children and fell in line to buy tickets for themselves. Some of the mothers knew that their children were in the circus tents, and they looked for their own children and found them in one of the tents and sat through the circus numbers beside them and gasped, laughed, and clapped their hands far more vehemently than

their little ones, completely forgetting about supper. Some naughty boys bought tickets at the stripteaser's booth, and they were the only ones who got whipped by their angry mothers.

The meeting between Norma and Robin took place that sultry first night of the novena. Ruth, Lydia, Sylvia, and Marie, Maurina's mute daughters, had taken turns in persuading her with their hands to take them to the carnival. Norma alone didn't evince a desire to go to the carnival. Old Andy had died the year before, the year Maurina and her daughters didn't go to the carnival. And this year Andy Junior was sick, and what Maurina felt was more apt for her to do was to go home and look after her son. But her daughters wanted to see the carnival. The past few days they were forced to stay indoors because of heavy and dreadful rains that made the ground miry and life unbearably reclusive. That morning a raging sun came out, and they threw open the windows and cleaned the house and broached the subject of a visit to the carnival once more.

It only stood to reason that they must go. Although they didn't hear the carnival sounds, her mute daughters were immensely delighted by the different colorful sights. They saw the guinea pig show as they stood by the entrance, it was right in front of them. Because a big crowd had gathered around it, they watched the show from a distance. When Norma said she would stay at the guinea pig show, Maurina, going with her mute daughters who wanted to see the rest of the carnival shows, failed to see where her daughter's eyes were looking. Norma's eyes looked apprehensively at Robin, because she felt an almost instant love for Robin when she first discovered him selling tickets and lowering a fat guinea pig in a carnival show. She elbowed her way through the thick crowd, and went nearer to him, and as she drew a long breath and accepted a ticket from Robin with a lavish smile, she knew she was falling in love.

"You may not have done it intentionally, but you certainly made a show of yourself last night. Smiling all night

at that boy in the guinea pig show." Maurina said at the breakfast table to Norma.

"But wouldn't you be as happy as I was if *you* were in my place? All those prizes I won."

"You know it's not those prizes. And I'm sure tonight you'll go back there."

"Yes, you're right. There's a cup and saucer with a very artistic design I'd like to win."

"Are you going with your sisters?"

"Do you want to go with me?" Norma asked her sisters tartly.

"I resent that tone of voice. Do you have to talk like that to your sisters? Even if it doesn't matter because they don't hear you, that is no way to talk to your sisters."

Norma stood up holding her coffee cup and saucer. Her mother had always wanted her to be gentle and kind to her sisters, not one of whom she had shared a secret with because not one of them wanted to share a secret with her. She looked at her sisters and their serious faces glowered at her as though they had volubly agreed with Maurina, and had heard everything.

"I'm sorry I can't say I'm sorry. Yet I wish my sisters weren't mutes, so if they could speak they could say they wish *I* were a mute."

Norma saw her mother take a step toward her, with her arms hanging stiffly at her sides, one hand balled into a fist and the other an open hand. She thought Maurina was going to slap her with the open hand and as she moved a step backward the cup tilted and the saucer slipped off her hand. She ran to her room upstairs. Her mute daughters anxiously waited for what Maurina would do, they thought she would run after Norma, but all she did a moment later was to bend down and pick up the broken pieces of porcelain on the floor and dump them into the wastebasket.

"Finish your breakfast," she said.

Maurina walked with a gouty shuffle to the banistered steps and slowly went up to the upstairs rooms. Going up to those rooms on the second floor exhausted her, climbing the long stairs was no longer easy for her. It took a minute or two before she got her wind back after the ascent.

* * * * *

THE house was the largest on their street, and one of the earliest in the town. Andy Senior's grandparents were once inordinately rich, and the house was famous for magnificent parties; its drapes and rugs and rare furniture came from the finest shops. Andy Senior's grandfather, founder of the family fortune which mainly flourished with earnings from vast rice-fields and granaries, was a widower at forty-seven, and his consumptive wife didn't give him any heir. He married again, an unexpected marriage that became the main topic of town gossip for months, because he elected to bypass all the young heiresses and wealthy widows of the town to marry a farmer's daughter. They had one child, Andy's father. The farmer's daughter didn't find it difficult to assume her new status adroitly, from being the most shabbily dressed woman she became, in a few months, impeccably fashionable. She gave fabulous parties to which she invited only her small private circle of friends; it didn't take long before any woman in the town was willing to give anything to become her friend. She outlived Andy's grandfather and was ardently devoted to her son until Andy's father married a widow with a child named Elisa. The widow's daughter was a mute. Andy's grandmother was acrimonious and threatened to disown him and had a torrid feud with her son over the brashness, she deemed, of his desire to marry a widow ten years his senior. But Andy's father was self-possessed and firm; he abided by what for him was the unequivocal thing to do. His mother never forgave him for marrying the widow. He became an arrant collector of gamecocks, and was prominent in cockfight houses after winning a number of matches. His son, Andy, was seven when the grandmother died. In her will, she divided the escrowed

wealth among her brothers and sisters and charitable institutions; she left nothing to her son, except the house. He felt no indignation at his mother's will, and began talking to his wife about selling their house and moving to his parents' house. Then one afternoon Andy's father bought a ticket at the train station. A large handkerchief was wrapped around his head, knotted loosely at the middle of his broad forehead like every truly indubitable cockfighter. He had a cigar in his mouth and he blew puffs of smoke at the fiercest of his game-cocks cradled in the nook of his arm, the only possession he took along with him. He didn't even leave a letter to his wife. She sold her house and moved with her children to the house Andy's father inherited.

* * * * *

ONE desolate rainy afternoon, Andy stood motionless at the porch of the hoary house; and the bleakness of the world before him made him cogitate on the probable motives for going away of someone he didn't quite get to know well — his enigmatic father.

The bed of four o'clocks in the garden didn't unfold their ruffled pink flowers. It was quite some time when he last pottered around in the garden. The crumbling porous stone fence was completely covered with moss and ferns. Linemen from the telephone company came that summer, and cut several massive branches of the great breadfruit tree behind the gate that got in the way of new telephone lines. The tree's trunk was starting to decay, and in the damp air, Andy smelled a whiff of its noisome scent.

The gate opened, and two black umbrellas sailed along the hibiscus hedge bedecked with red, purple, and yellow flowers. Norma and her friend clumped to the porch and left their open umbrellas dripping by the cement steps.

"Hello, Mr. Blanco. Hello, Mrs. Blanco." Norma's friend said.

"This is Carmen, father. My classmate. She lives near the school house. I invited her to listen to my new records. Come, Carmen." Norma took her friend's hand.

Maurina sat in a gilded rocking chair by the front door, darning knee-high socks Andy wore on chilly nights to keep his rheumatic legs warm.

"Remind me to ask you for ten centavos tomorrow, mother," Norma said. "I need sandpaper to clean my desk at school. My teacher saw me asking for a piece of sandpaper from my seatmate. She told me to write 'I will bring my own sandpaper' fifty times."

"Have you finished writing it?"

"Not yet. We clean our desks before we are dismissed. I'll write it tonight, and give it tomorrow." Norma reached for the brass doorknob and went with her classmate inside the house.

Her little girl always came home with other children, Maurina thought, and shook her head with chagrin. Her only child who was not a mute was at ease with her friends, but agitated and listless in the company of her brother and three sisters. Maurina was pregnant again. She didn't want to have another baby. Andy entreated her to take this chance, if they failed this time it would be the last ruthless birth they could bear, and out of love and pity, and perhaps a similar longing, she consented; he wanted another son who would not be a mute.

"I was coming home from school, it was rainy. That year, I had just started going to school with my little daughter." Andy mused out loud, and walked toward Maurina's chair; a meaty cleft formed between his brows, and he touched his wide forehead briefly with a hand and removed his rimmed glasses.

"What did you say?" Maurina looked up at him, dropping a darned sock into an empty shoebox.

"I've been thinking of father. He left us on a cheerless afternoon. It might have been the rain, the dark, that made that day seem so gloomy. He hasn't even crossed my mind again. After that he was a ghost. It's strange that he seems

so alive today, as though he were right before me, and I were a boy who had just come home from school and watched his father walk out of that gate, the gate of my mother's house, and never saw him again."

