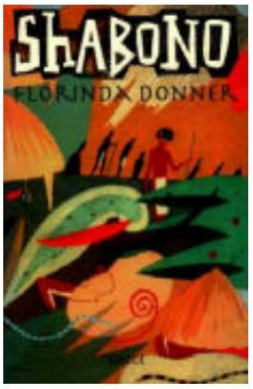
SHABONO



FLORINDA DONNER

DESCRIPTION

In a remote settlement —*a shabono*— deep in the Amazon rainforest, between Venezuela and northern Brazil, lives a group of Yanomami Indians. *Florinda Donner,* a renowned anthropologist and disciple of Carlos Castaneda, went to meet them on what she imagined would be a brief visit. Little by little, however, this virgin and pure world, elusive and mysterious, captivated her, and she ended up staying there for a year.

This book recounts her adventures and discoveries during that journey, an initiation in more ways than one, which Donner narrates with vibrant freshness. Daily activities alternate with significant events: hunting, celebrations, battles, the birth of children, initiation rites, ways of dressing, meals... the author's agile prose manages to convey the wild beauty of the place, the intensity of her experiences, and, above all, the magic and power that the shamanic rituals of a dying culture still retain today.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The *Yanomami Indians,* also known in anthropological literature as Waikas, Shamataris, Baraf Iris, Shirishanas, or Guharibos, inhabit the most isolated part of the border between southern Venezuela and northern Brazil. Their population is estimated at between ten thousand and twenty thousand, occupying an area of approximately eleven thousand square kilometers. This territory encompasses the headwaters of the Orinoco, Mavaca, Siapo, Ocamo, Padamo, and Ventuari rivers in Venezuela, and the Uraricoera, Catrimani, Dimini, and Araca rivers in Brazil.

The *Yanomami* live in villages of palm-thatched huts called *shabonos,* scattered throughout the rainforest. The number of individuals residing in each of these scattered villages varies between sixty and one hundred.

Some of the *shabonos* are located near Catholic or Protestant missions, or in other areas accessible to white people; others are hidden deeper in the jungle. There are still some villages, in remote parts of the forest, that have not been visited by outsiders.

My experience with the iticoteris, inhabitants of one of these unknown *shabonos,* is the subject of this book. This is a subjective narrative, made up of the surplus data, so to speak, from an anthropological field investigation I carried out in Venezuela, on the healing practices of the indigenous people.

A key aspect of my training as an anthropologist is the belief that objectivity is what validates anthropological work. But during my time with this *Yanomami* group, I failed to maintain the distance nor the freedom of judgment necessary for an objective investigation.

Special bonds of gratitude and friendship with them made it impossible for me to interpret the data or draw any conclusions. Conclusions drawn from what I witnessed and learned. Despite my character traits, I posed no threat to the Indians. They accepted me as a docile oddity, and I was able to enter, albeit briefly, into the peculiar rhythm of their lives.

In my narration, I have altered my original notes in two ways. The first change concerns names: the term iticoteri, as well as the names of the people described, are fictitious. The second concerns style. For the sake of dramatic effect, I have altered the sequence of events, and for the sake of narrative flow, I have reproduced the conversations in a correct syntactic

and grammatical structure. If there had A literal translation of their language would not have done justice to its complexity and flexibility, nor to its highly poetic and expressive forms. The variety of suffixes and prefixes gives the Yanomami language delicate nuances of meaning that have no true equivalent in our language.

Although they patiently trained me until I could distinguish and reproduce most of their words, I never became fluent. However, my inability to master their language was not an obstacle to communicating with them. I learned to "talk" to them long before I possessed an adequate vocabulary.

Speaking was more of a physical sensation than a true exchange of words. Another question is how accurate our communication was. For them and for me, it was effective. They excused me when I couldn't explain myself or when I failed to understand the information they gave me about their world; after all, they didn't expect me to grasp the subtleties and depths of their language. The Yanomami, like us, have their prejudices: they think white people are childish and, therefore, less intelligent.

MAIN CHARACTERS

ANGELICA. An old indigenous woman from the Catholic mission who organizes the trip to the land of the iticoteris.

MILAGROS. Son of Angelica, a man who belongs to both worlds, that of the Indians and that of the whites.

PURIWARIWE. Brother of Angelica, old shaman of the Iticoteri village.

KAMOSIWE. Angelica's father.

ARASUWE. Brother-in-law of Milagros, leader of the Iticoteris.

HAYAMA. The eldest of Angelica's sisters who are still alive, mother-in-law of Arasuwe, grandmother of Ritimi.

ETEWA. Son-in-law of Arasuwe.

RITIMI. Daughter of Arasuwe,first wife of Etewa.

TUTEEMI. Etewa's second and younger wife.

TEXOMA. Four-year-old daughter of Ritimi and Etewa.

SISIWE. Six-year-old son of Ritimi and Etewa. HOAXIWE. Newborn son of Tutemi and Etewa.

IRAMAMOWE. Brother of Arasuwe, shaman of the Iticoteri village.

XOROWE. Son of Iramamowe.

MATUWE. Hayama's youngest son.

XOTOMI. Daughter of Arasuwe, stepsister of Ritimi.

MOCOTOTERIS. Inhabitants of a nearby *shabono* .

I

I was half asleep. Yet I felt them moving around me. As if from a great distance, with the soft touch of bare feet on the packed earth floor of the hut, the coughs, the clearing of throats, and the faint voices of the women. It was still dark. In the dim light, I could make out Ritimi and Tutemi, their naked bodies bent over the hearths, where the embers of the fire still glowed.

Nocturnal. Tobacco leaves, gourd bowls filled with water, quivers full of poisoned arrows, animal skulls, and bunches of green bananas hung from the palm roof and seemed suspended in the air beneath the rising smoke.

Yawning, Tutemi stood up. She stretched her limbs and bent over the hammock to pick up Hoaxiwe. With soft laughter, she rubbed her face against the baby's belly and murmured something unintelligible as she put her nipple to the little boy's mouth. Sighing, she lay back down in her hammock.

Ritimi pulled out some dried tobacco leaves, soaked them in a gourd filled with water, took one leaf, and, before rolling it tightly, sprinkled it with ash. She placed the resulting ball between her gum and lower lip and sucked on it noisily while preparing two more. She gave one to Tutemi and then came over to me. I closed my eyes, pretending to still be asleep. Squatting at the head of my hammock, Ritimi ran her finger, moistened with tobacco and saliva, between my gum and lower lip, but didn't put a ball in my mouth. Laughing, she went over to Etewa, who was watching her from his hammock. She spat the tobacco into her palm and held it out to him. A soft moan escaped his lips as, putting another ball in his mouth, he lay down on top of him.

The fire filled the hut with smoke, gradually warming the cold, damp air. The hearths, burning day and night, were the heart of each dwelling. The smoke stains they left on the palm-thatched roof

They separated each family room from the next, because there were no dividing walls between the cabins. They were so close to each other that the adjacent roofs overlapped, giving the impression of a huge circular house. There was a large main entrance for the entire complex and several narrow openings between some of the cabins. Each cabin was supported by two long and two short posts. The upper side of the cabin was open and faced a clearing in the center of the circular structure, while the lower, outer side of the cabin was enclosed by a wall of short posts embedded in the roof.

A dense fog enveloped the surrounding trees. The fronds of the palms hung over the edge. the interior of the cabin stood out against the gray sky. Etewa's hunting dog lifted its head from its curled-up body and, without fully waking, opened its mouth in a great yawn. I closed my eyes, dozing in the scent of green plantains roasting over the fires. My back was stiff and my legs ached from squatting for hours the day before, pulling weeds growing among the neighboring vegetables.

I suddenly opened my eyes as my hammock swung violently and a small knee dug into my stomach, making me gasp for breath. Instinctively, I covered myself with the edges of the hammock to protect myself from the cockroaches and spiders that invariably rained down from the palm roof whenever the posts supporting it shook.

Laughing, the children climbed all over me and around me. Their dark, naked little bodies were soft and warm against my skin. As they had done almost every morning since my arrival, the children spent their chubby hands roamed over my face, my breasts, my stomach, and my legs, asking me to identify every part of my body. I pretended to still be asleep and began to snore loudly. Two little boys snuggled up against my sides, and the girl on top of me tucked her dark head under my chin. They smelled of smoke and earth.

I didn't know a word of their language when I arrived at their village, hidden deep in the jungle between Venezuela and Brazil. But that didn't stop the nearly eighty people who lived in the *shabono* from accepting me. For the Indians, not understanding their language is equivalent to being *aka boreki:* stupid. As such, they fed me, showed me affection, and pampered me; my mistakes were excused or ignored, like those of a child.

In the worst cases, my mistakes provoked thunderous laughter that shook their bodies until they

rolled on the ground, with tears in their eyes.

The pressure of a tiny hand against my cheek brought my reverie to an end. Texoma, Ritimi and Etewa's four-year-old daughter, lying on top of me, opened her eyes and, bringing her head closer, began to rub her thick eyelashes against mine.

"Don't you want to get up?" the little girl asked, running her fingers through my hair. "The bananas are ready."

I felt no desire to leave the warmth of the hammock.

"I wonder how many months I've been here," I said. "Many," three voices answered me in unison.

I couldn't help but smile. Any number greater than three was expressed as "many" or "more than three."

— Yes, many months —I nodded gently.

— Tutemi's child was still sleeping inside her belly when you arrived — Texoma murmured, pressing herself against me.

It wasn't that they had lost all sense of time, but the days, weeks, and months had lost their precise boundaries. Here, only the present mattered. For these people, only what happened each day within the immense green shadows of the jungle counted. Yesterday and tomorrow, they said, were as indeterminate as a vague dream, as fragile as a spider's web, visible only when a ray of sunlight pierces the leaves.

Measuring time had been my obsession during the first few weeks. I wore my automatic watch day and night, and recorded each new day in a diary, as if my very existence depended on it. I can't pinpoint when I realized that a fundamental change had taken place within me. I think it all began before I arrived at the Iticoteri village, in a small town in eastern Venezuela, where I had been investigating healing practices.

After transcribing, translating, and analyzing the many tapes and hundreds of pages of notes collected during months of fieldwork with the three healers in the Barlovento area, I had begun to have serious doubts about the validity and purpose of my research. My attempts to organize the data into a coherent theoretical framework proved futile, because the material was riddled with contradictions and inconsistencies.

My work aimed to uncover the meaning that healing practices hold for healers and their patients in their daily lives. My focus was on discerning how reality was created social, in terms of health and illness, stemming from their collective activity. I thought I needed to know perfectly what the healers thought of each other and of their knowledge, because only then could I work within their social environment and their own system of interpretation. And thus, the analysis of my data would come from the system in which I had been operating and would not be superimposed from my own environment.

While I was in the countryside, I lived in the house of Doña Mercedes, a healer with whom I was working. Not only did I record, observe, and interview the healers and their numerous patients, but I also participated in their sessions, immersing myself completely in the new situation. However, I encountered blatant inconsistencies in the healing practices and their explanations about these. Doña Mercedes laughed at my perplexity and what she considered my lack of fluency in accepting changes and innovations.

"Are you sure I said that?" she asked me after listening to one of the tapes that I insisted on making her listen to.

"It's not me speaking," I said sharply, and began reading my typed notes, hoping she would understand the contradiction in her information.

"That sounds wonderful," Doña Mercedes remarked, interrupting my reading. "Is she really referring to me?" You've made me a real genius. Read me your notes about the sessions with Rafael and Serafino. They were the other two healers I had been working with.

I did as it asked, and then I reconnected the tape recorder so it could help me with the information. However, Doña Mercedes had no interest whatsoever in what she herself had said months before. For her, it was a thing of the past and, therefore, had no validity. Without any hesitation, she made me understand that the tape recorder was to blame for having recorded something she didn't remember saying.

"If I really said those things, it was because of you. Every time you ask me about healing, I start talking without really knowing what I'm saying. You always put the words in my mouth. If you knew how to heal, you wouldn't worry about writing or talking about it. You'd just do it."

I didn't want to believe my work was useless. I went to see the other two healers. To my great disappointment, they weren't much help either. They acknowledged the contradictions and explained them in a very similar to Doña Mercedes.

In retrospect, my despair at this failure seems comical. In a fit of anger, I challenged Doña Mercedes to burn my notes. She readily agreed, and burned page after page in the flame of one of the candles that illuminated the image of the Virgin Mary on the altar in her treatment room.

— I really don't understand why you worry so much about what your machine says and what I say—

“What difference does what I do now make from what I did a few months ago?” Doña Mercedes observed, lighting another candle on the altar. “The only thing that matters is that the patients get better. Years ago, a psychologist and a sociologist came and recorded everything I said on a machine like yours. I think their machine was better; it was much bigger. They were only here for a week. With the information they gathered, they wrote a book about healing.”

“I know the book,” I replied sharply. “I don’t think it’s a very accurate study. It’s simplistic and superficial, and it lacks true understanding.”

Doña Mercedes looked at me questioningly, her gaze half compassionate, half disdainful. Silently, I watched as the last page turned to ashes. I wasn't bothered by what I had done. She got up from her chair and sat next to me on the wooden bench.

"Very soon you will feel that a great weight has been lifted from your shoulders," she comforted me. I felt compelled to launch into a lengthy explanation about the importance of studying non-Western healing practices. Doña Mercedes listened attentively, a mocking smile playing on her lips. "If I were you," she suggested, "I'd accept your friends' offer to go hunting up the Orinoco River. It would be a good change for you."

Although I intended to return to Los Angeles as soon as possible to finish my work, I was seriously considering accepting a friend's invitation for a two-week trip deep in the jungle. I had no interest in hunting, but I thought I might have a chance to meet a shaman, or witness a healing ceremony, through one of the Indigenous guides he planned to hire upon arriving at the Catholic mission, the last outpost of civilization.

"I think that's what I have to do," I told Doña Mercedes. "Maybe I'll find a great Indian healer who will tell me things about healing that even you don't know."

"I'm sure you'll hear all sorts of interesting things," Doña Mercedes replied, laughing. "But don't worry about writing them down; you won't do any research”.

— Wow. And how do you know that?

"Remember, I'm a witch," she said, tapping me lightly on the cheek. There was an expression of an ineffable sweetness in her dark eyes —. And don't worry about your English notes; they're safe on your desk. When you return, they won't be of any use to you anymore.

A week later, I was with my friend in a small plane, on our way to the Catholic mission on the upper Orinoco. There we were to meet the other members of the expedition, who had set sail a few days earlier with the hunting equipment and supplies we would need to spend two weeks in the jungle.

II

My friend was eager to show me the wonders of the turbulent, muddy Orinoco River. He maneuvered the small contraption with daring and skill. For a few moments, we were so close to the water's surface that we startled the caimans basking in the sun on the sandbar at the riverbank. Just a moment then we were airborne again, above the seemingly endless and impenetrable jungle.

He had calmed down, and was already descending again, so low that we could see the turtles dozing on the logs, at the water's edge.

I was trembling with nausea and dizziness when we finally landed in a small clearing near the mission's cultivated fields. The priest in charge, Father Coriolano, greeted us along with our expedition companions, who had arrived the day before, and a group of Indians who shouted with excitement as they swarmed the small plane.

Father Coriolanus led us through fields of corn, cassava, bananas, and sugarcane. He was a thin man with long arms and short legs. Thick eyebrows almost completely obscured his deep-set eyes, and the mass of his unruly beard covered the rest of his face. His black cassock contrasted sharply with the tattered straw hat, which he kept pushing back to let the breeze dry his sweat-covered forehead.

My clothes, soaked through, clung to my body as we passed a kind of dock made of posts driven into the mud of the riverbank, where the boat was moored. We stopped, and Father Coriolano began to speak of our departure, which would take place the following day. I found myself surrounded by a group of Indian women, who didn't say a word but smiled at me shyly. Their ill-fitting dresses rode up in the front and hung down in the back, giving the impression that they were all pregnant. Among them was an old woman so small and wrinkled that she looked like an aged child. She didn't smile like the others. There was a silent plea in the old woman's eyes when she held out her hand to me. I was overcome with strange feelings when I noticed her eyes filling with tears; I didn't want to see them roll down her mud-colored cheeks. I placed my hand in hers. Smiling contentedly, she led me toward the fruit trees that surrounded the mission, a long, single-story building.

In the shade, under the ample shelter of the house's asbestos roof, a group of elderly people squatted, holding enameled aluminum cups in their trembling hands. They wore khaki clothing and their faces were partially obscured by sweat-stained straw hats. They laughed and talked with

They spoke in high-pitched voices and noisily sucked their lips as they drank their rum coffee. Two boisterous parakeets, their brightly colored wings tightly tied, perched on one of their shoulders.
I couldn't see the men's features, nor the color of their skin. They seemed to be speaking Spanish, but their words were unintelligible to me.

"Are they Indians?" I asked the old woman who was guiding me to a small back room in one of the houses surrounding the mission.

The old woman laughed. Her eyes, barely visible between the slits of her eyelids, rested on my face. "They're *rational.* They call non-Indians ' *rational,'* " she explained. "Those old people have been here too long. They came looking for gold and diamonds."

— Did they find them?

— Many of them did.

— Why are you still here?

“They are the ones who can’t return to where they came from,” she said, placing her bony hands on my shoulders. Her gesture didn’t surprise me. There was something warm and affectionate about her touch. I just thought I was a little crazy. “They’ve lost their souls in the jungle.”

The old woman's eyes were now wide open; they were the color of dried tobacco leaves. Not knowing what to say, I tore my eyes from his piercing gaze and surveyed the room. The blue-painted walls were faded by the sun, and dampness was peeling them. Near a narrow window stood a crudely constructed wooden bed. It looked like an oversized crib around which mosquito netting had been nailed. The more I looked at it, the more it reminded me of a cage that could only be entered by lifting the heavy, wire-covered lid.

"I'm Angelica," the old woman said, staring at me. "Is this all you have?" she asked, taking the orange backpack off my back.

Speechless and with a look of complete astonishment, I watched as he took out my underwear, a pair of jeans, and a long t-shirt.

"That's all I need for two weeks," I explained, pointing to my camera and toiletry bag at the bottom of my backpack.

Carefully, she took out the machine, opened the plastic bag, and quickly laid its contents on the floor. There was a comb, nail clippers, toothpaste and a toothbrush, a bottle of shampoo, and a bar of soap.

Shaking her head in disbelief, she turned the backpack inside out. Lost in thought, she brushed aside the dark hairs that clung to her forehead. There was a dreamy air in her eyes as her face crinkled into a smile. She put everything back in the backpack and, without a word, led me back to where my friends were.

Long after the mission had fallen into darkness and silence, I was still awake, listening to the unfamiliar sounds of the night drifting in through the open window. I don't know if it was due to my exhaustion or the mission's tranquil atmosphere, but that night, before retiring, I had decided not to join my friends on their hunting expedition. Instead, I wanted to stay at the mission for those two weeks.

Fortunately, no one seemed bothered. In fact, everyone appeared relieved. Although they hadn't said so, some of my friends thought that someone who didn't know how to handle a rifle had no business being on a hunt.

As if spellbound, I watched the blue transparency of the air dissolve into the shadows of the night. A softness spread across the sky, revealing the contours of branches and leaves, waving in the breeze outside my window. The solitary cry of a howler monkey was the last thing I heard before falling into a deep sleep.
dream.

“So you’re an anthropologist,” Father Coriolanus said to me at lunch the next day.

The anthropologists I've met all came loaded down with tape recorders and film cameras and I don't know how many other gadgets. — He offered me a second helping of baked fish and corn on

the cob—. Are you interested in Indians?

I explained to him what I had been doing in Barlovento and the difficulties he had with the data collected.

— I would like to see some healing sessions during my stay here.

“I’m afraid you won’t see much of this kind around here,” said the priest, picking up the crumbs of cassava bread that clung to his beard. “We have a well-equipped dispensary. The Indians come from far and wide to bring us their sick. But perhaps I can arrange a visit for you to one of the nearby villages, where you might find a shaman.”

— I would be very grateful if I could arrange it. It's not that I came here to do fieldwork, but it would be very interesting to see a shaman.

"You don't look like an anthropologist." Father Coriolanus's eyebrows arched, meeting in a fro. "Most of those I've met were men, but there were some women." He scratched his head. "Somehow, you don't fit my description of an anthropologist."

"You can't expect us all to look alike," I said casually, wondering who I had met.

“I suppose not,” he admitted meekly. “What I mean is, you don’t seem entirely grown up. This morning, after your friends had left, several people asked me why they had left the child with me.”

With lively eyes, he joked about how Indians expect a white adult to be something more than themselves.

— Especially if she's blond with blue eyes. She's supposed to be a real giant.

That night I had a terrifying nightmare in my crib, covered by the mosquito net. I dreamt that the lid had been nailed shut. All my efforts to escape were useless. Panic overwhelmed me. I screamed and shook the frame until the whole contraption tipped over. Still half asleep, I found myself lying on the floor, my head resting against the small mound of the old woman's sagging breasts. For a moment, I couldn't remember where I was.

A childish fear made me press myself closer to the indigenous woman, knowing I was safe with her. The old woman stroked my head and whispered incomprehensible words in my ear until I fully awoke. Her touch and the nasal, unfamiliar sound of her voice calmed me. I couldn't rationalize this feeling, but

Something made me hold on to her. She led me to her room, behind the kitchen.

I lay down beside her in a heavy hammock strung between two posts. Protected by the strange old woman's presence, I closed my eyes without fear. The faint beating of her heart and the dripping of water from a jug lulled me to sleep.

"It will be much better if you sleep here," the old woman said the next morning, hanging up a hammock. cotton next to hers.

From that day on, Angelica rarely left my side. Most of the time we stayed by the river, talking and bathing on the bank, where the reddish-gray sand had the color of ashes mixed with blood.

In complete peace, I would sit for hours watching the indigenous women wash their clothes and listening to Angelica's stories about her past. Like clouds scattered across the sky, her words mingled with the images of the women rinsing the clothes in the water and hanging them to dry on the stones.

Angelica wasn't Maquiritare, like most of the Indians at the mission. She had been given to a Maquiritare when she was very young. He treated her well, she said with pleasure. She quickly learned his ways, which weren't so different from her own. She had also been to the city, but she never told me which one. Nor did she tell me her Indian name, which, according to the customs of her tribe, shouldn't be spoken aloud.

Whenever he spoke of the past, his voice sounded strange to me. It became very nasal, and he often switched from Spanish to his own language, mixing up tenses and spaces. He frequently stopped mid-sentence; hours later, or even the next day, he would resume the conversation at the exact point where he had left off, as if it were the most natural thing in the world to chat like that.

"I'll take you to my people," Angelica told me one afternoon. She looked at me with a hesitant smile. I had the feeling she was about to say something else, and I wondered if she knew about the arrangement Father Cariolano had made with Mr. Barth to take me to the nearest Maquiritare village. Mr. Barth was an American miner who had spent more than twenty years in the Venezuelan jungle. He lived downriver with an Indigenous woman, and many evenings he would treat himself to dinner at the mission. Although he had no desire to return to the United States, he greatly enjoyed hearing about his country.

"I'll take you to my people," Angelica said again. "It will take us many days to get there. Milagros will guide us through the jungle."
— Who is Milagros?

"He's an Indian like me. He speaks Spanish well." Angelica rubbed her hands together happily. "He was supposed to accompany your friends, but he decided to stay. I know why."
Angelica spoke with a strange intensity; her eyes shone and I had, as upon my arrival, the feeling that she was a little crazy.

"He already knew I would need him to accompany us," the old woman said. Her eyelids closed as if she no longer had the strength to open them. Suddenly, as if afraid of falling asleep, she opened them completely. “It doesn't matter what you tell me now. I know you'll come with me.”

That night I lay awake in the hammock. From Angelica's breathing, I knew she was asleep. I prayed because I didn't want her to forget her offer to take me to the jungle. Doña Mercedes's words echoed in my head: "When you return, your notes will be useless." Perhaps I would do some fieldwork among the Indians. The thought amused me. I didn't have a tape recorder with me; I didn't have paper or pencils either, only a small notebook that served as my diary, and a pen. I had my camera, but only three rolls of film.

Restless, I turned over in the hammock. No, I had no intention of going into the jungle with an old woman I thought was a bit eccentric, and an Indian I'd never seen. Yet, a journey through the jungle was so tempting... It was easy to take some time off; I didn't have any deadlines to meet, and no one was waiting for me. I could leave a letter for my friends, explaining my sudden decision. They wouldn't worry too much. The more I thought about it, the more intrigued I became. Father Coriolanus could, no doubt,

Provide me with enough paper and pencils. And yes, perhaps Doña Mercedes was right. My old notes about the healers would be of no use to me when I returned —*if I returned,* as my thoughts of such a trip threateningly interrupted.

I got up from the hammock and gazed at the frail old woman asleep. As if she sensed my presence, her eyes trembled, her lips began to move:

— I will not die here, but among my own people. My body will be cremated, and my ashes will remain with them.

Her eyes opened slowly; they were dull, clouded with sleep, and expressed nothing, but I sensed a deep sadness in her voice. I touched her hollow cheeks. She smiled at me, but her thoughts were elsewhere.

I woke up with the feeling that someone was watching me. Angelica told me she had been waiting for me to wake up. She made me look at a box next to her, about the size of a makeup bag, made of tree bark. She opened the tight lid and, with great relish, proceeded to show me each of the objects inside, with loud exclamations of joy and surprise, as if she were seeing these things for the first time. There was a mirror, a comb, a necklace of plastic pearls, some empty Pond's cream bottles, a lipstick, a pair of rusty scissors, and a faded blouse and skirt.

"And what do you think this is?" he asked me, hiding something behind his back.

I confessed my ignorance and he laughed.

"This is my notebook." She opened it, its pages yellowed with age. Each page was covered in lines of crooked writing. "Look at me." Taking a pencil with a chewed end from the box, she began to write her name.

"I learned to do this on another mission. A much bigger one than this. I also had a school. That was many years ago, but I haven't forgotten what I learned." Over and over, he wrote his name on the pale pages. "Do you like it?"

-A lot.

I was bewildered by the sight of the old woman squatting on the floor, her body bent forward, her head almost touching the notebook. Yet she maintained perfect balance as she painstakingly traced the letters of her name.

Suddenly, he stood up and closed the notebook.

“I’ve been to the city,” he said, his eyes fixed on a point beyond the window. “A city full of people who all looked the same. At first I liked it, but very soon I grew tired of it. There were too many things to see. And it was so noisy! Not only did people talk, but things talked too.” He stopped, his brow furrowed, in a tremendous effort to concentrate; every line of his face deepened. Finally he said, “I didn’t like the city at all.”

I asked him what city he had been in and on which mission he had learned to write his name. He looked at me as if he hadn't heard me and continued his story. As he had done before, he began to mix up tenses and places, switching to his own language. Sometimes he laughed, repeating over and over:

—I will not go to Father Coriolanus' paradise.

"Are you serious about going to see your people?" I asked her. "Don't you think it's dangerous for two women to go into the jungle? Do you really know the way?"

"Of course I know the way," she said, abruptly emerging from her almost trance-like state. "Nothing can happen to an old woman."

—I'm not old.

He stroked my hair.

"You're not old, but your hair is the color of palm fibers and your eyes the color of the sky. Nothing will happen to you."

“I’m sure we’ll get lost,” I objected gently. “You don’t even remember how long it’s been.”

It's been a while since he last saw his people. You told me they're going deeper and deeper into the jungle.

"Milagros will come with us," Angelica said convincingly. "He knows the jungle well. He knows almost everyone who lives in the jungle." Angelica began packing her belongings into the bark box.

I'd better find him so we can leave as soon as possible. You'll have to give him something.

"I don't have anything he might want. Maybe I can convince my friends to give Milagros the machetes they brought."

"Give him your camera," Angelica suggested. "I know he wants a camera as much as he wants another machete."

— Do you know how to use it?

"I don't know." He laughed, his hand over his mouth. "He once told me he wanted to take pictures of the white people who come to the mission to see the Indians."

I had no desire to part with my camera. It was good and very expensive, so I regretted not having a cheaper one.

— I'll give her the machine—I agreed, hoping that once I had explained how complicated it was to use, Milagros would prefer a machete.

"The fewer things you have to carry, the better," Angelica warned, slamming the lid of her box shut. I'm going to give all these things to one of the women here. I won't need them anymore. If you come empty-handed, nobody expects anything from you.

— I'd like to take the hammock you gave me—I said jokingly.

"That might be a good idea." Angelica looked at me and nodded. "You're a very restless sleeper, and you probably wouldn't be able to rest in the fiber hammocks my people use." She picked up her box and left the room. "I'll come back when I find Milagros."

Father Coriolano sipped his coffee and looked at me as if I were a stranger. With great effort, he stood up, leaning on a chair. Visibly disoriented, he gazed at me without saying a word. It was the silence of an old man. Watching him run his stiff, gnarled fingers over his face, I realized for the first time how frail he was.

"You're crazy to go to the jungle with Angelica," she finally said. "She's very old; she won't get very far."

Walking through the jungle is no walk in the park.

— Milagros will accompany us.

Father Coriolanus turned toward the window, lost in thought. He kept pushing his beard back and forth with his hand.

— Milagros refused to go with his friends. I'm sure he won't accompany Angelica to the jungle.

— Silo will do it.

My certainty, incomprehensible, was a feeling completely foreign to my everyday reasoning.

“Although he is a trustworthy man, he is strange,” Father Coriolanus remarked with concern. “He has guided several expeditions. However…” Father Coriolanus returned to his chair and, leaning toward me, continued, “You are not prepared to enter the jungle. You cannot even begin to imagine the difficulties and dangers of such an adventure. You don’t even have the right shoes.”

— Several people who have been in the jungle have told me that athletic shoes are the best thing to wear. It dries on, doesn't shrink, and doesn't cause blisters.
Father Coriolanus ignored my comment.
"Why do you want to go?" he asked, exasperated. "Mr. Barth will take you to see a Maquiritare shaman; you'll be able to see a healing ceremony without having to go very far."
“I don’t really know why I want to go,” I admitted, sounding helpless. “Maybe I want to see more than just a healing ceremony. In fact, I wanted to ask you to leave me some writing paper and pencils.”

"And your friends? What am I going to tell them? That you disappeared with a senile old woman?" he asked me as he poured himself another cup of coffee. "I've been here for over thirty years and I've never heard of such a scheme."

It was past siesta time, but the mission was still quiet as I stretched out in my hammock, strung in the shade of long, twisted branches and the jagged leaves of the yango trees. In the distance, I saw Mr. Barth's tall figure approaching the mission clearing. It was odd, I thought, because he usually came at night. Then I guessed why he was there.

He stopped at the steps leading to the terrace, near where I was, squatted down on the ground and lit one of the cigarettes my friends had brought him. Mr. Barth seemed restless. He stood up and began pacing back and forth like a sentry guarding the building. I was about to call him when he began talking to himself. The words came out of his mouth in a haze of smoke. He rubbed the white stubble on his chin and rubbed one boot against the other, trying to remove the mud. Again, he squatted down and began to shake his head as if he wanted to rid himself of what was on his mind.

— You've come to tell me you found diamonds in the Gran Sabana — I said by way of greeting, hoping to dispel the melancholy expression in her sweet brown eyes.

He took a drag on his cigarette and exhaled the smoke through his nose in short puffs. After spitting out some tobacco particles that had remained on his tongue, he asked:

— Why do you want to go to the jungle with Angelica?

— I already told Father Coriolanus: I really don't know.

Mr. Barth softly repeated my words, turning them into a question. He lit another cigarette and exhaled slowly, watching the spiral of smoke dissolve into the clear air.

"Let's go for a walk," he suggested.

We walked along the riverbank, where large, crisscrossing roots emerged from the earth like sculptures of wood and mud. The warm, sticky humidity quickly permeated my skin. From beneath a layer of twigs and leaves, Mr. Barth pulled a canoe out, pushed it into the water, and motioned for me to climb aboard. He steered it.

Directly across the river, seeking the shelter of the left bank, which offered some protection from the full force of the current. With strong, precise movements, he steered the canoe upstream until we reached a narrow tributary. The thicket of bamboo gave way to other heavy, dark plants, an endless wall of trees pressed trunk to trunk right on the riverbank. Roots and branches dangled over the water. Vines climbed the trees, twining around their trunks like snakes about to break them in their tight embrace.

"Ah, here it is," said Mr. Barth, pointing to an opening in what appeared to be an impenetrable wall.

We beached the canoe on the muddy bank and tied it tightly to a log. The sun barely penetrated the dense foliage, and the light faded into a faint green as I followed Mr. Barth through the undergrowth.

Vines and branches brushed against me like living things. The heat wasn't as intense anymore, but the sticky humidity made my clothes cling to my body like mud. Soon my face was covered in dirty plant dust and cobwebs that smelled of decay.

"Is this a path?" I asked incredulously, almost falling into a puddle of greenish water.

The surface of the puddle trembled beneath hundreds of insects that were little more than pulsating dots in the murky liquid. The birds fled, and amidst the greenery, I could neither distinguish their color nor their size, but only hear their furious squawks protesting our intrusion. I understood that Mr. Barth was trying to scare me. The thought that he was taking me to another Catholic mission also crossed my mind.

"Is this a path?" I insisted.

Abruptly, Mr. Barth stopped in front of a tree, so tall that its upper branches seemed to reach the sky. Climbing plants twisted and turned upwards around the trunk and branches.

“I wanted to give him a lecture, and it would terrify him,” Mr. Barth said grimly. “But everything I prepared seems foolish now. Let’s rest for a while, and then we’ll come back to it.”

Mr. Barth let the canoe drift with the current, paddling only when we got too close to the shore.

— The jungle is a world beyond your imagination. I can't describe it to you, even though I've experienced it so often. It's a personal matter: everyone's experience is different and unique.

Instead of returning to the mission, Mr. Barth invited me to his home. It was a large, circular hut with a conical palm-leaf roof. It was very dark inside; the only light came from the small entrance and a rectangular window in the roof, which was closed by pulling a leather pulley. Two hammocks hung in the middle of the hut. Against the whitewashed walls were baskets full of books and magazines; hanging on them were pumpkins, pots, machetes and a rifle.

A naked young woman rose from one of the hammocks. She was tall, with large breasts and wide hips, but her face was that of a child, round and soft, with dark, almond-shaped eyes. Smiling, she picked up her dress, which hung next to a woven wicker fan.

"Coffee?" he asked in Spanish, sitting down on the floor in front of the fireplace, next to the pots and pans of aluminum.

—Do you know Milagros well? —I asked Mr. Barth, after he had introduced me to his wife and we sat down in the hammocks, she and I together.

“It’s hard to say,” he said, picking up his coffee cup from the floor. “He comes and goes. He’s like the river; he never stops, he never seems to rest. Nobody knows how far Milagros goes, how long he stays in one place. All I know is that when he was a young boy, some white men took him from where his people lived. His story is never the same. Sometimes he says they were rubber tappers; other times, that they were were missionaries; others were miners or scientists. Whoever they were, he traveled with them for many years.

— To which tribe does he belong? Where does he live?

— He is Maquiritare, but nobody knows where he lives. He periodically returns to his people. I don't know which village he belongs to.

— Angelica went to look for him. I wonder if she knows where to find him.

"I'm sure they are. They're very close. I wonder if they're related." She placed the bowl on the ground and got up from the hammock, disappearing momentarily into the thick undergrowth surrounding the cabin. She reappeared seconds later with a small metal box. "Open it," she said, handing it to me. Inside was a small brown leather bag.

—Diamonds? — I asked, feeling its contents.

Smiling, Mr. Barth nodded; then he motioned for me to sit beside him on the dirt floor. He took off his shirt, spread it on the ground, and told me to empty the small bag onto the cloth. I could barely conceal my disappointment. The stones did not shine; they seemed more like they were made of opaque quartz.

"Are you sure they're diamonds?" I asked.

"Absolutely certain," said Mr. Barth, placing a stone the size of a small tomato in the palm of my hand. "If it's cut well, it could make a lovely ring."

— Did you find these diamonds here?

“No,” he replied, laughing. “Near the Parima Mountains, years ago.” Narrowing his eyes, he rocked back and forth. His cheeks were veiny, and the stubble on his chin was damp. “A long time ago, all I cared about in life was finding diamonds so I could go home with a lot of money.”

Mr. Barth sighed deeply, his gaze lost somewhere beyond the cabin. “One day I realized that my dream of getting rich had dried up, so to speak. It no longer obsessed me, and I didn’t want to go back to the world I had known. I stayed here.” His eyes glistened with tears as he pointed at the diamonds.

He blinked several times, then looked at me and smiled

— I like them as much as I like this land.

I wanted to ask him many questions, but I was afraid of disturbing him. We remained silent, listening to the deep, continuous murmur of the river.

Mr. Barth spoke again:

— You know, anthropologists and missionaries have a lot in common. They're both bad for this land. Anthropologists are more hypocritical; they deceive and lie to get the information they want. I suppose they think that in the name of science everything is justified. No, no, don't interrupt me — Mr. Barth warned me, shaking his head in front of my face. The anthropologists — he continued in the same harsh tone — have complained to me about the missionaries' arrogance, their haughtiness, and their patronizing attitude toward the Indians. And look at them: they're the most arrogant of all; they meddle in other people's lives as if they had every right to.

Mr. Barth sighed heavily, as if that outburst had exhausted him.

I chose not to defend the anthropologists, fearing a second outburst of anger, so I I was content to examine the diamond I held in my hand.

"It's very beautiful," I said, handing him the stone.

"Keep it," he said, and then he gathered the rest of the stones and placed them, one by one, in the small leather bag. "I don't think I can accept such a valuable gift." I started laughing nervously and added as an excuse — I never wear jewelry.

"Don't consider it a valuable gift. Take it as a talisman. Only city people consider it a jewel," he commented calmly, closing my fingers over the stone. "It will bring you luck."

He stood up, shaking the dampness off the back of his pants with his hands; then he lay down in his hammock.

The young woman refilled our cups. Sipping the heavily sugared coffee, we watched as the whitewashed walls turned violet in the twilight. The shadows didn't have time to lengthen, because in an instant it became dark.

Angelica woke me up, murmuring in my ear:

—We're leaving in the morning.

"What?" I jumped out of my hammock, wide awake. "I thought it would take me two or three days to find Milagros. I'd better pack my bag."

Angelica laughed.

"The suitcase? You don't need to take anything. I gave your pants and one of your shirts to an Indian boy. You don't need two pairs of pants. You'd better keep sleeping. Tomorrow will be a very long day. Milagros is in a great hurry."

"I can't sleep," I said, breathless. "It'll be dawn soon. I'll write a note to my friends. I hope the hammock and blanket will fit in my backpack. And the food?"

— Father Coriolanus left sardines and cassava bread for us; we'll collect everything in the morning. I'll carry it in a basket.

— Did you speak to him tonight? What did he say?

—He said that God's will be done.

I had just finished packing when the chapel bell began to ring. For the first time since arriving at the mission, I went to Mass. Indigenous people and *non-Indigenous people* filled the wooden pews. They laughed and talked as if they were at a party. Father Coriolano needed quite a while to quiet them before beginning Mass. The woman sitting next to me complained that Father Coriolanus always woke her baby with his powerful voice. Indeed, the child began to cry, but before his first cry could be heard, the woman uncovered her breast and placed it over the baby's mouth. Kneeling, I raised my eyes to the Virgin standing on the altar. She wore a blue mantle embroidered with gold. Her face was turned toward heaven: her eyes were blue, her cheeks pale, and her lips bright red. In one arm she held the infant Jesus; the other arm was outstretched, and her delicate white hand reached out toward the strange pagans at her feet.

III

Machete in hand, Milagros cleared a path along the narrow trail that bordered the river. His muscular back was visible beneath his tattered red shirt. His khaki trousers, rolled up to mid-calf and tied at the waist with a cotton cord, made him appear shorter than he actually was. He walked briskly, his weight on the outer edges of his feet, which were narrow at the heels and fanned out at the toes. His very short hair and the broad tonsure on his crown reminded me of a monk.

I stopped and turned around before taking the path that led into the jungle. Across the river, almost hidden around a bend, lay the mission. Bathed in the light of the newborn sun, it seemed already beyond my reach. I felt strangely detached, not only from the place and the people I had been with for the past week, but from everything familiar. I sensed a change taking place within me, as if crossing the river marked the end of a phase, a crossroads. Something of this must have been reflected in my face, because when I glanced beside me and saw Angelica's eyes, I saw understanding there.

— We're already far away— said Milagros, stopping next to us.

Folding her arms across her chest, she let her gaze wander over the river. The morning light shimmered on the water and reflected off her face, tints it with a golden glow. It was an angular, bony face, to which the small nose and wide lower lip added an unexpected vulnerability, a stark contrast, noticing the deep circles and wrinkles surrounding her almond-shaped brown eyes. They were decidedly similar to Angelica's eyes, and reflected the same timeless expression.

In complete silence, we walked beneath the enormous trees, along paths hidden in the thick undergrowth, mingled with vines, leaves and branches, climbing plants and roots. Cobwebs hung over my face like an invisible veil. I saw nothing but greenery and felt nothing but dampness. We jumped and circled around tree trunks, crossed streams and marshes shaded by immense bamboo stalks. Sometimes Milagros walked ahead of me; other times Angélica preceded me, her U-shaped basket slung over her back, held in place by a band of tree bark wrapped around her forehead. It was filled with pumpkins, cassava bread, and cans of sardines.

I had no idea which way we were going. I couldn't see the sun; only its light filtering through the dense foliage. Soon my neck began to ache from looking up at the incredible height of the motionless trees. Only the straight palm trees, undefeated in their vertical ascent towards the light, seemed to sweep away the few visible patches of blue with their fronds of silvery shadows.

"I need to rest," I said, sitting down heavily on a fallen log. According to my watch, it was already three in the afternoon. We had walked without
stopping for more than six hours. "I'm starving."

Angelica handed me a pumpkin from her basket, and sat down next to me.

— Fill it up—he said, pointing with his chin at the nearby stream.

Squatting in the river, legs apart and palms on her thighs, Milagros leaned forward until her lips touched the water. She drank without getting her nose wet.
"Drink," he said, sitting up.

“He must be almost fifty,” I thought. And yet, the unexpected grace of his fluid movements made him seem much younger. He smiled for a moment and then began wading downstream.
"Be careful or you'll end up taking a bath!" Angelica exclaimed, laughing cheerfully.

Startled by his voice, I lost my balance and fell headfirst into the water.

“I can’t drink like Milagros does,” I said calmly, handing her the full gourd. “I think I’ll drink from the gourd from now on.” I sat down next to her and took off my soaking wet sneakers. “Whoever said these shoes were the best for the jungle clearly didn’t walk in them for six hours.”
My feet were red and covered in blisters, and my ankles were bleeding and full of scratches.

"It's not so bad," Angelica said, examining my feet. She gently ran her fingers over the soles and my sore toes. "You have good calluses. Why don't you go barefoot? Wet shoes will only make your feet more sore."

I looked at the soles of my feet: they were covered with thick, calloused skin that I had acquired from practicing karate for several years.
"What if I step on a snake?" I asked. "Or a thorn?" Although I hadn't seen a single reptile, I noticed that Milagros and Angelica stopped several times to pull thorns out of their feet.

—You have to be really stupid to step on a snake —she said, taking my feet off her lap—. Compared to mosquitoes, thorns aren’t so bad. You’re lucky those little devils don’t bite you as much as they bite *rational people* - She rubbed my arms and hands, as if hoping to find the key to the phenomenon there. “I’d like to know why.”

Angelica had already been amazed at the mission, when she saw me sleeping like the Indians, without a mosquito net.

"I'm in a bad mood," I said, smiling.

Seeing her puzzled expression, I explained that as a child I had often gone to the jungle with my father to look for orchids. He was invariably bitten by mosquitoes, flies, and any other aggressive insects that might be there. Somehow, I always escaped their bites. Once, my father was even bitten by a snake.

"Did he die?" Angelica asked.

"No. It was a very strange incident. The same snake bit me, too. I screamed after my father. He thought I was making fun of him, until I showed him the small red marks on my foot. But the bite didn't swell or turn purple like his. Some friends drove us to the nearest town, where my father was given antivenom. He was sick for several days."

- And you?

— Nothing happened to me — I said, and told him that those friends of my parents were the ones who had jokingly said that I had bad blood.

They did not believe, as the doctor thought, that the snake had exhausted its reserve of venom in the first I was bitten, and whatever stings might have been left behind proved insufficient to have any effect on me. I told Angelica that I had once been stung by seven wasps, the kind known as " *horse killers."* The doctor thought I was going to die, but I only had a fever, and a few days later I was perfectly fine.

I had never seen Angelica so attentive, listening to me with her head slightly tilted, as if she were afraid of missing a single word.

"I was bitten by a snake once too. People thought I was going to die." She was silent for a moment, lost in thought; then a shy smile crept across her face. "Do you think it used up its venom on someone else before biting me?"

"Sure," I said, touching her withered hands.

“Perhaps I have bad blood too,” she remarked with a smile. She seemed very frail and old. For a moment, I had the feeling she might vanish into the shadows. “I am an old woman,” she said, looking at me as if I had voiced my thoughts aloud. “I should have died years ago. I have kept death waiting.”

— He looked again as a line of ants demolished a bush by cutting off pieces of its leaves and carrying them in her mouth —. I knew you were the one who was going to take me to my people; I knew it the moment I saw you.

There was a long pause. Either she didn't want to say anything else, or she was trying to find the right words. She looked at me, with a faint smile on her lips.

"You knew it too, or you wouldn't be here," she finally said, with absolute conviction.

I laughed nervously; she always managed to unsettle me with the intense brightness of her eyes.

"I'm not sure what I'm doing here," I said. "I don't know why I'm going with you."

"You knew you were meant to come here," Angelica insisted.

Something about Angelica's self-assurance stirred a critical spirit in me. It would have been very easy to agree with her, especially since I myself didn't know what I was doing in the jungle, on my way to God knows where.

— To tell you the truth, I had no intention of going anywhere. Remember, I didn't even go with my friends upriver to hunt alligators, as I had planned.

— But that's exactly what I'm saying— she assured me as if I were talking to a stupid child. You found an excuse to cancel your trip so you could come with me.

She placed his bony hands on my head

— Believe me, I didn't have to think about it much. Neither did you. The decision was made the moment I laid eyes on you.

I hid my head in the old woman's lap to hide my laughter. There was no way I could argue with her. Besides, maybe he was right, I thought. I couldn't find any explanation of my own.

“I waited a long time,” Angelica continued. “I had almost forgotten that you were supposed to come to me. But when I saw you, I knew the man was right. I never doubted him, but it had been so long since he told me that I thought I'd missed my chance.

"What man?" I asked, lifting my head from his lap. "Who told him I was coming?"

"I'll tell you another day." Angelica reached for the basket and took out a large piece of cassava bread. "We'd better eat," she added, and opened a can of sardines.

There was no point in insisting. Once Angelica was determined not to speak, there was no changing her mind. With my curiosity unsatisfied, I contented myself with examining the neat row of plump sardines that

They were resting in the thick tomato sauce. I had seen sardines like that in a supermarket in Los Angeles; a friend of mine used to buy them for her cat. I picked one up with my finger and spread it on the loaf of bread.

"Where could Milagros be?" I asked, biting into the sardine sandwich, which was quite good.

Angelica didn't answer. She didn't eat either. Every now and then, she sipped water from the bowl. A slight smile.

The words still lingered at the corners of her lips, and I wondered what the old woman was thinking, the look of longing in her eyes. Suddenly, she looked at me as if waking from a dream.

"Look," she said, pulling me by the arm.

Before us stood a man, naked except for the red cotton bands that adorned his lower body.

The upper part of his arms and a cord around his waist encircled his foreskin and held his penis against his abdomen. His entire body was covered in reddish-brown designs. In one hand he held a bow. One hand was very long and had several arrows; the other had a machete.

"Milagros?" I finally managed to murmur, recovering from the initial shock.

However, I barely recognized him. It wasn't just that he was naked; he seemed taller, more muscular. Red lines zigzagged across his forehead and down his cheeks, over his nose and around his lips, sharpening the contours of his face and erasing his vulnerability. There was something more, besides the physical change, something I couldn't quite put my finger on. It was as if, by shedding the clothes of a *rational being,* he had rid himself of an invisible weight.

Milagros began to laugh loudly and openly. A laugh that rose from deep within him shook his entire body. Repeated and amplified by the jungle, it mingled with the frightened cries of a flock of parakeets that took flight. Squatting before me, he stopped abruptly and said:

"You hardly recognize me." He brought his face so close to mine that our noses touched. Then he asked, "Don't you want me to paint your face?"

"Yes," I said, taking the camera out of my backpack. "But first, can I take your picture?"

"That's my camera," he said emphatically, holding out his hand. "I thought you'd left it on the mission for me."

— I'd like to use it while we're in the Indian village—I began, explaining how the machine worked and putting in a roll first. He paid close attention to my explanations, nodding his head each time I asked if he understood.

I hoped to confuse him by pointing out all the complications of the device.

— Now we'll take a picture of you, so you can see how to hold the machine.

"No, no." She stopped me quickly, taking the camera from my hands. Without any difficulty, she opened the back cover and removed the film, exposing it to the light. "It's mine, you promised. Only I can take pictures with it."

Speechless, I watched him hang the camera across his chest. It looked so incongruous against his nakedness that I couldn't help but laugh. With exaggerated gestures, he began focusing, adjusting, and pointing the camera around himself, talking to imaginary subjects, telling them to smile, to stand closer, or to move away. I felt a strong urge to pull the cotton cord around his neck that held his quiver and lighter hanging down his back.

"You won't take any pictures without film," I said, handing him the third and final roll.

“I never said I wanted to take pictures.” Cheerfully, she exposed the film to the light; then, deliberately, she placed the camera back in its leather case. “Indians don’t like to be photographed,” she said earnestly. Then she turned to Angelica’s basket on the ground and rummaged inside until she found a small bowl sealed with a piece of animal hide. “This is annatto,” she said, showing me a red paste. It was very oily and had a faint aroma I couldn’t identify. “This is the color of life and joy.”

"Where did you leave your clothes?" I asked as I cut a piece of vine with my teeth, about the length of a pencil — Do you live near here?

Busy chewing on a vine tip until he had a makeshift brush, Milagros didn't bother to answer me. He spat on the annatto, then stirred the red paste with the brush until it was smooth. With a steady, precise hand, he drew wavy lines on my forehead, cheeks, chin, and neck, and around my eyes, and decorated my arms with round spots.

—Is there an Indian village around here?

-No.

-Do you live alone?

—Why are you asking so many questions?

The expression of annoyance, heightened by the sharp lines of his painted face, matched the irritated tone of his voice.

I opened my mouth, made a sound, and hesitated about whether to tell him that it was important for me to know something about him and Angelica, and that the more he knew, the better I would feel.

"I was taught to be curious," I said after a moment, realizing that he wouldn't understand the brief unease I was trying to alleviate by asking questions.

Knowing them, I thought, would give me a certain sense of control.

Smiling, completely ignoring what I had said, Milagros stared at me, examined my painted face, and burst into loud laughter. It was a joyful and contagious laugh, like a child's.

"A blonde Indian woman," he said, wiping the tears from his eyes.

I laughed with him, and my momentary fears vanished. Stopping abruptly, Milagros leaned toward me and murmured an incomprehensible word in my ear:

"It's your new name," he clarified seriously, putting his hand over my lips to prevent me from repeating it aloud.

Turning towards Angelica, he murmured the name in her ear.

As soon as he had eaten, Milagros signaled for us to follow him. Ignoring my blisters, I quickly put on my shoes. I saw nothing but green as we climbed the hills and descended the plains: an endless expanse of vines, branches, leaves, and thorns, where every hour was twilight.

I no longer raised my head to see slivers of sky between the clumps of leaves, but contented myself with their reflection in the puddles and streams. Mr. Barth was right when he told me that the jungle was a world impossible to imagine. I couldn't believe I was walking through that endless greenery, toward an unknown destination. In my head, descriptions from anthropologists of fierce and belligerent Indians, of uncivilized tribes, feverishly resurfaced.

My parents knew some German explorers and scientists who had been in the Amazon rainforest.

As a child, their stories about headhunters and cannibals had impressed me; they all recounted incidents in which they had escaped certain death by saving the life of a sick Indian, usually a tribal chief or one of his relatives. A German couple with a little girl, who had returned after a two-year journey through the South American jungle, made the greatest impression on me.
profound. I was seven years old when I saw the objects from those cultures and the life-size photos they had collected during their trip.
Completely captivated by the eight-year-old girl, I followed her through the palm-decorated room in the Sears building in Caracas. I barely had a chance to see the collection of bows and arrows, baskets, quivers, feathers, and masks hanging on the walls as she hurriedly led me to an alcove darkened. Crouching on the ground, from under a pile of palm leaves she took out a red-stained wooden box and opened it with a key that hung from her neck.

"This was given to me by one of my Indian friends," he said, pulling out a wrinkled little head. "It's a *tsantsa,* the shrunken head of an enemy," he added, stroking the long, dark hair as if it were a doll.
She filled me with awe as she explained that she wasn't afraid in the jungle, and that the adventure didn't go as her
parents described it.
"The Indians weren't horrible or ferocious," he said in a very sincere tone. Not for a moment did I doubt his words, as he looked at me with his large, serious eyes. "They were kind and laughed a lot; they were my friends."

I couldn't remember the girl's name. She had lived through the same events as her parents, but she hadn't perceived them with the same prejudices and fears. I laughed to myself and almost fell on a twisted root covered in slippery moss.

"Are you talking to yourself?" Angelica's voice cut short my reverie. "Or to the spirits of the jungle?" Are there spirits?
"Yes. They live in the middle of all this," she said softly, gesturing around her. "In the thicket of climbing vines, along with the monkeys, the seeds, the spiders, and the jaguars."
"It won't rain tonight," Milagros affirmed, sniffing the air, as we stopped next to some stones bordering a shallow stream.

Its calm, clear waters were covered with pink blossoms, fallen from the trees that, like sentinels, stood on the opposite bank. I took off my shoes, let my aching feet float in the comforting coolness, and gazed at the sky, a golden scarlet gradually turning to orange, vermilion, and finally, deep violet. The evening humidity filled my nose with the scent of the jungle, a smell of earth, of life, of corruption.

Before the shadows had fully fallen upon us, Milagros had fashioned two hammocks from strips of bark, tied to either side of a rope made of vines. I couldn't hide my delight when she hung my cotton hammock between the two rather uncomfortable-looking bark cradles.
Filled with anticipation, I watched Milagros's movements as she removed the quiver and lighter from her back. My disappointment was immense when, after removing the piece of monkey fur covering the quiver, she pulled out He took a box of matches and lit the firewood that Angelica had gathered.
"Cat food," I said meanly when Milagros handed me an open can of sardines.
I had imagined my first dinner in the jungle as a tapir or armadillo, freshly hunted and roasted to perfection over a crackling fire. All the damp twigs managed was
producing a thin line of smoke in the air, and its low flames barely illuminated our surroundings.
The dim firelight accentuated Angelica and Milagros's features, filling the hollows with shadows, adding a gleam to their temples, above their prominent eyebrows, along their short noses and high cheekbones. I wondered why the fire made them look so alike.
"Are you related?" I asked the corporal.
— Yes —said Milagros—. I am his son.

"Your son!" I repeated incredulously. I had expected him to be a younger brother or a cousin, since he looked to be about fifty years old. "So, you're only half Maquiritare?"
The two of them started laughing, as if they were enjoying a secret joke. "No, it's not half maquiritare," explained Angelica, between bursts of laughter — He was born when I was still living with my family.

She didn't say another word, but she brought her face close to mine with an expression that was both challenging and amused.

I shifted nervously under her penetrating gaze, wondering if perhaps my question had offended her. Curiosity must be an acquired trait, I decided. I was eager to know everything about them; however, they never asked me anything about myself. The only thing that seemed to matter to them was that we were together in the jungle. At the mission, Angelica had shown no interest whatsoever in where I came from. Nor was she keen to learn about hers, except for the few stories she shared about her life at the mission.

Once our hunger was satisfied, we lay down in our hammocks; Angelica's and mine hung near the fire. She soon fell asleep, her legs tucked under her dress. The air was getting cold, and I offered Milagros the light blanket I had brought with me, which she gladly accepted. Fireflies flickered like points of fire in the dense darkness. The night throbbed with the chirping of crickets and the croaking of frogs. I couldn't sleep; exhaustion and nervousness prevented me from relaxing. I watched the hours tick by on my phosphorescent clock and listened to the sounds of the jungle, which I could no longer identify. There were creatures that growled, hissed, creaked, and howled. Shadows slithered beneath my hammock, moving stealthily, like time itself.

Straining to see in the darkness, I sat up, blinking, unsure whether I was asleep or awake.
Monkeys with phosphorescent eyes leaped from behind the ferns. Beasts with gaping snouts stretched toward me from the branches that covered the hammock, and gigantic spiders with long, hair-like legs wove silver webs over my eyes.

The more I watched, the more frightened I became. A cold sweat trickled down my neck to the base of my spine as I made out the figure of a naked man, bow drawn, aiming at the black sky. Hearing the arrow's whizz clearly, I covered my mouth with my hand to stifle a scream.
"Don't be afraid of the night," Milagros said, putting her hand over my face.

It was a fleshy, calloused hand that smelled of earth and roots. He tied his hammock over mine, so close I could feel the warmth of his body through the strips of bark. Gently, he began to speak in his language; a procession of rhythmic, monotonous words that drowned out the other sounds of the jungle. A feeling of peace washed over me, and my eyes finally closed.

Milagros's hammock was no longer hanging over mine when I awoke. The sounds of the night, now very faint, still lingered among the misty palm trees, the bamboo, the nameless vines, and the parasitic plants. There was still no color in the sky; only a vague clarity that promised a clear day.

Crouching over the fire, Angelica stirred and blew on the embers, bringing them back to life. Smiling, she gestured for me to come closer.

— I heard you while I was sleeping. Were you scared?

"The jungle is so different at night..." I said, a little embarrassed. "I must have been too tired." He nodded.

"Look at the light, see how it reflects from leaf to leaf until it falls to the ground, to the sleeping shadows. That's how dawn lulls the spirits of the night to sleep." Angelica began to stroke the leaves on the ground. "During the day, the shadows sleep. At night, they dance in the darkness."

I smiled meekly, not quite knowing what to say. "Where did Milagros go?" I asked after a moment. Angelica didn't answer me; she sat up, looking around.

"Don't be afraid of the jungle." Raising her arms above her head, she began to dance with skipping steps, singing in a low, monotonous tone that abruptly shifted to a very high one. "Dance with the shadows of the night and sleep with a light heart. If you let the shadows frighten you, they will destroy you."

Her voice dropped to a whisper. She turned her back on me and walked slowly toward the river.

The water was cold when I sat naked in the middle of the stream, whose placid pools held the first light of morning. I watched Angelica gather firewood, placing each branch on her bent arm as if she were holding a child. “She must be stronger than she looks,” I thought, rinsing the shampoo from my hair.

But she might not be as old as she looked. Father Coriolanus told me that when an Indian woman reaches thirty, she is often a grandmother. If she reaches forty, she will have reached an advanced age.

I washed the clothes I'd worn the day before, hung them on a stick near the fire, and put on a long t-shirt that reached almost to my knees. It was much more comfortable than my tight jeans.

"You smell nice," Angelica said, running her fingers through my wet hair. "Is it coming from the bottle?"

I nodded.

—Do you want me to wash your hair?

She hesitated for a moment. Then, quickly, she took off her dress. It was so wrinkled that there

wasn't an inch of smooth skin left. She reminded me of one of the fragile trees that lined the path, with its thin, gray trunks, almost withered, yet supporting branches with green leaves.

Until then, I had never seen Angelica naked, because she wore her cotton dress day and night. I was sure she was over forty: she was an old woman, indeed, as she had said.

Sitting in the water, Angelica squealed and laughed happily, splashing all around, spreading the lather from her head all over her body. With a broken gourd, I rinsed off the soap, and after drying her with the blanket, I combed her short, dark hair and styled her bangs.

—It's a shame we don't have a mirror. Do I still have the red paint?

"Just a little bit," Angelica said, moving closer to the fire. "Milagros will have to repaint your face."

—In a little while we'll smell like smoke—I observed, heading towards Angelica's hammock.

I settled inside and wondered how I'd managed to sleep there without falling out. I was barely there.

long enough for me, and so narrow that I couldn't turn around: However, despite the annoying bark that pricked my back and head, I found myself half asleep as I watched the old woman break the firewood she had gathered into twigs of the same size.

A strange heaviness held me in that crevice of consciousness that is neither waking nor dreaming. I could feel the red of the sun through my closed eyelids. I was aware that Angelica was to my left, murmuring to herself as she tended the fire, and of the jungle that surrounded me and pulled me deeper and deeper, toward its green caverns. I called the old woman by name, but no sound came from my lips. I called again and again, but only silent, gliding shapes emerged from me, rising and falling with the breeze like dead butterflies. Words began to speak without lips, mocking my desire to know, asking a thousand questions. They exploded in my ears, and their echoes reverberated around me like a flock of parakeets crossing the sky.

I opened my eyes at the smell of burnt fur. On a crudely constructed grill, almost half a meter above the fire, was a whole monkey, with its tail, hands, and feet. I looked wistfully at Angelica's basket, still full of cans of sardines and cassava bread.

Milagros was sleeping in my hammock. Her bow rested against a log, and her quiver and machete were on the ground, within her reach.

"Did he only hunt this?" I asked Angelica, getting out of the hammock. Hoping he was never ready.

I added: How long will it take to be ready?

Angelica looked at me with a big smile of unmistakable joy.

—A little more. You'll like it more than sardines.

Milagros dismembered the monkey with her bare hands and served me the best part, the head, which was considered exquisite. Unable to force myself to suck the brains from the split skull, I opted for a piece of well-roasted thigh.

It was tough and chewy and tasted like an old bird, a little bitter. After devouring the monkey's brains with somewhat exaggerated relish, Milagros and Angelica began to eat the entrails, which had been cooked over the embers, each piece wrapped separately in large, strong, fan-shaped leaves. They passed each bite through the ashes before putting it in their mouths. I did the same with the thigh pieces and was surprised to find the meat saltier. What remained was wrapped in leaves, tied tightly with vines, and placed in Angelica's basket for our next meal.

IV

The next four days and nights seemed to merge into one another as we walked, we bathed and slept. They had the quality of a dream in which trees and vines of strange shapes repeated themselves like images infinitely reflected in invisible mirrors, images that faded away as to enter a clearing or along the edge of a river, where the sun shone fully upon us.

By the fifth day, my feet were no longer blistered. Milagros had cut up my slippers and tied pieces of plant fiber to the soft soles. Every morning she tied the makeshift sandals again, and my feet, as if obeying a force of their own, followed Milagros and the old woman.

We always walked in silence, following paths lined with leaves and ferns as tall as a man.

We crawled beneath bushes or squeezed through walls of vines and branches that left our faces dirty and scratched. Sometimes I lost sight of my companions, but I easily followed the twigs that Milagros had a habit of breaking as she walked. We crossed rivers and streams on suspension bridges made of lianas tied to the trees on both banks. They seemed so fragile that every time we crossed one, I feared they wouldn't hold our weight. Milagros laughed, assuring me that her people, though poor navigators, knew the art of building bridges.

On some trails we saw footprints in the mud, which, according to Milagros, indicated that we were in the near an Indian village. We never approached one of them because he wanted us to arrive without delay to our destination.

"If I were alone, I would have arrived a long time ago," Milagros would say every time I asked her when.

We would arrive at Angelica's village. Then, looking at us, he shook his head and added in a resigned tone, "Women slow us down."

But Milagros wasn't bothered by our slow progress. He usually camped, in the early afternoon, on the bank of some large river where we bathed in the pools warmed by the sun and dried ourselves on the enormous, smooth rocks that rose from the water. Lazily, we watched the motionless clouds that changed shape so slowly that twilight arrived before they dissolved into new configurations.

During those lazy afternoons, I wondered about my reasons for embarking on this unsettling adventure.

Was it to fulfill a personal fantasy? Was he running away from some responsibility he could no longer handle? Confront? I even considered the possibility that Angelica had bewitched me.

As the days passed, my eyes grew accustomed to the omnipresent greenery. Soon I began to distinguish red and blue parrots, strange toucans with black and yellow beaks. Once I even saw a tapir darting through the bushes like a whirlwind in search of water. It ended up as the main course at our next feast.

Reddish-skinned monkeys followed us from above, only to disappear as we continued along a river, between waterfalls and through tranquil channels that reflected the sky. Deeply hidden among the bushes, on moss-covered logs, grew red and yellow fungi, so delicate that at the slightest touch they disintegrated as if made of colored dust.

I tried to orient myself by the large rivers we encountered, thinking they would correspond to the ones that I remembered them from geography books. But when I asked their names, they never matched mine, because Milagros only referred to them by their indigenous names.
At night, by the light of the weak fire, when a white mist seemed to emanate from the ground and I felt the dampness of the night dew on my face, Milagros would begin to speak, in his low nasal voice, about the myths of her people.

Angelica, her eyes wide open as if trying to stay awake rather than pay attention, sat very upright for about ten minutes before falling asleep. Milagros talked until very late, bringing to life the time when beings that were part spirit, part animal, and part human inhabited the jungle: creatures that caused floods and diseases, replenished the jungle with game and fruit, and taught humanity how to hunt and plant.

Milagros' favorite myth was about lwrame, a caiman who, before becoming a river animal, walked and talked like a man. Lwrame was the guardian of fire, which he kept hidden in his mouth and refused to share with others. The creatures of the jungle decided to give the crocodile a sumptuous feast, because they knew that only by making him laugh could they steal his fire. They told joke after joke until, finally, unable to contain himself any longer, lwrame burst out laughing. A little bird flew to his open mouth, snatched the fire, and flew to the top of a sacred tree.

Without changing the basic structure of the various myths he wanted to tell, Milagros modified and embellished them according to his mood. He added details she hadn't remembered before, interspersing personal opinions that they seemed to arise from the inspiration of the moment.

— Dream, dream —Milagros would say every night at the end of her stories—. A person who dreams lives for many years.

Was it real, was it a dream? Was I asleep or awake when I heard Angelica stir? She mumbled something unintelligible and sat up. Still drowsy, she brushed her hair away from her face, looked around, and then came over to my hammock. She stared at me with a strange intensity; her eyes seemed enormous in her thin, wrinkled face.

She opened her mouth; strange sounds came from her throat and her whole body began to tremble. I reached out, but there was nothing there; only a vague shadow retreating toward the bushes.

"Old woman, where have you gone?" I heard myself ask.

There was no answer; only the sound of dew dripping from the leaves. For a moment, I saw her again as I had seen her that same afternoon bathing in the river; then she disappeared into the thick night fog.

Unable to stop her, I watched her vanish into an invisible crack in the earth. Searching high and low, I couldn't find even her dress. "It's just a dream," I kept telling myself, but I continued searching for her among the shadows, among the leaves shrouded in mist. But there was no trace of her.

I woke up with a deep anxiety, noticing the heavy thumping of my heart. The sun was already high in the treetops. I hadn't slept so late since the beginning of our trip, not because I hadn't

wanted to, but because Milagros insisted we wake up at dawn.

Angelica wasn't there, and neither was her hammock nor her basket. Leaning against a tree trunk, I saw Milagros's bow and arrows. "That's strange," I thought, "because she's never left without them. She must have gone with the old woman to gather the fruits and nuts she discovered yesterday afternoon," I kept repeating to myself, trying to calm my growing unease.

I walked to the water's edge, unsure what to do, for until then they had never left together, leaving me alone. A tree, infinitely solitary, stood on the other side of the river, its branches arching over the water supporting a network of climbing plants covered in delicate red flowers. They hung like butterflies caught in a gigantic spider's web.

A flock of parakeets noisily perched on some vines that seemed to grow out of the water without any visible support, and it was impossible to tell which trees they belonged to. I began to imitate the parakeets' cries, but they completely ignored my existence. Only when I entered the water did they take flight, unfurling a green arc in the sky.

I waited until the sun disappeared beyond the trees, and the blood-red sky flooded the river with its fire. Out of habit, I returned to my hammock, stoked the fire, and tried to rekindle the embers. I froze in terror when a green snake with amber eyes stared at my face. Lifted into the air, she seemed as surprised as I was. Afraid to breathe, I listened to the rustling of leaves as the animal slowly disappeared among the twisted roots.

With absolute certainty, I knew I would never see Angelica again. I didn't want to cry, but I couldn't. I held back my tears and buried my face in the dead leaves on the ground. "Old woman, where have you gone?" I whispered, just as I had said in my dream. I called out her name across the vast green sea of plants. The old trees didn't answer me. Silently, they witnessed my grief.

I could barely make out Milagros's figure in the thickening shadows. Rigid, he stood before me, his face and body blackened with ash. For an instant he held my gaze; then his eyes closed

They buckled under his weight and he collapsed to the ground exhausted.
"Did you bury her?" I asked, putting his arm around my shoulders to drag him to my hammock. With great difficulty, I lifted him up and put him inside: first his torso, then his legs.

He opened his eyes, stretching his hand towards the sky as if he could reach the distant clouds.
"His soul ascended to heaven, to the house of thunder," he said with great effort. "The fire freed his soul from his bones," he added, and then fell into a deep sleep.

As I watched over her restless sleep, I saw the shadowy shapes of ghostly trees grow before my weary eyes. In the darkness of the night, those chimeric trees seemed more real and taller than the palm trees. I was no longer sad. Angelica had vanished from my dream; she was part of the real, imaginary trees. She would wander forever among the spirits of animals and vanished mythical beings.

It was almost daylight when Milagros picked up his machete, his bow, and his arrows, which lay on the ground.
With a vacant expression, he slung his quiver over his shoulder and, without a word, entered the thicket. I followed him, afraid of losing him in the shadows.

We walked for about two hours, in silence, until Milagros stopped abruptly at the entrance to a clearing in the jungle.
"The smoke from the dead is harmful to women and children," he said, pointing to a pyre of logs. It was half collapsed and, among the ashes, I could see the blackened bones.
I sat on the ground and watched Milagros dry a wooden mortar she had made from a log over a small fire. Something between horror and fascination kept my eyes fixed on Milagros as he began to sift through the ashes, searching for Angelica's bones. He pounded them with a thin stick until they were reduced to a dark gray powder.

"With the smoke of the fire, her soul reached the house of thunder," said Milagros.

It was already night when he filled our pumpkins with the pulverized bones. He sealed them with a ream. sticky.

"If only I could have made death wait a little longer..." I said melancholically.

"It doesn't matter," Milagros remarked, lifting her face from the mortar. Her face was expressionless, but his dark eyes were filled with tears that didn't fall. His lower lip trembled, then froze in a half-smile. "All I wanted was for the essence of her life to be part of her people again."

"It's not the same," I objected, not really understanding what Milagros was saying.

"The essence of his life is in his bones," he explained, in a tone that seemed to excuse my ignorance. "His ashes will remain with his people, in the jungle."

"She's not alive," I insisted. "What good are her ashes if she wanted to see her people?" "It's so sad."

An uncontrollable feeling overwhelmed me at the thought that I would never again see the old woman's smile or hear her voice and laughter—.

She never told me why she was so sure that I would accompany her.

Milagros began to cry, and gathering pieces of charcoal from the pyre, he rubbed them against her tear-stained face.

"One of our shamans told Angelica that even though she would leave the village, she would die among her people and her soul would continue to be part of her tribe." Milagros looked at me intently as I was about to interrupting him—. The shaman assured him that a girl with hair and eyes the color of yours would make her return.

"But I thought your people had no contact with white people..." Tears continued to flow from Milagros' eyes as he explained that there was a time when her people lived closer to the great river.

—Now only a few old people remember those times—he said softly. —For a long time now, we have been going deeper and deeper into the jungle.

“I see no reason to continue the journey,” I thought disheartened. What would I do without the old woman, among her people? She was the reason I was there.

"What will I do now? Will you take me back to the mission?" I asked, and then, seeing the expression Confused by Milagros, I added: It's not the same to carry her ashes.

"It's the same thing," she murmured. "For her, it was the most important part," she concluded, tying the ash-filled gourds around my waist.

My body stiffened for a moment, but relaxed when I saw Milagros's eyes. His face was imposing and sad at the same time. He pressed his tear-stained cheeks against mine, then blackened them with charcoal. Timidly, I touched the bowls that encircled my waist: they were light, like the old woman's laughter.

V

For two days, at an increasingly faster pace, we walked up and down the hills, without resting.
With apprehension, I watched Milagros's silent figure glide in and out of the shadows. The urgency of his movements only intensified my sense of uncertainty; there were moments when I wanted to scream at him to take me back to the mission.

Evening was closing in on the jungle as the clouds shifted from white to gray to black. Heavy and oppressive, they hung over the treetops. A deafening roar of thunder shattered the stillness. Water poured down in sheets, snapping branches and leaves with merciless fury.
Milagros told me to take refuge under the gigantic leaves she had cut, and she squatted on the ground.

Instead of settling down next to him, I took off my backpack, untied the gourds around my waist that held Angelica's pulverized bones, and removed my t-shirt. Warm and comforting, the water lathered my aching body. I soaped my head first, then my body with shampoo, washing away the ashes, the smell of death that clung to my skin. I turned to look at Milagros; his blackened face was worn with fatigue, and his eyes held such sadness that I regretted cleaning myself in such a hurry. Overcome with nervousness, I began washing my t-shirt and, without looking at him, asked:

— Are we reaching the village?
I was sure we had traveled more than a hundred miles since we left the mission.
— We'll arrive tomorrow— said Milagros, untying a small package of roast meat, wrapped in leaves and vines.

A peculiar smile raised the corners of her lips and deepened the wrinkles around her eyes. torn—. That is, if we walk at my pace.
The rain thinned and the clouds dispersed. I breathed deeply, filling my lungs with the fresh, clear air. Drops continued to fall from the leaves long after the rain had stopped.
calm. As they caught the sun's reflection, they shone with dazzling intensity, like pieces of broken glass.
— I hear someone approaching— whispered Milagros. —Stay still.

I heard nothing, not a bird's song, not the rustling of leaves. I was about to say so when a branch cracked and a naked man appeared on the path in front of us. He wasn't much taller than me. He carried a large bow and several arrows. His face and body were covered with red, serpentine lines that reached down the sides of his legs and ended in points around his ankles.
A short distance behind him, two naked young women stared at me. In their large, dark eyes was an expression of frozen surprise. Bundles of fibers seemed to sprout from their ears. Matchstick-like sticks protruded from the corners of their mouths and lower lips. Around their waists, the upper part of their shoulders, wrists, and below their knees were adorned with red cotton sashes. Their dark hair was They had short hair like a man's and a clean, wide tonsure on the crown of their head.