"You saw him before he left? Did he say anything to you?"

"No, he just stood in front of me and kind of smiled. His particular expression when he was looking at you, seeing you, but then his mind would be somewhere else. His lips would part a bit and his eyes would blink, and you wondered whether he was slightly smiling at you, whether he saw you at all. If he had asked me to come with him, I would have. If he asked me."

Maurina looked up at the high ceiling to avoid looking into her husband's teary eyes.

"The children should be up by now. Their afternoon nap has been too long. I think Emilia has finished cooking supper. I'll go up and wake them up." She rose.

"Please, will you stay?"

She slowly went back to her seat, not neglecting to notice Andy's blanched face; she could almost make out the size and shape of a vein that stood out on his forehead, tapering down at the tip of an eyebrow.

"I hated my father. I thought, when my mother converted this house into a boarding-house, that he was responsible. He deserted his duty to his children. And mother was a heroine in my eyes, she didn't even speak a word against father. Her silence was magnanimous. It was later, much later, that it came to me why. She had done all that was in her power to drive my father to desperation. She married my father for his money, and when he didn't come into the inheritance she could live on, she regretted having married my father. And long before the afternoon he left, my father knew that his marriage was a mistake. And now that I have come

around to this substantial explanation I suddenly feel nearer to my father, and I forgive him everything."

"Other people think what they know of your father's departure is as well-founded."

"Rumors! You and I know that girl entered a convent."

"That's what their parents said. That girl never even went to church regularly, and all of a sudden she entered a convent."

Andy cursed under his breath and fastened frenzied eyes upon her. He was rubbing one eyeglass in his hand furiously with thumb and forefinger; a film of mist had gathered around the edges of the eyeglass.

"There was no sufficient evidence!"

"I'm not saying there was. I'm not saying that your father had not been a good and loyal husband, but he hadn't been discreet about his trysts with that girl. They had been seen together. And whatever it was that made them see one another could only be interpreted by people as a love affair."

Andy took out a white handkerchief from the pocket of his trousers and started wiping the mist off his glasses. He put his glasses on, and looked at his neighbor's trees in the distance. Dense raindrops formed a transparent curtain before his eyes.

Maybe his wife was right, he thought. How could he be definite about his "substantial explanation"? What was he at the time? Only a child. A little boy who was retarded in speech, who took a long time before he was able to say his first words because he was spoiled. He merely had to point to anything he wanted and it was given to him, because words were unnecessary with Elisa, his mute stepsister. And how often had his father wanted to talk to him? He would rather spend his time with his collection of gamecocks. Was there ever a pained look in his father's eyes when he wanted his son to talk to him, and his son could not respond? He doubted it, he hoped it was there, that pained look, but he was afraid it was only a figment of his imagination.

"If there is one person who knows, it's Elisa. My father and she understood one another in a quiet and unrevealed way. They communicated, in the language of hands and eyes and pieces of paper on which Elisa sometimes wrote something for father to read. But like me, she didn't even seem to miss him when he was gone. Making paper dolls seemed to have taken all of her time."

"Elisa, Elisa, she didn't have to go," Maurina said. "She didn't have to leave this house."

Maurina had given birth to mutes, and Elisa was dolefully aware of that and felt a secret compunction for the mute children. Maurina had her share of Elisa's remorse; her mother told her before she married Andy there was a mute somewhere in her mother's family, this she didn't divulge to her husband. After the birth of Andy Junior, Elisa made annual visits to a first cousin, an unmarried woman her age, and Andy had to travel a hundred miles to their cousin's house to ask Elisa if she would like to come home; she didn't answer the letters they sent to her when she was there. Maurina had three more mute children — Ruth, Lydia, and Sylvia. The year after Sylvia was born, Elisa didn't return with Andy. Then she arrived home one day with her first cousin, and quickly packed her things into four suitcases. In the piece of paper she handed to Andy she wrote a single word, "Good-bye." She bequeathed her half ownership of the house and her money from her life insurance policy to Andy.

"She was thirty when I was five, and you were eighteen," Maurina said. "I remember being scared of her, for she was said to have drowned a baby in your well in the back yard. It was, of course, not true, it was something the children thought was true because she would drive away and run after the children who passed by or entered your yard. A certain child must have seen a doll made of rags in the well and started that story about her having drowned a baby in it."

But mothers took the story up. And soon afterward Elisa became a stubborn child's pacifier, "I will give you to Elisa," was a mother's effective warning.

"She was really afraid of children. Children used to tease her, molest her. Maybe when she was of age, she still was afraid of them, and chose to be on the defensive. By making guttural sounds and flailing her arms she scared them away."

"Was she afraid of *our* children then?"

"What in the world are you saying? They are her nieces and nephews!"

"Oh, Andy, I want to know...I want to know why she left..."

Andy was silent.

"I wish she would come back, someday," Maurina said.

Andy walked to the door and fumbled for the light inside the semi-dark front room. The bulb didn't light up when he flipped the switch on.

"It's in the papers. I thought you'd read it. There's an electric interruption. They're repairing something at the electric station." Maurina said. She stood by the door.

Andy hobbled to their room, closed the door, and cried.

* * * * *

MAURINA raised a hand to press back a few bangs of straggly hair. She clutched at the railing and breathed deeply. The second floor of the house had six small apartment-like rooms that faced east and had formerly been rented to transients, traveling salesmen, spinster schoolteachers, and Baptist ministers, by Andy's mother. They stopped renting the rooms in the house after Andy's mother's death. Ruth, Sylvia, and Marie had their rooms on the left side; the rooms of Andy Junior, Lydia, and Norma were on the right. In between the rooms on each side was a balcony overlooking a verdant ravine. The windows of the rooms had been screened against mosquitoes endlessly breeding in a nearby fetid stream. Maurina slept in the master bedroom on the first floor which, now that Andy was dead, she had all to herself.

Quietly she turned the knob of the door on which Andy Junior had pasted a picture of Christ on the cross. She pushed the door. Her son was still sleeping in bed. Carefully she went around the room to gather Andy Junior's shirts lying about on the chairs. He forgot to put out the light from a reading lamp. She emptied the ashtray on the table into a wastecan. Beside the ashtray was a note he had written for her, which read: "Mother, I don't want to go with Father Anselmo to see the priest psychiatrist. Please, Mother, there's nothing for you to worry about. I'm all right. I feel fine already." Their family doctor had prescribed some pills to relieve Andy Junior's tremors and restlessness. But after a few days he had advised Maurina to send her son to a psychiatrist. Father Anselmo, the parish priest, was a friend of the Jesuit psychiatrist the doctor recommended. She took the note, folded it, and dropped it into the pocket of her dress.

Andy Junior was, among her children, the diligent note writer. He would leave notes on top of her bedside table, in the bathroom, on the dining room table... even if it was only to announce that there would be a new or full moon in the evening.

On the window sill of his room, there was a big aquarium that once contained goldfish, black molly, moonfish, angel and tiger fish. The decorative fish and water plants were gone. The little boy who owned them became a young man with no time to change the water and feed fish in an aquarium. The young man's aquarium was a childhood remnant; the tall skinny young man owned an old aquarium without plant and fish, that retained only white sand and calcareous shells.

Andy Junior was an active member of the town's youth club; his friends were proud of him as a player—basketball, volleyball, tennis—he scored well during games and was an important, indispensable member of the youth club team. His tennis racket wrapped in light blue plastic was hanging on a nail in the yellow wall. He went with their neighbor's son every Saturday to play in the tennis court behind the muni-

cipal building. That was before the restlessness and the tremors.

Maurina looked at her son's sallow face and hollow cheeks and bit her lower lip hard. She didn't know that Andy Junior was awake and was secretly observing her from the corner of one eye each time she wasn't looking in his direction. He didn't want to get up yet. He was having a pleasant and aureate dream in which Patricia didn't have to ride in that big black car that never would bring her back. Instead they went to a beach which they had all to themselves and had a wonderful time swimming, and watching sea gulls; and luminous clouds were hanging low.