Nobody said a word and, out of sheer nervousness, I shouted:
—*Shroi noje, shori flojel*
Angelica had advised me that if I ever encountered Indians in the jungle, I should greet them by shouting: “Good friend, good friend!”
—*Aja, aja, shori* —replied the man, approaching.
Red feathers adorned its ears: they grew from two short pieces of cane, about the size of my little finger, inserted through the earlobes. He began to talk to Milagros, gesturing a lot, indicating with his hand or with a nod the path that led into the thicket. Repeatedly he raised one of his arms directly above his head, with his fingers outstretched as if he wanted to catch a ray of sunlight.

I signaled to the women to come closer. Laughing, they hid behind the bushes. When I saw the bananas they were carrying in baskets tied to their backs, I opened my mouth wide and gestured with my hands that I wanted to eat one. Cautiously, the older of the two women approached and, without looking at me, untied her basket and cut the softest, yellowest banana from the bunch. With a swift movement, she removed the sticks surrounding her mouth, sank her teeth into the peel, bit around it, opened it, and then held the peeled fruit up to my face. It had a curious triangular shape and was certainly the thickest banana I had ever seen.

"Delicious," I said in Spanish, rubbing my belly.

The banana tasted very similar to an ordinary one, but it left a thick film in my mouth.
He gave me two more. When I was peeling the fourth one, I tried to make him understand that I couldn't eat any more. Smiling, she dropped the remaining fruit on the ground and placed her hands on my stomach. They were hands Calloused yet delicate, her slender fingers gently and hesitantly touched my breasts, shoulders, and face, as if she wanted to verify that I was real.

She began to speak in a nasal, high-pitched tone that reminded me of Angelica's voice. She tugged at the elastic of my panties and called her companion over to watch. Only then did I begin to feel ashamed.

I tried to pull away. With laughter and squeals of delight, they hugged me, caressing my back and the front of my body. Then they took my hand and guided it over their own faces and bodies. They were a little shorter than me, but very robust. With their full breasts, protruding bellies, and wide hips, they made me appear smaller.

“They’re from the Iticoteri village,” Milagros said in Spanish, turning to me. “Etewa and his two wives, Ritimi and Tutemi, along with other people from the village, have camped for a few days in an abandoned plantation nearby.” She picked up her bow and arrows, which were leaning against a tree, and added, “We’ll travel with them.”

Meanwhile, the women had discovered my soaked T-shirt. Amazed, they rubbed it against their painted faces and bodies before I had time to put it on. Stretched out and stained with red annatto paint, it now hung over me like a dirty, oversized potato sack.

I put the ash gourds in my backpack, and when I lifted it to put it on my back, the women began to laugh uncontrollably. Etewa stood beside me; she looked at me with her brown eyes, and a wide smile lit up her face as she ran her fingers through my hair. Her finely chiseled nose and the soft curve of her lips gave her round face an almost girlish air.

— I'll go with Etewa to follow a tapir she saw a while ago — said Milagros. — You stay with the women.

For a moment I could only stare at him, unable to believe what I was hearing.

"But..." I finally managed to say, not knowing what else to say.

My gesture must have been comical, because Milagros started laughing; his almond-shaped eyes almost disappeared between his forehead and high cheekbones. He put a hand on my shoulder. He tried to look serious, but a fluttering smile still played on his lips.

"These are my people and Angelica's," he explained, turning to Etewa and his two women. "Ritimi is her granddaughter, but Angelica never met her."

I smiled at the two women, who nodded as if they had understood Milagros' words.

Milagros and Etewa's laughter echoed through the vines, fading as they reached the bamboo thicket that bordered the path along the river. Ritimi took my hand and led me through the undergrowth.

I walked between Ritimi and Tutemi. We moved silently, single file, toward the abandoned fields of the iticoteris trees. I wondered if it was because of the heavy loads they carried on their backs or because it gave their feet better support on the ground, as they walked with their knees and feet turned inward. Our shadows grew and shrank with the weak rays of the sun that filtered through the trees. My ankles were weak from exhaustion.

I moved clumsily, stumbling over branches and roots. Ritimi put her arm around my waist, but this only made walking along the narrow path even more difficult. She took the backpack off my back and placed it in Tutemi's basket.

A strange apprehension gripped me. I wanted to retrieve my backpack, take the ash-covered pumpkins, and tie them around my waist. I had a vague feeling that I had broken some kind of bond. If I had been asked to put my feelings into words, I wouldn't have been able to. Yet, I felt

that from that moment on, some of the magic and enchantment that Angelica had bestowed upon me was fading.

The sun was already below the horizon of the trees when we reached a clearing in the jungle. Amidst all the other shades of green, I clearly distinguished the palest, almost translucent, green of the banana leaves.
Located along the edge of what had once been a large orchard were low, triangular huts arranged in a semicircle with their backs to the jungle. The dwellings were covered on all sides except for the roof, which was covered with several layers of broad banana leaves.

As if someone had given the signal, we were instantly surrounded by men and women with wide mouths and eyes. I leaned on Ritimi's arm; having walked with her through the jungle, she seemed different from those gaping figures. Wrapping her arms around my waist, she pulled me close. The quick, excited tone of her voice held the crowd at bay for a few moments. Suddenly, their faces were only inches from mine. Saliva trickled from their chins, and their features were

disfigured by the balls of tobacco they carried between their gums and lower lip. I forgot everything related to the objectivity with which an anthropologist must consider a culture different from his own. At that moment, those Indians were nothing but a group of ugly, dirty people. I closed my eyes, only to open them a moment later when a nervous, bony hand touched my cheeks. It was an old man. Smiling, he began to shout.

—*Aia, aja, ajija shori!*

Echoing their shouts, they all tried to hug me at once, and almost crushed me with their joy. They managed to pull my shirt over my head. I felt their hands, lips, and tongues on my face and body.
They had a smell of smoke and earth; their saliva, which stuck to my skin, smelled like rotten tobacco leaves. Scared, I burst into tears.
With fearful expressions, they stepped back. Although I couldn't understand their words, their tone revealed clearly his perplexity.
Later that same night, Milagros told me that Ritimi had explained to them that he found me in the jungle.

At first he thought I was a spirit, and he was afraid to approach me. Only when he saw me devouring the bananas did he become convinced that I was human, because only humans eat with such eagerness.

Between my hammock and Milagros's, a fire burned, smoking and sputtering, casting a pale light on the open cabin and leaving the trees outside in a solid mass of darkness. It was a reddish light that, combined with the smoke, brought tears to my eyes. The people sat around the fire, so close together that their shoulders touched. Their faces, all in shadow, seemed identical to me. The red and black patterns on their bodies seemed to have a life of their own, moving and twisting with every gesture.

Ritimi sat on the floor, legs fully extended, her left arm resting on my hammock. Her skin had a soft, dark yellow tone in the dim light. The painted lines on her face ran toward her temples, accentuating her Asian features. At the corners of her mouth, on her lower lip, and on the sides of her broad nose, where she had previously worn sticks, I could clearly see the nostrils. Noticing me looking at her, she met my gaze, her round face contracting into a smile. She had square teeth and they were short; they were strong and very white.

I began to doze off amidst the sweet murmur of voices, and then I fell completely asleep. I wondered, every time their laughter woke me up, what Milagros was telling them.

VI

"When do you think you'll come back?" I asked Milagros six months later, as I handed her the letter I had written for Father Coriolano.

In it, I briefly notified him that I intended to remain with the iticoteris for at least two more months. I asked him to inform my friends in Caracas and, above all, I begged him to send me, with Miracles, all the notebooks and pencils I could do without.

"When will you be back?" I asked again.

"In about two weeks," Milagros replied, without paying much attention, as she placed my letter in her bamboo quiver. Perhaps she sensed my anxious expression, because she added, "There's no way of knowing exactly when, but I'll be back."

I watched him as he set off along the path that led to the river. He secured his quiver to his back and turned toward me for a moment, his movements momentarily still, as if he wanted to say something to me. But he simply raised his hand to wave goodbye.

Slowly, I made my way back to the *shabono,* passing several men who were cutting down trees next to the vegetable plots. Carefully, I turned over the logs piled on the cleared area, so as not to cut my feet on the bark and splinters hidden among the fallen leaves on the ground.

"She'll be back when the bananas are ripe," Etewa shouted, waving her hand in the direction Milagros had just left. "She won't miss the party."

Smiling, I waved my hand in response, eager to ask when the party would take place. There was no need, as he quickly replied: when the bananas are ripe.

The weeds and logs that were placed each night in front of the main entrance of the *shabono* to keep strangers away had already been removed. It was still early, but the huts that opened onto the circular clearing were almost empty. Men and women were working in the nearby gardens or had gone into the forest to gather wild fruits, honey, and firewood.

Armed with miniature bows and arrows, a group of children surrounded me.

"Look what a lizard I've killed," said Sisiwe, holding the dead little animal by its tail.

"That's all he knows how to do: shoot at lizards," said one of the boys in the group mockingly, scratching his ankle with the toes of his other foot. "And most of the time, he misses."

"That's not true!" Sisiwe shouted, his face red with fury.

I stroked the nascent hairs on his crown. In the sunlight, his hair wasn't black but a reddish-brown. Searching for the right words in my limited vocabulary, I tried to assure him that one day he would be the best hunter in the village.

Sisiwe, son of Ritimi and Etewa, was six or perhaps seven years old, but no older, since he did not wear a pubic rope tied around his waist. Ritimi, believing that the sooner a boy's penis was tied to his abdomen, the faster it would grow, had forced him to do so several times. But Sisiwe refused, arguing that the rope hurt him. Etewa hadn't insisted. His son was growing strong and healthy. Soon, the father said, Sisiwe would realize that it wasn't proper for a man to be seen without his belt. Like most children, Sisiwe wore a piece of fragrant root tied around his neck, as a talisman against illness, and when the drawings on his body were erased, they repainted him with annatto. Smiling, forgetting her anger, Sisiwe took my hand and with a single, agile movement climbed onto me as if I were a tree. She wrapped her legs around my waist, leaned back, and, stretching her arms to the sky, shouted:

—Look how blue it is! Just like the color of your eyes.

From the center of the clearing, the sky seemed immense. There were no trees, vines, or leaves to obstruct its view. Splendor. Dense vegetation sprouted from the *shabono,* beyond the log palisades that protected the village. The trees seemed to take their time, as if they knew they were only being kept at bay provisionally.

Pulling me by the arm, the children made me fall to the ground along with Sisiwe. At first, I hadn't been able to associate them with any particular parent because they came and went from the huts, eating and sleeping wherever they pleased. She only knew who the babies belonged to because they were constantly clinging to their mother's body. Day or night, the little ones never seemed disturbed, no matter what their mother did.

I wondered what I would do without Milagros. Every day he dedicated a few hours to teaching me the language, customs, and beliefs of her people, which I recorded with the utmost care in my notebooks.

Learning who was who among the Iticoteris proved a very confusing task. They never called each other by name, except to insult one another. Ritimi and Etewa were known as the Father and Mother of Sisiwe and Texoma. (It was permissible to use children's names, but as soon as they reached puberty, everyone stopped.) Things were further complicated because men and women of a certain lineage called each other brothers and sisters; men and women of another lineage were, to the former, brothers-in-law and sisters-in-law. A man who married a woman of an accessible lineage called all the women of that lineage his wives, but he had no sexual relations with them.

Milagros often pointed out that I wasn't the only one who had to adapt. The iticoteris remained equally perplexed by my strange behavior; to them I was neither woman, nor man, girl or boy, and therefore they did not know what to think of me or where to place me.

Old Hayama came out of her hut. In her high-pitched voice, she ordered the children to leave me alone. "He still has an empty stomach," he said.

Putting his arm around my waist, he led me to the fire that was burning in his cabin.

I sat down opposite Hayama, careful not to step on or bump the aluminum and enamel cooking pots (acquired through trade with other villages), the turtle shells, the gourds, and the baskets scattered on the floor. I stretched my legs out fully, as the Iticoteri women did, and, scratching the head of her parakeet, waited for the meal.

"Eat," he said, handing me a baked banana on top of a broken pumpkin.

The old woman watched me intently as she chewed with her mouth open, clicking her tongue.

She repeatedly touched her lips. She smiled, pleased that he fully appreciated the soft, sweet fruit.

Milagros had introduced me to Hayama as Angelica's sister. Every time I looked at her, I tried to find some resemblance to the frail old woman I had lost in the jungle. Hayama was about five feet three inches tall — tall for an iticoteri. Not only was she physically different from Angelica, but she also lacked her sister's lightheartedness. There was a harshness in Hayama's voice and gestures that often made me uneasy. And her heavy, half-closed eyelids gave her face a peculiarly sinister expression.

"You will stay here with me until Milagros returns," said the old woman, serving me another roasted plantain.

I stuffed my mouth with the hot fruit so I wouldn't have to answer. Milagros had introduced me to her brother-in-law Arasuwe, leader of the Iticoteris, as well as the other members of the village. However, Ritimi, by hanging my hammock in the hut she shared with Etewa and her two children, had made it clear that I belonged to her.

— The white girl sleeps here—she had told Milagros, explaining that little Texoma and Sisiwe would hang their hammocks next to Tutemi's fire, in the adjacent cabin.

No one had interfered with Ritimi's plan. Silently, with a mocking smile on his face, Etewa had watched Ritimi hurry from his hut to Tutemi's,

arranging the hammocks in the customary triangle around the hearth. In a small storage shed nestled among the poles supporting the back of the hut, he placed my backpack, among boxes of bark, a variety of baskets, an axe, bowls of annatto, and roots.

Ritimi's security stemmed not only from the fact that she was the eldest daughter of Chief Arasuwe—and of his first wife, now deceased, daughter of the elderly Hayama—and Etewa's first and favorite wife, but also from the fact that she knew that, despite her quick temper, everyone in the *shabono* respected and liked her.

"No more," I pleaded with Hayama, seeing him take another banana from the fire. "My stomach is full." Lifting up my shirt, I stuck out my belly so he could see how full it looked.

"You need to put on weight around your bones," the old woman said, squashing the banana with her fingers. "Your breasts are as small as a child's." Laughing, she lifted my shirt even higher. "No man will ever want you: he'll be afraid of hurting himself on your bones."

Opening my eyes in exaggerated horror, I pretended to devour the pasta.

"I'm sure I'll gain weight and become beautiful with your food," I said with my mouth full.

Still wet from her bath in the Ritimi River, she entered the hut, combing her hair with a thorny sheath. Sitting beside me, she threw her arms around my neck and planted resounding kisses on my face. I had to stifle a laugh. The kisses of the iticoteris tickled me. They kissed differently: each time they pressed their mouths against my cheek and neck, they vibrated their lips as they exhaled.

—You're not going to move the white girl's hammock here— said Ritimi, looking at her grandmother. The confidence in her tone did not match the inquisitive gentleness of her dark eyes. To avoid causing an argument, I made it clear that I didn't care too much where I hung my hammock.

Since there were no walls between the huts, we lived practically side by side. Hayama's hut was to the left of Tutemi's, and to its right was Arasuwe's, the chief, who shared it with his eldest wife and three of his youngest children. His other two wives and their respective children occupied the adjacent huts.

Ritimi fixed her eyes on me with a pleading expression.

— Milagros asked me to take care of you —s he said, gently running the spiny sheath through my hair so as not to scratch my scalp.

After what seemed like an interminable silence, Hayama finally said:

— You can leave your hammock where it is, but you will eat here with me.

It was a good arrangement, I thought. Etewa already had four mouths to feed. Hayama, for her part, was well looked after by her youngest son. Judging by the number of animal skulls and bananas hanging from the palm-thatched roof, her son was a skilled hunter and farmer. Besides the roasted bananas we ate in the morning, there was only one other meal, late in the afternoon when the families gathered. During the day, people ate whatever was available: fruit and nuts, or delicacies like roasted ants and worms.

Ritimi also seemed pleased with the food arrangement. Smiling, she went to our cabin, pulled down the basket she had given me that was hanging over my hammock, and took out my notebook and pencil.

— Now let's get to work—he said in a commanding tone.

In the following days, Ritimi gave me lessons about her people, just as Milagros had done for the past six months. She had set aside a few hours each day for what I considered my instruction.

At first, I had great difficulty learning their language. Not only did I find it terribly nasal, but I also found it extremely difficult to understand when they spoke to me with wads of tobacco in their mouths. I tried to invent some form of comparative grammar, but I abandoned the endeavor when I realized that not only did I lack the necessary linguistic training, but the more I tried to rationalize my thoughts, the less I could speak.

My best teachers were the children. Although they pointed things out to me and greatly enjoyed making me repeat words, they made no conscious effort to explain anything to me. With them, I could babble as I pleased, without any shame about my mistakes. After Milagros left, and although I still didn't understand many things; I was amazed at how well I was able to communicate with others, interpreting correctly the inflection of their voices, the expression of their faces and the eloquent movements of their hands and horns.

During the hours of instruction, Ritimi would take me to visit the women in the different huts, and I was allowed to ask all the questions I wanted. Stimulated by my curiosity, the women would talk

I felt free, as if it were a game. Patiently, they explained to me again and again what I didn't understand. I was grateful that Milagros had set the precedent. Not only was curiosity considered a lack of education, but it went against their wish not to be questioned. But Milagros

had consented indulgently my eccentric tendencies, saying that the more I knew about the language and customs of the Iticoteris, the sooner I would feel at home.

It soon became clear that I didn't need to ask too many direct questions. Often, the most casual observation on my part would elicit a flow of information I never would have dreamed of generating.

Each day, before nightfall, aided by Ritimi and Tutemi, I reviewed the data collected during the day and tried to organize it according to some kind of classification scheme, such as social structure, cultural values, subsistence techniques, and other universal categories of human social behavior.

However, to my great disappointment, there was one topic that Milagros had not yet touched upon: shamanism. From my hammock, I witnessed two healing sessions, which I described in detail in writing.

"Arasuwe is a great *shapori ,"* Milagros told me as I contemplated my first healing ritual.

— Do you invoke the help of spirits with your songs? —I asked, while Milagros' brother-in-law massaged, sucked, and rubbed a child's prostrate horn.

Milagros gave me a furious look:

"There are some things we don't talk about." He stood up abruptly, and before leaving the cabin she added, "Don't ask about these things. If you do, you'll be in serious trouble."

This response didn't surprise me, but I wasn't prepared for such outspoken anger. I wondered if her refusal to discuss the topic was because I was a woman or because shamanism was taboo. I didn't dare find out then. Being a white woman alone was a situation sufficiently precarious.

I realized that in most societies, knowledge about shamanic and healing practices was never revealed to anyone other than the initiated. During Milagros' absence, I didn't mention the word shamanism even once, but I spent hours thinking about the best way to find out something about it without arousing anger or suspicion.

In my notes on the two sessions, it was clear that the Iticoteris believed the shapori's horn underwent a transformation under the influence of a hallucinogen called *epena, which was*

inhaled through the nose. That is, the shaman acted on the assumption that his human body was transformed into a supernatural body. In this way, he came into contact with the spirits of the jungle. Obviously, the appropriate approach would be to understand shamanism through the horn: not as an object determined by psychochemical laws, holistic forces of nature, the environment, or the psyche itself, but through an understanding of the body as lived experience, the body as an expressive unit known through its performance and output.

Most studies on shamanism, including my own, focused on the aspects psychotherapeutic and social aspects of healing. I thought my approach would not only offer a new explanation,

Rather, it would provide me with a way to investigate healing without arousing suspicion. Questions about the body don't necessarily have to be associated with shamanism. I had no doubt that, little by little, I would gather the necessary information without the shamans realizing what I was really after.

I quickly silenced any pangs of conscience regarding the dishonesty of my task by repeating to myself that my work was important for understanding non-Western healing practices. The strange customs related to shamanism, sometimes incomprehensible, would become intelligible in the light of a broader context. a different interpretation, and thus anthropological knowledge in general would advance.

"You haven't worked for two days," Ritimi told me one afternoon. "You haven't asked about last night's songs and dances. Don't you know they're important? If we don't sing and dance, the hunters will come back without meat for the feast."

— With a frown, he threw the notebook into my lap—. You haven't even colored in your book.

— I'm resting for a few days—I said, holding the notebook to my chest as if it were my most prized possession.

I had no intention of revealing to him that each of the precious pages had to contain exclusively facts about shamanism.

Ritimi took my hands in hers, examined them intently, and then, with a very serious expression, remarked:

—They look tired; they need to rest.

We burst out laughing. Ritimi had always been amazed that I considered “decorating” my book to be something else.

Work. For her, work meant pulling weeds from the fields, gathering firewood, and repairing the roof of the *shabono.*

"I really enjoyed the dances and the songs," I said. "I recognized your voice; it was very beautiful." Ritimi shone brightly.

"I sing very well." There was a charming candor and certainty in her statement; she wasn't not boasting, but pointing out a fact—. I am sure that the hunters will return with plenty of prey to feed the guests at the party.

I nodded. Then I found a twig and began to sketch a human figure in the soft earth.

— This is the body of a white man—I said, sketching the main organs and bones. —What does the body of an iticoteri look like?

"You must be really tired if you're asking such a stupid question," Ritimi said, looking at me as if I were mentally deficient. She stood up and began to dance, singing in a loud, melodious voice: "This is my head, this is my arm, this is my breast, this is my stomach, this is my..."

Immediately, drawn by Ritimi's antics, a group of men and women gathered around.

We were screaming and laughing, making obscene remarks about each other's bodies. Some of the teenage boys laughed so hard they rolled on the floor, clutching their penises.

"Can anyone draw a body the way I drew mine?" I asked.

Several of them responded to the challenge. Taking a piece of wood, a branch, or a broken bow, they began to draw in the dirt. Their drawings were very different from one another, not only because of the obvious sexual differences, which they emphasized, but also because all the men's bodies were depicted with tiny figures inside their chests.

I could barely hide my delight. I thought that those must be the spirits I had heard Arasuwe summon with his song during the healing session.

"What is this?" I asked, not giving it much thought.

"The *hekuras* of the jungle who live in a man's chest," said one of the men. Are all men *shaporis?*

"All men have *hekuras on* their chests. But only a true *shapori* can use them. Only a great *shapori* can command his *hekuras* to help the sick and counteract the enchantments of an enemy *shapori ."*

After studying my drawing, he asked, "Why does your drawing have *hekuras* even on the legs?"

Women do not have *hekuras."*

I explained that they were not spirits, but organs and bones, and They quickly added them to their own drawings. Pleased with what I had learned, I accompanied Ritimi to gather firewood in the jungle, the most arduous and detested task for women. They could never gather enough wood because the fires must not go out for a moment.

That night, as every day since I arrived in the village, Ritimi examined my feet for thorns and splinters. Satisfied at finding none, she rubbed them with her hands to clean them.

—I wonder if the bodies of the *Shaporis* undergo some kind of transformation when they are under the Influence of the *epina ,"* I said.

It was important to confirm this in his own words, since the original premise of my theoretical framework was that the shaman operated on certain assumptions regarding the body. I needed to know whether these assumptions were shared by the entire group and whether they were conscious or unconscious in nature.

"Did you see lramamowe yesterday?" Ritimi asked me. "Did you see him walk? His feet didn't touch the ground. He's a powerful *shapori.* He transformed into the great jaguar."

"He didn't cure anyone," I commented gloomily.

I was disappointed that Arasuwe's brother was considered a great shaman. I had seen him beat his wife twice.

Having lost interest in our conversation, Ritimi walked away and began preparing for our nightly ritual. Taking the basket containing my belongings out of the small storage room located at the back, she placed the items on the floor of the cabin. One by one, she picked them up and held them above her head, waiting for me to identify them. As soon as I did, she repeated the name in Spanish and then in English, thus beginning a nightly chorus while the chief's wives and several other women, who gathered each night in our cabin, sang along.

I stretched out in the hammock while Tutemi's fingers parted my hair, searching for imaginary lice; I was sure I didn't have any; at least, not yet. Tutemi looked five or six years younger than Ritimi, whom I guessed was about twenty. She was taller and heavier, and her belly was round from her first pregnancy. She seemed shy and withdrawn. I often noticed a sad, distant look in her dark eyes, and sometimes she talked to herself as if she were thinking aloud.

"Lice! Lice!" shouted Tutemi, interrupting the women's Spanish-English chant.
"Let me see," I said, convinced he was joking. "Are lice white?" I asked, examining the tiny bugs on his finger.

I had always believed they were dark.
"White girl, white lice," Tutemi observed mischievously. With a cheerful and pleased expression, the He crushed them one by one between his teeth and swallowed them. —All lice are white.

VII

It was the day of the festival. From noon onwards, I was under the care of Ritimi and Tutemi, who went to great lengths to beautify me. With a sharpened piece of bamboo, Tutemi cut my hair in the usual style, and with a blade as thin as a knife, she shaved the top of my head. She removed the hair from my legs with an abrasive paste made of ashes, plant fibers, and earth.

Ritimi painted wavy lines on my face and traced intricate geometric designs all over my body with a chewed twig. My legs, red and swollen from waxing, were left unpainted. To my hoop earrings, which I insisted couldn't be removed, she tied a pink flower along with small bunches of white feathers. Around my upper arms, wrists, and ankles, she tied bands of red cotton.

"Oh, no. You're not going to do that," I warned her, jumping out of Ritimi's reach.

"It won't hurt you," she assured me, and then asked in an exasperated tone, "Do you want to look like an old woman?" "It won't hurt you," Ritimi insisted, following me.

"Leave her alone," Etewa said, grabbing a box of bark from the storage room. She looked at me, then burst out laughing. Her large white teeth and slanted eyes seemed to mock my embarrassment. "She doesn't have much pubic hair."

Grateful, I tied the red cotton belt Ritimi had given me around my hips and laughed with him. I took care to tie the wide belt so

that the decorated ends covered the offending hair.

—Now you can't see anything anymore—I told Ritimi.

Ritimi was unimpressed, but shrugged indifferently and continued examining his pubis for any hair.

Etewa's body was decorated with dark circles and arabesques. Over the rope she always wore around her waist, she tied a wide, thick cotton belt. Around her arms she placed

narrow bands of monkey skin, to which Ritimi attached the black and white feathers that Etewa had selected from the bark box.

Dipping her fingers in the sticky paste that one of Arasuwe's wives had prepared that morning, Ritimi ran them through Etewa's hair. Immediately, Tutemi took a handful of white feathers from another box and glued them onto her hair; in the end, she looked as if she were wearing a white fur hat.

"When will the party start?" I asked, watching a group of men clearing huge piles of banana peels from the clearing, now clean and free of weeds.

"When the plantain soup and all the meat are ready," Etewa said, pacing around to make sure we could see him from all angles.

Her lips were still parted in a smile, and her eyes were still squinting humorously. She glanced at me and removed the wad of tobacco from her mouth. She placed it on a piece of broken gourd on the ground and spat over her hammock, tracing a wide arc. With the self-assurance of someone pleased with her own appearance, she turned once more toward me and then left the hut.

Little Texoma scooped up the saliva-soaked paste. She put it in her mouth and began to suck on it with the same pleasure I would have felt savoring a piece of chocolate. Her disfigured little face, with half the ball sticking out of her mouth, looked grotesque. Smiling, she climbed into my hammock and immediately fell asleep.

In the next hut, I saw Chief Arasuwe lying in his hammock. From there he oversaw the preparation of the plantains and roasted meat, brought by the hunters who had left a few days before.

Workers on an assembly line, several men had moved numerous bunches of bananas in record time. One sank his sharp teeth into the peel to open it; another removed the peel

He threw the fruit into the tub of bark that Etewa had made early in the morning; a third man watched over the three small fires he had lit underneath.
"Why are only the men cooking?" I asked Tutemi.
I knew that the women never cooked the large game, but I was amazed that none of them had even gone near the bananas.

“Women are too careless,” Arasuwe answered for Tutemi, entering the hut. His eyes seemed to challenge me to contradict him. Smiling, he added, “They get distracted very easily and let the fire burn the bark.”

Before I had time to make the slightest comment, he was back in his hammock.
—Did you come here just to say that?
—No —said Ritimi — He's come to check on you.
I didn't dare ask if I had passed the Arasuwe exam, lest they remind me of my pubic hair without... wax.
—Look— I said— the visitors are arriving.
"That's Puriwariwe, Angelica's older brother," Ritimi said, pointing to an old man among a group of men. "He's a very feared *shapori* . They killed him once, but he didn't die."

"They killed him, but he didn't die," I repeated slowly, wondering if I should interpret it literally or if I meant it figuratively.

"They killed him in a raid," Etewa explained, entering the cabin. "Dead, dead, dead, but he didn't die." He spoke clearly, moving his lips exaggeratedly as if that would make me understand the true meaning of his words. Are there still raids?

No one answered my question. Etewa took a hollow reed and a small bowl hidden behind one of the roof beams, and went to greet the guests who were in the center of the clearing, in front of Arasuwe's hut. More men came in and I wondered aloud if they had invited any women.

—They're outside— said Ritimi. —With the rest of the guests, getting dressed up while the men drink *epena.*

Chief Arasuwe, his brother Iramamowe, Etewa, and six other Iticoteris—all adorned with feathers, fur, and red annatto paste— squatted before the visitors, who were already settled on the ground. They spoke for a while, avoiding eye contact.

Arasuwe untied the small bowl that hung from his neck, poured some of the greenish-brown powder.

He took the end of his hollow cane and stood before Angelica's brother. Placing the end of the cane against the shaman's nose, Arasuwe blew the hallucinogenic powder forcefully into the old man's nostrils.

The shaman didn't flinch, nor did he complain or stagger as I had seen others do. But his eyes clouded over, and soon a greenish slime began to drip from his nose and mouth, which he brushed away with a twig. Slowly, he began to sing. I couldn't make out his words; he spoke very softly, and the groans of the others drowned out his song.

With glassy eyes and mucus and saliva dripping from his chin and chest, Arasuwe leaped into the air. The red parakeet feathers that hung from his ears and arms fluttered around him. He hopped several times, touching the ground with a lightness that seemed incredible in someone so robust. His face looked as if sculpted from stone. Straight bangs hung over a prominent eyebrow. The wide nose and mouth from which...

Their escaping growls reminded me of one of the four guardian kings I once saw in a temple in Japan.

A few men staggered away from the group, clutching their heads as they vomited. The old man's chanting grew louder; one by one, the men gathered around him again. They sat silent and squatted, arms folded on their knees, eyes fixed on some unseen point only they could see, until *the shapori* finished his chant.

Each of the iticoteris returned to his hut accompanied by a guest. Arasuwe had invited

Puriwariwe, and Etewa entered her hut with one of the young men who had vomited. Without looking at us, the guest lay down in Etewa's hammock as if it were his own; he didn't seem to be more than sixteen years old.

"Why haven't all the male iticoteris taken *epena* and adorned themselves?" I whispered to Ritimi, who was cleaning and repainting Etewa's face with onoto.

"Everything will be decorated tomorrow. More guests will be coming in the next few days," she said. "Today is for Angelica's relatives."

— But Milagros isn't here.

— He arrived this morning.

"This morning!" I repeated, incredulous.

The young man lying in Etewa's hammock opened his eyes wide, looked at me, and closed them again. Texoma woke up and began to cry. I tried to calm her by putting the ball of tobacco, which had fallen to the ground, in her mouth. Rejecting it, she began to cry even louder. I handed her to Tutemi, who rocked her until she calmed down. Why hadn't Milagros let me know he was back? I wondered, angry and hurt. My eyes filled with tears of self-pity.

—Look, there he comes— said Tutemi, pointing to the entrance of the *shabono.*

Followed by a group of men, women, and children, Milagros walked directly toward the cabin of Arasuwe. Around his eyes and mouth were red and black lines. Enchanted, I stared, mouth agape.

The black monkey tail was coiled around his head, from which hung multicolored parakeet feathers, like those that dangled from his leather bracelets. Instead of the festive red belt, he wore a loincloth of a certain color, scarlet.

An inexplicable unease gripped me as he approached my hammock. I felt my heart pound with fear and looked at his tense, weary face.

—Bring your bowl — he told me in Spanish— and, turning around, he walked away towards the tub full of plantain soup.

Without paying me the slightest attention, they all followed Milagros toward the clearing. Speechless, I picked up my basket, set it down in front of me, and took out all my belongings. Deep inside, wrapped in my backpack, were the soft, ochre-colored gourds that contained Angelica's ashes. I had often wondered what to do with them. Ritimi had never touched the backpack when she went through my things.

The pumpkins felt heavy in my stiff, cold hands. They had been so light when I carried them tied to my waist in the jungle!

—Empty them into the vat—said Milagros, who was speaking in Spanish again. "It's full of soup," I observed stupidly.

I felt my voice tremble and my hands were so unsteady that I thought I wouldn't be able to remove the ream plug from the pumpkins.

"Empty them," Milagros repeated, gently pushing my arm.

I squatted down awkwardly and slowly poured the burnt, pulverized bones into the soup. I stared, mesmerized, at the little mound they formed on the thick, yellow surface. The smell made me Nausea. The ashes didn't sink. The women began to cry and scream. Should I imitate them?

I asked. I was sure that, no matter how hard I tried, not a single tear would come to my eyes.

Startled by the sharp sounds of something breaking, I sat up. With the handle of her machete, Milagros had split the two pumpkins in perfect halves. Then she mixed the powder into the soup, so thoroughly that the yellow flesh turned a dirty gray.

I watched him bring the bowl of soup to his mouth and empty it in one long gulp. Wiping his chin with the back of his hand, he refilled it and handed it to me.

Horrified, I looked at the faces around me; they watched my every move and gesture intently, with eyes that no longer seemed human. The women had stopped crying. I could hear my heart pounding. I swallowed repeatedly, trying to clear the dryness from my mouth, and reached out a trembling hand.

Then I closed my eyes tightly and swallowed the thick liquid. To my surprise, the sweet yet slightly salty soup went smoothly down my throat. A faint smile softened Milagros's tense face as he took the empty bowl. I turned and walked away slowly as waves of nausea tightened in my stomach.

I could hear the high-pitched tone of the conversation and snippets of laughter coming from the cabin. Sisiwe, surrounded by his friends, was sitting on the ground, showing them each of my things, which I had left scattered about.

My nausea dissolved into fury when I saw my notebooks burning in the hearth.

Amazed, the children laughed at me as they saw me burn my fingers trying to salvage what was left of the notebooks. Slowly, the amused expression on their faces changed to bewilderment as they realized I was crying.

I ran out of the *shabono* along the path that led to the river, clutching the burnt pages to my chest. chest.

"I'll ask Milagros to take me back to the mission," I stammered, wiping away my tears.
The idea seemed so absurd to me that I burst out laughing. How could I possibly face Father Coriolanus with a tonsure on my head!

Crouching at the water's edge, I put my finger to my throat and tried to vomit. It was useless. Exhausted, I lay on my back on a flat rock jutting out of the water and examined what remained of my notes. A cool breeze blew through my hair. I turned onto my stomach. The warmth of the stone filled me with a gentle languor that dissolved my anger and weariness.

I searched for my face in the clear water, but the wind erased all reflections from the surface. The river offered me no image. Trapped in the dark pools that lined the bank, the bright green of the vegetation was a cloudy mass.

—Let the river carry your notes away— said Milagros, sitting down next to me on the rock. His sudden appearance didn't startle me. I had been expecting him.

With a quick nod, I silently agreed and let my hand hang over the rock. My fingers splayed. There was a soft splash as the charred notebook fell into the water. I felt as if a weight had been lifted from my shoulders as the notes drifted downstream.

"You didn't go on the mission," I said. "Why didn't you tell me you had to bring Angelica's relatives?"

Milagros didn't answer, but kept staring across the river. "Did you tell the children to burn my notes?" I asked.

He turned toward me, but remained silent. The twitching of her mouth revealed a vague disappointment that I couldn't quite grasp. When He finally spoke, her tone was soft and seemed forced.

— The Iticoteris, as well as other peoples, have moved further and further inland over the years .

The jungle, far from the mission and the great rivers where the white man travels. —A lizard, crawling restlessly across the stone, turned to look at us. For a moment it stared at us with its lidless eyes, and then it slithered away and disappeared.— Other peoples have chosen to do the opposite— Milagros continued.—They seek the goods offered by the *rational ones.* They haven't understood that only the jungle can give them security.

They will discover too late that, to the white man, the Indian is no better than a dog.

He knew, he said, because he had lived his whole life between the two worlds, that the Indians had no opportunity in the world of the white man, even if some individuals of either race did or believed otherwise.

I spoke about anthropologists and their work, about the importance of recording customs and beliefs that, as he had mentioned on a previous occasion, were doomed to be forgotten.

A hint of a mocking smile twisted his lips.

"I know what anthropologists are like; I once worked for one of them as an informant," he said, and began to laugh.

It was a high-pitched laugh, but there was no emotion in her face. Her eyes weren't laughing, but blazing with animosity.

I was surprised because her anger seemed directed at me. “You knew I was an anthropologist,” I said hesitantly. “You yourself helped me fill part of my notebook with information about the Iticoteris. You were the one who took me from hut to hut, who encouraged the others to talk to me, to teach me your language and your customs.”

Imperturbable, Milagros remained seated, her painted face motionless like an expressionless mask. I felt I wanted to shake him. It was as if he hadn't heard my words. Milagros looked at the trees, already black against the faded sky, and I looked at his face. His head was silhouetted against the sky. The flaming parakeet feathers and the violet monkey-skin manes that adorned him looked like smudges in the sky.

Milagros shook her head sadly.

"You know you didn't come here to do your job. You could have done much better in one of the villages near the mission." Tears welled in his eyes; they hung from his thick eyelashes, glistening. Trembling —. The knowledge of our customs and beliefs was given to you so that you could move with the rhythm of our lives; so that you would feel safe and protected. It was a gift, not something to be used or given to others.

I couldn't tear my gaze from her bright, moist eyes; there was no resentment in them. I saw my own face reflected in her dark pupils. Angelica and Milagros's gift. I finally understood. They had guided me through the jungle, not to see their people with the eyes of an anthropologist—weighing, judging, analyzing everything I saw and heard—but to see them as Angelica would have seen them for the last time. She, too, knew that her time, and the time of her people, was drawing to a close.

I turned my gaze back to the river. I hadn't noticed my watch had fallen in, but there it was, among the stones on the bottom, an unsteady image of tiny luminous points gathering and separating in the water. One of the metal links of the strap must have broken, I thought; but I made no effort to retrieve the watch, my last link to the world beyond the jungle.

Milagros' voice broke into my reverie:

“A long time ago, in a village near the great river, I worked for an anthropologist. He didn’t live with us in the *shabono,* but built himself a hut outside the stockade. It had walls and a door that could be locked from both the inside and the outside.” Milagros paused for a moment, wiping away the tears that were drying around her wrinkled eyes, and then asked me, “Do you want to know what I did to him?”

—Yes —I said hesitantly.

" I gave him *grief.* " Milagros paused briefly and smiled as if she enjoyed my apprehension. "That anthropologist acted like all those who inhale the sacred powder. He said he had the same visions as a shaman."

"There's nothing strange about that," I said, a little stung by Milagros's superior tone.

"There isn't one," he objected and laughed. "Because what I blew in his nose was ashes. Ashes only make your nose bleed."

"Is that what you're going to give me?" I asked, blushing at the obvious self-pity that seeped into my voice.

"I gave you a part of Angelica's soul," he said gently, helping me to sit up.

The boundaries of the *shabono* seemed to dissolve into the darkness. I could see clearly in the diffused light. The people gathered around the vat reminded me of creatures from the jungle, their bright eyes colored by the firelight.

I sat down next to Hayama and accepted the piece of meat he offered me. Ritimi rubbed her head against my arm. Little Texoma sat on my lap. I felt content, protected by the familiar smells and sounds.

I carefully observed the faces of those around me, wondering how many of them were related to Angelica. None of them resembled her. Even Milagros's features, which had once seemed so familiar to me, now looked different. Perhaps I had already forgotten her face, I thought sadly.

Then, in a flash of light from the fire, I saw his smiling face. I shook my head, trying to erase the vision, and found myself staring at the old shaman Puriwariwe, squatting a little apart from the group.

He was a small, thin, and gaunt man with yellowish skin; the muscles of his arms and legs had already shrunk. But his hair was still dark and curled slightly around his head. He wore no ornaments; only a bowstring around his waist. Sparse hairs hung from his chin, and the remnants of a mustache shaded the corners of his upper lip. Beneath his deeply wrinkled eyelids, their eyes were like small lights, reflecting the glow of the fire.

Yawning, he opened a cavernous mouth where teeth yellowed like stalagmites. The conversation and laughter died away when he began to sing with a voice that seemed to belong to another time and place. He possessed two voices: the one that sprang from his throat was sharp and angry; the other, which came from his belly, sounded deep and comforting.

Long after everyone had retired to their hammocks and the fires had burned out, Puriwariwe remained squatting in front of a small bonfire in the middle of the clearing. He sang in a high-pitched voice.

I got out of the hammock and squatted beside him, trying to get my buttocks to touch the ground. According to the Iticoteris, that was the only way to squat for hours, completely relaxed. Puriwariwe looked at me, acknowledging my presence, and then continued contemplating the space as if I had disturbed his train of thought. He didn't move, and I had the strange feeling that he had fallen asleep. Then he shifted his buttocks on the ground without relaxing his legs and, gradually, began to sing again in a voice that was no more than a faint murmur. I couldn't understand a single word.

It began to rain, and I returned to my hammock. The raindrops pattered softly on the palm-thatched roof, creating a strange, trance-like rhythm. When I looked again toward the center of the clearing, the old man had vanished. And as dawn illuminated the jungle, I felt myself drifting into a timeless dream.

VIII

The red twilight stained the air with flashes of fire. The sky blazed for a few minutes before quickly dissolving into darkness. It was the third day of the festival. From my hammock, with the children of Etewa and Arasuwe, I watched as the nearly sixty men, including the iticoteris and their guests, continued dancing, without eating or resting since midday, in the center of the clearing. Following the rhythm of their own discordant shouts and the thuds of their bows and arrows, they turned to one side, then the other, took a step back, another forward, in a powerful and endless pulse of sounds and movements, an undulating display of feathers and bodies, a blurred mixture of black and scarlet patterns.

The full moon rose above the treetops, casting its radiant light upon the clearing. For a moment, there was a pause in the ceaseless noise and movement. Then, the dancers erupted in wild, strangled cries that filled the air with an unbearable roar, as they threw aside their bows and arrows.

The dancers rushed to the huts, seized the burning logs from the hearths, and with frenzied violence, smashed them against the posts supporting the *shabono.* All sorts of crawling insects fled, seeking safety under the palm-thatched roofs, before cascading to the ground.

Fearing that the cabins would collapse or that loose embers would set the roofs ablaze, I ran outside with the children. The ground trembled under the pounding of so many feet trampling over every hearth in the cabins.

Brandishing the burning logs high above their heads, they ran to the center of the clearing and they resumed their dance with growing frenzy. They circled the plaza, swaying their heads back and forth like puppets with broken strings. The soft white feathers in their hair fell onto their shoulders glistening with sweat.

The moon hid behind a dark cloud; only the sparks from the burning logs illuminated the clearing. The men's sharp shouts rose to a higher pitch; brandishing their clubs above their heads, they invited the women to join the dance.

Shouting and laughing, the women leaped back and forth, nimbly dodging the raised tree trunks.

The dancers' frenzy reached its peak when the young women, carrying bunches of yellow palm fruits in their outstretched arms, joined the crowd, swaying their bodies in sensual abandon.

I'm not sure if it was Ritimi who took my hand and pulled me into the dance, because the next moment I was alone among the ecstatic faces swirling around me. Trapped among shadows and bodies, I tried to reach old Hayama, who was standing under the shelter of a hut, but I didn't know which way to go. I didn't recognize the man who, brandishing a log above his head, pushed me back into the midst of the dancers.

I screamed. Terrified, I realized it was as if my screams were muted, dissipating into countless echoes that reverberated within me. I felt a sharp pain on the side of my head, immediately behind my ear, and fell face down to the ground. I opened my eyes, trying to see through the thickening shadows around me, and wondered if those frantic feet, whirling and leaping in the air, even noticed I had fallen among them. Then came the darkness, punctuated by pinpricks of light that darted in and out of my head like fireflies in the night.

I vaguely realized someone was pulling me away from the dancers and toward a hammock. I forced my eyes open, but the figure moving above me remained blurry. I felt a pair of gentle, slightly trembling hands touch my face and the back of my head. For a moment, I thought it was Angelica.

But after hearing the unmistakable voice coming from the depths of his stomach, I knew it was the old shaman Puriwariwe, singing. I tried to focus my gaze, but his face remained distorted, as if I were seeing him through layers of water. I wanted to ask him where he'd been, because I hadn't seen him since the first day of the party, but the words were nothing but visions in my head.

I don't know if I was unconscious or asleep, but when I woke up, Puriwariwe was gone. In its place was Etewa's face, leaning over mine, so close I could have touched the red circles on her cheeks, between her eyebrows, and at the corners of her eyes. I reached out, but there was no one there.

I closed my eyes; the circles danced inside my head like a red veil in a dark void. I squeezed them shut, until the image shattered into a thousand fragments. They had relit the fire; it filled the cabin with a soft warmth that enveloped me like an opaque chrysalis of smoke. Dancing shadows stood out against the darkness and were reflected on the golden patina of the pumpkins hanging from the rafters.

Laughing happily, old Hayama entered the hut and sat on the floor next to me.
"I thought you'd sleep until tomorrow." He raised both hands to my head and his fingers traced my skin until he found the bump behind his ear. It's big.
Her withered features expressed a distant sorrow; her eyes had a soft, gentle light. I sat down in the fiber hammock. Only then did I realize I wasn't in Etewa's hut.
"It's Iramamowe's," Hayama said before I had time to ask where it was. "It was the nearest hut, and Puriwariwe brought you here after you were pushed against one of the men's clubs."
The moon had moved a great deal in the sky. Its pale glow spilled over the clearing. The dance had It had ceased, but an inaudible vibration still lingered in the air.
Shouting and rattling their bows and arrows, a group of men formed a semicircle in front of the cabin.

Iramamowe and one of the visitors stood in the center of the circle of gesticulating men. I was unable to determine which village the visitor came from, as I could not distinguish the various groups that had been coming and going since the beginning of the festival.
lramamowe extended his legs in a firm stance, and raised his left arm above his head, fully exposing his chest.

"Ha, ha, ahaha, aita, stop!" he shouted, stamping his foot on the ground, a courageous cry that dared his opponent to hit him.
The young visitor measured the distance by extending his left arm to lramamowe's body; he took a few short runs and then, with his fist closed, delivered a powerful blow to the left side of lramamowe's chest.

My body cringed in fear. I felt nauseous as if the pain had passed through my own chest. "Why are they fighting?" I asked Hayama.

"They're not fighting," he said, laughing. "They want to hear their *hekuras* resonate, the life essence that dwells in their chests. They want to hear the *hekuras* vibrate with every blow."

The crowd cheered enthusiastically. The young visitor took a step back, his chest heaving.

With enthusiasm, he struck Iramamowe once more. Chin held high, eyes steady, body rigid and defiant, Iramamowe acknowledged the men's cheers. Only after the third blow did his posture change. For a moment, his lips parted in an appreciative smile, then settled once more into a sneer of indifference and contempt. The persistent tapping of his foot, Hayama assured me, revealed nothing more than annoyance; his adversary had not yet struck him hard enough.

With morbid and vengeful satisfaction, I wished that lramamowe would feel the pain of every punch.
He deserved it, I thought. Ever since I saw him hit his wife, I had harbored resentment against him. However, as I gazed at him, I couldn't help but admire the gallant way he stood amidst the crowd. There was something childishly defiant about the metallic rigidity of his back, the way he thrust his wounded chest forward. His round, flat face, with its narrow brow and raised upper lip, seemed utterly vulnerable as he stared at the young man before him. I wondered if the slight movement of his brown eyes betrayed his shock.

With crushing force, the fourth blow struck Iramamowe's chest. It reverberated like rocks falling into the river during a storm.

—I think I heard his *hekuras* —I said, certain that lramamowe would have a broken rib.
—It's *waiter!* —shouted the iticoteris and their guests in unison.
With faces lit up with joy, they jumped on their bent legs, banging their bows and arrows against their heads.

— Yes. He is a brave man—repeated Hayama, his eyes fixed on lramamowe who, satisfied that his *hekuras* had resounded powerfully, was still standing amidst those who cheered him, his chest wounded, puffed up with pride.

Arasuwe silenced the spectators and approached his brother.

—Now you will receive the blow of lramamowe—he said to the young man who had delivered the four punches.

The visitor took the same defiant stance before

lramamowe. Blood was coming out of his mouth when he fell to the ground, after receiving the third blow.

Iramamowe leaped into the air, then began to dance around the fallen man. Sweat trickled down his face, from the exhausted muscles of her neck and shoulders. But his voice was clear, vibrant with joy, when he shouted:

—*Al al aiaiaiai, alal!*

Two of the visiting women carried the wounded man to the empty hammock hanging near where Hayama and I were. One of them was crying; the other bent over the man and began sucking blood and saliva from his mouth until he could breathe again, in slow, measured breaths.

Iramamowe challenged another guest to hit him. After receiving the first blow, he knelt on the ground, from where he dared his opponent to strike again. He spat blood after the next blow.
The guest squatted down in front of him. Putting his arms around his neck, they embraced.

"You hit well," said lramamowe, his voice barely a whisper. "My *hekuras* are full of life, strong and happy. Our blood has flowed. That is good. Our children will be strong. Our gardens and the fruits of the forest will ripen and be sweet."

The guest expressed similar thoughts. Promising him eternal friendship, he offered Iramamowe a machete he had acquired from a group of Indians settled near the great river.
"I need to keep a closer eye on that one," Hayama said, leaving the cabin.

His youngest son was one of the men who had entered the circle for the next round of ritual blows.

I didn't want to keep the injured visitor in Iramamowe's hut. The two women who had brought him had gone to ask their group's shaman to prepare some medicine to soothe his chest pain.
As I stood up, my head spun. Slowly, I walked past the empty huts until I reached Etewa's. I lay down in my cotton hammock, and an eerie silence closed over me as if I were slipping into a faint.

I was awakened by angry shouts. Someone said:

—Etewa, you slept with my wife without my permission!

The voice sounded so close it was as if he had spoken in my ear. Startled, I sat up. A group of men and smiling women had gathered in front of the hut. Etewa stood perfectly still in the middle of the crowd; his face was an unreadable mask, but he did not deny the charge. Suddenly he shouted:

— You and your family have been eating like starving dogs for the past three days!

It was a deplorable accusation: visitors were given everything they asked for, because during a feast the hosts' orchards and hunting grounds were at their disposal. Such an insult meant that the man had taken advantage of his privileged position.

"Ritimi, bring me my *hekuras!"* shouted Etewa, without taking his eyes off the irate young man in

front of him.

Sobbing, Ritimi ran to the hut, picked up the stick and, without looking at her husband, held it out to him; it was a stick more than a meter long.

"I can't see what's going to happen," he said, letting himself fall into my hammock.

I put my arms around her, trying to comfort her. If she hadn't been so upset, I would have laughed. Not at all bothered by Etewa's infidelity, Ritimi was afraid the night would end in a serious fight. Seeing the two furious men shouting at each other and the excited reaction of the crowd, I couldn't help but be alarmed myself.

"Hit me on the head," the furious visitor demanded. "Hit me, if you're a man. Let's see if we can laugh together again. Let's see if I calm down."

"We're both angry!" Etewa shouted with insolent vigor, swinging the *nabrushi* in his hand. We must calm our anger.

Then, without further ado, he launched a powerful blow onto his opponent's tonsure.
The blood that began to flow from the wound slowly spilled over the man's face, until
She was covered like a grotesque red mask. Her legs trembled and almost buckled under her weight. But she didn't fall.

"Hit me and we'll be friends again!" Etewa shouted belligerently, silencing the heated crowd.
He leaned on his club, lowered his head, and waited. When the man struck him, Etewa remained still.

Momentarily stunned, blood flooded his brows and eyelashes, forcing him to close his eyes. The men's explosive shouts broke the silence in a chorus of raucous approval demanding they beat each other.

With a mixture of fascination and disgust, I watched the two men facing each other. Their muscles were taut, the veins in their necks bulged, and their eyes shone as if rejuvenated by the raging rush of blood. As they circled each other like wounded roosters, their faces, fixed like red masks of

contempt, betrayed no pain.

With the back of his hand, Etewa wiped away the blood that was obscuring his vision and spat. Raising his club, he brought it down on his opponent's head, who, without uttering a sound, fell flat on the ground.
Clicking their tongues, their eyes somewhat unfocused, the spectators emitted terrifying screams. I was sure a fight would break out; the entire *shabono* echoed with their piercing howls. I grabbed Ritimi's arm and was surprised to see that her tear-stained face wore an expression

She was pleased, almost joyful. She explained that, judging by the tone of the men's shouts, they were no longer thinking about the initial insults. They were only interested in learning the power of each opponent's *hekuras.* There were no losers or winners. If a warrior fell, it simply meant that his *hekuras* weren't strong enough at that moment.

One of the spectators laid a gourd filled with water over the prostrate visitor, pulled his ears, and wiped the blood from his face. Then, helping him to his feet, he handed the half-dazed man his club and he urged Etewa to strike him once more on the head. The man barely had the strength to lift the heavy weapon; instead of hitting Etewa's skull, it struck him in the middle of the chest.
Etewa fell to her knees; blood flowed from her mouth; over her lips, chin and throat, from her chest and thighs, the red trail sank into the earth.

"How well you strike," Etewa said in a strangled voice. "Our blood has flowed. We are no longer disturbed. We have calmed our anger."

Ritimi approached Etewa. Sighing heavily, I lay back in the hammock and closed my eyes. I had seen enough blood for one night. I touched the swollen area on my head and thought that perhaps I had suffered a mild concussion.

I nearly fell out of the hammock when someone grabbed the vine rope that tied it to one of the cabin's posts. Startled, I saw Etewa's face, covered in blood. Either she didn't see me or she didn't care where she was lying, because she simply collapsed on top of me. The warm, pungent smell of blood mingled with the acrid odor of her skin. Filled with both revulsion and fascination, I couldn't tear my eyes away from the gaping wound on her skull, which was still bleeding, and from her bruised and swollen chest.

I was wondering how I would manage to free my legs from under his heavy body when Ritimi entered the hut with a bowl of water and placed it on the fire to heat. With expert movements, he lifted Etewa slightly and motioned for me to slide behind him in the hammock so I could support him against my bent knees. Gently, he washed his face and chest with the warm water.

Etewa was perhaps twenty-five years old; however, with her hair hanging over her forehead and lips His eyes were half-open; he looked as helpless as a sleeping child. It occurred to me that he might die from internal injuries.

"Tomorrow will be fine," Ritimi said as if she had read my thoughts. She began to laugh softly; her laughter had the tone of a secret, childlike joy. "It's good that blood is being spilled. Her *hekuras* are strong. It's *waiteri."*

Etewa opened his eyes, pleased to hear Ritimi's praise. He looked at me and mumbled something unintelligible.
-Yeah. “It's *a waiteri,”* I agreed with Ritimi.

Tutemi arrived shortly afterwards with a dark, hot infusion. "What is that?" I asked.
— Medicine— said Tutemi, smiling. She dipped her finger in the brew and placed it on my lips. — Puriwariwe made it with roots and magic plants.

Ritimi's eyes shone with joy as she forced Etewa to drink the bitter brew. The blood had flowed; she was convinced she would give birth to a strong and healthy son.

Ritimi examined my legs, which were covered in cuts and scratches from when Puriwariwe dragged me out of the clearing, and washed them with the remaining hot water. I lay down in Etewa's uncomfortable fiber hammock.

The moon, surrounded by a yellow halo, had moved until it was almost touching the horizon of trees. A few men were still dancing and singing in the clearing; then a cloud hid the moon and darkened everything around us. Only the sound of voices, no longer high-pitched but reduced to a soft murmur, indicated that the men were still there. The moon reappeared with its pale light illuminating the treetops, and tanned figures materialized in the darkness; shadows of elongated bodies that gave substance to the soft tapping of bows and arrows.

Some of the men continued singing until a flash of light appeared above the trees, towards

East. Dark purple clouds, the color of Etewa's wounded breast, covered the sky. Dew glistened on the leaves, on the edges of the palm fronds that hung from the ceiling. Voices began to dissolve, drifting away in the cold breeze of dawn.

IX

Planting and sowing were primarily male tasks, but most women accompanied their husbands, fathers, and brothers when they went to work in the orchards in the morning. Besides doing other tasks, they also helped them.

In the company, the women helped clean the land or took the opportunity to collect firewood if new trees had fallen.

For several weeks, I went with Etewa, Ritimi, and Tutemi to their plots of land. The long and arduous hours that we spent time clearing the land; it seemed a waste, because no progress could ever be seen. The sun and rain relentlessly favored the growth of all species, without regard for human preferences.

Each family had its own plot of land separated by fallen tree trunks. Etewa's garden was next to Arasuwe's, which had the largest plot of land among the iticoteris, since the produce from the chief's plot was used to feed guests at feasts.

At first, I could only distinguish the bananas, various kinds of their fruit, and the different palm trees scattered throughout the orchards. The palm trees were also cultivated for their fruit, and each tree belonged to the individual who had planted it. I was surprised to discover, among the mass of weeds, a display of edible roots, such as cassava and sweet potatoes, and a great variety of vines of squash, cotton, tobacco, and magical plants. Also growing in the gardens and around the *shabono* were the trees with pink flowers and red pods from which annatto paste was made.

The piles of red, thorny pods were cut open, and the scarlet seeds, along with the pulpy flesh surrounding them, were placed in a large gourd filled with water. The annatto was boiled all afternoon, being stirred and mashed. After cooling overnight, the mixture

The semi-solid mixture was wrapped in layers of perforated banana leaves, and the resulting bundles were tied to one of the roof beams to dry. A few days later, the red paste was distributed into small bowls, ready to use.

Ritimi, Tutemi and Etewa had individual plantations of tobacco and magical plants on Etewa's plot.

Like all tobacco plantations, they were surrounded by a wall of sharpened sticks and bones to deter intruders. Tobacco could not be taken without permission, and anyone who broke the rules was punished.

They triggered fights. Ritimi had assigned me several of her magical plants. Some were used as aphrodisiacs and protective agents; others were used for malevolent purposes. Etewa never spoke of her magic plants, and Ritimi and Tutemi pretended to know nothing about them.

I once saw Etewa extract a bulbous root. The next day, before going hunting, he rubbed his feet and legs with the macerated root. We had armadillo meat for our dinner that night.

"What a powerful plant!" I remarked.

Perplexed, he stared at me for a long time; then, smiling, he said:

—The roots of *Adorno* protect me from snake bites.

On another occasion, I was sitting in the garden with little Sisiwe, listening to his detailed explanations about the varieties of edible ants, when I saw his father pull another one from its roots. Etewa crushed it, mixed the pulp with annatto, and then rubbed that substance all over her body.

"A pecan tree will cross my father's path," Sisiwe whispered. "I know this because of the type of root he has used."

For there is a magic plant for every animal. "Even for monkeys?" I asked.

“Monkeys get scared if you shout loudly,” Sisiwe said confidently. “Paralyzed, the monkeys no longer…” They can escape, and the men can shoot them.

One morning, almost hidden behind the thick leaves, gourds, and weeds, I discovered Ritimi. I could only see her head peeking out from behind the fence, the pointed leaves, and the mounds of white bellflowers on the cassava plants. She seemed to be talking to herself. I couldn't hear what she was saying, but her lips moved incessantly, as if she were reciting a spell. I wondered if she was bewitching her tobacco plants to make them grow faster or if she actually intended to steal tobacco from Etewa's plot, which was next door.

Stealthily, Ritimi approached the center of her plantation. Her movements were hurried as she cut branches and leaves. Looking around, she put them in her basket and covered them with banana leaves. Smiling, he stood up, hesitated for a moment, and started walking towards me.

I raised my face in feigned surprise as I felt his shadow upon me.

Ritimi put her basket down and sat down next to me. I was bursting with curiosity, but I knew it would be useless to ask her what she had been doing.

"Don't touch the package in my basket," she said a moment later, unable to hold back her laughter. "I know you were watching me."

I felt myself blush and smiled.

—Did you get any tobacco from Etewa?

"No," he rejected with feigned horror. "She knows her leaves so well that she would notice if one was missing." "I thought you were on his property," I said, without insisting.

Lifting the banana leaves from the basket, Ritimi explained:

"I was minding my own business. Look, I picked some branches of *oko-shiki,* a magical plant," she whispered. "I'll make a powerful brew."

—Are you going to cure someone?

"Cure! Don't you know that only *shapori* cures?" Tilting his head slightly to one side, he hesitated for a moment before continuing. "I'm going to cast a spell on the woman who made love with Etewa at the party," he confessed with a broad smile.

"Perhaps you should prepare a potion for Etewa as well," I observed, examining her face. Her change in expression took me by surprise. Her mouth closed in a straight line, and her eyes narrowed, looking at me.

"After all, he's just as guilty as the woman," I stammered apologetically, uneasy at the harsh way he regarded me.

—Didn't you see how shamelessly that woman tempted him?

—Ritimi asked reproachfully—. Didn't you see how vulgarly all the visiting women behaved?

Ritimi sighed, almost comically, and added with undisguised disappointment: Sometimes you're very stupid.

I didn't know what to say to her. I was convinced that Etewa was just as guilty as the woman. For lack of anything better, I smiled. The first time I caught Etewa in a compromising situation was by chance.

Every day, I would leave the hut at dawn to relieve myself. I always ventured a little way into the jungle, beyond the area reserved for human evacuation. One morning, I was startled by a soft whimper. Thinking it was a wounded animal, I crept as quietly as I could toward the sound. Shocked, I could only stand motionless when I saw Etewa on top of Iramamowe's youngest wife. He looked at me, smiling softly, but didn't stop moving on top of the woman.

Later that same day, Etewa offered me some of the honey she had found in the jungle. Honey was a rare delicacy and was almost never shared as readily as the rest of the food. In fact, it was consumed right there where it was found. I thanked Etewa for her gift, and assumed he had bribed me.

I was constantly hungry for sugar. I no longer minded having to eat honey mixed with bits of wax, bees, worms, pupae, and pollen, as the Iticoteris did. Whenever Etewa brought honey to the village, I would sit beside him and anxiously watch the runny paste teeming with bees in various stages of their metamorphosis until he offered me some. It never occurred to me that he believed I had finally learned that looking at something one desires or simply asking for it was considered proper behavior.

That's right. Once, hoping to remind her that I knew about her escapades, I asked her if she wasn't afraid that some angry husband would hit her on the head again.
Etewa looked at me with absolute astonishment.

— You say these things because you don't know what to do; otherwise, you wouldn't say them.

His tone was distant; with a haughty look, he turned towards a group of children sharpening bamboo slivers to use as arrowheads.

There were other occasions, not always accidental, when I found Etewa in similar circumstances. It soon became obvious that dawn was not only the time to attend to the lower bodily functions, but that it provided the safest opportunity for extramarital affairs. I was very curious to know who was cheating on whom. The two involved would agree the night before and disappear at dawn into the undergrowth. A few hours later, quite calmly, they would return along separate paths with nuts, fruit, honey, sometimes even firewood. Some husbands reacted more violently than others upon discovering their wives' activities. There were those who, in addition to beating their wives, demanded a duel with clubs with the guilty man, a duel that sometimes ended in a group fight in which others participated.

Ritimi's voice burst into my thoughts.

—What are you laughing at?

"I'm laughing because you're right," I said. "Sometimes I'm really stupid."

Suddenly I realized that Ritimi knew about Etewa's activities; probably everyone in the *shabono* knew what was going on. It was undoubtedly just a coincidence that Etewa offered me honey that first time. But I had interpreted the whole thing with suspicion, and I felt as though I had become his accomplice.

Ritimi threw her arms around my neck and covered my cheeks with kisses, assuring me that I wasn't stupid; just very ignorant. She explained that if she knew who Etewa was involved with, his love affairs didn't worry her too much. She didn't like them, but she believed she could maintain some control if it involved a member of the *shabono.* What worried her was the possibility that Etewa might take a third woman from another village.

"How are you going to bewitch that woman?" I asked him. "Are you going to prepare the infusion yourself?" Standing up, Ritimi smiled with obvious satisfaction.

"If I tell you now, the magic won't work." She paused, a hesitant expression in his eyes. "I'll explain it to you after I've cast a spell on that woman. Perhaps someday you'll need to know how to cast a spell on someone too."

—Are you going to kill her?
—No. I'm not that brave. The woman will have back pain, she might even miscarry. —Ritimi placed the basket on her shoulders, then walked over to one of the few trees near his tobacco plantation. "Come on, I need to rest before I bathe in the river."

I stood for a moment to loosen my aching muscles, then followed her. Ritimi sat on the ground, her back against the enormous tree trunk. Its leaves were like open hands between us and the sun, providing a cool shade. The earth, covered with leaves, was soft. I rested my head on Ritimi's thigh and gazed at the sky, so blue, so pale, it seemed transparent. The breeze whispered through the reeds behind us, gently, as if hesitant to assert itself in the morning stillness.

"The bump is gone," Ritimi said, running her fingers through my hair. "And you don't have any scars on your legs," she added with a hint of mockery.

I nodded sleepily. Ritimi laughed at my fear of getting sick from what she considered insignificant injuries. The fact that Puriwariwe had dragged me to safety was guarantee enough that I would be fine.
"It would be fine," she assured me. However, I was afraid the cuts on my legs would get infected, and I insisted that I wash them with boiled water every day. As an extra precaution, old Hayama rubbed the wounds with powder from a burnt anthill, which she said was a natural disinfectant. The smelly powder had no ill effect, and the cuts healed quickly.

Through half-closed eyelids, I gazed at the airy expanse of the orchards before us. I was startled by shouts from the far end of the orchard and opened my eyes.

lramamowe seemed to have emerged from nowhere under the banana leaves and on its way to the sky.

Fascinated, I followed his movements as he climbed the thorny trunk of the *rasha palm.* To avoid getting pricked by the thorns, he used two pairs of crossed sticks tied together, which he placed them alternately on the trunk. With great ease and movements that flowed seamlessly, he climbed onto a pair of crossed poles and, standing on one, lifted the other to place it higher, until he reached the yellow clusters of *rashas,* which were about twenty meters from the ground. For a moment he disappeared beneath the palm leaves, which formed a silvery arc against the sky. Iramamowe cut the large drupes, tied the heavy clusters onto a long vine, and slid them to the ground. He descended slowly and disappeared into the dense green thicket of the banana trees.

“I like boiled drupes; they taste like…” I said, when I realized I didn’t know the word for *potato.* I sat up.

"Let's take a bath," I suggested, gently touching her nose with a blade of grass.

Ritimi opened her eyes; she had the disoriented look of someone who has just woken up from a dream. Lazily, she got up, yawned, and stretched like a cat.

— Yes, let's go —she agreed, tying the basket to her back—. The water will take my dream away.

—Was it a bad dream?

She looked at me gravely, and then brushed her hair away from her forehead.

"You were alone on a mountain," she said vaguely, as if trying to recall the dream. "You weren't afraid, but you were crying." Ritimi looked at me intently and added, "Then you woke me up."

As we took the path that led to the river, Etewa came running after us.

—Pick some *pishaansi* leaves —he told Ritimi. And turning to me—: You come with me.

I followed him through the newly cleared area of the jungle, where new banana trees had been planted, among the piles of fallen trees and the clipped leaves that covered the ground. They were spaced about three meters apart approximately, so that the future adult trees would gather their leaves but not shade each other.

Just a few days earlier, Etewa, Iramamowe, and other close relatives of Chief Arasuwe had helped him separate the young banana plants from the large bulbs at the base of the trees. Using a contraption made of vines and thick leaves, they transported the heavy shoots to the new orchard.

"Did you find honey?" I asked hopefully.

"No honey," Etewa said, "but something just as delicious."

He pointed out the spot where Arasuwe and two of his older sons were standing. They were taking turns kicking an old banana tree. Hundreds of fat, whitish larvae were falling from the many layers that made up the trunk.

As soon as Ritimi returned from the forest with the *pishaansi leaves,* he boys gathered the wriggling worms and placed them on the broad, sturdy leaves. Arasuwe lit a small fire. One of his sons, his feet firmly planted on the ground, held an elliptical piece of wood, while Arasuwe spun a wooden point with astonishing speed. The burning sawdust set the termite nest ablaze, to which dry leaves and twigs were added.

Ritimi cooked the larvae for just a moment, until the *pishaansi* leaves turned black and brittle.

Etewa opened one of the wrappers, moistened a finger with saliva, ran it over the pile of roasted worms, and offered it to me.

"It's very rich," he insisted as he saw me turn my face away.

Shrugging his shoulders, he sucked his finger clean.

With her mouth full, Ritimi urged me to try the new delicacy.

— How can you say you don't like it if you haven't even tried it?

With my fingertips, I placed one of the worms, grayish and still soft, in my mouth. It's not much different from a snail or a baked oyster, I told myself. But when I tried to swallow, the worm stuck to my tongue. I pulled it out again, waited until I had enough saliva, and swallowed the worm like a pill.

"In the morning I can only eat bananas," I told Etewa, who placed a nice pile in front of me.

"You've worked in the garden," he said. "You have to eat. When there's no meat, it's good to eat this." It reminded me that I had liked the ants and centipedes that he had offered me on several occasions.

Seeing her expectant face, I couldn't tell her I didn't like them at all, even though the centipedes tasted like fried vegetable scraps. Reluctantly, I forced myself to swallow a few more roasted worms.

Ritimi and I followed the men toward the river. The children were playing in the water and singing around a fat tapir that had fallen in and drowned. The four adults were rubbing themselves with leaves, their bodies glistening in the sun, golden and smooth.

Sparkling droplets hung from their sleek hair, reflecting the light like diamonds.

Old Hayama gestured for me to sit beside her on a large rock by the water's edge. Perhaps I had become Ritimi's grandmother's special pupil, and she considered the task of gaining weight a kind of personal challenge.

Just as they did with the children in the *shabono,* whom they fed well so they would grow up strong and healthy, old Hayama made sure I had plenty to eat every day. I tried to satisfy my insatiable appetite for sugar. Whenever someone found the sweet, thick, clear honey produced by harmless bees — the only kind of honey given to children — the old woman would at least manage to get me a taste. If someone brought honey from the black bees, the ones that stung, Hayama would get some for me too. Only adults ate that second kind, because the Iticoteris believed that it caused nausea and even death in children. The Iticoteris were certain that nothing bad would happen to me if I drank from both kinds, because they couldn't decide whether I was a child or an adult.

— Eat —Hayama told me, offering me some *sopaa fruits.*

They were greenish-yellow and about the size of a lemon. I cracked them open with a stone (I'd already broken a tooth trying to crack nuts and fruits like the snails), sucked out the sweet, white pulp, and spat out the tiny brown seeds. The sticky juice coated my fingers and mouth.

Little Texoma climbed onto my back and placed a capuchin monkey she carried with her day and

night on my head. The little animal wrapped its tail so tightly around my neck that it almost choked me. One furry hand gripped my hair while the other flailed in front of my face, trying to snatch the fruit from my head.

Afraid of swallowing the monkey's fur and lice, I tried to free myself. But Texoma and her little animal howled with delight, thinking I was playing. I put my feet in the water and tried to pull my shirt over my head. Taken by surprise, the girl and the monkey jumped back.

The children dragged me onto the sand and rolled around beside me. Laughing, they began to walk, one by one, across my back, and I surrendered to the pleasure of their cool little feet on my aching muscles. I had tried in vain to convince the women to massage my back, shoulders, and neck after I had worked for hours in the vegetable garden. Whenever I tried to show them the good it did, they would refuse.

I understood that, although they liked being touched, massage was something only the *shapori* performed when a person was sick or bewitched. Fortunately, they had no objection to their children walking on my back. For the Iticoteris, it was inconceivable that anyone could derive pleasure from such a barbarian act.

Tutemi sat down next to me on the sand and began to untie the *pishaansi* bundle that Ritimi had given him.

Her pregnant belly and swollen breasts seemed barely held in place by taut skin. She never complained of pain or nausea, nor did she ever express any cravings. In fact, there were so many taboos surrounding feeding them for pregnant women that I wondered how they ever managed to give birth to healthy children. They were forbidden from eating large game. Their only sources of protein were insects, nuts, grubs, fish, and certain types of small birds.

"When will you have the baby?" I asked, stroking the side of her belly.

Tutemi frowned intently and did some calculations. "This moon comes and goes; another moon comes and goes; then another comes, and before it goes I'll have a healthy child."

I wondered if she was right. According to her calculations, it would be three more months. To me, it felt like I was due to give birth any day now.

"There are fish upstream: the kind you like," Tutemi said, smiling at me.
— I'll take a quick bath, and then I'll go fishing with you. "Take me swimming with you," pleaded little Texoma.
"You have to leave your monkey here," Tutemi warned him.
Texoma hung the little monkey over Tutemi's head and came running after me. Screaming with pleasure, she lay down on my back in the water, her hands clasped around my shoulders. I slowly stretched out my legs and arms, lengthening them with each stroke, until we reached a pool on the opposite bank.
—Do you want to go all the way down? —I asked him.
"Yes, yes," he cried, rubbing his wet little nose against my cheek. "I'll keep my eyes open, I won't breathe, I'll hold you tight without suffocating you.

The water wasn't very deep. The blurred stones at the bottom, grayish, reddish, and white, rested on amber-colored sand and shimmered with light despite the shadows cast by the trees across the pond. I felt Texoma's hands tugging at my neck; I quickly surfaced.

"Come out!" Tutemi shouted as soon as she saw our heads. "We're waiting for you," and she pointed to the women waiting beside her.

—I'll go back to the *shabono* now —Rit'mi announced. —If you see Kamosiwe, give him this— and he handed me the last package of larvae.

I followed the women and several men along the wide path. Soon we came upon Kamosiwe, standing in the middle of the road. Leaning on his bow, he seemed fast asleep. I placed the bundle at his feet. The old man opened his one good eye; the sun made it blink, grotesquely distorting his face.

He gathered the maggots; slowly, he began to eat, shifting his body weight from one foot to the other. We followed Kamosiwe to the top of a small hill covered with bushes; I was amazed at the He moved with extraordinary agility. He never looked where he put his feet, but he always avoided the roots and thorns in his path.