His mother wondered whether it could have been the girl, if she was the cause of the nervous breakdown her son was about to have. She remembered the program the elementary school had when Norma graduated. Each grade contributed a number, and among the Grade I participants was this girl. Maurina couldn't even recall her name. Roberta or something. Anyway, Andy Junior wrote a note to her the day following and said in the note didn't she think the girl who played the princess in the Grade I number, this girl, was cute. She had seen the girl. Her mother always went wherever she went, clattering her skewed sandals behind the girl. The father went insane, and she had heard that insanity ran in the family.

Then she began seeing her, years later, among the spectators, in games in which Andy played. She would be in the front rows, with her mother who held up an umbrella printed with flowers above her head. She was stunningly pretty. Delicate-boned, looking so dainty, so frangible, in the sun. She had to stop coming to school when she was in the fourth grade because she started having frequent headaches, and her brilliant showing in the earlier grades markedly declined. It was only recently that she heard the girl had been taken to the mental hospital.

She walked out of the room almost on her toes. As she passed by Norma's room she thought of the bottle of Johnny Walker she found in her room, hidden under the bed, which

she took surreptitiously. It was supposed to have been surplus Scotch in her last sorority party before college graduation, in which she was chairman of the food committee. At dinner-time last week Maurina saw a little Scotch in Norma's glass, and Norma tried to get away with it by saying it was only an aperitif. She rummaged Norma's room for the bottle. She couldn't tolerate an alcoholic in her house.

* * * * *

THE music came from a guitar, and it was beautiful and sad, arcane and celestial. Maurina heard it, and the singing in her head unclouded with memory eagerly joined with the guitar's music. She hadn't intended to drink Norma's Scotch; she had never tasted a drop of it in her life, she was just curious how it was going to taste. She hadn't really wanted to drink more than a fifth of what the glass could hold, and, before she knew it, she had finished a third of the bottle. She was happy, happier than she had ever been, ebullient, smiling to herself and softly reciting stanzas from *A Psalm of Life* when the music from the garden came. That haunting, sweet music from a guitar. From the garden. She walked to the window and peeped with fuddled eyes through the blinds and saw the two in the garden. She raised the blinds, and saw that the lights were on in Ruth's room and that her other three mute daughters were with Ruth, looking out at the two in the garden. She wondered how oppressive the mosquitoes were outside, whether the thin waft of smoke from the girl's cigarette was enough to drive them away. One of the two was Norma, her contumacious child, who sat on the garden stone bench with her back to Maurina and her daughters. Norma held a cigarette between her fingers and, after taking each drag, she would rest her elbow on the back support of the bench and feebly dangle her hand in the cool air. The cigarette's lighted end glimmered in the dark. Her other arm she had around the boy's shoulders. He was Robin of the guinea pig show. Why should he mimic singers in the guinea pig show, Maurina thought, when he could make such enchanting music with a guitar? She also wanted to know if Andy Junior was watching Norma and Robin. There was no light in his room. There was a moribund moon and the

stars were pellucid; the two figures could be visible, even from the dark in Andy Junior's room. The sweet, sweet guitar started to play another poignant song, and Maurina decided she would get the best of Norma yet, in the meantime, she would have a little more of her daughter's Scotch.

What Maurina didn't know was that the music came from Robin's portable phonograph, that Andy watched the lovers in the garden; he held an ashtray in his hand, paced the room, and chain-smoked after the lovers left, then lay awake in bed and didn't close his eyes till dawn.

In the morning, Maurina could hardly get up from bed. Her sleep was so untroubled and deep and were it not for the harsh morning light that streamed into her room she would have stayed a few more hours in bed. She tried to rise but her flaccid, aching body didn't budge, as though it had been glued to the bed, and once more, strenuously, she tried to get up. She put her hands backward, open palms leaning on the soft mattress to hold her limp body and swimming, throbbing head in place. Then she swung her feet after the count of three to the side of the bed and dashed forward to the sink. She opened the faucet and doused her hair, arms, and face with water; she forced herself to vomit by inserting a finger into her mouth.

She trudged to the door, her febrile head seized in both hands because she had the feeling it would fall off. She went to the medicine cabinet in the combined kitchen and dining room. She took two Alka-Seltzers and two aspirins. Her daughters sat at the table and were having breakfast. They all had their inquisitive eyes on her incredulously, as though, with uncombed hair and in a wet crumpled nightgown, she were some repellent creature from the remote past. Abashed, she retreated to the cupboard for a glass, swallowed the aspirins, filled the glass with water from the bibcock above the kitchen sink and drank it. Afterward she refilled the glass, tore the foil-packaged Alka-Seltzers, dropped them in the glass and gulped the cloudy liquid.

"Have some *black* coffee," Norma said.

"No need," she said. She opened the refrigerator and took out an ice cube tray. She stamped toward her room trying to manage a straight walk. She was dizzy, pale, hunched forward; she almost stumbled when she reached back the door to her room.

Norma followed her. Maurina had rolled the ice cubes in a piece of white cloth she pressed on her head. She sank down in a sofa by the bed.

"So," Norma said. She walked to the bottle of Scotch on the dresser and put her grinning face near the bottle. "You must have had a nice time, God, half a bottle, what a surprise," Norma said and laughed derisively.

"You can get it back."

"I hate to spoil your fun. *Anybody* who wants some fun—"

"Can't you see I'm trying to get *some rest*?"

"Of course, God, you really should have been more careful and moderate."

"That applies better to you. I saw you and Robin in the garden last night. Norma, I'm telling you don't do anything you'll be sorry for later."

"A timely remark, indeed, I suppose you're sorry for having drunk right this minute."

"Out," she pointed to the door, "*get out!*"

"Gladly. Oh God, the air in this room has an alcoholic odor." Norma slammed the door behind her, and then Maurina heard her start to chant "She's a drunk," abruptly accompanied by the suppressed laughter of her mute daughters. She crawled to bed and went back to sleep. Every evening since they had gone to the carnival on the first day of the novena Norma went to the guinea pig show. And on the second night, she actually won the cup and saucer she wanted, and she put them on top of the dining table for Maurina and her daughters to see. She had won many other

cipal building. That was before the restlessness and the tremors.

Maurina looked at her son's sallow face and hollow cheeks and bit her lower lip hard. She didn't know that Andy Junior was awake and was secretly observing her from the corner of one eye each time she wasn't looking in his direction. He didn't want to get up yet. He was having a pleasant and aureate dream in which Patricia didn't have to ride in that big black car that never would bring her back. Instead they went to a beach which they had all to themselves and had a wonderful time swimming, and watching sea gulls; and luminous clouds were hanging low.

His mother wondered whether it could have been the girl, if she was the cause of the nervous breakdown her son was about to have. She remembered the program the elementary school had when Norma graduated. Each grade contributed a number, and among the Grade I participants was this girl. Maurina couldn't even recall her name. Roberta or something. Anyway, Andy Junior wrote a note to her the day following and said in the note didn't she think the girl who played the princess in the Grade I number, this girl, was cute. She had seen the girl. Her mother always went wherever she went, clattering her skewed sandals behind the girl. The father went insane, and she had heard that insanity ran in the family.

Then she began seeing her, years later, among the spectators, in games in which Andy played. She would be in the front rows, with her mother who held up an umbrella printed with flowers above her head. She was stunningly pretty. Delicate-boned, looking so dainty, so frangible, in the sun. She had to stop coming to school when she was in the fourth grade because she started having frequent headaches, and her brilliant showing in the earlier grades markedly declined. It was only recently that she heard the girl had been taken to the mental hospital.

She walked out of the room almost on her toes. As she passed by Norma's room she thought of the bottle of Johnny Walker she found in her room, hidden under the bed, which

she took surreptitiously. It was supposed to have been surplus Scotch in her last sorority party before college graduation, in which she was chairman of the food committee. At dinner-time last week Maurina saw a little Scotch in Norma's glass, and Norma tried to get away with it by saying it was only an aperitif. She rummaged Norma's room for the bottle. She couldn't tolerate an alcoholic in her house.

* * * * *

THE music came from a guitar, and it was beautiful and sad, arcane and celestial. Maurina heard it, and the singing in her head unclouded with memory eagerly joined with the guitar's music. She hadn't intended to drink Norma's Scotch; she had never tasted a drop of it in her life, she was just curious how it was going to taste. She hadn't really wanted to drink more than a fifth of what the glass could hold, and, before she knew it, she had finished a third of the bottle. She was happy, happier than she had ever been, ebullient, smiling to herself and softly reciting stanzas from *A Psalm of Life* when the music from the garden came. That haunting, sweet music from a guitar. From the garden. She walked to the window and peeped with fuddled eyes through the blinds and saw the two in the garden. She raised the blinds, and saw that the lights were on in Ruth's room and that her other three mute daughters were with Ruth, looking out at the two in the garden. She wondered how oppressive the mosquitoes were outside, whether the thin waft of smoke from the girl's cigarette was enough to drive them away. One of the two was Norma, her contumacious child, who sat on the garden stone bench with her back to Maurina and her daughters. Norma held a cigarette between her fingers and, after taking each drag, she would rest her elbow on the back support of the bench and feebly dangle her hand in the cool air. The cigarette's lighted end glimmered in the dark. Her other arm she had around the boy's shoulders. He was Robin of the guinea pig show. Why should he mimic singers in the guinea pig show, Maurina thought, when he could make such enchanting music with a guitar? She also wanted to know if Andy Junior was watching Norma and Robin. There was no light in his room. There was a moribund moon and the

prizes—rubber dolls, chalk frogs and rabbit banks, yards of lavender lace — it was only one evening that her luck ran out, but Robin gave her what she wanted to win, five cane-shaped caramel sticks wrapped in pink-striped cellophane.

That night, the eve of the town fiesta, Norma didn't show any inclination to go to the carnival. She went down just to eat an orange and make a salami sandwich at two in the afternoon, that was all she ate during the day, and the rest of the time she locked herself in her room.

Maurina rapped on her door at six-thirty.

"Norma, are you ill? Supper's ready."

"I'm not hungry." Norma answered but didn't open the door.

"Don't you know today's the day of the fiesta? Aren't you going with us for the novena? Tonight's the big night at the carnival. Aren't you going?" Maurina said, and it wasn't until then that she realized it was her daughter's brusque voice that answered her but she was talking to the door. A mosquito bit her arm. She killed it with one quick slap, and flicked a fingernail at the black diminutive mass whose lifeblood dried in a blotch on her arm.

"I'm sorry I can't make a perfect attendance at the novena. And I'm afraid that goes for the carnival, too."

Maurina turned away, paused, and walked toward Andy Junior's door. It was not locked. She opened the door and looked inside. Andy Junior was still asleep. He slept for long hours now, and when he was up, he paced his room and went down only when he had to take a bath or use the toilet. Father Anselmo had already talked to the Jesuit psychiatrist. The psychiatrist said the best thing to do was to take Andy Junior to an N-P hospital ward. She dreaded the idea of having to take her son there. She closed the door and drew near the stairs. She saw her daughters coming down for supper, all dressed up for the novena and the carnival.

The church bells rang with a plangent sound. The novena was over. People were coming out of church and

were greeted by the shrill parched voices of the candle sellers. The ones who would join in the procession began assembling in front of the church. The vehicles on which the cross and the Virgin Mary were mounted were brought out from the side of the church to the church yard. Each vehicle was four-wheeled and cartlike with a flat and round-shaped surface, on top of which was a dais for the image. Hanging around the surface's edge was an embroidered tapestry flecked with artificial leaves and flowers. The vehicle with the Virgin Mary was surrounded with cherubs perched below the dais.

The cross and the Virgin Mary had special religious value to the parishioners. The cross was found after a thunderstorm embedded in the immense trunk of a duhat tree. Lightning had peeled off the bark around the cross, yet the cross was pure and undappled. That was when the church in the town was built. Heretofore the Catholic townspeople went to the church in the town. Not a month after, an image of the Virgin Mary came from Spain, and it was brought to the next town. When the town held its first fiesta commemorating the discovery of the cross, the Virgin was conveyed to the town for the procession. When the men were to take the Virgin back to the next town the day after the fiesta, the vehicle could not be moved, even with ten sinewy men pushing the vehicle. Two men brought the Virgin to the town, and even just one of them could have done it. The next town had its town fiesta day after that of the town's, and the Virgin was to be in the procession that evening in the next town. But there were a hundred witnesses that the Virgin wanted to stay in the town's parish, and the parish priest in the next town exultantly said there was nothing to do, except, it being the wish of the Virgin, letting the image remain in the town's church.

Her daughters had lighted candles and were forming in line with the procession participants when she saw her. She was running hand in hand with the boy and had a suitcase in her hand. They boarded a red bus. Her daughter and Robin. She shouted her name but her voice was lost in the

intervening "Dios Te Salve, Maria," the procession had started to move out of the church.

"Norma!"

An impersonal face or two turned and looked at her, probably thinking she needed help, and looked away when they saw she wasn't hurt. A group of little girls in gleaming white organdy dresses and holding blue tulle bouquets walked past her in twos. She stood in a corner of the church, paralyzed, derelict, stranded; balked by the procession from her fleeing daughter. Clutching a hand at her constricted throat she moved toward the red bus slowly turning at the corner of the street. She brushed against the vehicle of the cross and made her way through the khaki-uniformed band members holding their instruments primly. Father Anselmo led the prayers, somewhere before the vehicle of the cross, his resonant voice full and lucid above the steady purring of the generator behind the vehicle. The procession had passed, now she stood before the bus and was looking at her daughter sitting near a window of the bus. Her daughter caught her eye but didn't recognize her, and the bus gathered momentum and turned on the corner and slithered out of view.

She didn't know she had walked to the carnival. She was startled to see she was before two circus performers enticing people to see the circus show. She walked to the guinea pig show where Robin worked and saw the two homosexuals had replaced Robin. Robin must have informed them they would have to hire somebody else. She was watching the vertiginous, turning Ferris wheel when suddenly there was a commotion when the Ferris wheel stopped to let two passengers board. She saw a woman jump off the Ferris wheel from the topmost cubicle. There were screams from the women and mothers shaded their little ones' eyes with the palms of their hands, one in thinking it was absurd and tragic for their children to see a death in the carnival. People gathered around the body and she found herself standing before the dead body, the woman fell right at her feet. And the woman had a benevolent smile on her face as though death had come to her as something

sublime. A thickset policeman arrived and carried the body away, followed behind by a dumbfounded crowd.

She could still distinctly imagine the woman's face as she clumped on the road. It was a familiar face. She knew who the woman was! She trembled in a tumult of appalling knowledge. The woman's identity came to her. She was the mother of the girl who went insane! *Oh dear*, she mumbled, *oh dear*.

She walked past the jagged gray stones that would be used in constructing an asphalt road on their street. Beside the tanks of asphalt on top of stoves, each one built with three big blocks of stone, was a sign that read DANGER MEN WORKING and a little to the side of the road, brightly lit with fluorescent lamps, was a large Coca-Cola billboard saying how many Coca-Colas were drunk the world over each day.

At the gate of her house, she held on to the cold iron bars. She broke into a sweat and inhaled air hungrily. The lights in her mute daughters' rooms were on, they had come home, perhaps after giving up a search for her. One by one the lights went out, as her daughters hopped into bed. She turned back and hoped Father Anselmo hadn't retired yet. She started running, but her high heels impeded her. She took them off, and with a shoe in each hand ran, faster this time, as fast as she could, unmindful of the sharp-edged stones that bloodied her feet.

She went to the house at the back of the church where Father Anselmo lived. She banged loudly at the door. Heavy footsteps came from inside the house. The door latch was removed, and Father Anselmo's small old housekeeper wagged her face at Maurina and pressed her face forward and looked at her with eyes half-blinded by cataract.

"Yes, yes ma'am?" she asked rather peevishly. "What do you want?" The old woman's breath reeked with the smell of the betelnut she chewed.

"I want to see Father Anselmo."

The old woman struck a match and held it up to Maurina's face.