Small, shrunken with age, he was the oldest-looking man I had ever seen. His hair was neither black, nor gray, nor white, but a woolly mane of indeterminate color that seemed to have been untouched by a comb for years. It wasn't long, though, suggesting he cut it regularly. It had probably stopped growing, I concluded, like the nascent beard on his chin, which always remained the same length. The scars on his wrinkled face were from a blow with a club, which had left him blind in one eye. When he spoke, his voice was nothing more than a murmur, its meaning difficult to discern.

At night, he would stand in the middle of the clearing, talking for hours on end. The children would squat at his feet and tend the fire that had been lit for him. His worn voice possessed a strength, a tenderness, that seemed at odds with his appearance. There was always in his words, which faded into the night, a sense of urgent need, a tone of warning or enchantment.

"There are words of wisdom, of tradition, that are preserved in the memory of this old man," Milagros had explained to me.

Only after the party did he tell me that Kamosiwe was Angelica's father. "You mean he's your grandfather?" I asked incredulously. Nodding, Milagros added:

— When I was born, Kamosiwe was the chief of the iticoteris.

Kamosiwe lived alone in one of the huts near the entrance to the *shabono.* He no longer hunted or worked in the gardens; however, he never lacked food or firewood. He accompanied the women to the fields or the forest when they went to gather nuts, fruits, and wood. While the women worked, Kamosiwe kept watch, leaning on his bow, with a banana leaf stuck on the tip of an arrow to

protect his face from the sun.

Sometimes he would wave his hand in the air, perhaps to greet a bird, perhaps a cloud, which he believed to be the soul of an iticoteri. Sometimes he would laugh to himself. But most of the time he remained motionless, dreaming or listening to the murmur of the wind rustling the leaves.

Although he had never done or said anything to acknowledge my presence among the Iticoteris, I often found him staring at me. Sometimes I had the distinct feeling that he was intentionally seeking me out, because he always accompanied the group of women who were with me. And at nightfall, when I sought the solitude of the river, there he was, crouching not far from me.
We stopped at a point where the river widened. The dark rocks, scattered across the yellow sand, gave the impression that someone had arranged them in a symmetrical pattern. The still, shaded water resembled a dark mirror reflecting the aerial roots of the giant *strangler fig trees.*
They descended from a height of almost thirty meters, suffocating and squeezing the trees. These deadly roots had initially sprouted on one of the tree's branches, like a tiny seed dropped by a bird. I couldn't tell what tree it was: perhaps a ceiba, because the branches that bent with tragic grandeur were covered in thorns.

Armed with branches from the *arapuri* trees that grew nearby, some women waded into the shallow waters of the river. Their piercing, high-pitched cries broke the stillness as they struck the water's surface. The frightened fish took refuge under the rotting leaves on the opposite bank, where the other women caught them with their bare hands. They bit off their heads and threw them back, still writhing in the flat baskets they had left on the sand.
"Come with me," one of the chief's women said to me. She took my hand and led me upstream. "Let's try our luck with the men's arrows."

The men and young men who had accompanied us found themselves surrounded by a group of women shouting for their weapons. Fishing was considered a women's activity; men only came to laugh and mock them. It was the only time women were allowed to use their bows and arrows. Some men handed their weapons to the women and then ran for cover on the shore, afraid of being accidentally wounded. They were delighted that none of the women caught a fish.

"Try it," Arasuwe invited me, extending his bow to me.
I had taken archery lessons in school and felt confident in my ability. However, as soon as I

picked up the bow, I knew I couldn't shoot properly. I could barely draw it; my arm was trembling. uncontrollably when I released the small arrow. I tried several times, but I was never able to hit a fish.

— What a daring way to shoot—remarked old Kamosiwe, handing me a smaller bow that belonged to one of Iramamowe's sons.

The boy didn't complain, but he looked at me with sullen displeasure. At his age, no man would voluntarily offer his bow to a woman.

— Try again— encouraged Kamosiwe, whose single eye shone with strange intensity.

Without the slightest hesitation, I drew back the bow, aiming the arrow at the silvery, gleaming body that, for an instant, seemed motionless beneath the surface. I felt the bow's tension suddenly relax, and the arrow shot out effortlessly. I distinctly heard the sharp sound of the arrow hitting the water, and then I saw a trail of blood. With cheers, the women handed me the skewered fish. It was no bigger than a medium-sized trout.

I returned the weapon to the boy, who looked at me with surprised admiration. I looked for old Kamosiwe, but he had left.

"I'll make you a small bow," Arasuwe said, "and thin arrows, the kind used for shooting fish."

Men and women surrounded me.

"Did you actually hit the fish?" one of the men asked me. "Try again. I didn't see it."

—Yes, she did it, she did it— Arasuwe's wife assured him, showing him the trophy.

—*Ahahahaha!* —exclaimed the men.

"Where did you learn to shoot with a bow and arrows?" Arasuwe asked me.

As best I could, I tried to explain what a school is. Looking into Arasuwe's puzzled eyes, I wished I had said that my father had taught me. Explaining something that required more than two or three sentences could be a frustrating experience not only for me but also for my audience. It wasn't always a matter of knowing the right words; the difficulty stemmed more from the fact that certain words did not exist in their language. The more she spoke, the more worried Arasuwe's expression became. With a frown of disappointment, he insisted that I explain how I knew how to use the bow and arrows.

I wished Milagros hadn't gone to visit another town.

"I know white people who are good rifle shots," Arasuwe said, "but I've never seen a white person use a bow skillfully."

I felt the need to downplay the fact that I had hit the fish, claiming it was pure luck, which it truly was. But Arasuwe kept insisting that I knew how to use the Indians' weapons. Even Kamosiwe had noticed the way I was holding the bow, as he said aloud.

I think I somehow managed to get them to grasp the idea of what school is, because they insisted I tell them what else I had learned. The men burst out laughing when they heard that the way I decorated my notebooks was something I learned at school.

"You weren't taught properly," Arasuwe said with conviction. "Your drawings were very bad."

"It takes hundreds of people for that," I explained. "Machetes are made in a factory." The more I tried to make them understand, the more my tongue got tied.

"Only men make machetes," I finally said, pleased to have found an explanation that satisfied them.

"What else did you learn?" Arasuwe asked.

I wished I had some gadget with me, like a tape recorder, a flashlight, or something, to impress them. Then I remembered the gymnastics I had practiced for several years.

"I can jump in the air," I said boastfully. They cleared a square area on the sandy beach, and I placed four of the baskets full of fish in the corners. "No one can enter this space."

Standing in the middle of the sand, I observed the curious faces that surrounded me. They erupted in hilarious laughter erupted as I performed a series of warm-up exercises. Although the sand lacked the firmness of a gymnastics track, I was at least comforted by the fact that I wouldn't hurt

myself if I lost my footing. I went on my head, did several handstands, jumped back and forth, and walked back and forth on my hands. I didn't land with the grace of a seasoned gymnast, but I was filled with satisfaction by the admiring expressions I saw around me.

"What strange things they taught you!" Arasuwe remarked. "Do it again."

— It can only be done once.

I sat down on the sand to catch my breath. Although

Had I wanted to, I wouldn't have been able to repeat my performance.

Men and women approached, their eyes fixed on me.

"What else can you do?" one of them asked me. For a moment, I didn't know what to say; I thought I had already done quite a bit. After a moment of hesitation, I said:

— I can sit on my head.

Laughter made their bodies tremble until tears rolled down their cheeks.

"Sit on your head!" they repeated, and each time they burst into laughter again.

I laid my arms flat on the ground, placed my forehead on my joined palms, and slowly lifted my body.

Once I was sure of my balance, I crossed my outstretched legs. The laughter died away.

Arasuwe lay down on the ground, his face close to mine. He was smiling, his eyes crinkling at the corners.

"White girl, I don't know what to think of you, but I know that if I go with you through the jungle, the monkeys will stop to stare at you. Delighted, they'll sit very still, gazing at you, and I'll kill them." He touched my face with his large, calloused hands. "Sit back down on your buttocks. Your face is red, as if it were painted with *annatto.* I'm afraid your eyes will pop out of your head."

Back in *the shabono,* Tutemi placed one of the fish wraps, cooked in *pishaansi leaves, on the floor in front of me.* Fish was my favorite food. To everyone's surprise, I preferred it to armadillo, pecan, or monkey. The *pishaansi* leaves and the salty solution made from the ashes of the *kurori* tree added a flavor that greatly enhanced its natural taste.

“Did your father want you to learn to use a bow and arrow?” Arasuwe asked, sitting down beside me. Before I had time to answer, he continued, “Did he want a boy when you were born?”

— I don't think so. He was very happy when I was born. He already had two sons.

Arasuwe opened the wrapping in front of him. Silently, he slid the fish to the center of the leaves, as if pondering a mystery for which he had no words. He gestured for me to have some of his food. With two fingers and my thumb, I lifted a large piece of fish to my mouth. As was proper, I sucked the juice that ran down my arm, and when I found a bone, I spat it out on the ground, not a single drop of the white flesh.

"Why did you learn to shoot arrows?" Arasuwe asked me in an imperative tone. Without thinking twice, I replied:

— Perhaps something inside me knew that one day I would come here.

"You should have known that girls don't use bows and arrows." She smiled at me briefly and then began to eat.

X

The gentle drumming of the rain and the voices of men singing outside the hut roused me from my afternoon nap. Shadows were beginning to lengthen, and the wind played with the palm fronds hanging from the roofs. Sounds and presences suddenly filled the huts. They stoked the fires. Everything immediately began to smell of smoke, dampness, food, and wet dogs. There were men talking outside, oblivious to the raindrops falling on their backs, on their faces as still as masks.

His eyes, moistened by the effect of the epena, were fixed on the distant clouds, open to the spirits of the jungle.

I walked through the rain to the river. Heavy raindrops pattered on the ceiba leaves, awakening tiny frogs hidden beneath the tall grass that grew along the bank. I sat at the water's edge. Oblivious to the passage of time, I watched the concentric circles of rain scatter across the river and the pink blossoms drift by, like forgotten dreams from another place. The sky darkened; the pattern of the clouds began to blur as they merged into one another. The trees gathered into a single mass. The leaves lost their distinct shapes and blended into the night sky.

I heard sobs behind me; I turned around, but could only see the faint sheen of the rain on the leaves. An inexplicable fear gripped me, and I climbed the path that led to the shabono. At night I never felt safe from anything: the river and the jungle were like presences I could sense, but never understand. I slipped on the muddy path, my foot caught on a protruding root. Again I heard a soft sob. It reminded me of the pained whimpers of Iramamowe's hunting dog, which he had wounded with an arrow in a fit of rage.

It was poisoned because, during a hunt, the animal barked at an inopportune moment. The wounded dog returned to the village and hid behind a palisade, where it remained, howling for hours, until Arasuwe ended its suffering with another arrow.

I called out softly. The moans stopped, and then I clearly heard an agonized groan. “Perhaps it’s true that there are spirits in the jungle,” I thought, sitting up. The Iticoteris claim that there are beings that dwell on a tenuous border between animals and humans. These creatures call to the Indians at night and lead them to their deaths. I stifled a cry, for a figure seemed to stand out in the darkness: a hidden form moving among the trees just a step away from where I stood. I sat down again, intending to hide. I heard faint breathing; it was more like a series of sighs

accompanied by a scraping, choking sound. Stories of old vendettas and bloody raids that the men liked to tell at night flashed through my mind. I remembered in particular the story of Angelica's brother, the elderly shaman Puriwariwe, who had supposedly been killed in one of those raids, but had not died.

"They shot him in the stomach, where death hides," Arasuwe had said one night. "He didn't lie down in his hammock, but remained standing in the center of the clearing, leaning on his bow and arrows. He staggered, but he didn't fall."

“The attackers stood rooted to the spot, unable to fire another arrow, while the old man sang, invoking the spirits. With the arrow still lodged where death lies, he disappeared into the jungle. He didn't return for many days and nights. He lived in the darkness of the thicket without food or drink. He sang to the spirits of the animals and trees, creatures that are harmless in the clear light of day, but that in the shadows of night cause terror to those who cannot command them. From his In his hiding place, the old shapori lulled his enemies to sleep with his song, and killed them one by one with magic arrows.

Again I heard a groan, then a strangled gasp. I slid down, carefully feeling my way to avoid the thorns. I nearly screamed in terror when I touched a hand; the fingers were curled around a broken bow. I didn't recognize the prostrate body until I felt Kamosiwe's scarred face.

"Old man," I called, afraid he was dead.

He rolled onto his side and curled up his legs with the ease of a child seeking warmth and comfort. I tried to focus on the fixed gaze of his single eye, which stared at me helplessly. It seemed as if he had returned from a great distance, from another world. Leaning against the broken tree trunk, he tried to stand. He grabbed my arm, but fell back to the ground with a bloodcurdling sound. I couldn't lift him. I shook him, but he remained motionless.

I searched for his heartbeat to see if he was dead. Kamosiwe opened his single eye; in his gaze there seemed to be a silent plea. The dilated pupil reflected no light; like a deep, dark tunnel, it seemed to drain the strength from my body. Afraid of making a mistake, I spoke to him in Spanish, softly, as if he were a child. I wished he would close that terrifying eye and fall asleep.

I lifted him by the arms and dragged him toward the shabono. Although he was nothing but skin and bones, his body felt like it weighed a ton. After a few minutes, I had to sit down and rest; I wondered if he was still alive. His lips trembled; he spat out a wad of tobacco. The dark saliva dripped onto my leg.

Her eye filled with tears. I put the tobacco back in her mouth, but she refused it. I took her hands and rubbed them against my body to warm them. She started to say something, but I only caught an unintelligible murmur.

One of the young men who were sleeping near the entrance, next to the old man's hut, helped me lift him up to his hammock.

"Add wood to the fire," I told one of the boys who were staring at us with their mouths open. "And call Arasuwe, Etewa, or someone who can help the old man."

Kamosiwe opened his mouth to breathe better. The flickering light of the small fire accentuated his pallor. ghostly. His face twisted into a strange smile, a grimace that confirmed to me that I had done what I had to do.

The hut was filled with people. Their eyes shone with tears; their sad complaints filled the shabono.

—Death is not like the darkness of night— Kamosiwe said in a barely audible murmur.

His words fell into silence as those who had gathered around his hammock momentarily suspended their lamentations.

"Don't leave us alone," the men lamented, and then they burst into more intense sobs.

They began to talk about the old man's courage, the enemies he had killed, his children, the times when he was chief of the Iticoteris, and the prosperity and glory he had brought to the village.

"I will not die yet." The old man's words silenced the others once more. "Your weeping makes me too sad." He opened one eye and looked at the

faces around him. "The hekuras are still in my chest. Sing to them, for they are the ones who keep me alive."

Arasuwe, Iramamowe, and four other men blew pipes into each other's noses. With blurred eyes, they began to sing to the spirits that live beneath and above the earth.

"What's wrong?" Arasuwe asked after a while, leaning over the old man.

His strong hands massaged the weak, withered chest; his mouth blew warmth upon the motionless form.

"I'm just sad," Kamosiwe whispered. "The hekuras will soon leave my chest. My sadness is what weakens me."

I returned with Ritimi to our cabin.

"He won't die," she said, wiping the tears from her face. "I don't know why he wants to live so long. He's so old! He's not a man anymore."

-What is it?

—Her face has become so small, so thin...

Ritimi looked at me as if she lacked the words to express her thoughts. She made a vague gesture with her hand, as if trying to reach for something she didn't know how to explain. Shrugging, she smiled.

—The men will sing all night, and the hekuras will keep the old man alive.

The monotonous, warm, and persistent rain mingled with the men's singing. Every time I sat in the hammock, I could see them through the clearing, in Kamosiwe's hut, sitting around the fire. Convinced that their invocations could preserve life, they sang with great force, while the rest of the iticoteris slept.

The voices faded with the rosy melancholy of dawn. I got up and crossed the clearing. The air

It was cold and the ground was soaked with rain. The fire had gone out, but the hut was warm thanks to the misty smoke that filled it. The men, huddled together, still surrounded Kamosiwe. Their faces looked exhausted, their eyes surrounded by deep circles.

I went back to my hammock while Ritimi got up to relight the fire. "Kamosiwe looks good," I said, going to sleep.

As I got up from behind a bush, I saw Arasuwe's youngest wife and her mother opening up

I slowly made my way through the undergrowth, heading towards the river. Silently, I followed the two women. They weren't carrying anything, just a sharpened piece of bamboo. The pregnant woman held her belly with her hands, as if to support its weight. They stopped under an arapurí tree, cleared of undergrowth and covered with broad plantain leaves spread on the ground. The pregnant woman knelt on the leaves, pressing her abdomen with both hands. A soft moan escaped her lips, and she gave birth.

I put my hand to my mouth to stifle a laugh. I couldn't believe that giving birth could be so effortless, so quick. The two women were whispering, but neither of them looked at or picked up the wet, glistening baby lying on the leaves.

With the bamboo cane, the old woman cut the umbilical cord, and then searched until she found a straight branch.

I saw her place the branch on the baby's neck, and then step on both ends with her feet. There was a soft, sharp crack. I wasn't sure if it was the branch or the child's neck that had broken.

They wrapped the placenta in a bundle of plantain leaves and the small, lifeless body in another. They tied the bundles with vines and placed them under a tree.

I tried to hide behind the bushes as the women got up to leave, but my legs wouldn't obey me. I felt drained of all emotion, as if the scene before me were some strange nightmare. The women looked at me. A faint flicker of surprise crossed their faces, but I saw no pain or regret.

As soon as they had left, I untied the vines. The lifeless body of a little girl lay on the leaves as if she were asleep. Long black hair, like silken threads, clung to her wet head. Her eyes were closed, her eyelids swollen and without lashes. The blood had stopped flowing from her nose and mouth and had dried, like a macabre drawing in annatto, on her slightly bruised skin. I opened her little fists. I checked her feet to see if she had all her toes; I found no visible deformity.

The last hours of the afternoon had passed. The dry leaves made no sound beneath my bare feet; the night dampened them. The wind parted the leafy branches of the ceiba trees. Thousands of eyes seemed to be spying on me; indifferent eyes, veiled in green shadows. I walked downstream and sat on a fallen log that wasn't yet dead. I touched the clusters of new shoots that desperately longed to see the light. The sound of the crickets seemed to mock my tears.

I could smell the smoke from the huts, and I was bothered by those fires that burned day and night, swallowing up time and events. Dark clouds hid the moon, covering the river with a veil of mourning. I heard the animals: those that awaken from their daytime sleep and roam the jungle at night. I wasn't afraid. The silence, like soft stardust, fell around me. I wanted to fall asleep and wake up knowing it had all been a dream.

Through a gap in the trees, I saw a shooting star. I couldn't help but smile. I'd always been quick to make wishes, but I couldn't think of one.

I felt Ritimi's arm around my neck. Like a jungle spirit, she had sat down beside me without making a sound. The light-colored sticks that marked the corners of her lips shone in the darkness as if they were made of gold. I was grateful for her presence and for her silence.

The wind blew away the clouds that had obscured the moon; its light bathed us in a pale blue. Only then did I notice the old man Kamosiwe, squatting beside the tree trunk, his eye fixed on me. He began to speak, slowly, enunciating each word. But I didn't hear him. Leaning heavily on his bow, he indicated that he followed the shabono. He stopped at his hut; Ritimi and I continued to ours.

"Just a week ago, men and women were crying," I said, sitting down in my hammock. "They were crying because they thought Kamosiwe was going to die. Today I saw Arasuwe's wife kill her newborn."

Ritimi gave me some water.

“How can a woman breastfeed a newborn if she has a child, she observed sharply. "A child who has lived all this time."

Intellectually, I understood Ritimi's words. I knew that infanticide was a common practice among the Amazonian Indians. Children were born approximately two or three years apart. The mother breastfed during this time and avoided having another child to maintain a good supply of milk. If a deformed child or a girl was born during this period, it was killed to give the still- nursing child a better chance of survival.

However, emotionally, I couldn't accept it. Ritimi grabbed my face and forced me to look at her. Her eyes were shining, her lips were trembling.

"He who has not yet seen the sky must return to where he came from." She stretched his arm toward the immense black shadows that began at our feet and ended in the sky. "To the house of thunder."

XI

One morning, instead of waking me up to the gentle chatter of the women, I was awakened by the shouts of lramamowe announcing that he would prepare curare that day.

I sat down in the hammock. Iramamowe was standing in the middle of the clearing. With his legs apart and his arms crossed over his chest, he was carefully examining the young people who had gathered around him.
Shouting as loudly as he could, he warned them that if they planned to help him prepare the poison, they wouldn't be allowed to sleep with a woman that night. Iramamowe continued to scold them as if the boys had already committed a crime. reminding them that he would find out if they disobeyed him because he would test the poison on a monkey. If the animal Once he survived, he would never again ask men for help. He told them that if they wished to accompany him into the jungle to gather the various herbs needed to make mamucoil, they must not eat or drink until they had coated the tips of their arrows with poison.

Calm returned to the shabono as soon as the men left. Tutemi, after stoking the fires, made tobacco balls for herself, Ritimi, and Etewa, and returned to her hammock. I thought I had time to sleep a little longer before the plantains were ready in the embers. I turned over in the hammock; the smoke warmed the cold air. As every morning, after relieving themselves, little Texoma and Sisiwe, as well as Arasuwe's two younger children, climbed into my hammock and snuggled up to me.

Ritimi was unaware of the morning's events. She slept soundly on the floor. Sleep did not interfere with Ritimi's vanity. Her head, resting on her arm, was positioned in a way that allowed her to retain all her adornments; thin, polished sticks were embedded through the nostrils and at the corners of her lips. Two brown lines marked her visible cheek, a sign by which any inhabitant of the shabono could recognize that she was menstruating. For the past two nights, Ritimi had not

Asleep in his hammock, he had not eaten meat, had not cooked any of the meals, and had not touched Etewa or any of her belongings.
Men were afraid of menstruating women. Ritimi had told me that women were known not to have hekuras on their breasts, but were linked to the life essence of the otter, from whom the first woman

on Earth descended. During their menstruation, women were supposed to be imbued with the otter's supernatural powers. Apparently, she didn't know what these powers were, but she said that if a man saw an otter in the river, he would never kill it, for fear that a woman from the village would die at that very moment.

The Iticoteris women were initially very puzzled because I hadn't menstruated since my arrival. My explanations—weight loss, a change in diet, new circumstances—didn't seem like a sufficient reason to them. Instead, they believed that, not being Indian, I wasn't entirely human. I had no connection to the life essence of any animal, plant, or spirit.

Only Ritimi wanted to believe and prove to the other women that I was human.
"You have to tell me immediately when you're red, as if I were your mother," Ritimi would tell me every time she menstruated. "And I'll make the necessary preparations so that the tiny creatures that live underground don't turn you to stone."

Ritimi's insistence was probably another reason why my body wasn't following its normal cycles. Since I was prone to claustrophobia, I suffered periodic anxiety attacks when I was in the room.
possibility of suffering the same restrictions as an iticoteri girl when she has her first menstruations.

Just a week earlier, Xotomi, one of the chief's daughters, had emerged from a three-week lockdown.
When her mother learned that Xotomi had her first period, she built a cell out of sticks, palm leaves, and vines in a corner of their hut. They left a small opening that barely allowed the mother to slip inside twice a day to feed the small fire burning within (which was not to be allowed to go out) and remove the stained plantain leaves that covered the floor. The men,

Afraid of dying young or getting sick, they didn't even look towards that part of the cabin.
For the first three days of her period, Xotomi only drank water and had to sleep on the floor. Afterward, she was given three small bananas a day and allowed to rest in the small bark hammock that was hung inside the cell. She was not allowed to speak or cry during her confinement. All that could be heard behind the "Palm leaves" was the faint sound of Xotomi scratching himself with a stick, because he was forbidden to touch his body.

At the end of the third week, Xotomi's mother dismantled the cell, tied the palm leaves into a tight bundle, and asked some of her daughter's friends to hide them in the jungle. Xotomi didn't move, as if the palm leaves still surrounded her. She remained crouched on the ground with her eyes downcast. Her slightly hunched shoulders looked so fragile that it seemed as if, if someone touched them, the bones would give way with a hollow crack. More than ever, she looked like a frightened, thin, and dirty child.

“Keep your eyes on the ground,” her mother advised, helping the twelve-year-old girl, maybe thirteen, to her feet. With her arms around her waist, she led Xotomi to the fire. “Don’t look at…”

"None of the men in the clearing," he warned the girl, "if you don't want their legs to tremble when they have to climb the trees."

They had heated water. Lovingly, Ritimi washed her stepsister from head to toe, then rubbed her body with annatto until it shone, uniformly red. They placed fresh banana leaves on the fire, while Ritimi led the girl around the hearth. Only when her skin smelled of nothing but burnt leaves were they allowed to look at us and speak to us.

She bit her lower lip as she slowly raised her head.

"Mom, I don't want to leave my father's cabin," she finally said, and burst into tears. "Bah, bah, you silly little girl!" exclaimed her mother, taking Xotomi's face in her hands.

Wiping away her tears, the woman reminded her how lucky she was to become the wife of Hayama's youngest son, Matuwe, and how fortunate she was to be so close to his brothers, who would protect her if her husband mistreated her. The mother's dark eyes shone, clouded with tears.

I had reason to be sad when I first came to this shabono. I had left my mother and my brothers behind. I had no one to protect me.

Tutemi hugged the girl.

—Look at me. I also came from far away, but now I'm happy. I'll soon have a child. "But I don't want a child," Xotomi sobbed. "I just want to hug my little monkey."

I followed a quick impulse and reached for the little monkey hanging from a bunch of bananas to give it to Xotomi. The women burst out laughing.

"If you treat your husband well, he'll be like your little monkey," one of them said, laughing.

"Don't say such things to the girl," protested old Hayama. Smiling, she turned to face Xotomi. "My son is a good man," she said in a comforting tone. "You have nothing to fear."

Hayama continued praising his son, emphasizing Matuwe's skill as a hunter and provider for the household.

On the wedding day, Xotomi sobbed silently. Hayama went to her side.

— Don't cry anymore. We'll adorn you. Today you'll be so beautiful that everyone will be speechless in admiration.

She took Xotomi by the hand and indicated to the women to follow her through a side exit, into the jungle.

Seated on a fallen log, Xotomi wiped her tears with the back of her hand. A fragile smile appeared on her lips as she gazed at old Hayama's face, and she submitted without resistance to the women's preparations.

They cut his hair and shaved off his tonsure. They placed bunches of soft white feathers in his earlobes, which contrasted with his black hair and gave his

Her slender face possessed an ethereal beauty. The dimples at the corners of her mouth and on her lower lip were decorated with red parakeet feathers. In the nose piercing, Ritimi inserted a very polished, almost white stick.

"How beautiful you look!" we exclaimed, when Xotomi stood before us, adorned. "Mom, I'm ready to go," she said solemnly.

Her dark, almond-shaped eyes shone, and her skin seemed to glow with annatto. She smiled briefly, revealing strong, even, white teeth, and led the

way back to the shabono. Just for a

An instant—immediately before entering the clearing—, her eyes turned to her mother with a silent plea.

With her head held high and without fixing her gaze on anyone in particular, Xotomi slowly circled the clearing, seemingly indifferent to the men's words of admiration and stares. She entered her father's hut and sat down before a bowl filled with banana pulp. First, she offered Arasuwe some soup, then her uncles and brothers, and finally, each man in the shabono. When she had served the women, she walked to Hayama's hut, sat in one of the hammocks, and began to eat the animal that her husband, to whom she had been betrothed since before birth, had hunted and prepared.

Tutemi's words interrupted my daydreams:

—Are you going to eat your banana here or at Hayama's cabin?

"I'd better eat it there," I said, smiling at Ritimi's grandmother, who was already waiting for me in the cabin next to Tutemi's.

Xotomi smiled at me when she saw me approaching. She had changed a lot. It wasn't because of the weight she had gained since being released from her confinement. Rather, it was the maturity of her demeanor, the way she looked at me, the way she invited me to eat the banana. I wondered if this was because, unlike boys who can prolong their childhood into adolescence, girls must help their mothers with household chores from the age of six
or eight: gathering firewood, weeding the gardens, caring for their younger siblings. By the time a boy reaches adulthood, a girl is already married and often the mother of one or two children.

After lunch, Tutemi, Xotomi, and I worked for several hours in the gardens, and returned to the shubono after a refreshing swim in the river. A group of men with their faces and bodies painted black were sitting in the clearing. Some were peeling the bark off thick pieces of branch.

"Who are they?" I asked.

"Don't you recognize them?" Tutemi laughed at me. "They are Iramamowe and the men who went with him to the jungle yesterday."

— Why are they painted black?

—Iramamowe! —shouted Tutemi—. The white girl wants to know why you have black faces — and she ran into her hut.

"You'd better run," Iramamowe told her, getting up. "The baby you're carrying could weaken the rnamucori by adding water to it."

With a frown, he turned to Xotomi and me; before we had time to say anything else, Xotomi pulled me by the hand and dragged me into Etewa's cabin.

Between fits of laughter, Xotomi explained to me that anyone who had been in the water that day was forbidden from approaching the men who were preparing the curare. It was believed that the water weakened the poison.
—If the mamucori doesn't act properly, he'll blame you.
—I would have liked to see them prepare the mamucori —I commented, disappointed.

“Who would want to see something like that?” Ritimi said, sitting up. “I’ll tell you what they’re going to do.” He yawned and stretched, folded the plantain leaves he’d been sleeping on, and covered the ground with fresh ones. “The men are painted black because the mamucori isn’t just for hunting, it’s for waging war,” Ritimi said, gesturing for me to sit beside him.

He peeled a banana and, with his mouth full, explained to me how the men boiled the marnucori plant until it turned into a dark liquid. Later, dried ashukamakz plants were added to thicken the poison. When the mixture had boiled down to evaporating all the water, it would be ready to be spread on the tips of the arrows.

With resignation, I helped Tutemi prepare tobacco leaves for drying. Following her precise instructions, I cut each leaf along the vein and pulled it upward so it would curl, then tied them in bundles to the rafters. From where I sat, I couldn't see what was happening outside the lramamowe hut. The children crowded around the men who were working, hoping they would be asked to help. It wasn't surprising that I hadn't seen a single child bathing in the river that morning.

"Bring some water from the stream," Iramamowe told little Sisiwe, "but don't get your feet wet. Step on the logs, the roots, or the stones. If you get wet, we'll have to send someone else."

The afternoon was already late when Iramamowe finished mixing and cooking the curare.

—Now the mamucorise is coming back strong. I feel my hands going numb.

In a low, monotonous voice, he began to sing to the spirits of poison, while stirring the curare.

Around mid-morning the next day, lramamowe ran into the shabono.

“The curare is useless. I shot a monkey with it, but it didn’t die. It just walked away with the useless arrow stuck in its leg.” Iramamowe ran from hut to hut, cursing the men who had helped him prepare the curare. “Didn’t I warn you not to sleep with women? Now the curare is worthless. If an enemy attacked us, you wouldn’t even be able to defend your women. You think you’re brave warriors, but you’re as useless as your arrows. You should be carrying baskets instead of weapons.”

For a moment I thought lramamowe was going to cry, when I saw him sit down on the ground in the middle of the clearing.

"I'll make the poison myself. You're all incompetent," he muttered over and over, until his fury was spent and he was completely exhausted.

A few days later, at dawn, shortly before the monkey that lramamowe had killed with an arrow freshly coated with new poison was fully cooked, a stranger entered the shabono carrying a large wrapping. Her hair was still wet from bathing in the river; her face and body were extravagantly painted with annatto. Leaving his bundle, as well as his bow and arrows, on the ground, he stood silently for a few minutes in the center of the clearing, and then approached Arasuwe's hut.

— I have come to invite you to the party my people are celebrating—said the man in a high, sing-song voice. —The chief of the Mocototeris has sent me to tell you that we have many ripe bananas.

Arasuwe, without getting up from the hammock, told the man that he would not be able to attend the party.

"I can't leave my orchards now. I've planted new banana trees; they need care." Arasuwe gestured broadly with his hand. "Look at all the fruit hanging from the rafters; I don't want it to go to waste."

The visitor walked to our cabin and headed towards Etewa.

— Your father-in-law doesn't want to come. I hope you can visit my family, who sent me to invite you. Etewa slapped her thighs with joy.

— Yes. I'll go. I don't mind leaving my bananas. I'll give others permission to eat them.

The visitor's bright, dark eyes shone with joy as he went from hut to hut summoning the iticoteris to their village. They invited him to rest in old Kamosiwe's hut and offered him

plantain soup and monkey meat. Later that night, he unwrapped his bundle in the middle of the clearing.

"A hammock," murmured the disappointed men who had gathered around him.

Although the Iticoteris recognized the comfort and warmth of cotton hammocks, only a few women owned them. The men preferred hammocks made of bark or vines, and they periodically replaced them with new ones. The visitor wanted to trade the cotton hammock for poisoned arrowheads and epena powder. Some men stayed up all night talking and exchanging news with the stranger.

Arasuwe flatly refused to let me be part of the group that would attend the Mocototeris feast.

"Milagros left you in my care," the boss reminded me. "How can I protect you if you're somewhere else?" "What do I need protection from?" I asked. "Are the Mocototeris dangerous people?"

"You shouldn't trust the mocototeris," Arasuwe said after a long silence. "I feel in my legs that it's not good for you to go."

—The first time I saw Angelica she told me that it wasn't dangerous for a woman to walk through the jungle.

Arasuwe didn't bother to reply or comment on what I had said; instead, she looked at me as if I had become invisible. She obviously considered the matter settled and wasn't about to stoop to further arguments with an ignorant girl.

"Maybe Milagros is there," I ventured. Arasuwe smiled.

—Milagros won't be there. If he were, I wouldn't have any reason to worry.

—Why can't the mocototeris be trusted?

"You're asking too many questions. We're not on friendly terms with them," he added reluctantly. I looked at him in disbelief.

—So why are you being invited to the party?

"You are ignorant," Arasuwe concluded, leaving the cabin.

I wasn't the only one disappointed by Arasuwe's decision. Ritimi was so sad because she wouldn't be able to

to show myself off and boast about myself before the Mocototeris, which got Etewa, lramamowe and the old man Kamosiwe helped convince their father to let me accompany them. Although the advice of the elders was valued and respected, it was lramamowe, known for his bravery, who finally persuaded and assured his brother that nothing bad would happen to me in the Mocototeri village.

“You must take the bow and arrows I made for you,” Arasuwe warned me later that night. He began to laugh heartily. “That will truly astonish the Mocototeris. It would almost be worth my while to go and see their surprise.” Noticing me checking my arrows, Arasuwe added, more seriously, “You can’t take them.”

It is not right for a woman to go through the jungle carrying a man's weapon.

"I will take care of her," Ritimi promised her father. "I will make sure she never leaves my side, not even when he has to go hide in the undergrowth.

"I'm sure Milagros would have wanted me to be there," I said, hoping this would reassure Arasuwe a little.

He looked at me gloomily and shrugged.

—I hope you come back safe and sound.

Anxious and fearful, I couldn't sleep that night. The familiar sound of logs falling into the fire filled me with foreboding. Etewa stirred the embers with a stick before going to bed. Through the smoke and dampness, the distant treetops looked like ghosts. The gaps between the leaves resembled empty eyes, accusing me of something I didn't understand. I was almost tempted to follow Arasuwe's advice, but the daylight banished all my apprehension.

XII

The sun had barely dispelled the cold morning air when we set off, laden with baskets full of bananas, gourds, hammocks, the materials we needed for adornment, and items for trade: large bundles of raw cotton thread, arrowheads of new shapes, and bamboo containers filled with annatto and epena. With their hammocks slung around their necks, the older children walked behind their mothers. The men, who brought up the rear of each family group, carried only their bows and arrows.

We were a group of twenty-three people. For four days we walked in silence through the jungle, at a walking pace. The calm that the elders and children maintained. When they perceived the slightest movement or sound in the undergrowth, the women stopped, nodding their chins in the direction of the noise. Quickly, the men disappeared in that direction. They almost always returned with an agouti—a rabbit-like rodent—or a pecan, or a bird, which we cooked as soon as we camped for the night. The children were always on the lookout for wild fruits. Their sharp eyes followed the flight of the bees until they found their hives in the hollow trunks of trees. With the insects still in full flight, they could accurately identify whether they belonged to the variety that stung or those that did not.

Hayama, Kamosiwe, and several other elders wore the fibrous phloem of a tree tied around their chests and abdomens. They said it restored their energy and made walking easier. I tried it, but the tightly bound phloem only gave me hives.

As we climbed up and down the hills, I wondered if this was a different route from the one we had taken with Milagros. I couldn't recall a single tree, rock, or stretch of river. Nor did I remember encountering mosquitoes or any other insects in the marshes. Attracted by our sweaty bodies, they buzzed around us with maddening persistence. I, who had never suffered from them, couldn't

decide which part of my body to scratch first. My ripped t-shirt offered me no protection whatsoever. Even Iramamowe, who at first had paid no attention to the constant stings, admitted occasionally the annoyance manifests as slapping their neck and arms or lifting a leg to scratch their ankle.

Midway through the fifth day, we camped on the edge of the Mocototeri orchards. The clearings, free of undergrowth, made the gigantic ceiba trees seem even more monumental than in the middle of the jungle.