"Oh, it's you, Maurina. Father Anselmo has already gone to bed."

"I am going to make a confession. Please, could you see if he's still awake?"

The old woman asked her to come in and made her wait in the priest's study. She had started praying when the old woman came back.

"Father Anselmo will see you at the confessional, Maurina."

She thanked the housekeeper and slowly rose. She walked to the church and saw the lights had been turned on. Father Anselmo had used a side door and was already at the confessional.

Her feet had started to hurt. Every step she took to the confessional was excruciating. She dropped her shoes. It was almost in relief that she said, on her knees, "Bless me father for I have sinned...."

* * * * *

QUIEL. She felt a fresh pang of guilt each time his orotund voice rang in her ears, sighing her name "Marina, Marina...." She had been "*Marina*" and not "*Maurina*" to Quiel. She was another woman when she was with him.

She didn't even have an exact memory of how Quiel looked. When she tried to picture him she would invariably begin with his hair, well-groomed, right parted, thick black hair without a trace of gray; she was terrified and saddened by this, for she would grow old, and someday her picture of him would still be that of a young man, and perhaps then she would forget and lose him at last. Her image of his face was blurred and warped. In her mind, she could only imagine his face as a craggy face that was handsome in some antic and unknown and abstract way. She sometimes pictured him as having a lopsided face and a jaw that protruded to one side, but her picture was off-focus, and when she looked up to a clear blue sky and saw his face it was framed in viridian and amber, astral and wordlessly sympathetic and passionate.

She found it comical to remember a portrait painter in an abstract way. In his atelier there were various portraits hanging on the walls but none of himself. That was the first thing she noticed when she came to his studio to sit for her portrait.

He was a swarthy man who had an air of threadbare, mellow elegance. He was in a striped shirt and bluish-gray slacks.

"Mrs. Blanco?" he said, half-smiling at her. "Marina Blanco?" he hastily added.

"Maurina Blanco," she corrected him.

"I was expecting you to come an hour from now. You said three o'clock, didn't you?"

"Yes, but I have to leave at four. My daughter's coming. I'm going to meet her at the train station."

"Come in."

She followed him through a dark narrow corridor that led to his studio. The decor of the studio was stark and exact. The absoluteness of the ornaments impressed upon her an at-homeness with the room. On the coffee table was a beautiful piece of unvarnished driftwood and a pearl-colored shell ashtray. There were two sofas and a purple-and-gold carpet on the floor. The room was air-conditioned and the drapes covering the wide glass windows were pale green which seemed to add a presence of breath and life in the tall portraits on the walls.

He motioned her to sit in an armchair in a corner of the room, and tilted her head this way and that until he got the angle he wanted.

"Now, be still," he said.

She clasped her hands firmly near her knees and froze.

To her surprise he set up his canvas by her side. She thought he would be painting before her.

He walked forward to a curtained window and pulled the curtain to reveal a hidden mirror. Then he moved back

to his canvas and paints, oils, and brushes beside it and started painting her image in the mirror.

"Do you always paint like this?" she asked.

"I get better, more lifelike paintings this way. I'm more objective when I see a figure in the mirror, rather than looking directly at the person."

"But doesn't the mirror give the *wrong* picture?"

"It does but you won't notice it when the painting is finished. That's the beauty of a symmetrical figure like man's. Right can be considered as left, and left can pass for right. I don't forget, though, to put moles in the right places."

"Don't forget this one, then," she said, pointing to a mole below her lower lip, toward the right side of her chin.

"I won't."

She laughed and went back to her reflective pose.

"Can't you smile a little? Don't be so pensive."

Her lips parted in a fabricated light cheery smile.

"That's better."

Somebody coughed in an adjoining room.

"Who's that?" Maurina asked. The coughing quickened and then abruptly stopped.

"My mother." He nimbly stroked the canvas with a brush freshly dipped in paint. "She's dying. Cancer."

"Who's looking after her?"

"A private nurse. I wanted her to be in the hospital, so she could get the best attention, I can't bear to watch her writhing in pain. But she prefers to die in her room, in the same bed where her mother died."

He continued to paint and in the mirror secretly studied Maurina. There was an expression of wistfulness in her calm and contemplative face. She had beautiful hands. He saw

her eyelashes flutter and her provocative eyes looking into his. She stirred in the armchair.

"I must go now," Maurina said.

"I could drive you out there to the station."

"That's very kind of you, there's really no need, I know you're a busy man."

"I'm free for the rest of the afternoon. It would be relaxing as a leisurely afternoon drive. Come on."

She stood on the curbside as he took the car out of the garage. He opened the door of his Ford for her. She closed the door and he drove off the national road.

"You're new in this town," he said, giving her a sidelong glance.

"I was born here. My parents left this place when I was four. But my aunts and uncles have stayed here. I'm visiting my relatives."

"How did you pick me to paint your portrait?"

"I saw one of your paintings. A portrait of my aunt that hangs in her room. You paint beautifully."

He smiled. She didn't tell him the truth. She was bored, and for lack of things to do she had decided posing for a portrait would while away her time. She didn't want to go home yet. Hers and Andy's disappointment in their common wish to have a normal son came with the birth of their last daughter, Marie, who also was, bitterly, impenetrably, a mute. She had lost weight considerably, and a lingering melancholy feeling depressed her. Marie was three and Sylvia, her second youngest child, was in kindergarten when she decided to visit her aunt, leaving Marie in the care of Emilia, their maid. But her planned two-week visit became a four-month stay. She had received two letters from her husband asking her to come home. She hadn't answered his letters, and now her daughter was coming. It was so like Andy Senior, she thought, to remind her of her duties, not as a wife, but as a mother.

The train was slowly pulling into the station when they arrived. In the aluminum-roofed enclosure people rose, some to meet those coming down the train, and some to walk with those getting on it. Maurina craned her neck above the crowd and tiptoed to get a better view of those who were getting off the train. She sighed heavily, almost giving up, as the crowd gradually thinned the assurance in a telegram, that she would find her daughter there.

"You sure your daughter's coming today?" he asked.

"That's what the telegram I got this morning said."

"Perhaps there's been a mistake. Or something might have kept your daughter from coming."

"Perhaps. Anyway, she's a very smart little girl. Even if there isn't somebody to meet her, I'm sure she'll easily find her way to her grandaunt's house."

"Let's go, I'll take you home."

"What?" Of course he meant her grandaunt's place, she thought.

"I said let's go."

"Oh, yes," she said, "home."

He offered her his arm. It was such a gallant and conventional gesture, and she took his arm confidently. At that instant, a familiar voice called aloud behind her back, "Wait a minute!" and Maurina, looking back, saw her daughter.

Norma seemed to have grown at least three inches since Maurina had last seen her. Under the electric lights, her face with its round bright eyes and pink freckled cheeks, had an affrighted and uncertain expression. She was carrying in one hand, a light suitcase on which she had thrown over a cashmere sweater, a recent birthday present from her father. On her other arm, a plump pale yellow cat nestled. She was in a white blouse with flower patchings and a checkered skirt. Maurina ran toward her daughter, arms open to embrace her, but when she reached the middle of the distance between

them she halted, because her daughter was gazing at her with a smug and impassive face.

"Mrs. Blanco?" Norma asked.

She stifled a shriek. *Four months!* Not four years.

She nodded painfully. "Come on, Norma," and the three of them walked to Quiel's car.

Maurina took the suitcase, put it on the backseat, and helped Norma into her cashmere sweater. Norma sat between her and Quiel in front. Norma stroked her cat which purred contentedly and blinked its sharp, whimsical eyes.

"Where did you get that cat?" Maurina asked her daughter.

"I don't know where she came from. She would come after supper and sit by the kitchen window and I would give her some food. Then after a while I named her and after that she didn't leave the house."

"What do you call her?"

"Medusa. I bet she liked being called that, or she wouldn't have stayed."

"How's your father?"

"Fine."

"And Andy Junior and your sisters?"

"Andy Junior had measles, and last month Ruth got the mumps, and we had mumps one after another."