Patches of light filtered through the leaves, illuminating and casting shadows on the dark ground. We bathed in the nearby river, where the red flowers that hung from the vines over the water were swayed with sensual grace to the rhythm of the breeze. Iramamowe and three other young men were the first to finish their festive attire and paint themselves with annatto, before heading to our guests' shabono.

Iramamowe returned shortly afterwards, with a basket full of roast meat and baked bananas.
"Iduy, the Mocototeris have much more," he said, distributing the food among us.
Before the women began to adorn themselves, they helped their men glue feathers and white fluff into their hair and tie more feathers and monkey fur around their arms and heads. I was entrusted with the task of decorating the children's faces and bodies with the prescribed annatto designs.

Our laughter and conversations were interrupted by the shouts of a mocototeri that was approaching.
"He looks like a monkey," Ritimi whispered.
I nodded, barely able to hide my laughter. The man's short, bowed legs and arms disproportionately long seemed even more pronounced when he approached Etewa e Iramamowe, imposing with their heads covered in white down and the long multicolored feathers that came out of their bracelets and their scarlet belts.
"Our chief wants to start the banquet. He wants you to come soon," said the mocototeri in the same high-pitched, formal voice as the man who had come to the shabono to invite us. "If you waste too much time getting ready, we won't have a chance to talk."
With their heads held high and chins slightly raised, Etewa, Iramamowe, and three young men, also Properly painted and adorned, they followed the mocototeri. Although they feigned

indifference, the men They were aware of the admiring glances we directed at them as they marched towards the shabono.
Overcome by last-minute nerves, the women hurried to add the final touches to their outfits, adding a flower here, a feather there, a bit of annatto over there. Their appearance was left to the judgment of others, because there were no mirrors.

Ritimi tied the wide belt for me, making sure its broad end was properly centered.
"You're still so thin," he said, touching my breasts, "despite how much you eat! Don't eat today the way you eat in our shabono, or the mocototeris will think we don't give you enough."
I promised to eat little, and then I laughed when I remembered it was the same advice my mother always gave me whenever I was invited to spend the weekend at a friend's house. She was also embarrassed by my voracious appetite, thinking that people would assume I wasn't fed properly at home or, worse, that I had a tapeworm.

Just before leaving for the Mocototeri shabono, old Flayama warned her grandsons, Texoma and Sisiwe, to behave themselves. Raising her voice so the other children accompanying us could hear, she emphasized the importance of preventing the Mocototen women from having any opportunity to criticize them after they had left. The old woman Hayama insisted that the children try to urinate and defecate one last time behind the bushes, because inside the shabono no one would be able to clean up what they had done.

Upon reaching the clearing of the Mocototeris, the men formed a line, holding their weapons vertically in front of their raised, haughty faces. We positioned ourselves behind them with the children.

A group of women came screaming out of their huts as soon as they saw me. I felt neither fear nor disgust when they touched me, kissed me, and licked my body and face. But Ritimi seemed to have forgotten how the Iticoteris had greeted me the first time they saw me when I arrived at their village, because she kept murmuring beside me that she would have to trace the annatto designs on my skin again.
Holding my arm firmly, one of the Mocototeris women pushed Ritimi aside.
— Come with me, white girl—he said.
"No!" Ritimi shouted, pulling me towards her. Her smile did nothing to soften the angry, sharp tone of her voice.

I have brought the white girl for you to see. No one must take her away from me. Each one is like the shadow of the other. I go where she goes.
Trying to defeat her opponent with her eyes, Ritimi held the woman's gaze, daring her to challenge her words.

The woman opened her mouth full of tobacco and laughed openly.
—If you have brought the white girl to visit us, you must let her come to my cabin.
Someone approached us from behind the group of women. With her arms crossed over her chest, she leaned her hips forward slightly with a slight hesitation as she stood next to me.
“I am the chief of the Mocototeris,” he said. As he smiled, his eyes were nothing more than two bright openings amidst the reddish markings on his deeply wrinkled face. “Is the white girl you protect so much your sister?” he asked Ritimi.

"Yes," she replied energetically. "She's my sister."

Shaking his head in disbelief, the boss examined me. He seemed very unimpressed.

“I see she’s white, but she doesn’t look like a real white woman,” he finally said. “She’s barefoot like us; she’s not wearing any strange clothes, except this.” He tugged at my ripped, loose panties. “Why is she wearing this under an Indian belt?”

"Pantyhose," Ritimi said, putting on airs; she liked the English word better than the Spanish one, which she had also learned. "That's what her people call it. She has two more. She wears pantyhose because she's afraid that spiders at night and centipedes during the day might get inside her."

Nodding as if he understood my fear, the chief touched my short hair and rubbed his plump palm against my shaved tonsure.

"It's the color of young assai palm leaves." She brought her face close to mine until our noses touched. "What strange eyes! They're the color of rain." Her frown vanished into a smile of enjoyment. "Yes, she must be white, and if you call her your sister, no one can take her away from you," she told Ritimi.

"How can you call her sister?" asked the woman, who was still holding my arm. There was a real perplexity on his painted face.

— I call her sister because she's like us —Ritimi explained, putting her arm around my waist. "I want him to come and stay in my cabin," the woman said. "I want him to touch my children."

We followed the woman to one of the huts. Bows and arrows rested against the sloping roof. Bananas, bowls, and bundles of meat wrapped in leaves hung from the rafters. Machetes, axes, and a variety of clubs lay in the corners. The floor was covered with twigs, fruit peels, and pieces of broken clay pots.

Ritimi sat with me in the same cotton hammock. As soon as I had finished the juice from the soaked palm fruits that the woman had given me, she placed a baby on my lap.

—Caress it.

The little boy squirmed and twisted in my arms, almost falling to the ground. And when he looked at my face, he started crying loudly.

"You'd better hold him," I said, handing the child to the woman. "Babies are afraid of me. They have to get to know me before I can touch them."

"Oh, really?" the woman asked, eyeing Ritimi suspiciously as she rocked the child in her arms.

"Our babies don't cry," Ritimi remarked, looking disdainfully at the infant. "My children and my father's even sleep with her in the same hammock."

"I'll call the older children," the woman decided, gesturing towards the girls and boys who were watching us from behind the bunches of bananas piled up against the sloping roof.

"Don't do it," I warned him, for I knew they would be afraid of me too. "If you force them to come, they will cry as well."

"Yes," said one of the women who had followed us to the hut. "The children will sit next to the white girl when they have seen that their mothers are not afraid to touch her palm-fiber hair and her pale body."

Several women had gathered around us. Hesitant at first, their hands explored my face, then my neck, my arms, my breasts, stomach, thighs, knees, calves, and toes; they left no part of my body unexamined. Every time they discovered a mosquito bite or a

If they got a scratch, they would spit on it and then rub the area with their fingers. If the bite was fresh, they would suck the poison.

Although I was used to the excessive displays of affection from Ritimi, Tutemi and the iticoteris children, which never lasted more than a few minutes, I felt uncomfortable under the exploratory touch of so many hands on my body.

"What are you doing?" I asked, pointing to a group of men squatting in front of the cabin.

neighbor.

—They are preparing the assai leaves for the dance—said the woman who had placed the baby on my lap—.

Do you want to see them?

—Yes —I replied confidently, eager to shift the focus away from myself.

"Does Ritimi have to accompany you wherever you go?" the woman asked when Ritimi got up

from the hammock at the same time as me.

—Yes. If it weren't for her, I wouldn't be here visiting. Ritimi has taken care of me since I arrived in the jungle.

Ritimi looked at me radiantly. I wished I had said something like that much sooner. For the rest of our stay, the Mocototeris women never once again questioned Ritimi's possessive manner toward me.

Outside the hut, the men were using sharpened sticks to separate the pale yellow, still-closed leaves of a young assai palm. As we approached, one of the men stood up, abandoning his squatting position. Taking the ball of tobacco from his mouth, he wiped the juice trickling from his chin with the back of his hand and held the palm leaf above my head. Smiling, he pointed to the fine golden veins of the leaf, barely visible against the light of the setting sun. He stroked my hair, put the tobacco back in his mouth, and without saying a word, continued separating the leaves.

As soon as it got dark, they lit bonfires in the middle of the clearing. The Iticoteris men had an explosion, from loud cheers from their guests as they lined up, weapons in hand, around the bonfires. Two by two, the iticoteris danced around the clearing, lingering in front of each hut so that everyone could admire their attire and their dance steps.

Etewa and Iramamowe were the last pair. Their shouts reached higher notes as they advanced with perfectly synchronized steps. They didn't dance around the huts but stayed close to the campfires, spinning and spinning at ever-increasing speed, following the rhythm of the leaping flames. Etewa and Iramamowe suddenly stopped in their tracks, raised their bows and arrows vertically in front of their faces, and pointed them at the mocototerisjz standing before their huts. With enormous laughter, the two men resumed their dance, while the spectators erupted in shouts of euphoric approval

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The guests invited the iticoteris to rest in their hammocks. While the meal was being served, a group of mocototeris burst into the clearing. “Haii, hulil, halilí!” they shouted, moving to the rhythm of the taps of their bows and arrows, to the beat of the whistling sound of the assai palm leaves, undulating and frayed.

I could barely make out the figures of the dancers. Sometimes they seemed to merge, only to leap apart again; among the waving palm fronds, fragments of dancing arms, legs, and feet could be seen: black silhouettes, like birds with gigantic wings moving away from the light of the bonfires; bright and polished copper figures, no longer human nor animal, their bodies covered in sweat gleaming in the glow of the flames.

"We want to dance with your women," the Mocototeris requested. Since the Iticoteris did not respond,
They began to mock them. "You're jealous of them. Why don't you let your own poor women dance? Don't you remember that we let you dance with our women at your party?"
"Anyone who wants to dance with the mocototeris can do so!" shouted Iramamowe, and then warned the men—: But you will not force any of our women to dance if they do not wish to do so.

Hall, halil, halilil, shouted the men, enthusiastically welcoming the Iticoteris women and their own.

"Don't you want to dance?" I asked Ritimi. "I'll go with you."
— No. I don't want to lose you in the crowd. I don't want anyone hitting you on the head.
— That was an accident. Besides, the mocototeris aren't dancing with burning logs. What harm can they do to me with palm leaves?
Ritimi shrugged.
— My father said that you shouldn't trust the mocototeris.
— I thought you only invited your friends to a party.
"Even enemies," Ritimi said, laughing. "Parties are good occasions to find out what The others have plans.
— The Mocototeris are very kind. They gave us very good food.
"They feed us well because they don't want anyone to accuse them of being stingy. But, as my father told you, you're still very ignorant. You obviously don't realize what's going on if you think

they're being kind."

Ritimi patted me on the head, as if I were a child; then she continued: “Haven’t you noticed that our men didn’t take any pains this afternoon? Didn’t you notice how alert they are?”
I hadn't noticed, and I was tempted to add that the iticoteris' behavior wasn't very friendly, but I kept quiet. After all, as Ritimi had pointed out, I didn't understand what was happening. I watched the six iticoteris dancing around the campfires. They weren't moving with their usual languidness, and their eyes darted from side to side, intently observing everything happening around them. The rest of the iticoteris weren't resting in their hosts' hammocks, but standing outside the huts.

The dance had lost its charm for me. The shadows and voices took on a different character. The night now seemed heavy with a menacing darkness. I began to eat what I had been served earlier.
"This meat has a bitter taste," I said, wondering if it was poisoned.
"It's bitter because of the mamucori," Ritimi explained calmly. "They haven't washed the place where the monkey was wounded by a poisoned arrow.

I spat out the meat. Not only was I afraid of being poisoned, but I felt nauseous remembering the image of the monkey cooking in a large aluminum pot, with a layer of fat and hair floating on the surface.

Ritimi put the piece of meat back on my plate, which was made of pumpkin.
"Eat it. It's good, even the bitter part. Your body will get used to the poison. Don't you know that parents always give their children the part where the arrow entered? If they're wounded by a poisoned arrow during an attack on the shabono, they won't die, because their bodies are used to the mamucori."

—I'm afraid I'll die from eating poisoned meat before I get hit by an arrow.

“No. You don’t die from eating mamucori,” Ritimi assured me. “It has to go in through the skin.”
She took the already chewed piece from my plate, bit off a small piece, and placed the remaining half in my open mouth. Smiling.
Mockingly, he swapped his plate for mine. "I don't want you to choke," he said, and ate the rest of the stewed monkey
breast with exaggerated displays of delight.

Still chewing, he pointed towards the clearing and asked me if I could see the round-faced woman dancing by the fire.

I nodded, still unable to tell which one she meant, for about ten women were dancing by the fire. They all had round faces, dark, almond-shaped eyes, and voluptuous, honey-colored bodies in the flames.

— She's the one who slept with Etewa at our party—Ritimi explained. —I've already bewitched her.

—When did you do it?

"This afternoon," Ritimi confessed softly, and began to laugh. "I blew on her hammock the okoshiki I had picked in my garden," she added with satisfaction.

—And what will happen if someone else uses the hammock?

—Nothing. The magic is only directed against her —Ritimi assured me.

I couldn't find out more about the witchcraft because at that moment the dance stopped, and the dancers, tired and smiling, returned to the various huts to rest and eat.

The women who joined us around the hearth were surprised that Ritimi and I hadn't danced.

Dancing was as important as painting one's body with annatto: both activities kept one young and happy.

Shortly after, the chief entered the clearing and announced in a booming voice: "I want to hear the Iticoteris women sing. Their voices are pleasing to my ears. I want our women to learn their songs."

Laughing, the women gently pushed each other.

—You go, Ritimi—said one of Iramamowe's wives. —Your voice is beautiful. Ritimi didn't need any more stimulation.

"Let's all go together," she suggested, getting up.

Silence fell over the shabono as we entered the clearing, our arms around each other's waists. In front of the chief's hut, Ritimi began to sing in a clear, melodious voice. The songs were very short; the rest of us repeated the last two verses, like a chorus. The other women sang too, but Chief Mocototeri insisted that they repeat Ritimi's songs to him again and again, and one in particular, until his women learned it.

When the wind blows through the palm leaves, I hear its mournful sound mingled with the silent frogs. Up in the sky, the stars laugh, but when the clouds cover them, they weep tears of sorrow.

The boss approached us and, turning to me, said:

—Now you must sing for us.

—But I don't know any songs—I objected, unable to control my nervous laughter.

"You must know something," the chief insisted. "We've heard that white people really like to sing. They even have singing boxes."

In third grade in Caracas, my music teacher told me that besides having a terrible voice, I had absolutely no musical ear. However, Professor Hans, as he liked to be called, wasn't indifferent to my desire to sing. He allowed me to stay in the class, provided I sat in the back row and sang very quietly.

Professor Hans wasn't very concerned about the religious and popular songs that supposedly
We were supposed to learn, but instead he taught us Argentine tangos from the 1930s. I hadn't forgotten those songs.

Looking at the expectant faces around me, I moved closer to the fire. I cleared my throat and began to sing, ignoring the off-key notes escaping my mouth. For a moment, I thought I was faithfully reproducing the passionate way Professor Hans sang his tangos. I placed my hands on my chest and closed my eyes, as if transported by the sadness and tragedy contained in each verse.

My audience was fascinated. Mocototeris and iticoteris had come out of their huts so as not to miss a single one of my gestures.

The boss stared at me for a long time. Finally, he said:
—Our women cannot learn to sing in such a strange way.
Then the men sang. Each singer stood alone in the middle of the clearing, with both hands resting on the bow, which was placed on the ground. Sometimes a friend accompanied the singer; then, the singer
He rested his arm on his companion's shoulder. A song performed by a young Mocótoteri man was the favorite of the night.

When a monkey jumps from tree to tree, I shoot it with my arrow. Only green leaves fall.
Spinning in the air, they pile up at my feet.

The iticoteris did not lie down in their hammocks, but talked and sang all night with their guests.
I slept with the women and children in the empty huts surrounding the main entrance of the

shabono.

In the morning I ate a huge platter of papaya and pineapple chunks that one of the Mocototeris girls had brought for me from her father's orchard. Ritimi and I had discovered those fruits while we were looking for them in the bushes. She had advised me not to ask for them, not because it was wrong, but because they weren't ripe. But I didn't mind their bitter taste or the slight stomachache that followed. I hadn't eaten any familiar fruit for months. Bananas and dates were like vegetables to me.

"You had a terrible voice when you sang," a young man said to me, sitting down next to me. "Oh, I didn't understand your..." song, but it sounded awful.

Unable to answer, I shot him a furious look. I didn't know whether to laugh or insult him in turn.

Throwing her arms around my neck, Ritimi burst out laughing. She glanced at me sideways and then whispered in my ear:

—When you sang I thought the monkey meat had given you a stomach ache.

Squatting in the same spot in the clearing where they had been the night before, a group of Iticoteris and Mocototeris were still speaking in the formal, ritualized manner typical of the Wayamou. The haggling was a slow and laborious process during which equal importance was given to the items being bartered, the exchange of information, and gossip.

Around noon, some of the women began criticizing their husbands for the items they had purchased, saying that they needed machetes, aluminum pots, and cotton hammocks for themselves.

"Poison arrows!" one of the women shouted angrily. "You could make them yourselves if you don't..." you were so lazy.

Paying no attention whatsoever to the women's observations, the men continued with their talks.

XIII

We left the Mocototeri village after midday, with baskets full of the usual bananas, dates, and meat that our hosts gave us.

Shortly before nightfall, three mocototeris caught up with us. One of them raised his bow to speak.

—Our boss wants the white girl to stay with us.

He looked at me over the tip of his arrow pointed at me.

"Only a coward aims his arrow at a woman," said lramamowe, stepping in front of me. "Why don't you shoot, you useless mocototeri?"

"We didn't come here to fight," the man said, returning the bow and arrow to their upright position. We could have ambushed you a while ago. All we want is to scare the white girl into coming with us.

"She can't stay with you. Milagros brought her to our *shabono.* If he had wanted her to stay with you, he would have brought her to your village."

"We want her to come with us," the man insisted. "We'll take her back before the rains start."

"If you make me angry, I'll kill you right here." Iramamowe beat his chest. "Remember that, coward mocototeri, that I am a fierce warrior. The *hekuras* of my chest are always at my command, even without taking *epena.*

Iramamowe approached the three men—. Don't you know that the white girl belongs to the Iticoteris?

"Why don't you ask her where she wants to stay? She liked our people. Maybe she'd like to live with us."

lramamowe began to laugh with thunderous laughter that made it impossible to tell if he was amused or furious. He stopped abruptly.

— The white girl didn't like the way the mocototeris looked. She said you all look like monkeys.

Iramamowe turned to me. There was such a pleading expression in his eyes that all I could do was not laugh.

I felt a pang of remorse as I looked at the perplexed faces of the three Mocototeris. For a moment I was tempted to deny Iramamowe's words. But I couldn't ignore their anger, nor had I forgotten Arasuwe's apprehension at the idea of my attending the feast. I crossed my arms over my chest, raised my chin, and, without looking directly at them, said:

— I don't want to go to your village. I don't want to eat and sleep with monkeys.

The iticoteris burst into loud laughter. The three men abruptly turned their backs and disappeared down the path that led into the jungle.

We camped not far from the river, in a clearing in the jungle, where remnants of temporary shelters still remained. We didn't cover them with fresh leaves, because old Kamosiwe assured us it wouldn't rain that evening.

Iramamowe did not eat but sat, somber and focused, in front of the fire. There was tension in him, as if he were expecting the three men to reappear at any moment.
"Is there a danger that the mocototeris will return?" I asked him.
lramamowe took a while to reply to me.

"They're cowards. They know my arrows would kill them instantly." He stared at the ground, his lips pressed tightly together. "I'm trying to figure out the best way back to our *shabono."*
“We should split up,” suggested old Kamosiwe, looking at me with his one eye. “There’s no moon tonight: the mocototeris won't return. Perhaps tomorrow they'll ask us for the white girl again. We can tell them that they frightened her and she asked us to take her back to the mission.
"Are you going to send her back?" Ritimi's voice hung in the darkness, full of tension.

"No," said the old man cheerfully.

The gray beard on his chin, his eye that never missed a thing, his slight, wrinkled body gave him the appearance of a malevolent goblin. Etewa must return to the *shabono* with Ritimi and the white girl, through the mountains. It's a longer route, but they'll be able to go faster because they won't have children or the elderly with them.

They'll arrive at our village only a day or two after us. It's a good route, not used by many people. — Old Kamosiwe stood up and sniffed the air—. It will rain tomorrow. Build a shelter for the night —he told Etewa. Then he squatted down, a smile on his lips and his sunken eye fixed on me—.

Are you afraid to return to the *shabono* by way of the mountains?

Smiling, I shook my head. Somehow, I couldn't believe I was in a real danger.

"Were you afraid when the mocototeri pointed its arrow at you?" the old man asked.

— No. I knew the iticoteris would protect me.

I had to restrain myself from adding that I found the incident more comical than dangerous. It was clear, then, that despite the obvious boasting, characteristic of any

In this critical circumstance, Mocototeris and Iticoteris were perfectly serious in their threats and demands.

Old Kamosiwe was delighted with my answer. I had the feeling he was more pleased by my confidence in his people than by the fact that I hadn't been frightened. He talked with Etewa for a long time that night. Ritimi fell asleep with my hand in hers, a cheerful smile on her lips. Watching her sleep, I guessed why she seemed so happy. For a few days, she would have Etewa practically to herself.

In the *shabono,* men almost never showed affection to their wives, as caresses were considered a weakness. Men were only openly tender and loving with children;

They pampered, kissed, and caressed each other with fervor. I had seen Etewa, and even the fierce lramamowe, carry their women's heavy loads of firewood only to drop them as soon as they approached the *shabono.* When no other man was around, I watched Etewa set aside a special piece of meat or fruit for Ritimi or Tutemi. Protected by the darkness, I had seen him press his ear against Tutemi's belly to listen for the strong kicks of his child. In the presence of others, he never mentioned the fact that he was going to be a father.

Etewa woke us up at Ritimi a few hours before dawn. Silently, we left the camp, following the sandy riverbank. Except for our hammocks, a few bananas, and the three pineapples the young Mocototeri woman had given me, our baskets were empty. The elder Kamosiwe had assured

Etewa that there would be plenty to hunt. There was no moon, but the water shimmered black, reflecting the faint glow of the sky. At intervals, the sound of a night bird pierced the stillness: a faint cry heralding the dawn.

One by one the stars disappeared, the outlines of the trees gradually emerged, while the rosy light of dawn slowly descended to the shadows at our feet. I was amazed by the width of the river, by the silence of its waters, so still they seemed motionless. Three parrots formed a triangle in the sky, coloring the white clouds with their red, blue, and yellow feathers, while the bright orange sun rose above the treetops.

Etewa opened her mouth in a yawn that seemed to rise from the deepest recesses of her lungs. She squinted; the sunlight was too bright for her eyes, which hadn't had enough sleep.

We untied our baskets. Ritimi and I sat on a log and watched as Etewa drew his bow. Slowly, he raised his arms and arched his back, aiming the arrow high into the air. He remained motionless for an eternity, like a stone figure, each powerful muscle carefully controlled.
He was drawing, his gaze fixed on the birds crossing the sky. I didn't dare ask why he took so long before shooting his arrow.
I didn't hear the whizz of the arrow as it crossed the air: only a short cry that dissolved into a fluttering of wings. For an instant, the parrot, a mass of feathers that the red-stained arrow seemed to hold together, was suspended in the air; then it plummeted vertically, not far from where Etewa stood.
Etewa lit a fire and roasted the plucked bird, along with some bananas. She ate only a small portion and insisted that we take the rest so that we would gather strength for the difficult climb up the hills.

We didn't miss the sun's rays falling on the river as we ventured deeper into the jungle.
The dimness of the climbing plants and trees was a comfort to our weary eyes. The withered leaves looked like clusters of flowers against the green background. Etewa picked branches from the dark wild cacao trees.
—This wood is good for rubbing and starting fires—he said, cleaning the bark off the branches with his sharp knife, made from the lower incisor of an agouti.

Then he cut open the green, yellow, and purple pods, each of which clung individually to the short, leafless cacao trunks. He opened the pods and sucked out the sweet, gelatinous pulp surrounding the seeds, which he then wrapped in leaves.
— Cooked —Ritimi explained—, pohoro seeds are delicious. I wondered if they would taste

similar to chocolate.

"There must be monkeys and weasels around here," Etewa explained, showing me the peels of already eaten fruit scattered on the ground. "They like depohoro fruit as much as we do."

A little further on, Etewa stopped in front of a twisted vine, which he marked with his knife.
—*Mamucori.* I will return to this place when I need to make new poison.
—*Ashukamaki?* —I asked when we stopped under a tree whose trunk was encrusted with shiny, waxy-looking leaves.

But it wasn't the vine used to thicken curare. Etewa pointed out that its leaves were long and serrated. He had stopped when he noticed bones of various animals on the ground.
"A harpy eagle," he said, pointing to the nest hidden in the treetop.
—Don't kill her—Ritimi pleaded. —Perhaps she is the spirit of a dead iticoteri.
Ignoring his wife, Etewa climbed the tree. Reaching the nest, he lifted a fluffy white eaglet that was chirping incessantly. We heard its mother's loud cries as Etewa dropped the chick to the ground. He leaned against the trunk and a branch and aimed his arrow at the bird circling above him.
“I’m glad I killed it,” Etewa said, indicating that we should follow him to the spot where the dead eagle had crashed against trees and branches. “It only eats meat.” He turned to Ritimi and added Gently—: I heard her scream before I pointed: it wasn't the voice of a spirit.
She took out the soft, white feathers that the bird had on its chest, and others, gray and long, from its wings, and wrapped them in leaves.

The afternoon heat filtering through the trees made me drowsy, and I felt no desire but to sleep. Ritimi had dark circles under her eyes, as if she had smeared charcoal on her smooth skin. Etewa's pace slowed. Without a word, she walked toward the river. She stood motionless in the wide, shallow water, suspended in the warmth and the radiance. She gazed at the reflected clouds and trees; then she lay down on an ochre sandbar in the middle of the river. The blue turned green and red from the pigments of the submerged roots. Not a leaf or a cloud stirred. Even the damselflies resting on the water seemed motionless in their transparent vibrations. Lying face down, I let my hands rest flat on the river's surface, as if I could hold the languid harmony that reigned between the river's reflections and the sky's brilliance. I slid down onto my belly until my lips touched the water, and I drank the reflected clouds.

Two herons that had flown away when we arrived returned. Standing on their long legs, their necks submerged in their feathers, they looked at us with half-closed, blinking eyes. I saw silvery bodies leaping in the air, seeking the intoxicating warmth that rested on the water.
"Fish!" I exclaimed, my lethargy momentarily dissipated.

Laughing, Etewa pointed his arrow at a flock of screaming parrots crossing the sky. "Birds!" he shouted.

He took an arrowhead and, with the tip of his tongue, tasted the poison to see if it was still good. Satisfied with its bitter taste, he tied the tip to a shaft. Then he tested the bow and let out the string. "It's not taut enough," he said, untying one end. He twisted it several times and tied it again. "We'll spend the night here,"
he decided, as he waded across the river.
He climbed to the opposite bank and disappeared among the trees.
Ritimi and I stayed on the sandy shore. She unwrapped the feathers and spread them out on a rock so the sun would kill the lice. With great enthusiasm, she pointed to a tree from which clusters of pale flowers hung like fruit. She cut off whole branches and offered me the flowers.
"They're very sweet," she explained, noticing that I couldn't decide whether to eat them.
I tried to explain that the flowers reminded me of strongly scented soap, and almost immediately sleep overtook me. I awoke as the sounds of dusk erased the daylight, while the murmur of the breeze cooled the trees and the birds called, preparing to spend the night.
Etewa had returned with two guacos and a pile of palm leaves. I helped Ritimi gather firewood along the riverbank. While she plucked the birds, I helped Etewa build a shelter.
"Are you sure it's going to rain?" I asked, looking at the clear, cloudless sky.
"If old Kamosiwe said it's going to rain, it will rain," Etewa replied. "He can smell the rain just like others can smell food."

We built a cozy little hut. The front post was taller than the two back ones, but not tall enough for us to stand upright. The posts were joined together by long poles, giving the shelter a triangular shape. Both the roof and the back were covered with palm leaves.
We covered the ground with banana leaves because the posts weren't strong enough to support three hammocks.

In truth, Etewa hadn't built the shelter for Ritimi and my comfort so much as for his own. If it got wet from the rain, it could cause the child Tutemi was carrying to be stillborn or deformed.

Ritimi roasted the birds, several bananas, and the cocoa seeds over the fire that Etewa lit outside the hut.

I smashed one of our pineapples. The mix of flavors and textures reminded me of a Thanksgiving dinner.

—It must be like momo nuts —Ritimi said when I explained what our cranberry sauce was like—.

The momo is also red; it must be cooked for a long time until it becomes soft. Then it must be rinsed in water until all the poison is gone.

—I don't think I would like momo nuts.

"I'm sure you will," Ritimi affirmed. "Look how much you like *pohoro* seeds . Momo nuts are even better."

Smiling, I nodded. Although the roasted cacao beans didn't taste like chocolate, they were just as delicious as fresh cashews.

Etewa and Ritimi fell asleep the moment they lay down on the plantain leaves. I lay down next to Ritimi. Asleep, she stretched out toward me and pulled me close. The warmth of her body filled me with a comforting languor; her rhythmic breathing lulled me into a pleasant drowsiness. Through my mind, a succession of dreamlike images drifted by, sometimes slow, sometimes fast, as if someone were projecting them before me: the mocototeris leaping from tree to tree slithered past me, and their cries were mistaken for the eyes of the howler monkey. Caimans with luminous eyes, barely visible on the surface of the water, blinked sleepily and, suddenly, opened their gigantic jaws ready to swallow me. Anteaters with long, sticky tongues like threads blew bubbles in which I saw myself trapped along with hundreds of ants.

I was awakened by a sudden gust of wind; it carried with it the scent of rain. I sat up and listened to the heavy drops striking the palm fronds. The familiar sounds of crickets and frogs provided a continuous, pulsating background hum to the cries and wails of the night monkeys and the flute-like calls of the partridges. I was sure I heard footsteps and then the sound of snapping branches.

"There's someone outside," I said, touching Etewa. He approached the front post of the shelter.
"It's a jaguar that hunts frogs in the swamps." Etewa turned my head slightly to the left.
You can smell it.

I sniffed the air repeatedly.
—I can't smell anything.

"That smell is the jaguar's breath. It's strong because it eats everything raw." Etewa turned my head again, this time to the right. "Listen, it's going back to the jungle."
I lay down again. Ritimi woke up, rubbed her eyes, and smiled. "I dreamt I was climbing the mountains and seeing the waterfalls."

"We'll go there tomorrow," said Etewa, untying the small bag of *epena* she wore around her neck.

He put some powder in the palm of his hand and, with a deep breath, inhaled it through his nose.

—Are you going to sing to the *hekuras* now? —I asked him.

"I will beg the spirits of the jungle to protect us," Etewa said, and began to sing softly.

Her song, carried on the night breeze, seemed to pierce the darkness. I was certain that the spirits who dwelled in the four corners of the Earth could hear her. The fire gradually died down until only a reddish glow remained. I no longer heard Etewa's voice, but her lips were still moving as I drifted off to sleep, a dreamless sleep.

Shortly afterwards I was awakened by Ritimi's faint moans and I touched her shoulder, thinking she was having a nightmare.

"Want to try?" he murmured.

Surprised, I opened my eyes and saw Etewa's smiling face; they were making love. I watched them for a while. The movement of their bodies was so intimate that they barely moved.

Etewa, not at all embarrassed, came out of Ritimi and knelt before me. Lifting my legs, he stretched them out slightly. He pressed his cheeks against my thighs; his touch was like the playful caress of a child. There was no embrace, no words. But I felt filled with tenderness.

Etewa returned to Ritimi, resting his head between her shoulder and mine.

—Now we are truly sisters— said Ritimi gently. — On the outside we don't look the same, but on the inside we are now the same.

I snuggled up to her. The river breeze blowing through the shelter was like a caress.

The rosy light of dawn descended gently upon the trees. Ritimi and Etewa headed towards the river.

I left the shelter and breathed in the air of the new day. At dawn, the darkness of the jungle was no longer black but a bluish-green, like an underwater cavern illuminated by light filtering through a secret crack.

A light mist, like gentle rain, dampened my face as I pushed aside leaves and vines from my path.

Tiny spiders with hairy legs were quickly rebuilding their silver webs.

Etewa found a beehive inside a hollow tree. After squeezing the last drop into our mouths, she rinsed the honeycomb in a gourd filled with water, and we drank the sweet water.
We climbed up almost enclosed paths alongside small waterfalls and gorges of the river, which ran at dizzying speeds and produced a breeze that stirred our hair and shook the bamboo on the bank.

—This is the scene from my dream— said Ritimi, stretching out her arms as if to encompass the wide course of water that plunged before us into a wide, deep pool.

I walked on the dark basalt rocks that jutted out around the falls. For a long time, I stood underwater, my hands raised to break the thunderous force of the cascade, now warmed by the sun.

"Come, white girl!" Etewa shouted. "The spirits of the running water will make you sick."

Later that afternoon, we camped beside a wild banana grove. Among the bananas, I found an avocado tree. It had only one fruit, not pear-shaped, but round and the size of a melon, and it gleamed as if made of wax. Etewa lifted me up so I could reach the first branch, and then I slowly climbed toward the fruit hanging at the end of the highest branch. My desire to reach that green orb was so great that I ignored the fragile branches that broke under my weight. As I pulled the fruit toward me, the branch I was leaning on gave way.

Etewa laughed until tears streamed down her cheeks. Ritimi, laughing too, scraped the avocado puree off my tummy and thighs.

"He could have hurt me," I said, stung by his indifference and amusement. "Maybe he broke my leg."

“No, you didn’t break it,” Etewa assured me. “The ground is soft because of the dead leaves.” She took out some mashed fruit and offered me a taste. “I told you not to stay under the falls.”

He added seriously, "The spirits of the flowing water made you ignore the danger of the dry branches."

By the time Etewa had built the shelter, all traces of the day had vanished. A whitish mist clouded the air. It didn't rain, but dew fell from the leaves in large drops at the slightest touch.

We slept on the plantain leaves, warmed by our bodies and by the low fire that Etewa kept alive all night by occasionally pushing the burning logs towards the flames with his foot.

We left the camp before dawn. A thick fog still enveloped the trees, and the croaking of frogs reached us as if from a great distance. The higher we climbed, the sparser the vegetation became, until finally there was nothing left but grass and rocks.

We arrived along a plain eroded by winds and rains, like a relic of other times.

Below, the jungle continued to sleep under a blanket of mist: a mysterious and pathless world, whose a vastness one could never guess from the outside. We sat on the ground and waited in silence for the sun to rise.

An overwhelming awe made me stand up as the sky turned red and violet along the eastern horizon. The clouds, obeying the wind, parted to let the disc pass. A pinkish mist rolled over the treetops, touching the shadows and painting them dark blue, scattering greens and yellows across the sky until it reached a transparent blue.

I looked back at myself, toward the west, where the clouds shifted and allowed the expanding light to filter through. To the south, the sky was tinged with fiery flashes, and the luminous clouds They were piled up, pushed by the wind.

"There is our *shabono ,"* Etewa said, pointing into the distance. He took my arm and turned me toward the North. "And there is the great river, where the white man passes."
The sun had lifted the blanket of fog. The river shone like a golden serpent slicing through the greenery until it disappeared into a vast expanse that seemed to belong to another world.
I wanted to speak, to shout at the top of my lungs, but I had no words to express my emotions. Looking at Ritimi and Etewa, I knew they understood how deeply the place moved me. I opened my arms as if to embrace the wondrous border between jungle and sky. I felt I was on the edge of time and space. I could hear the vibrations of the light, the whispering of the trees, and the cries of distant birds carried on the wind.

I suddenly knew that if the iticoteris had never shown any curiosity about my past, it was by choice, not for lack of interest. For them, I had no personal history. Only in this way could they accept me as anything more than a strange being. The events and relationships of the past had begun to fade from my memory. It wasn't that I had forgotten them: I had simply stopped thinking about them, because they held no meaning there in the jungle. Like the iticoteris, I had learned to live in the present. Time was outside of me. It was something to be used only in the moment. Once used, it sank back into itself and became an imperceptible part of my inner being.

— You've been very quiet for a long time —Ritimi observed, sitting down on the floor.
She bent her legs, wrapped her arms around them, and rested her chin on them, looking at me.
— I've been thinking about how happy I feel here. Smiling, Ritimi swayed gently back and forth.
— One day I will gather firewood and you will no longer be by my side. But I will not be sad, because this afternoon, before we reach the *shabono,* we will paint ourselves with annatto and be happy to see a flock of parrots chasing the setting sun.

XIV

I had been told that women were not to be involved in any aspect of the *epena ritual.* They were not to prepare it, nor were they allowed to inhale the hallucinogenic powder. It wasn't even proper for a woman to touch the reed tube through which the powder was blown, unless a man specifically asked her to hand it to him.

To my utter astonishment, one morning I saw Ritimi bent over the hearth, intently studying the dark red *epena* seeds drying on the embers. Without letting me know she was there, she proceeded to rub the dried seeds between her palms on a large leaf that held a small pile of bark ash. With the same confidence and skill with which he had seen Etewa do it, he periodically spat on the seeds and ash while kneading them into a uniform and pliable paste.

As I spread the floury mixture onto a heated fragment of a vessel, Ritimi looked at me and smiled It clearly revealed how much he enjoyed my bewilderment.

"Whoa, the *epena* will be strong," he said, looking again at the hallucinogenic paste that was exploding in noisy bombs and bubbles on the piece of baked clay.

Using a smooth stone, he ground the mass, quickly drying it until it became a very fine, uniform powder, which included a layer of powder from the fragment of the vessel itself.

— I didn't know that women knew how to prepare *epena* —I commented.

— Women can do anything—replied Ritimi, depositing the brownish powder in a narrow bamboo container.

I waited in vain for him to satisfy my curiosity and, finally, I asked:

— Why are you preparing it?

"Etewa knows I make good *epena,"* he declared proudly. "She likes to have some ready whenever she comes back from a hunt."

For several days we had eaten nothing but fish. Since I didn't feel like hunting, Etewa and a group of men built a dam in a

stream, placing flattened pieces of *ayori-toto plants across it.* The water turned milky white. All the women had to do was fill their baskets with the suffocated fish that floated to the surface. But the iticoteris didn't much care for fish, and soon the women and children began to complain about the lack of meat. Two days had passed since Etewa and his friends had gone deep into the jungle.

"How do you know Etewa will return today?" I asked, and before Ritimi could answer, I quickly added, "I know; you feel it in your legs."

Smiling, Ritimi lifted the long, narrow tube and blew repeatedly. "I'm cleaning it," he said with a mischievous glint in his eyes.

—Have you ever taken *Epena ?*

Ritimi leaned closer to whisper in my ear:

"Yes, but I didn't like it. It gave me a headache." She glanced around furtively. "Would you like to try some?"

—I don't want it to give me a headache.

—Perhaps the same won't happen to you.

Standing up, he calmly placed the bamboo container and the meter-long cane in his basket.

—Let's go to the river. I want to make sure I mixed the epena properly .

We walked along the shore a good distance from where the stingrays usually went to bathe or collect water. I squatted on the ground in front of Ritimi, who very carefully began to introduce a small amount of *epena* into one end of the cane. Gently, she tapped the tube with her index finger, distributing the powder along the length of the cane. I felt beads of sweat trickling down my sides. The only time I had ever been high was when I had three wisdom teeth extracted, I wondered if it wouldn't have been better to endure the pain instead of suffering the awful hallucinations the drug caused.

"Lift your head a little," Ritimi advised, holding the thin tube in front of me. "See the small *rasha* nut at the tip? Press it against your nostril."

I nodded. I could see that the palm seed had been firmly glued to the end of the cane. I made sure the small hole in the hollow fruit was inside my nose. I ran my fingers along the fragile, smooth cane, all the way down. I heard the sudden burst of compressed air being shot through the tube. I let go as a sharp pain pierced my brain.

"It feels awful!" I complained, hitting the top of my head with my palms.

— Now the other one— said Ritimi laughing, as he placed the cane on the left side of my nose. I felt like I was bleeding, but Ritimi assured me it was just snot and saliva dripping.

uncontrollably from my nose and mouth. I tried to wipe it off, but I couldn't lift my hand, it felt so heavy.

— Why don't you try to enjoy it instead of worrying so much about a little drool falling on you?

— said Ritimi, mocking my clumsy efforts—. Then I'll wash you in the river. "There's nothing to enjoy," I replied, starting to sweat profusely from every pore.
I felt nauseous and my limbs felt strangely heavy. I saw red and yellow points of light everywhere. I wondered what Ritimi found so funny. Her laughter echoed in my ears as if it were coming from inside my head.

— Let me blow a little into your nose—I suggested.

—Oh, no; I have to take care of you. We can't both end up with headaches.

— This *epena* will give me more than just a headache. Blow a little more in my nose. I want to see a *hekura.*

"The *hekuras* don't come to women," Ritimi said between fits of laughter. She put the cane to my nose. "But maybe if you sing, they'll come to you."

I felt each grain travel down my nasal passage, exploding atop my skull. Slowly, a delicious languor spread through my body. I turned my gaze back to the river, almost expecting some mythical creature to emerge from its depths. The ripples began to grow into waves that crashed with such force that I fell back onto my hands and knees. I was sure the water was trying

To catch me. When I looked at Ritimi's face, I was surprised by her alarmed expression.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

My voice trailed off as I followed the direction of her gaze. Etewa e lramamowe were standing before us. With great difficulty, I got up. I touched them to make sure I wasn't hallucinating.
They untied the large bundles hanging from their backs and handed them to the other hunters who were waiting behind them, on the path.

—Take the meat to the *shabono* —Iramamowe said in a hoarse voice.

The thought that Etewa and Iramamowe would eat such a small portion of the meat filled me with such sadness that I began to weep. A hunter gives away most of his kill. He would rather starve than risk being accused of greed.

"I'll give you my share," I told Etewa. "I like fish better than meat."

—Why are you taking *Epena?*

Etewa's voice was stern, but her eyes sparkled with amusement.

"We had to see if Ritimi had mixed the powder properly," I murmured. "It's not strong enough." I haven't seen any *hekura yet.*

"It's strong," Etewa replied. Placing his hands on my shoulders, he made me sit on the ground in front of him. "The seed-based *epena* is stronger than the one made from bark." He filled the cane with the powder. "Ritimi's breath isn't very strong."

A devilish smile wrinkled his face as he placed the tube against my nose and blew.

I fell backward, clutching my head, which reverberated with the laughter of lramamowe and Etewa. Slowly, I stood up. It felt as if my feet weren't touching the ground.

—Dance, white girl—Iramamowe urged me. —Let's see if you can attract the *hekuras* with your song.

Fascinated by his words, I stretched out my arms and began to dance with small, bouncy steps, just as I had seen men do when they were in a trance of *epena.*

In my head echoed the melody and words of one of the songs for the *hekuras,* which Iramamowe sang.

After calling for several days, the hummingbird hekura finally came to me. Amazed, I watched its dance. I fainted on the ground and felt nothing as it pierced my throat and tore out my tongue. I didn't see my blood run to the river, turning the water red. It filled the opening with precious feathers. That is why I know the songs of the hekuras, that is why I sing so well.

Etewa guided me to the riverbank and poured water on my face and chest.

"Don't repeat her song," she warned me. "Iramamowe will get angry. She will hurt you with her magic plants." She wanted to obey, but she was forced to repeat the *hekuras* song of lramamowe.

"Don't repeat her song," Etewa pleaded. "Iramamowe will make you deaf. He will make your eyes bleed." Etewa turned to Iramamowe. "Don't bewitch the white girl."

“I won’t,” Iramamowe assured her. “I’m not angry with her. I know she doesn’t yet know our ways.” Taking my face in his hands, he forced me to look him in the eyes. “I see the *hekuras* dancing in her pupils.”

In the sunlight, lramamowe's eyes were not dark, but clear, the color of honey.

—I can see the *hekuras* in your eyes too— I said, studying the yellow sparks in her irises

His face shone with a kindness I had never seen before. I tried to tell him that I finally understood why he was called Jaguar Eye, but I fainted on top of him. I vaguely remember someone carrying me in their arms. As soon as I found myself in my hammock, I fell into a deep sleep, from which I did not awaken.

I didn't wake up until the next day.

Arasuwe, Iramamowe, and old Kamosiwe had gathered at Etewa's hut. I looked at them one by one, gripped by anxiety. They had painted themselves with *annatto,* and their pierced ears were adorned with pieces of cane and feathers. When Ritimi sat down beside me in my hammock, I knew she had come to protect me from the men's anger. Before they had a chance to speak, I began to weave excuses for having taken the *epena.* The faster
I spoke, the safer I felt. A steady stream of words, I thought, was the surest way to dispel their anger.

Arasuwe finally interrupted my incoherent rambling.

—You speak too fast. I can't understand what you're saying.

I was taken aback by the friendliness of her tone. I was sure it wasn't a result of what I had said. I glanced at the other two. Except for a vague curiosity, their faces revealed nothing. I leaned against Ritimi and asked softly:

—If they're not angry, why are they in the cabin? "I don't know," he replied softly.

"White girl, had you ever seen a *hekura* before yesterday?" Arasuwe asked. "I've never seen a *hekura* in my life," I quickly asserted. "Not even yesterday."

— Iramamowe saw *hekuras* in your eyes—Arasuwe insisted. He took *epena* last night. His personal *hekura* told him that he had taught you his song.

"I know Iramamowe's song because I've heard it many times," I said, almost shouting. "How could her *hekura have taught it to me?* Spirits don't come to women."

— You don't look like an iticoteri woman —commented the old Kamosiwe, looking at me as if he were seeing me for the first time—.

The *hekuras* could easily be mistaken. —He wiped the tobacco juice that was dripping from the corner of his lips—. Sometimes the *hekuras* have appeared to women.

— Believe me —I told lramamowe—; I know your song because I have heard you sing it many times.

— But I sing very softly—Iramamowe argued. —If you really know my song, why don't you sing it now?

Hoping this would put an end to the matter of the *epena,* I began to hum the tune. To my great dismay, I couldn't remember the words.

"See?" exclaimed Iramamowe triumphantly. "My *hekura* taught you my song. That's why I wasn't angry with you yesterday, that's why I didn't blow on your eyes and ears, that's why I didn't hit you with a burning log."

"That's how it should be," I admitted, forcing myself to smile.

A chill ran through me. Iramamowe was well known for his bad temper, his nature vengeful and her cruel punishments.

The old man Kamosiwe spat his ball of tobacco onto the ground and he picked up a banana that was hanging directly above him. He peeled it and put the whole thing in his mouth.

“Long ago, there was a female *shapori ,”* he stammered, still chewing. “Her name was Imaawami. Her skin was as white as yours. She was tall and very strong. When she took *epena,* she sang to the *hekuras.* She knew how to relieve pain with massage and how to suck out illness. There was no one like her at hunting the lost souls of children and countering the curses of enemy shamans.”

—Tell us, white girl— Arasuwe interjected—, have you met a *shapori* before coming here? Has one taught you?

"I know shamans, but they never taught me anything." In great detail, I described the kind of work I did before arriving at the mission. I spoke of Doña Mercedes and how she allowed me to observe and record her patients' visits.

—Once, Doña Mercedes let me take part in a séance. She believed that perhaps I was a medium.

Healers from various regions had gathered at his house. We all sat in a circle singing to summon the spirits. We sang for a long time.

—Did you take *epena?* —Iramamowe asked.

"No. We smoked some big, thick cigars," I said, and I almost laughed at the memory.

There were ten people in Doña Mercedes's room. We sat stiffly on stools covered with goatskin. With obsessive concentration, we puffed on our cigars, filling the room with smoke so thick we could barely see each other. I was too preoccupied with my dizziness to enter a trance.

—One of the healers asked me to leave, saying that the spirits would not come while I was in the room.

—Did the *hekuras* show up when you left? —Iramamowe asked.

—Yes. Doña Mercedes told me the next day how the spirits had entered the head of each healer.

"How strange," murmured lramamowe. "But you must have learned a lot if you lived in his house."

“I learned his prayers and incantations for the spirits, and also the types of plants and roots he used for his patients. But he never taught me how to communicate with the spirits or how to heal people.” I looked at each of the men. Etewa was the only one smiling.

According to her, the only way to learn anything about healing was by practicing it.

—Have you started healing? —asked old Kamosiwe.

—No. Doña Mercedes suggested that I go to the jungle.

The four men looked at each other. Then, slowly, they turned to me and asked almost in unison:

—Did you come here to learn about shamans?

"No!" I shouted; then, in a lower tone, I added, "I came here to bring Angelica's ashes."

Choosing my words very carefully, I explained that my profession was to study people, including shamans, not because I want to be one of them, but because I was interested in investigating the similarities and differences between the various shamanistic traditions.

— Have you ever been with other *shaporis,* besides Doña Mercedes? —asked old Kamosiwe.

I told them about Juan Caridad, an old man I had met ten years earlier. I stood up and took my backpack, which I kept inside a basket tied to one of the beams. From the inner pocket, which, because of its strange closure — a zipper — had escaped the old woman's notice, I took out a small leather pouch. I emptied its contents into Arasuwe's hands. Suspiciously, she examined a stone, a pearl, and the uncut diamond that Mr. Barth had given me.

— This stone —I said, taking it from Arasuwe's hands—was given to me by Juan Caridad. He made it leap out of the water right before my eyes.

I stroked the smooth, golden stone. It fit perfectly in the palm of my hand. It was oval-shaped, flat on one side, with a round bump on the other.

"Did you keep him, the same way you kept Doña Mercedes?" Arasuwe asked.

— No. I didn't stay with him for very long. I was afraid of him. "Fear? I thought you were never afraid!" exclaimed old Kamosiwe.

— Juan Caridad was an impressive man. He gave me strange dreams in which he always appeared. In the morning he would tell me in detail what I had dreamed.

The men looked at each other and nodded.

— What a powerful *shapori !*— said Kamosiwe — What made you dream?

I told them that the dream that had scared me the most had been, to a certain extent, an exact sequential replica of an event that took place when I was five years old. Once, when I was returning from the beach in the car with my family, my father decided not to go directly home, but to take a detour through the jungle to look for orchids. We stopped by a shallow river. My brothers went into the undergrowth with my father. My mother, afraid of snakes and mosquitoes, stayed in the car. My sister dared me to wade with her to the other side. She was ten years older than me, and tall and thin, with short, curly hair, so sun-bleached it looked white. Her eyes were a dark, velvety brown, not blue or green like most blondes'. She sat down in the middle of the stream and told me that

I looked at the water between her feet: to my complete astonishment, the water turned blood red. “Are you hurt?” I asked her. She didn’t say a word; she stood up and, smiling, told me to follow her. I remained in the water, petrified, as I watched her climb to the opposite bank.

In the dream, I had the same fear, but I told myself that now that I was an adult, I had nothing to fear. I was going to follow my sister to the other side along the steep riverbank when I heard Juan Caridad's voice urging me to stay in the water. “She's calling you from the land of the dead,” he said. “Don't you remember she's dead?”

No matter how much I begged him, Juan Caridad absolutely refused to tell me how he managed to appear in my dream or how he knew my sister had died in a plane crash. I had never spoken to him about my family. He knew nothing about me, except that I came from Los Angeles and wanted to investigate healing practices.

Juan Caridad wasn't angry when I suggested that he probably knew someone who, in turn, knew me well. He assured me that no matter what I said or what I accused him of, he wouldn't speak about a matter he had sworn to silence. He also urged me to go home.

"Why did he give you the stone?" asked old Kamosiwe.

— Do you see these dark spots and the transparent veins that run across its surface in all directions? — "I explained, holding the stone up to his single eye. Juan Caridad told me they represent the trees and rivers of the jungle. He said the stone revealed that I would spend a long time in the jungle, and that I should keep it as a talisman to protect me from all harm."

The four men remained silent for a long time. Arasuwe handed me the uncut diamond and the pearl.

— Tell us what these stones are.

I told them about the diamond that Mr. Barth had given me on the mission.

"And this?" asked the old man Kamosiwe, taking the small pearl from my hand. "I've never seen such a round stone."

— I've had it for a long time.

— More than the stone that Juan Caridad gave you? —Ritimi asked.

— Much more. An old man also gave me the pearl when I arrived on Margarita Island, where I went with some school friends for a vacation. When we disembarked, an old fisherman came directly towards me. He placed the pearl in my hand and said, “It has been yours since the day you were born. You lost it, but I found it for you at the bottom of the sea.”

"So what happened then?" Arasuwe asked impatiently.

— Nothing much happened. Before I could recover from the shock, the old man was gone.

Kamosiwe held the pearl in her hand, letting it roll back and forth. It looked strangely beautiful in her dark, calloused palm, as if that were its natural place.

"I'd like you to stay with her," I told him. Smiling, Kamosiwe looked at me.

"I like it very much." He held the pearl up to the sunlight. "How beautiful it is. There are clouds inside the stone." "Did the old man who gave it to you look like me?" he asked as the four of them left the cabin.

"He was as old as you," I said, as he walked toward his cabin.

But he hadn't heard me. Holding the pearl high above her head, he walked through the clearing.

No one said anything about the fact that I had taken *epena.* Some nights, however, when the men gathered outside their huts to inhale the hallucinogenic powder, some young men shouted in joke:

—White girl, we want to see you dance! We want to hear you sing the song of *hekuras* de lramamowe! But no, I never tried the powder again.

XV

I never found out where Puriwariwe, Angelica's brother, lived. I wondered if they would actually call him when they needed him, or if he just sensed it. Nobody knew if he would stay in the *shabono* for a few days or several weeks.

There was something reassuring about his presence, in the way he sang to the *hekuras* at night, asking the spirits to protect his people, especially the children, who were the most vulnerable of all, from the enchantments of an evil *shapori* .

One morning, the old *shapori* went straight into Etewa's hut. He sat down in one of the empty hammocks and asked me to show him the treasures I had hidden in my backpack.
I was tempted to tell him I had nothing to hide, but I kept quiet and untied the basket hanging from the beam. I knew he was going to ask me for one of the stones, and I fervently hoped it wasn't the one Juan Caridad had given me. Somehow, I was sure that the stone had led me to the jungle.

I feared that if Puriwariwe took it from me, Milagros would come and take me back to the mission. Or worse, something terrible might happen to me. I implicitly accepted the belief in the stone's protective powers. The old man carefully studied both the diamond and the stone. He held the diamond up to the light.

“I want this one,” he said, smiling. “It has the colors of the sky inside.” Stretching out in the hammock, the old man placed the diamond and the other stone on his stomach. “Now, I want you to tell me about the *shapori* Juan Caridad.”

I want to hear all the dreams in which that man appeared.
—I don't know if I remember them all.

Looking at his thin, wrinkled face and his gaunt body, I had the vague feeling that I had known him for longer than I could remember. A familiar and tender feeling came over me when his smiling eyes met mine. I settled comfortably into my hammock and began to speak fluently.

When he didn't know the word iticoteri to say something, he used the Spanish word. To Puriwariwe this didn't seem bothering him. I had the impression that he was more interested in the sound and rhythm of my words than their actual meaning.

When I finished my story, the old man spat out the tobacco Ritimi had prepared for him before he left to work in the orchards. In a soft voice, he told me about the shaman woman Kamosiwe had already mentioned. Imaawami was not only considered a great *shapori,* but she was also believed to have been a magnificent huntress and warrior who raided enemy villages alongside the men.

"Did he have a rifle?" I asked, hoping to find out something about his identity.

Ever since I first heard about her, I'd been obsessed with the possibility that she was a white captive. Perhaps from a time as remote as the arrival of the Spanish in search of El Dorado.

"He used a bow and arrows," said the old shaman. "His *mamucori* poison was of the highest quality."

Although I tried to phrase my question in various ways, I was unable to find out whether Imaawami was a real person or a being from a mythological era. The only thing the *shapori* was willing to tell me was that Imaawami existed long ago. I was certain that the old man wasn't trying to avoid my questions.

It was very common for the iticoteris to be vague about past events.

Some afternoons, when the women had already prepared the last meal of the day, Puriwariwe would sit by the fire in the center of the clearing. Young and old alike would gather around him. I always found a place near him, because I didn't want to miss a single word he said. In a slow, monotonous, nasal tone, he spoke of the origin of humankind, of fire, of floods, of the moon and the sun. Some of these myths were already familiar to me. However, each time I heard them, it was as if it were a different story altogether.

Each narrator embellished or improved them according to their own criteria.

"What is the true creation myth?" I asked Puriwariwe one night when he had finished the story of Waipilishoni, a shaman woman who had created blood by mixing *annatto* and water.

He had given life to the wooden bodies of a brother and sister by making them drink that substance. The night before, the *shapori* had told us that the first Indian was born from the leg of a human-like creature.

For a moment, Puriwariwe looked at me with a perplexed expression.

"They are all real," he finally said. "Don't you know that man was created many times throughout history?"

I shook my head in amazement. He touched my face and laughed.

—Oh, how ignorant you still are! Listen carefully. I'll tell you all the times the world has been destroyed by fires and floods.

A few days later, Puriwariwe announced that Xorowe, Iramamowe's eldest son, was to be initiated as *a shapori.* Xorowe was perhaps seventeen or eighteen years old. His body was agile and slender, and in his narrow face with fine features, his dark brown eyes seemed too large and bright. Wearing only his hammock, he moved to the small hut that had been built for him in the clearing. It was believed that the *hekuras* fled from women, so none of them were allowed near the room, not even Xorowe's mother, grandmother, and sisters.

They chose a young man who had never been with a woman to care for the initiate. He blew the *penta* into Xorowe's nose, watched that the fire didn't go out, and made sure every day that Xorowe had enough water and honey, the only food the initiate was allowed. The women always left enough firewood outside the *shabono* so the boy wouldn't have to go looking for it.
Too far away. The men were responsible for finding the honey. Each day, the *shapori* sent them farther into the jungle to search for new hives.

Xorowe spent most of his time inside the hut, lying in his hammock. Sometimes he sat on a polished log that lramamowe had placed outside the little house, because he wasn't supposed to sit on the ground. After a week, Xorowe's face had darkened from the *epena.* His once bright eyes were dull and unfocused. His dirty, emaciated body moved clumsily, as if he were drunk.

Life continued as usual in the *shabono,* except for the families who lived closest to Xorowe's hut, who were not allowed to cook meat in their homes. According to Puriwariwe, the *hekuras* detested the smell of roasted meat, and even the slightest whiff of it would send them fleeing back to the mountains.

As his apprentice, Puriwariwe drank *epena* day and night. Without rest, he sang for hours, inviting the spirits to Xorowe's hut, begging the *hekuras* to rip open the young man's chest.

Some nights, Arasuwe, Iramamowe and others accompanied the old man in his songs.

During the second week, with an uncertain and trembling voice, Xorowe joined in the singing. At first, he only sang the songs of the *hekuras* of the armadillo, the tapir, the jaguar, and other large animals, which were considered male spirits. These were the easiest to convince. Next came the songs of the *hekuras* of plants and rocks. Finally, those of the female spirits: the spider, the snake, and the hummingbird. Not only were they the most difficult to attract, but their treacherous and jealous nature proved difficult to control.

One night, late in the day, when most of the inhabitants of the *shabono* were asleep, I sat outside Etewa's hut and watched the men singing. Xorowe was so weak that one of them had to hold him up so that Puriwariwe could dance around him.

"Xorowe, sing louder!" the old man told him. "Sing as loud as the birds, as loud as the jaguars."
Puriwariwe danced out of the *shabono* and disappeared into the jungle. "Xorowe, sing louder!"
"He shouted—. The *hekuras* who live in every corner of the world need to hear your song."
Three nights later, Xorowe's shouts of joy echoed throughout the *shabono:*

“Father, father, the *hekuras* are coming! I can hear them buzzing and whistling. They are dancing and coming toward me. They are tearing open my chest, my head. They are coming through my fingers and my feet.” Xorowe ran out of the hut. Squatting before the old man, he cried out, “Father, father, help me, for they are coming through my eyes and my nose!”

Puriwariwe helped Xorowe to his feet. They began to dance in the clearing; their thin, skeletal shadows spilled across the moonlit ground. Hours later, a desperate cry, the panicked howl of a child, pierced the dawn.

"Father, father, from now on don't let any woman near my cabin!"

“That’s what everyone says,” Ritimi murmured, getting out of her hammock. She stoked the fire and buried several plantains in the embers. “When Etewa decided to have him initiated as a *shapori,* I had already gone to live with him. The night he begged Puriwariwe not to let any woman near her, I went to his hut and drove the *hekuras away.”*

-Because?

—Etewa's mother advised me to do this. She was afraid he would die. She knew that Etewa liked women too much, and that he would never become a great *shapori.*

Ritimi sat down in my hammock. “I’ll tell you the whole story.” She settled comfortably against me and began to speak in a low murmur. “The night the *hekuras* entered Etewa’s breast, she screamed just like Xorowe screamed tonight. The female *hekuras* are the ones that make so much noise. They don’t want any of them.”

Etewa sobbed bitterly that night, crying out that an evil woman had passed near his hut. I felt very sad when I heard him say that the *hekuras* had abandoned him.

— Did Etewa ever find out that it was you who was in her cabin?

— No. Nobody saw me. If Puriwariwe knew, he never told him, because he knew that Etewa would never be a good *shapori.*

— So why was it initiated?

"There's always the possibility that a man can become a great *shapori. "* Ritimi rested his head on my arm. "That night, many men stayed up singing for the *hekuaras* to return. But the spirits had no desire to come back. They fled not only because Etewa was tainted by a woman, but because they feared he would never be a good father to them."

—Why does a man get dirty when he's with a woman?

—The *shaporis* get dirty. I don't know why, since both men and *shaporis* enjoy it. I think the female *hekuras* are jealous and afraid of a man who enjoys women too often.

Ritimi went on to explain that a sexually active man has little desire to take *epena* and chant to the spirits. Male spirits are not possessive. They are content if a man takes the hallucinogen before and after a hunt or raid.

—I would rather have a good hunter and warrior for a husband than a good *shapori* —he confessed— Shaporis don't like women very much.

—And what about lramamowe? —I asked—. He is considered a great *shapori* but he has two wives.

"Oh, you're so ignorant...! I have to explain everything to you." Ritimi laughed. "Iramamowe doesn't often sleep with his two wives. His younger brother, who doesn't have a wife of his own, sleeps with one of them."

Ritimi looked around to make sure no one could hear us. "Have you noticed that..." Does lramamowe often go into the jungle alone?

I nodded.

— But other men do it that way.

"And the women too." Ritimi mimicked me, mispronouncing the words, just as I had. It was very difficult for me to reproduce the correct nasal tone of the iticoteris, which was perhaps because they usually had tobacco in their mouths. "That's not what I mean. Iramamowe goes to the jungle to find what the great *shaporis are looking for."*

-What is it?

—The strength to travel to the house of thunder. The strength to travel to the sun and return alive.

"I saw Iramamowe sleeping in the jungle with a woman," I confessed.

Ritimi laughed softly.

"I'll tell you a very important secret," I whispered. "Iramamowe sleeps with a woman in the way the *shaporis do.* He takes the woman's energy, but gives her nothing in return."

—Did you sleep with him?

Ritimi nodded. But despite how much I pressured and begged her, she refused to explain anything further.

A week later, Xorowe's mother, sisters, aunts, and cousins began to lament in their cabins.

"Old man!" the mother shouted. "My son has no strength left. Do you want to starve him to death? Do you want to kill him from lack of sleep? It's time you left him in peace."

The old *shapori* paid no attention to their cries. The following night, Iramamowe took *epena* and danced before his son's hut. Alternately, he would leap very high or crawl on all fours, imitating the ferocious roars of a jaguar. He stopped suddenly. With his eyes fixed on a point directly in front of him, he sat down on the ground.

"Women, women, don't despair!" she shouted in a loud, nasal voice. "Xorowe has to go without food for a few more days. Although he seems weak and his movements are clumsy and he groans in his sleep, he will not die."

Rising up, Iramamowe went to Puriwariwe and asked him to blow more *epena* on his head. Then he returned to the same place where he had been sitting.
“Listen carefully,” Ritimi advised me. “Iramamowe is one of the few *shaporis* who have journeyed to the sun during their initiation. He has guided others on their first journey. He has two voices. The one you just heard is his own; the other is that of his personal *hekura”*

Now Iramamowe's words rose from the depths of his chest; like stones rolling down a ravine, words piled up in the silence of the people gathered in their huts. Huddled together, in an atmosphere heavy with smoke and anticipation, they barely seemed to breathe.

I longed for what Iramamowe's personal *hekura* had to say, for what was going to happen in the mysterious world of the initiates.

“My son has journeyed to the depths of the Earth and burned in the blazing fires of the silent caverns,” said lramamowe in his thunderous *hekura voice. “ Guided* by the eyes of the *hekuras,* he has been led through webs of darkness, across rivers and mountains. He has been taught the songs of the birds, the fish, the snakes, the spiders, the monkeys, and the jaguars.”

“Though his eyes and cheeks are sunken, he is strong. Those who have descended into the silent, burning caverns, those who have journeyed beyond the jungle mist, will return with their personal *hekura* on their chest.

They will be guided to the sun, to the luminous huts of my brothers and sisters, the *hekuras* of the sky.

“Women, women, do not shout his name! Let him continue his journey. Let him part from his mother and sisters, so that he may reach that world of light, which is more exhausting than the world of darkness.”

Fascinated, she listened to Iramamowe's voice. No one spoke, no one moved, no one looked at anything but her figure, sitting rigidly before her son's hut. After each pause, her voice rose to a higher pitch.

—Women, women, do not despair! On your path you will find those who have endured the long, foggy nights. You will find those who have not returned. You will find those who have not trembled with fear at what they have witnessed during their journey. You will find those whose bodies were burned and cut to pieces, whose bones were torn out and left to dry in the sun. You will find those who did not fall into the clouds on their way to the sun.

“Women, women, do not disturb his balance! My son is about to reach the end of his journey. Do not gaze upon his dark face. Do not look into his empty eyes that shine without light, for he is destined to be a lonely man.

Iramamowe got up. With Puriwariwe, he entered Xorowe's hut, where they spent the rest of the night softly singing to the *hekuras.*

A few days later, the young man who had cared for Xorowe during his long weeks of initiation washed him with hot water and dried him with aromatic leaves. Then he painted his body with a mixture of charcoal and *annatto:* wavy lines that ran from his forehead to his cheeks and shoulders. The rest of his body was covered with evenly spaced red spots that reached down to his ankles. For a moment, Xorowe stood in the middle of the clearing. His eyes shone sadly from their sunken sockets, filled with immense melancholy, as if he had just realized that he was no longer the human being he once was, but barely a shadow. Yet there was an aura of strength around him that he hadn't possessed before, as if the conviction of his newly acquired wisdom and experience were more enduring than the memory of his past. Silently, Puriwariwe led him toward the jungle.

XVI

— White girl!

Ritimi's son was shouting, running between the rows of cassava bushes. Out of breath, he stopped in front of me and shouted with excitement:

—White girl, your brother...!

—My what?

I dropped my planting stick and ran toward the shabono. I stopped at the edge of the cleared patch of jungle that surrounded the wooden palisade that served as a wall for the shabono. Although it wasn't considered a garden, squash, cotton, and various medicinal plants grew there. According to Etewa, the reason for this cleared strip was that enemies couldn't pass silently through that type of vegetation as they could under the cover of the jungle.

No unusual sounds came from the cabins. As I crossed the clearing toward the group of people sitting in front of Arasuwe's cabin, I unsurprisingly spotted Milagros.

—Blonde Indian —he said in Spanish, indicating that I should squat next to him—, you even smell like an Indian.

—I'm glad you came. Little Sisiwe said you were my brother.

“I spoke with Father Coriolano at the mission.” Milagros gestured to the notebooks, pencils, sardine cans, and boxes of cookies and sweet biscuits that the Iticoteris were passing around. “Father Coriolano wants me to take you back to the mission,” Milagros said, looking at me thoughtfully.

I couldn't think of anything to reply. I picked up a twig and started drawing in the dirt.

—I can't leave yet.

"I know." Milagros smiled, but there was a trace of sadness around her lips. Her voice was very sweet, ironic. "I told Father Coriolano that you were working very hard. I convinced him of how important it is for you to finish the remarkable research you're conducting."

I couldn't help but laugh. He sounded like a pompous anthropologist.

—Did he believe you?

Milagros pushed towards my notebooks and pencils.

"I assured him you were fine." From a small package, Milagros pulled out a box containing three bars of Camay soap. "He also gave me this for you."

"So what am I going to do with this?" I asked, sniffing at the perfumed soaps.

—Wash yourself! — Milagros said emphatically, as if he really thought I had forgotten what soap was for.

"Let me smell it," Ritimi asked, taking a pill from the box. She held it to her nose, closed her eyes, and inhaled deeply. "Hmm... What are you going to wash with this?"

"My hair!" I exclaimed, for it occurred to me that perhaps the soap would kill the lice.

— I'll wash mine too— said Ritimi, rubbing the soap against her hair. "Soap only works with water," I explained. "We have to go to the river."
"Let's go to the river!" shouted the women, who had gathered around the men, as they stood up. Laughing, we all ran down the path. The men returning from the orchards stared at us, mouths watering.
open, while the women who accompanied them turned around and ran after us, towards Ritimi, who held the precious soap in her raised hand.
"You have to get your hair wet," I shouted from the water.

The women stood on the shore, looking at me hesitantly. Smiling, Ritimi handed me the soap. Soon my head was covered in thick lather. I scrubbed vigorously, enjoying the dirty bubbles that trickled down my fingers, neck, back, and chest. With half a pumpkin, I rinsed my hair, using the soapy water to wash my body. I began to sing an old Camay soap commercial in Spanish, one I'd heard as a child: "There's nothing like Camay soap, for a heavenly clean."

"Who wants to be next?" I asked, wading towards the shore where the women were. I felt radiant with cleanliness.
The women took a step back; they smiled, but none of them volunteered. "I want it, I want it!" cried little Texoma, running towards the water.
One by one, the women approached. Impressed, they stared intently at the foam that seemed to be erupting from the girl's head. I produced a thick layer of bubbles and shaped Texoma's hair until it looked as if spikes were sprouting from her entire head. Hesitantly, Ritimi touched her daughter's hair. A shy smile twitched at the corners of her lips.

—Ooh, how beautiful!
"For a heavenly cleansing," Texoma sang as soapy water ran down her back, "there's nothing like..." She looked at me, and I said what was missing. "Sing that song again, I want my hair to turn the same color as yours."

—It won't turn my color, but it will smell good. "I want some too!" the women began to shout.
Except for the pregnant women, who were afraid the magic soap would harm their babies, I washed at least twenty-five heads of hair. But, not wanting to be left out, the pregnant women decided to wash their hair the usual way: with leaves and mud from the riverbed. I had to sing the stupid Camay soap commercial for them too. By the time we were all finished, my voice was hoarse.

Gathered around Arasuwe's hut, the men were still listening to the account of Milagros's visit to the outside world. They sniffed our hair when we sat down next to them. An old woman squatted beside a young man, pushing his head between her legs.

—Smell this; I washed it with Camay soap—and she started humming the jingle from the commercial. Men and women burst into laughter. Still laughing, Etewa shouted:

— Grandma, nobody wants your vagina, even if you fill it with honey!

Grumbling, the old woman made an obscene gesture, went into her hut, and from her hammock shouted:

—Etewa has seen you lying between the legs of women older than me!

When the laughter died down, Milagros pointed to the four machetes resting on the ground in front of him.

—Your friends left them at the mission before returning to the city. They're for you to give away.

I looked at him, not knowing what to do.

—Why are there so few of them?

"Because I couldn't carry any more," Milagros said cheerfully. "Don't give them to the women."

"I'll give them to the chief," I said, looking at the expectant faces around me. Smiling, I placed the four machetes in front of Arasuwe. "My friends sent these to you."

“White girl, you are clever,” he said, checking the sharp point of one of the machetes. “I will keep this one. One is for my brother Iramamowe, who protected you from the Mocototeris. Another is for Hayama’s son, from whose garden and game you have eaten more than from any other.” Arasuwe looked at Etewa. “One should be for you, but since you were given one not long ago at one of our feasts, I will give it to your wives, Ritimi and Tutemi. They care for the white girl as if she were their own sister.”

For a moment, there was absolute silence. Then, one of the men stood up and walked over to Ritimi.

—Give me your machete so I can cut down trees. You don't have to do a man's work.

—Don't give it to him—said Tutemi—. It's easier to work in the orchards with a machete than with a digging stick.

Ritimi looked at the machete, picked it up, and gave it to the man.

—I'll give it to you. The worst of all sins is not giving what others ask for. I don't want to end up in the shopariwabe.

"Where is that?" I asked Milagros quietly.

—The shopariwabe is a place like hell for missionaries.

I opened a can of sardines. After putting one of the oily, silvery little fish in my mouth, I offered the can to Ritimi.

"Take one," I insisted.

He looked at me hesitantly. Between his index finger and thumb, he delicately lifted a piece of sardine and put it in his mouth.

"Ugh, what a horrible taste!" he shouted, spitting it out. Milagros took the can out of my hand.

—Keep them. They're for the trip back to the mission.

—But I'm not going back yet. They'll spoil if we keep them for too long.

"You must return before the rains," Milagros said gravely. "When they start, it's impossible to cross the rivers or walking through the jungle.

I couldn't suppress a smug smile.

—I have to stay at least until Tutemi's child is born. She was sure the baby would arrive during the rains.

—What shall I say to Father Coriolanus?

—What you already told him— I replied mockingly—: that I am doing a remarkable investigation.

"But he expects you to return before the rains," Milagros protested. "It rains for months!" Smiling, I took one of the boxes of cookies.

—We'd better eat them: they'll spoil in the humidity.

"Don't open the other cans of sardines," Milagros advised in Spanish. "The sardines won't like them. I'll eat them myself."

—Aren't you afraid to go to the shopariwabe?

Without answering, Milagros passed around the already open can. Most of the men just smelled the contents and passed it on to the next person. Those who dared to try the sardines spat them out. The women didn't bother to smell or taste them.

Milagros smiled at me when the can was returned to her.

"They don't like sardines. I won't go to hell if I eat them all myself."

The biscuits weren't a hit either, except with a few children, who licked the salt off and left the rest. But the cakes, though they tasted stale, were devoured with loud, approving slurps.