They heard a car honk behind them, and a bespectacled, balding man driving a rattling jalopy with one hand and waving a gin bottle in the other laughed uproariously and kept abreast with their car. As they turned to a narrow dusty street at the corner of an intersection, they were pursued by the old man's jalopy. Quiel was irritated by this and increased his speed. The old man was only too willing and enthusiastic to start a race. Great clouds of dust rose from the road studded with holes, and badly in need of repair. Both cars

shook and vibrated as the tires juttet out of every unavoidable hole. Quiel's car turned left to a broad asphalt road. The old man's jalopy followed. The old man's car clattered laboriously at his side. Ahead, a Chevrolet truck loaded with watermelons suddenly stopped and Quiel's car screeched as he grabbed the brake, barely saved from bumping into the truck. His fist holding the brake knocked the cat sitting on Norma's lap on the head. The cat looked at him contemptuously and before he could retrieve his hand, Medusa drew her paw across his arm, scratching his skin with a vengeful malice. The old man in the jalopy drove on, shaking his head up and down and laughing hysterically.

"Oh, heavens, your hand's bleeding!" Maurina said, snatching at the cat's long silky hair. She felt the cat's lean body. Only the lush hair made the cat look plump.

Medusa jumped up to Norma's shoulders and sprang to the back seat. Maurina's hand had begun to reach out for the back of the cat's head when Norma pulled it down.

"Don't hurt her! Don't be cruel to her!" Norma cried.

"Your Medusa's scratched his hand!"

"I saw what happened. She was hit in the head."

"Accidentally. It wasn't deliberate. That cat is wild."

"It's that drunk old man, of course. It's that drunk who's to blame!"

"Marina," Quiel interrupted. He wanted to tell her if the old man hadn't made him irascible he wouldn't have had a bloody hand. He didn't speak. Maurina and her daughter were waiting for what he would say, but by the look in their compassionate faces, he guessed they were only waiting for a confirmation of what they thought was in his mind. He broke into an apologetic smile.

"Come down at the house and I'll put some iodine on your hand," Maurina said. She covered his bleeding hand with Kleenex she took from her handbag.

THE next afternoon Maurina came punctually at three to Quiel's studio. Quiel answered the door. He was still wearing the gauze and adhesive tape she had used in dressing his wound. She went into her pose without his having to tell her the precise tilt of her face he thought best to paint. She was afraid of his hands. While she dressed the wound in his hand the other day, he had squeezed her hand and quickly pressed it to his lips. She immediately withdrew her hand and walked out of the room, not forgetting to cast a stern glance at him. And yet, she went back to his studio and shunned her fear of his intentions.

He worked on the painting intensely, with deft strokes of his brushes, leaning back slightly at times to look critically at the canvas. She began to wonder if what she remembered, the burning touch of his hand, was something that happened, or, she was greatly alarmed by the thought, if it had been only a daydream.

No sooner had she looked for assurance in his eyes when he walked toward her, his bright expressive eyes gazing fervently at her image in the mirror. He stood behind her, and put his hands on her shoulders. He kissed her eyes, throat, the mole on her chin, and brought his lips slowly to her lips, relishing them as though he were nibbling at olives.

Therefore it's like this, she thought, to have another man is like living in a new house. And this is his house, this room with a bed, a table, some chairs, and a phonograph. He had put the mattress on the floor and they had made love there because the private nurse and his dying mother in the other room might be disturbed.

He was asleep now, his face buried in her bosom. She was certain, more than when he had possessed her, that the man curled up and facing her was the man she had hoped to have all along, her lover. It was different with him. With her husband it had become a ritual. With him it was a flambeau, and she couldn't resist submitting to its searing, consuming flame.

Quiel opened his eyes and smiled at her. He stretched and kissed her. As she laughed softly because it was so funny for him to kiss like he was eating olives, a lizard clucked its tongue.

"Oh," she said, and she frowned.

"Are you worried by the lizard?"

Tsk-tsk-tsk-tsk... tsk-tsk!

"They say when you hear a lizard cluck its tongue, you're going to have a visitor. Do you believe that?" Quiel asked.

"What do you think it's saying?"

"Well, does it worry you any, Marina?"

This lover of hers called her by a different name, and, perhaps that made her, with him, a woman different from what she was.

"What is it like to you?" she asked.

"What?"

"The eerie voice of the lizard."

"Simply what it is. I'm a realist."

Tsk-tsk-tsk-tsk... tsk-tsk!

She moved away from him.

"What's the matter? Does that lizard trouble you?"

She hid her face in his hirsute chest. He held her chin with his hand.

"What is the lizard's voice to you?"

"Like the voice of my conscience."

Tsk-tsk-tsk!

"Oh, no more, no more!"

"Can I help you? Do you think—"

She pressed her fingers over his lips. He kissed her on the forehead obediently.

"What time is it?"

"Half past eight."

"I have to go now. They've probably begun wondering what happened to me."

"Stay awhile."

"I have to dress." She started putting on her clothes, trying her best to make the least possible noise as she gathered her garments thrown around among the chairs.

"Shall I put the light on?" he asked.

"No, don't bother."

Finally, she put her shoes on.

"I have to go now. Will you accompany me to the street corner?"

He got up and put on his pants and shirtsleeves.

"Let's go," he said, putting on his loafers.

"When will I see you?"

"Tomorrow. For the portrait."

"I'll call you if I can't come. I might have to take Norma to a movie."

They said goodbye and goodnight at the street corner. He went back to his room. He put on the light, lit a cigarette, and shucked off his loafers. Then he saw it, shining on the floor beside his shoes, a hairpin. He looked at it a moment. He walked slowly to the window and looked out into the jasmine-perfumed summer's night, and smiled to himself, for in his room she had left a cogent evidence of a wonderful culmination. He was amazed at how happy he felt.

* * * * *

MAURINA herself had a terrifying dream. She was in a hospital room and an obstetrician was examining her, palpating her abdomen. Looking on were medical clerks, at-

tendants and interns. They had formed a circle around her. The doctor, bewildered, shook his head sadly.

"Come, come, who's the man?"

"What, doctor?"

"You're pregnant. Who's the man?"

"There's no man! Oh, no!"

"It's about six months."

"Ah, women! Why don't they admit that men give them a good time?" an intern asked impatiently.

The doctor motioned to two attendants, and they led her out of the room. She screamed and waked.

Her daughter was sitting at the side of the bed.

"You were dreaming."

She embraced her daughter.

"What did you dream of?"

She groaned.

"Was it very awful?"

"Yes!" She hugged her daughter to her bosom.

In the morning, Quiel called up to tell her he was inviting her to a picnic the following morning. They were going to a waterfall. She told him she couldn't sit for the portrait that afternoon and told him that she was taking her daughter to a movie. He said it was all right. And she, with a hint of uneasiness in her voice because of the remembered dream, accepted his invitation to the picnic.

The picnickers were Quiel's wiry aunt and her potbellied spouse, a painter friend of Quiel's and his attractive fiancée, the unmarried middle-aged sister of the painter's fiancée, Quiel, and Maurina. The sky was overcast and rain was imminent. It didn't promise to be a beautiful day for a picnic, but since everything had been prepared and the food baskets had been put in the back of the cars, there was no alternative except to go ahead and hope that the weather would somehow improve.

They rode in two cars. The unmarried woman was a councilor in the town where the waterfall was. She rode with Quiel's aunt and her husband in the car that led the way. Maurina, Quiel, and the engaged couple rode in the car behind.

On the way to the waterfall they stopped once to buy boiled corn being peddled and cooked by the side of the road, and another time, to know what it was that the farmers and their families had gathered around. There were two constabulary men and an army jeep on the road. As they got out of the cars to take a look, they saw a man shot dead and lying face down in an irrigated rice paddy. Then it began to rain and they ran back to the car, not knowing why the man was shot. The people scattered away. The constabulary men, with the help of two farmers, lifted the body from the ground and took it to the army jeep.

The light and lively conversation the two couples in the second car had kept going stopped when they were back in the car. After the rain, the sun appeared, and, after an hour or so the morning changed from bleak to scorching.

The cars climbed up the winding road to the town with the celebrated waterfall. They passed through coconut trees that bore the names of senatorial candidates, painted in white on the coconut trunks. Yellow bells and cadena de amor bloomed on the hilly sides of the road. In the small resort near the waterfall there was a large swimming pool in which tourists bathed. When they reached the waterfall site the parking area men stood up to meet them. One had to pay for every hour one's car was parked there, and one was amused that such a patch of grassland had been transformed to a pecuniary place. The path that led to the waterfall was steep and stony and slippery, from where they stood at the end of the path near the road, they could see its slopes and curves, obviously difficult to tackle. They began to go down the path.

Some excursionists climbing up, returning from the waterfall, swore loudly that they never would go down that path again. This didn't discourage them any. The men carried the baskets of food and gave an arm to the women every time there was an elevation to get down from.

The councilor woman brought them to the spot by the rapids surrounded with brown-and-gray dappled boulders on which names had been set down for posterity. Underneath a rubber tree so huge two men with outstretched arms on opposite sides of its trunk couldn't even touch hands, they opened the baskets of food and started to eat their lunch.

As Maurina ate her lunch beside Quiel, she noticed a girl on the other side of the rapids looking at her through a telescope.

"Do you see that girl, Quiel? She's been looking at me." She pointed toward the other side.

"What?"

"The girl with the telescope."

"Do you know her?"

"No, I wonder why she's looking at me. I mean, why not at scenery?"

"She's put down her telescope."

The girl rose and walked with her companions toward them. She was wearing a wide brimmed buri hat, a slim girl with a pimply face in a loose red blouse and tight yellow toreador pants. She passed by Maurina without glancing at her. She was about twelve.

"They're going to the waterfall," the woman councilor said.

"Can we go now?" the painter's fiancée said, clearing the ground of banana leaves that substituted for plates.

The painter stood up with his sketch pad and made a rough drawing of the rapids and stones and trees. Quiel's aunt ate very slowly and was the last to finish her lunch. They started for the waterfall after they had had canned peaches for dessert. The path this time was soft moist sand and small stones less arduous to walk on. It gradually rose to a crest and from there one could hear the sound of the waterfall. From the crest they had to go down on boulders

of stone to the hard vermilion clay below contiguous to a creek in the middle of a great big slippery boulder of stone.

The water in the creek moved sluggishly and over the gap in the boulder was a narrow bamboo bridge. The painter walked sideways on it, the bamboo creaked and he swayed and his foot almost slipped off. Upon crossing the bridge, the painter found a bamboo pole several meters long and he dipped it in the creek, immersing the pole and his forearm in the water. He looked up at them, awed and frenetic, for the odd creek was for the moment unpredictably deep, unfathomable. One by one, they crossed to the other side, the fiancée started to go across the creek and the painter waited for her on the other side. The painter solicitously reached out for her hand, then she was followed by the woman councilor, and the painter likewise gave her a hand. The paunchy husband preceded his wife and waited for her on the other side to help her cross safely. Quiel went next, and when he stood on the other side of the gap Maurina hesitated following after him. She scuffed her sandals in the firm clay. She saw the girl with the telescope and the girl was again peering at her. She wondered if the girl knew. Had the girl guessed, merely by looking at her, that she and Quiel were illicit lovers? Did the girl look at her with accusing eyes through the telescope?

"Aren't you going to cross?" said a voice that seemed far away.

She shook her head regretfully. How could she cross when she was afraid, a numbing fear that if she did her lover might not hold her hand thoughtfully and she would fall and disappear in the unbounded water that would engulf her.

Quiel walked with the others to see the waterfall and after quite a while she saw him rushing up a steep hill to look from the top at the source of the waterfall, and when at the top she saw him form some words with his mouth, and she couldn't hear him, she couldn't make out what he was saying, he might have shouted those words at the top of his voice, but she didn't hear him.

On the way back she didn't ask him what he said, and he thought she knew. He had said, "You don't know what you're missing."

That was how Maurina decided to return, with her twelve-year old daughter, Norma, and the cat, Medusa, to her family.

* * * * *

YOU do penance now." said the priest.

At the church door Maurina bowed to pick up her shoes and as she walked slowly across the churchyard, a shoe in each hand, she kept pinching her arm to make sure her confession wasn't a dream. She wondered why she had chosen this night to confess a clandestine affair of nine years ago, the same night Norma chose to run off with Robin of the guinea pig show. Perhaps, she thought, it was the death she witnessed in the carnival of the insane girl's mother, a mother who put all her life and soul into the care of her only child doomed to madness, perhaps this tragic incident finally brought her into her long bludgeoned decision to confess. She had been a mother with only the tenuous connection through blood with her children, left out on a limb in their volitions undisclosed to her, unguided by her. She once constrained herself, in her lover's embrace, to believe her children didn't exist. She had felt her lover's arms because she was afraid he wouldn't hold her if she crossed the deep creek and she had nowhere to go but home to her husband and children. She had come back to her role as a mother, and she noticed that her children, in her months of absence, had come to believe she had ceased to be their mother. And all the years that followed didn't make as much difference as those few months had, as if regaining her place in her house would take her all her life.

Maurina got from a nephew she had asked to look for Norma, the information she wanted five months after Norma had eloped with Robin. With her nephew, she traveled to the town more than a hundred miles away. She wouldn't have to go if Andy were still alive, and she recalled his annual travels

to ask his sister Elisa to come home. To travel that far was too much for her, but if she knew Norma, there that night she had seen her board the red bus with Robin would have been the last she had seen of her, had she not disregarded the inconveniences of long travel in her wish to make her daughter come home.

The house was a small one and it had a nipa roof. In the yard Robin was cutting wood. She saw him, naked to the waist and in faded khaki trousers, chopping a block of wood with an ax. An old woman was sweeping in the yard and gathering leaves in a pile which she lighted to smoke the flowering santol and caimito trees.

Robin recognized her and walked toward her.

"Where's my daughter?" she asked.

"In the house," he said. The old woman approached them. She smiled timidly at Maurina. "Is this Norma's mother?"

"Yes, grandmother," Robin said.

"I must tell you that I did all I could to persuade these two to see you. Robin's an orphan and I'm his only living relative and I'm too old to make the trip."

Maurina touched Robin's grandmother on the shoulder.

"I want to see my daughter."

They walked up to the small porch and went inside the house that had only three divisions, a living room with a few chairs and a table, a room with no bed where those in the house slept, and the kitchen.

Norma was in the kitchen washing the dirty supper dishes. When Norma saw her mother she wiped her hands in the frayed apron she wore, and ran down the backstairs. She was pale, and thinner, and her dress was faded.

She called out her name and ran after her daughter who went into the thick green forest not too far away from the house. She chased her through the line of trees, but Norma outdistanced her. She didn't know where her daughter went

at the turn of another line of trees. She was soaking with sweat and she breathed heavily. She looked around her and saw the stumps of trees that had been felled to make a clearing. There were vegetable plots, and a well had been dug. She fetched water from the well with a pail beside it and splashed her face and arms with water.

It was getting dark and she had not found her way back yet. Then, when her legs refused to walk any further, she sat down on the protruding root of a tree, and she cried. She heard approaching footsteps and she looked up and saw a dark, barefoot woman balancing on her head a bundle of firewood she had gathered in the forest. A little girl was behind her.

"Can I help you?"

"I'm lost," Maurina said.

"Where do you live?"

"I'm staying at Robin's house. Do you know the way back?"

"Yes, follow me."

Norma wasn't there when Maurina came back.

"She'll be back," Robin said. "Are you hungry?"

Maurina had supper with her nephew. After supper, they sat silently in the porch, waiting for Norma. Robin told her, Norma had had a miscarriage three weeks ago, and that he was very sorry he couldn't give Norma the comforts money could give, he was earning very little in the tobacco factory where he worked. He tilled by himself the small piece of land his grandmother owned rather than hire a farmer, to save the money for their own use.

Robin held out his calloused hands to Maurina and said, "Look, I'm trying, I'm doing my best. I wanted to give your daughter a comfortable life, but I couldn't."

Norma didn't come back, and at dawn the following morning, Maurina and her nephew left. Robin went with them to the bus station.

"Norma knows her way very well in that forest. I'm sure she stayed for the night in the house of one of her friends there. I'll talk to her, and I promise you we'll visit you very soon."

As she entered her house in the late afternoon she returned from her disappointing trip, she found her mute daughters in the sala, waiting for her. She looked from one of them to the other.

"What's the matter?"

Her daughters looked up the stairs, and Marie, her youngest daughter, pointed to the direction of Norma's room.

Maurina went up the stairs, and when she opened Norma's room, she found her sitting on her bed, propped up with pillows, reading a magazine.

"You've come home," Maurina said.

Norma put down the magazine and said, "I suppose I have."

"Robin's waiting for you."

"I'm not going back there."

"He's your—"

"We're not married."

"He loves you."

"It's over for me. Finished." said Norma.

* * * * *

NORMA was home for quite a while. One day she made up her mind to take some psychology subjects and she packed her things and went back to college. She busied herself in every way she could, perhaps to have no time to think of Robin. Her friends who didn't know what happened to her in her months of absence began inviting her again to their parties, and when the semestral vacation came and most of them departed for two-week vacations, she made up her mind to go back to college.

Andy Junior had been completely neglectful of himself, his barber even had to go to their house to give him a haircut. He became morose and uncommunicative. He had stopped writing notes.

The morning Maurina found him in the bathroom and saw the blood on the bathroom tiles, it came to her that she knew she had this coming. Andy Junior had slashed his wrists with a blade. She rushed to the telephone. The ambulance came and she went with it, getting in the back, sitting close to her own son on the stretcher.

She didn't go home until the doctor had confirmed her son would live. She came into his room in the early evening. A newspaper was on Andy Junior's bed, turned to the second page and there she discovered an obituary for Patricia D. Juliano. She clutched a hand to her breast. Her heart beat fast and she felt weak and had to sit on a chair by the bed. She would have to take Andy to the N-P ward the psychiatrist recommended.

Maurina wrote to Norma about Andy Junior and asked her if she could visit her brother in the hospital. She had gone to the hospital with her daughters three times a week during the month Andy Junior was there. But Norma never came to visit her brother.

It was the day Andy Junior came home from the hospital that she got the call from Norma. At first, she couldn't hear her very well, her daughter was talking so fast and she couldn't understand what Norma was saying.

"I'm engaged!" said Norma. That she heard.

"What?" She couldn't believe it.

"I'm coming home!"

She hung up and for a minute she stood there and didn't put the phone back on its hook. Her daughter was engaged and she couldn't believe it. Norma hadn't even asked how her brother was.

Norma had her engagement party two weeks later, the week after she had introduced to Maurina the man she was going to marry. There was nothing more striking in the man Norma was engaged to than the fact that he resembled Robin. Norma's fiance could pass as a double for Robin, and she wondered whether it wasn't exactly what happened, that her daughter in looking for another man to love had found another Robin.

Marie and Sylvia were in white silk sequined dresses and Ruth and Sylvia wore dresses of light blue crepe. They had rhinestone tiaras in their hair and white and purple sapphire brooches worn on a gold chain around their necks. Norma was in a pale green dress, her favorite color, and was wearing a scarab brooch. They used different kinds of perfumes and different color shades of lipstick. They were lovely.

Dinner had been served and Norma and her fiance had opened the dance. The neighbors had come to help in the kitchen and serve the food. Maurina went to the porch and sat in the old gilded rocking chair. Then she heard the murmur of the guests and Norma's shriek, "Andy Junior, God, Andy Junior!"

She quickly went inside and saw the guests were ten-deep before the banistered stairs and on top of the steps was Andy Junior, in his pajamas and dragging a blanket on the floor, crawling on all fours, gazing back at the guests.

They gave way for her and she was followed by Ruth and Sylvia and they helped him get up. But he was looking at Norma and was trying to say something, but Norma couldn't make out what he was saying.

"Your brother, your brother wants to say congratulations," said Maurina.

And suddenly Norma broke into tears. She went up the stairs and held Andy Junior's hand. She kissed him on the forehead.

"You must get back to bed, Andy Junior. Come on," said Norma, and with her mother she helped Andy Junior walk back to his room.

The party went on after that, and in less than an hour she could hear from her chair in the dark porch the laughter of her mute daughters. She looked at the garden and she recalled the day Andy Senior came to her in the garden in his wheelchair. . . .

Andy Senior was ill, and according to the doctor he had only a few more months to live. That morning in the garden she was snipping insect-infested rose leaves, and had lighted coconut husks to smoke her flowering roses. It was early dawn and she had a towel in her hand and was engrossed in pottering about her beds of roses when she heard a thump on the ground, and when she looked back she saw Andy Senior on his hands and knees. He had fallen from his wheelchair. He was bruised and cut by the thorns of the rosebushes, and she helped him back to his wheelchair.

She was about to wheel him back to the house when he said, "Wait. I want to tell you something first. Maurina, look at me."

She stood before him and saw that his wheelchair was in a spot in the garden between two calamansi trees they decorated with colored bulbs during the Christmas season. The shafts of morning light were obstructed by these trees in such a way that they fell directly and glistened like a halo on the bald spot on top of his head.

"I want to thank you for all the years. You have been a good and faithful wife to me. No man could ask for more."

She wanted to tell him then, but she didn't have the heart to, she merely put Mercurochrome on his cuts, remembering she had done the same service to her lover.

The guests were leaving and they said goodbye to her in groups. There were still some guests dancing and Maurina saw when she looked at her mute daughters sitting in a corner of the room, that Ruth, Sylvia, and Lydia were talking with their hands animatedly while her daughter Marie was looking at a young man on the dancefloor. The young man would be Norma's fiance's best man.

The young man's group and Norma's fiance were the last to leave. At the last sound of the engine of the last car to leave, she flopped back in to her chair in the porch and went into a light, brief sleep. She woke at the tapping of raindrops on the roof and went inside the house. The living room was dark. She switched on the light, and went around the room, picking up empty bottles of beer and soft drink. She put them on a tray with the glasses and carried the tray to the kitchen sink. The dishes used during the dinner had been washed earlier by a neighbor. She put the bottles in a soft-drink case inside a cabinet under the electric kitchen stove. She put on an apron and started washing the glasses. She dried them afterwards with a piece of white cloth and put them in the cupboard.

She went up the stairs and looked into Andy Junior's room. The light on his table lamp was on. He slept now with that light beside his table on. The night she had put it out for him when he came back from the hospital, he walked out of his room screaming and weeping and he almost fell off the balcony.

She was going back downstairs when she heard a sob on the side of the rooms. She eased an ear close to Marie's room and she heard another sob. She opened the door slowly and saw her daughter in her white nightgown looking into a mirror and softly crying.

She walked toward her. Marie turned and she stood facing her. She took her daughter in her arms, and Marie cried again.

"Tell me, what's the matter?"

And slowly with her hands her daughter told her that she had wanted to dance during the party, with the young man Maurina saw her looking at. He had danced with all the other girls, except with Marie and her mute sisters. And Maurina, stroking her daughter's hair on which a rhinestone tiara still gleamed, was for the first time taken into the confidence of a daughter. Her daughter was bewildered by the

strange incipient feeling for that boy and didn't know it was first love. Maurina looked out the screened window at a moonless night. The rain had stopped and the morning star had come out.

A drop of leftover tear fell on her breast as she held her daughter in her arms, and as it trickled down in the groove between her breasts she closed her eyes and saw her lover rushing for a glimpse of the source of the waterfall; her headstrong daughter running from her into the green forest; her husband sitting in his wheelchair in the garden with a shaft of morning light on the baldness on top of his head; her son on all fours at the head of the banistered steps wanting to speak to his sister; and this daughter she held standing sadly before a mirror in her white nightgown. She turned the bed down and helped her daughter get in it. She was on her knees before the bed and she closed her daughter's eyes with a trembling hand. Marie reached out with her hands for her mother's withdrawing hand and pinned it down at the side of the bed for a while before she took her hands off and fell into a peaceful sleep. Maurina started praying for her daughter and didn't know she was saying, "Help me, help me, help me," tonelessly. Like her sleeping daughter she would again sleep and dream and awaken and live until the last sleep with no dream, no morning.