Ritimi took possession of the pencils and notebooks. He insisted that I show him the same kind of drawings I had used to decorate the notebook that had burned. Conscientiously, he practiced writing the English and Spanish words I had taught him. He had no interest in learning to write, although eventually she learned to draw all the letters of the alphabet, including some Chinese ideograms I had learned long ago in a calligraphy class. For Ritimi, these were drawings she would sometimes paint on her body, and she preferred the letters S and W.

Milagros stayed at the shabono for a few weeks. He went hunting with the men and helped them work in the gardens. However, he spent most of her time lying in her hammock, doing nothing but playing with the children. His happy squeals could be heard at all hours as Milagros would swing the little ones in the air, their feet raised to the sky. At night he would entertain us with stories about the Napes, the white men he had met over the years, the places he had visited, and the eccentric customs he had observed.

Nape was a term applied to all foreigners, that is, to all those who were not Yanomami. The Iticoteris did not distinguish nationalities. For them, a Venezuelan, a Brazilian, a Swede, a German, or Americans, regardless of their skin color, were napes.

Seen through Milagros's eyes, those white men were curious even to me. His sense of humor, his taste for the absurd, and his dramatic storytelling transformed the most superficial and insignificant event into something extraordinary. If ever any member of the audience dared to doubt his veracity, Milagros, with a very dignified tone, would turn to me:

"White girl, tell them if I'm lying." However much he might have exaggerated, I never contradicted her.

XVII

Tutemi went to look for us at Ritimi and at the orchards.

"I think my time has come," she said, setting her basket full of firewood on the ground. "My arms are weak. My breathing is shallow. I can no longer bend down easily."

"Are you in pain?" I asked, seeing Tutemi's face twist into a grimace.

She nodded.

—I'm scared too.

Carefully, Ritimi felt the girl's belly, first on the sides, then on the front.

"The child is kicking violently. It's time for him to come out." Ritimi turned to me. "Go find old Hayama. Tell her Tutemi is in pain. She'll know what to do."

—Where will you be?

Ritimi pointed ahead. I cut through the jungle, leaping over fallen logs, ignoring thorns, roots, and stones.

"Come quickly!" I shouted, trying to catch my breath, in front of Hayama's cabin. "Tutemi is about to have her baby. She's in pain."

Picking up her bamboo knife, Ritimi's grandmother first went to see an old man who lived in a hut on the other side of the clearing.

"I suppose you heard the white girl," Hayama told him. "If I need you, I'll send her to find you." I walked ahead of Hayama, waiting impatiently every fifty steps for her to catch up.
Leaning heavily on the broken bow he used as a walking stick, he seemed to move even more slowly than usual.

—Is the old man a shapori? —I asked him.

—She knows everything there is to know about a child who doesn't want to be born. When there is pain, it means the child doesn't want to leave the womb.
"I don't think that's what she meant at all." I was unable to disguise the argumentative tone in my voice. "It's normal for the first child to be difficult," I stated, as if I actually knew. "White women have heartaches with almost every child."

"It's not normal," Hayama stated. "Perhaps white babies don't want to see the world."

Tutemi's moans drifted through the undergrowth. She was crouched on the leaves of

a small banana that Ritimi had scattered on the ground. Dark shadows surrounded her feverish eyes. Tiny drops of sweat glistened on her eyebrows and upper lip.
"The water has already broken," Ritimi said. "But the baby doesn't want to come."

—Let's go deeper into the jungle—Tutemi pleaded. —I don't want anyone from the shabono to hear my screams. Tenderly, old Hayama moved the girl's bangs away from her forehead and dried the sweat from her face and neck.

"You'll be better in a moment," he said reassuringly, as if speaking to a child.

Each time the contractions came, Hayama pressed hard on Tutemi's belly. After what seemed like an eternity, Hayama told me to go find the old shapori.
He was prepared. He had taken epena, and a dark brew was simmering on the fire. With a stick, he removed the

He scooped the mucus from his nose and poured the infusion into a gourd.

—What is it made of?

—From roots and leaves—he said, but he didn't mention the name of the plant.

As soon as we reached the women, he told Tutemi to drink every last drop of the infusion. While she drank, he danced around her. In a high-pitched, nasal tone, he begged the white monkey hekura to release the unborn child's neck.

Slowly, Tutemi's face relaxed and her eyes lost their frightened expression. "I think the child will come now," he said, smiling at the old man.

Hayama held her from behind, stretching Tutemi's arms above her head. While I wondered whether it was the infusion or the shaman's dance that had induced her relaxed state, I missed the birth itself. I covered my mouth with my hand to stifle a scream when I saw the umbilical cord coiled around the bruised baby's neck. Hayama cut the cord and placed a leaf over the navel to absorb the blood. He rubbed his index finger on the placenta and then ran it across the baby's lips.

"What are you doing?" I asked Ritimi.

—He does that so the child learns to speak properly.

Before I had time to burst out saying the child was dead, the most unnerving human scream I had ever heard echoed through the jungle. Ritimi picked up the screaming child and motioned for me to follow her to the river. She filled her mouth with water, waited a moment for it to warm, and then poured it over the baby.

Imitating her, I helped her wash the blood and mucus off her little body.

"Now he has three mothers," Ritimi said, handing me the child. "Anyone who washes a newborn baby is responsible for him if anything happens to the mother. Tutemi will be pleased when she learns you helped wash the child."

Ritimi filled a large banana leaf with mud, while I cradled the baby with unsteady arms. I had never held a newborn child before. I stared in horror at its purplish, wrinkled face and the tiny fists it tried to shove in its mouth; I wondered what miracle had allowed it to live.

Hayama wrapped the placenta tightly in leaves and placed it under a small, raised screen that the old man had built beneath a very tall ceiba tree. It was to be cremated a few weeks later. We covered all the bloodstains on the ground with mud to keep wild animals and dogs from sniffing around.

With the child held securely in her arms, Tutemi led the way back to the shabono. Before entering her hut, she placed the child on the ground. Those of us who had witnessed the birth had to step over the child three times to signify his acceptance into the village.

Etewa didn't look at us from his hammock; he had been resting there ever since he learned that his youngest wife was giving birth. Tutemi entered the hut with the newborn child and sat down by the hearth.

After squeezing her nipple, she pushed it into the baby's mouth. Eagerly, the child began to suckle, occasionally opening his still unfocused eyes, as if he wanted to imprint that source of nourishment and comfort on his brain.

Neither parent ate anything that day. On the second and third days, Etewa caught a basketful of small fish, which she cooked and fed to Tutemi. Afterward, the two slowly resumed their normal routine. The day after the birth, Tutemi returned to work in the plantations with the baby strapped to her back. Etewa, meanwhile, rested in her hammock for a week. It was believed that any physical exertion on his part would be harmful to the child's health.

On the ninth day, Milagros was asked to pierce the child's ears. He used long thorns from the rasha palm, which he placed in the holes. After cutting the sharp points near the lobe, Milagros covered each end with resin so the child wouldn't remove the cut thorns. That same day, the child was given the name Hoaxiwe, because the white monkey had wanted to keep him inside its womb. It was just a nickname.

When the child started walking, they would give him his real name.

XVIII

It wasn't yet daylight when Milagros leaned over my hammock. I felt her calloused hand brush against my forehead and cheeks. I could barely make out her features in the darkness. I knew she was leaving. I waited for her to speak, but I fell asleep without finding out if she really wanted to tell me something.

"The rains will come soon," announced old Kamosiwe that night. "I have seen the size of the new turtles. I have been listening to the croaking of the rain frogs."

Four days later, shortly after noon, the wind blew with terrifying force through the trees and the *shabono.* The empty hammocks swayed like boats on a stormy sea. The leaves swirled on the ground in spiraling dances that died as suddenly as they had begun.

I stood in the clearing, watching the gusts of wind that came from every direction. Pieces of bark slammed against my shins. I tried to kick them off, but they stuck to me like glue. Gigantic black clouds darkened the sky. The continuous roar of the rain in the distance grew louder as I pressed on through the jungle. Thunder crashed from the clouds, and flashes of white lightning leaped in

the evening darkness. The cries of a tree falling, struck by lightning, echoed through the jungle, accompanied by the anguished groans of other uprooted trees crashing to the ground.

Howling, women and children huddled behind the banana trees piled against the sloping roof. Old Hayama grabbed a log from the fire and ran into Iramamowe's hut. Desperately, she began to pound on one of its posts.

"Wake up!" he shouted. "Your father isn't here. Wake up! Defend us from the *hekuras."*

Hayama was heading to Iramamowe's personal *hekura ,* because he was out hunting with other men.

The thunder and lightning receded into the distance, and the clouds parted above us. The rain fell in a solid curtain, so dense we couldn't see beyond the clearing. Moments later, the sky was clear. I accompanied old Kamosiwe to see the roaring river. Chunks of earth were torn from the banks, swept away by the raging torrent. Each landslide was followed by the shattering of vines, which snapped like a bowstring breaking.

A great stillness descended upon the jungle. Not a bird, insect, or frog could be heard. Suddenly, without any warning, a roar of thunder seemed to rise directly from the sun and roll over our heads.

"But there are no clouds!" I shouted, falling to the ground as if I had been hit.

"Do not challenge the spirits," Kamosiwe warned me, cutting two large leaves and indicating that I should cover myself.

Squatting side by side, we watched the rain cascade down from the clear sky. Gusts of wind shook the jungle until the curtain of dark clouds once again hid the sun.

—The storms are caused by the dead whose bones have not been burned, whose ashes have not been eaten—said the old man Kamosiwe. — These unfortunate spirits, who long to be cremated, heat the clouds until fires ignite in the sky.

—Fires that will eventually burn them —I finished his sentence.

"Oh, you're not so ignorant anymore!" exclaimed Kamosiwe. "The rains have begun. We'll spend many days with you; you'll learn much more.

Smiling, I nodded.

—Do you think Milagros will have arrived at the mission?

Kamosiwe glanced at me sideways, then burst into a hoarse, raspy laugh, the laugh of a very old man, which sounded sinister amidst the noise of the rain. He still had almost all of his teeth.

Strong and yellowish, they emerged from his receding gums like pieces of old ivory.

—Milagros wasn't going on the mission. He was going to see his wife and children.

—In which town does Milagros live?

—In many.

—Does he have a wife and children in all of them?

"Milagros is a talented man," Kamosiwe said, his single eye gleaming with a devilish flash. "He has a white woman somewhere."

Filled with curiosity, I looked at Kamosiwe. I was finally going to find out something about Milagros. But the old man remained silent. Then he placed his hand in mine, and I knew his mind had wandered elsewhere.

Slowly, I massaged his deformed fingers.

"Old man, are you really Milagros' grandfather?" I asked, hoping to bring him back to the topic.

Startled, Kamosiwe looked at my face, his eye studying me intently, as if something had occurred to him. Muttering, he held out his other hand for me to massage.

Distracted, I watched as the eye rolled into its socket as it fell asleep.

—I wonder how old you really are.

Kamosiwe's eye rested on my face, clouded with memories.

"If you stretched out all the time I've lived, it would reach the moon," Kamosiwe murmured. "That's how old I am."

We stood beneath the leaves, watching the dark clouds drift across the sky. The mist drifted among the trees, and the filtered light was a ghostly gray.

"The rains have begun," Kamosiwe repeated softly, as we returned to the *shabono.*

The fires in the cabins produced more smoke than heat, but the rainy air created a misty warmth.

I lay down in my hammock and fell asleep, surrounded by the distant and confusing sounds of the jungle under the storm.

The morning was cold and damp. Ritimi, Tutemi, and I stayed in our hammocks all day, eating bananas in barbecues and listening to the rain falling on the palm roof.

— I wish Etewa and the others had returned from the hunt last night—Ritimi murmured from time to time, looking at the sky, which only changed from a faint white to gray.

The hunters returned at nightfall the following day. lramamowe and Etewa went straight into the

The old woman Hayama's hut was carrying her youngest son, Matuwe, in a litter made of strips of bark. Matuwe had been injured by a branch when he fell. Carefully, the two men moved him to his hammock. His leg hung limp, and the shin bone threatened

to tear through the swollen, bruised skin.

"It's broken," said old Hayama.

"It's broken," I repeated to the other women in the cabin.

She had developed the habit of stating the obvious. It was a way of expressing concern, love, and sympathy all at once.

Matuwe gasped in pain as Hayama set the bone. Ritimi held his outstretched foot while the old woman fashioned a splint from pieces of broken arrowheads. Skillfully, she placed them along each side of the leg, inserting cotton fiber between the skin and the cane. Around the splint, from the ankle to mid-thigh, Hayama tied fresh strips of thin, tough bark.

Tutemi and Xotomi, the young wife of the wounded man, giggled softly whenever Matuwe complained. They didn't do it because they found it amusing, but to try to cheer him up.

—Oh, Matuwe, it doesn't hurt—Xotomi tried to convince him.—Remember how happy you were when your head was bleeding after you were hit with a club at the last party.

"Stay still," Hayama told his son. He passed a vine rope through one of the beams and tied it with a

With one hand he puts the boy's ankle and with the other his thigh.

"Now you can't move your leg," he said, inspecting his work with satisfaction.

About two weeks later, Hayama removed the bark and splint. The bruised leg had turned greenish and yellowish, but it was no longer swollen. He felt lightly around the bone.

"It's coming together," she announced, and proceeded to massage the leg with hot water. Every day, for at least a month, she performed the same routine of untying the splint, massaging the leg, and hanging it back up from the beam.

"The bone is repaired," Hayama stated one day, breaking the reed splint into small pieces. "But my leg isn't healed!" Matuwe protested, alarmed. "I can't move properly."
Hayama reassured him, explaining that his knee was...
My leg had become stiff from being stretched out for so long.
—I will continue giving you massages until you can walk like before.

The rains brought with them a feeling of tranquility, of timelessness, as day and night became indistinguishable.
They blended into one another. Nobody worked much in the orchards. For endless hours, we lay or sat in the hammocks, conversing in the strange way people do when it rains, with long pauses and gazes lost in the distance.

Ritimi tried to make me a basket weaver. I started with what I considered the simplest type: the large, U-shaped basket used for carrying firewood. The women were amused by my clumsy attempts to master the simple weaving technique. Then I concentrated my efforts on something I thought more manageable: the flat, disc-shaped baskets used for storing fruit or separating ashes from the bones of the dead. Although I liked the finished product, I had to agree with old Hayama that 68

The basket wasn't as it should have been.

Smiling at her, I remembered the time when a school friend had gone to great lengths to teach me to knit. In the most peaceful way, while watching television, talking, or waiting for a date, she would knit beautiful sweaters, gloves, and ski hats. I would sit beside her, tense, shoulders stiff and fingers clenched, holding the needles just inches from my face, cursing every time I dropped a stitch.

I didn't want to give up basket weaving. One must try at least three times, I told myself, and I began to make a flat fishing basket.

"Ohoo, white girl!" Xotomo laughed uncontrollably. "It's not tight enough." She ran her fingers through the loose, separated strips of fiber. "The fish will escape through the holes."

Finally, I resigned myself to the simpler task of separating the bark and the fibers needed to braid them into perfectly even strips, which were in high demand. Emboldened by my success, I made a hammock. I cut strips almost two meters long, tied the ends tightly, and reinforced them with a rope of interwoven bark beneath the trim. I mixed the liana strips with crosswise cotton threads that I had dyed with *annatto.* Ritimi was so delighted with the hammock that she replaced Etewa's old one with the new one.

—Etewa, I've made a new hammock for you —I said when he returned from work on the plantation. He looked at me skeptically.

—Do you think he'll put up with me?

I clicked my tongue in affirmation, showing him how I had reinforced the ends.

Hesitantly, he sat down in the hammock.

"He seems strong," he said, lying down completely.

I heard the liana rope scraping against the post, but before I could warn him, Etewa and the hammock were on the ground.

Ritimi, Tutemi, Arasuwe, and their wives, who were watching us from the next hut, burst out laughing, which immediately drew a considerable crowd. They slapped each other on the thighs and shoulders, doubled over with laughter. Later, I asked Ritimi if she had deliberately tied the hammock incorrectly.

"Naturally," she said, her eyes twinkling with loving mischief. She told me that Etewa wasn't angry in the slightest. "Men like it when a woman is smarter than they are."

Although I had my doubts about whether Etewa had truly enjoyed the incident, she didn't hold back any resentment. He advertised throughout the *shabono* how well he was resting in his new hammock. I was besieged with requests. Sometimes I even made three hammocks in a single day. Several men were in charge of providing me with cotton, which they separated by hand from the seeds. With a spiral spindle, they spun the fibers and twisted them into strong yarn, which I loosely wove between strips of bark.

With a finished hammock rolled up under my arm, I entered the Iramamowe cabin one afternoon. "Are you going to make arrows?" I asked him.

He had climbed one of the posts of his cabin to get the reeds stored under the roof beams.

"Is that hammock for me?" he asked, handing me the poles. He took the hammock, tied it up, and sat sideways in it. "It's well made."

—I made it for your eldest wife. I'll make one for you if you teach me how to make arrows. "It's not time to make arrows," said lramamowe. "I was just checking if the reeds are still dry."

He looked at me mockingly and burst out laughing. "The white girl wants to make arrows!" he shouted as loudly as he could. "I'll

teach her and take her hunting with me." Still laughing, he motioned for me to sit next to him.

He scattered the reeds on the ground and sorted the poles according to their size. "The long ones are the best for hunting."

Short bows are better for fishing and taking down enemies. Only a skilled archer can use long bows for everything. They often have flaws and their trajectory is inaccurate.

lramamowe chose a short cane and a long one.

"I'll put the tip here," he said, breaking off one end of each cane. He tied them tightly with cotton thread.

He cut some feathers in half and attached them to the other end with cotton thread. "Some hunters decorate their arrows with their own designs. I only do that when I'm going on a hunt."

I want my enemy to know who killed him.

Like most of the iticoteris, lramamowe was a superb storyteller, who enlivened his tales with very precise onomatopoeia, and dramatic gestures and pauses. Step by step, he led his audience through the hunt: how he located the animal; how, before releasing the arrow, he blew on it the pulverized roots of one of his magic plants, to immobilize the victim, thus ensuring that the arrow would not miss its target; and how, once wounded, the animal resisted dying.

With his eyes fixed on me, he laid the contents of his quiver on the ground. He explained to me in great detail the characteristics of each of the arrowheads it had.

“This is a palm-wood point,” he said, handing me a sharp piece of wood. “It’s made of slivers. The ring-shaped grooves are filled with *mamucori.* They break inside the animal’s body. It’s the best point for hunting monkeys.” He smiled and added, “And for killing an enemy.” Then he held up a long, broad point, sharpened at the edges and decorated with wavy lines. “This one is good for hunting jaguars and tapirs.”

The excited barking of the dogs, mixed with the shouts of the people, interrupted lramamowe's explanation. I followed him as he hurried toward the river. An anteater the size of a common bear cub had taken refuge from the dogs by going into the water. Etewa and Arasuwe had wounded the animal in the neck, belly, and back. Standing on its hind legs, it lashed out in the air with its powerful front claws.

"Do you want to finish him off with my arrow?" Iramamowe asked.

Unable to tear my gaze away from the animal's long tongue, I shook my head. I wasn't sure he was serious. The tongue hung from its narrow snout, dripping a sticky liquid in which dead ants swam. Iramamowe's arrow struck the small ear of the anthill, and the animal collapsed instantly. The men tied the enormous carcass with ropes and hauled it ashore, where Arasuwe butchered it so the men could carry the heavy pieces back to the *shabono.*

The men skinned the various pieces and then placed them on a wooden platform set over the fire. Hayama wrapped the entrails in *depishaans* leaves and buried them among the embers.
"An anthill!" shouted the children, clapping with joy as they danced around the fire.

—Wait until it's well cooked—Hayama would warn the children when any of them touched the wrappers—.

You will get sick if you eat meat that is not cooked properly. It must be cooked until no more liquid drips from the leaves.

The liver was ready before the rest. Hayama cut a piece for me before the children.

They started on it. It was tender, juicy, and unpleasantly bitter, as if it had been marinated in rancid lemon juice.

Later, Iramamowe offered me a piece of the hind leg, already roasted.

"Why didn't you want to try my arrow?" he asked. "It could have hurt one of the dogs," I said evasively, biting into the tough meat of the animal, which also had a bitter taste.
I looked at Iramamowe's face and wondered if he had realized that I didn't want to be compared, even vaguely, to lmaawami, the shaman woman who knew how to summon the *hekuras* and hunted like a man.

On stormy afternoons, the men drank *epena* and sang *to the hekura* of the anaconda, which writhes around the trees to prevent the wind from breaking the trunks. During a particularly bad storm

Intense emotion, old Kamosiwe rubbed his entire wrinkled body with white ashes. With a hoarse, raspy voice, he summoned the spider, his personal

hekura , to weave its protective silver threads around the garden plants.

Suddenly, his voice rose to a higher pitch, as high as the piercing cry of the parakeet.

— I was once an old child who climbed the tallest trees. I fell and was transformed into a spider.

"Why are you disturbing my peaceful sleep?" —Returning to his old man's voice, Kamosiwe stood up—. Spider, I want to blow your sting on the *hekuras* that break and uproot the plants in our gardens.

With his *epena cane,* he blew around the *shabono,* aiming the spider's sting against the destructive spirits.

The next morning, I accompanied Kamosiwe to the plantations. Smiling, he pointed out the small, hairy spiders working diligently, rebuilding their webs. Tiny drops of moisture dangled from the delicate silver threads; in the sunlight, they shimmered like jade pearls, reflecting the green of the leaves.

We walked through the steamy jungle toward the river. Squatting side by side, we silently gazed at the broken vines, the fallen trees, and the piles of leaves carried by the muddy waters. Back at the *shabono,* Kamosiwe invited me to his hut to share his specialty: roasted ants dipped in honey.

A favorite pastime during rainy days was for a woman to ridicule some fault of her husband.

through song. A fight would break out if the woman suggested that her husband was better suited to carrying a basket than a bow. These disputes always ended in public arguments, in which the others actively participated. Sometimes, hours after the fight had ended, someone would shout across the clearing a new opinion on the matter and reignite the duel.

XIX

When the sun finally broke through the clouds, I would go with the men and women to work in the fields. The weeds were easier to pull from the wet soil, but I had little energy. Like old Kamosiwe, I would stay among the tall, sharp leaves of the cassava plants and let the sunlight and warmth penetrate me. I would count the birds that crossed the sky, birds that hadn't been seen for days; I longed for the hot, rainless days. After so many weeks of rain, I wished the sun would stay long enough to lift the mist.

One morning I felt so dizzy I couldn't get out of the hammock. I lowered my head to my knees and waited for the rush to pass. I didn't have the strength to lift my head and answer Ritimi's anxious words, which were lost in the persistent noise around me. "It must be the river," I thought; "it doesn't come from far."

But then I realized the noise was coming from another direction. Desperately, as if my life depended on it, I tried to figure out where it was really coming from. It was coming from inside me.

For days I heard nothing but the drumming in my head. I wanted to open my eyes, but I couldn't. Through my closed eyelids, I saw the stars burning ever brighter instead of fading into the sky. I panicked at the thought that the night would last forever, that I was descending deeper and deeper into a world of shadows and disjointed dreams.

From misty shores, Ritimi, Tutemi, Etewa, Arasuwe, lramamowe, Hayama and old Kamosiwe me

They waved, and I drifted past, lost in thought. Sometimes they leaped from cloud to cloud, sweeping the mist with brooms of leaves. When I called to them, they melted into the fog. Sometimes I could see the sunlight, bright red and yellow, through the branches and leaves. I forced my eyes open and realized that what I had seen was nothing more than fire dancing on the palm-thatched roof.

"White people need food when they're sick!"

—I clearly heard Milagros' screams.

I felt his lips on mine, as he put chewed meat inside my mouth. At another time I recognized Puriwariwe's voice:

"Clothes make people sick." I felt him pull the blanket off me. "We need to cool down. Bring me some white mud from the river."

I felt his hands curl around my body and cover me in mud from head to toe. His lips left a cold mark on my skin as he sucked me dry, trying to draw out the evil spirits.

My waking and sleeping hours were filled with the voice of the *shapori.* Wherever I looked in the darkness, his face appeared. I heard the song of his *hekura.* I felt the hummingbird's sharp beak pierce my chest. The beak turned to light. It was not sunlight or moonlight, but the dazzling splendor of the old *shapori's eyes.* He commanded me to look into his deep pupils. His eyes seemed to lack yelids and spread to the temples. They were filled with dancing birds. The eyes of a madman, I thought. I saw his *hekuras* suspended in drops of dew, dancing in the shining eyes of a jaguar, and I drank the watery tears of the *epena.* A violent throbbing in my throat tightened my stomach until I vomited water.

This flowed out of the hut in torrents, outside the *shabono,* along the path, to the river, and mingled with the night of smoke and songs.

Opening my eyes, I sat up in the hammock. I clearly saw Puriwariwe running out of the hut. He raised his arms toward the night, his fingers spread wide as if to summon the energy of the stars. He turned and looked at me.

"You will live," he said. "The evil spirits have left your body." Then he disappeared into the shadows of the night.

After several days of violent storms, the rains slowed to a steady, almost predictable pace. Dawn was overcast and hazy, but by mid-morning fluffy white clouds drifted across the sky.
A few hours later, the clouds gathered over the *shabono.* They hung so low they looked suspended from the trees, they darkened the afternoon sky menacingly. A heavy downpour followed, turning into a light drizzle that often lasted well into the night.
I didn't work much in the vegetable gardens during those rainless mornings, but I usually accompanied the children to the marshes that had formed around the river. There we hunted frogs and pulled crayfish out from under the rocks.

The children, on all fours, eyes and ears alert to the slightest noise or movement, leaped with formidable agility upon the innocent frogs. Their eyes almost transparent in the diffused light, the boys and girls worked with the precision of wicked gnomes, passing fiber loops around the frogs' necks until they stifled the last croak. Smiling with an innocence only children possess when unaware of their cruelty, they cut off the frogs' feet so that the blood, which they believed to be poisonous, could flow. Once the frogs had been skinned, each child wrapped their prey in *pishaansi* leaves and cooked it over the fire. With porridge of cassava, they were delicious.

Most of the time I just sat on a rock among the tall bamboo leaves, watching rows of beetles climb with careful, almost imperceptible slowness up the pale green stalks. They looked like creatures from another world, protected by their gleaming obsidian and gold armor.

On windless mornings, everything was so still among the bamboo leaves that I could hear the beetles sucking the sap from the tender shoots.

Early one morning, Arasuwe sat at the head of my hammock. A cheerful glow covered his face, from his high cheekbones to his lower lip, where a small ball of tobacco protruded. The wrinkles around his eyes deepened when he smiled, giving his expression a reassuring warmth. I gazed at his thick, ridged nails as he cupped his brown hand to scoop the last drops of honey from a gourd. He reached out to me, and I ran my finger along his palm.

"This is the best honey I've tasted in a long time," I said, sucking my finger with delight. "You can come with me downstream," Arasuwe invited me.

He went on to explain that, with two of his wives and his two youngest sons-in-law, one of whom was Matuwe, he was going to an abandoned orchard where, a few months earlier, he had cut down several palm trees to harvest the tasty palm hearts. Ritimi came and sat next to me.

"I'll go to the orchards too," she said. "I have to look after the white girl." Arasuwe cleaned his nose, picking up the snot with his finger, and laughed.
—My daughter, let's go by canoe. I thought you didn't like traveling by water. "It's better than walking through the swampy jungle," Ritimi said defiantly.
Ritimi came with us instead of Arasuwe's younger wife. For a while, we walked along the river until we reached a landing. Hidden under the undergrowth was a long canoe.
"It looks like the big vats you use to make soup," I said, eyeing the tree bark contraption suspiciously.

Proudly, Arasuwe explained that both things were done in the same way. The bark was peeled off a large tree in one piece by beating the trunk with clubs. Then the ends were heated in the fire to make them flexible enough to be bent upwards and secured in the shape of a flat-bottomed vessel. Finally, the ends were tied together with vines. A rough frame of sticks was added to give the boat stability.

The men pushed the canoe into the water, and amid laughter, Arasuwe's second wife, Ritimi, and I climbed aboard. Afraid of capsizing the tube- shaped vessel, I didn't dare change my crouching position. Arasuwe maneuvered the canoe with a pole until it reached the center of the river.

With their backs to their mother-in-law, the two young people sat as far away from her as they could.

He asked why Arasuwe had brought them. It was considered incestuous for a man to have any familiarity with his wife's mother, especially if she was still sexually active. Men usually avoided their mothers-in-law altogether, to the point of not even looking at them. And under no circumstances did they speak their names aloud.

The current swept us along, gently carrying us down the muddy, gurgling river. There were gorges where the waters were calm, reflecting the trees on both banks with exaggerated intensity. Gazing at the reflected leaves, I felt as if we were tearing through an intricate veil of lace. The jungle remained silent. From time to time, we caught sight of a bird gliding across the sky. It seemed to fly in its sleep, its wings motionless. The journey ended far too soon. Arasuwe moored the canoe on the sand, among large black basalt boulders.

"Now we have to walk," he said, looking at the dark jungle that rose up before us.

—And the canoe? —I asked—. We should turn it upside down so the afternoon rain doesn't fill it with water. Arasuwe scratched his head and then burst out laughing. He had said on several occasions that I had

Too many opinions were offered, not necessarily because she was a woman, but because she was young. The elderly, regardless of gender, were respected and held in high esteem. Their advice was sought and heeded. But young people were taught to keep their opinions to themselves.

"We won't use the boat to return," Arasuwe said. "It's too difficult to go upstream."

"Who's going to take her back to the *shabono?"* I asked, afraid that we might have to transport her.

“No one,” he assured me. “The boat is only good for going with the current.” Smiling, Arasuwe turned the canoe upside down. “Perhaps someone needs it to go further down the river.”

It was good to move my numb legs. We walked in silence through the humid, swampy jungle.

Matuwe was walking ahead of me. He was thin with long legs. His quiver hung so low on his back that it tapped his buttocks with every step. I started whistling a tune. Matuwe turned around. His puzzled expression made me laugh. I had a strong urge to tap his buttocks with the quiver, but I controlled the impulse.

"Don't you like your mother-in-law?" I asked, unable to suppress the desire to tease her.

Matuwe smiled shyly and blushed at my shamelessness in pronouncing Arasuwe's wife's name in front of him.

— Don't you know that a man cannot look at, speak to, or approach his mother-in-law? His alarmed tone made me feel guilty.

"I didn't know that," I lied.

Upon arriving at our destination, Ritimi assured me that it was the same abandoned orchard to which she and Tutemi had led me after our first encounter in the jungle. I didn't recognize the place. It was so full of undergrowth it was difficult for me to find the temporary shelters that should have been among the banana trees.

The men hacked their way through the thick undergrowth with machetes, searching for fallen palm trunks. Once they found them, they extracted the half-rotten pith, which was almost buried, and opened it with their hands. Ritimi and Arasuwe's wife shouted with delight at the sight of the wriggling maggots, some the size of balls.

They played ping-pong. They sat next to the men and helped them cut off, with their teeth, the head of each larva, which came out dragging its intestines. Then, they piled the white bodies on *pishaansi leaves.*

When Ritimi bit a worm wrong, which happened to him frequently, he would eat it raw right there, licking his lips with pleasure.

Despite their mocking pleas for help preparing the larvae, I couldn't bring myself to touch the worms, much less bite their heads. I borrowed Matuwe's machete and cut banana leaves to cover the roofs of the half-collapsed shelters.

Arasuwe called me as soon as some larvae were cooked in the fire.

"Eat," she told me, placing one of the wrappers in front of me. "You need the fat: you haven't eaten enough lately. That's why you have diarrhea," she added in a tone that brooked no argument.

I smiled obediently. With a resolve I didn't feel, I opened the tightly tied package. The shrunken, whitish worms floated in grease; they smelled like burnt bacon. I watched what the others were doing and first sucked on the *depishaansi leaf;* then, carefully, I placed a worm in my mouth. It tasted wonderfully similar to the fried fat surrounding a good steak.

At nightfall, shortly after we had settled into one of the rebuilt huts, Arasuwe announced in a solemn tone that we should return to the *shabono.*

"You want to travel at night?" Matuwe asked, incredulous. "What about the palm trees we wanted to dig up in the morning?"

“We can’t stay,” Arasuwe insisted. “I feel in my legs that something is about to happen in the *shabono.”* He closed his eyes and rocked his head back and forth as if the slow, rhythmic movement could give him an answer as to what he should do. “We have to get to the *shabono* by dawn.” He concluded with determination.

Ritimi distributed the nearly twenty kilos of maggots that the men had salvaged from the rotting palm trunks among our baskets, assigning me the lightest load. Arasuwe and his two sons-in-law took the half-burned logs from the fire, and we set off in single file. To keep the makeshift torches burning, the men occasionally blew on them, scattering a shower of sparks into the damp shadows.
Sometimes, the nearly full moon shone through the leaves, illuminating the path with an eerie blue-green light. The tall trunks looked like columns of smoke dissolving into thin air.

Damp, as if trying to escape the embrace of the lianas and vines that hung in the air. Only the treetops stood out clearly against the drifting clouds.
Arasuwe often stopped, trying to catch the slightest noise, and his eyes moved in the darkness.
He was breathing deeply, his nostrils flared, as if he could detect something more than the smell of dampness and decay. When he looked at us women, his eyes seemed anxious. I wondered if memories of bloody attacks, ambushes, and God knew what else were flashing through his mind. But I couldn't gaze long at the chief's worried face, because I had to make sure the roots

The prominences of the giant ceiba trees were not anacondas in the middle of digesting a tapir or a pecan.
Arasuwe waded through the shallow waters of the river. He cupped his hands around his ear, cupping them to his ear, trying to catch any distant sounds. Ritimi whispered to me that his father was listening to the echoes of the current, the murmur of the spirits who knew the dangers that awaited us. Arasuwe placed his hands on the surface of the water and, for a moment, held the reflected image of the moon.
As we walked, the moon became blurry and barely discernible. It seemed as if the solitary clouds that
They crossed the sky, trying to get ahead of us on the journey toward morning. Little by little,

the calls of the monkeys and birds faded; the night breeze stopped, and I knew that dawn was not far off.

We arrived at the *shabono* at that still undefined gray hour when it is no longer night and it is not yet morning. Many of the iticoteris were still asleep. Those that were awake greeted us, surprised by to see us return so soon.

Reassured to see that Arasuwe's fears had been unfounded, I lay down in my hammock.

I woke up abruptly when Xotomi sat down next to me.

"Eat this, quickly," he said, handing me a roasted banana. "Yesterday I saw the kind of fish that you and I like best."

Without waiting to ask if I was too tired to go, he gave me my small bow and short arrows. The thought of eating fish instead of worms quickly dispelled my fatigue.

"I want to go too," said little Sisiwe, following us.

We marched upstream, where the waters formed wide ponds. Not a leaf stirred, and not a bird or a frog could be heard.

Sitting on a rock, we watched as the first rays of the sun penetrated through the leafy blind, wrapped in mist. As if filtered through a thick veil, the faint light ignited the dark waters of the pond. "I heard something," Sisiwe whispered, grabbing my arm, "a branch breaking."

— I've heard it too —Xotomi said softly.

I was sure it wasn't an animal, but the unmistakable sound of a human being treading carefully and stopping when he takes a step.

"There he is!" Sisiwe shouted, pointing to the other side of the river. "It's the enemy," he added, and ran off towards the *shabono.*

Grabbing my arm, Xotomi pulled me to one side. I turned around. All I saw on the opposite bank were the dew-covered ferns. At the same time, Xotomi let out a sharp cry. An arrow had wounded her in the leg. I dragged her to the bushes that lined the path and insisted we crawl deeper into the undergrowth until we were completely covered.

"We'll wait here until the iticoteris come to rescue us," I said, examining his leg. Xotomi wiped her tears with the back of her hand.

— If it is an assault, the men will stay in the *shabono* to defend the women and children.

— They'll come —I told him with a confidence I was far from feeling—. Sisiwe went to get help.

The sharp point had pierced her calf. Break the arrow; I pulled the point out of the horrible wound that was bleeding from both sides, and tied my old, torn knickers around her leg. The blood instantly soaked the fine cotton. Worried that the arrow might have been poisoned, I carefully applied the makeshift bandage and examined the wound again to see if the surrounding flesh was darkening. Iramamowe had explained to me that a wound caused by a poisoned arrow always turned dark.

"I don't think the arrowhead was coated with *mamucori ,"* I said. "Yes, I noticed that too," he said, smiling weakly. Tilting his head to one side, he signaled me to stay still.

"Do you think there's more than one man?" I whispered when I heard a branch break. Xotomi looked at me with wide, fearful eyes.

— There are usually more.

“We can’t wait here like frogs,” I said, taking up my bow and arrows. Silently, I crept to the path. “Show your face, you coward! You cowardly monkey! You’ve hurt my wife!” I shouted in a voice that didn’t sound like my own. To keep things civil, I added the words I knew an Iticoteri warrior would have said: “I’ll kill you on sight when I see you!”

No more than three meters from where I stood, a darkened face appeared among the leaves. His hair was wet. I felt an irrational urge to laugh. I was sure he hadn't bathed, but had slipped while crossing the river, because the water barely reached his waist. I aimed my arrow at him. For a moment, I couldn't think of what to say.

"Leave your weapons on the path," I finally shouted. And, to make the sentence sound right, I added, "My arrows are poisoned with the finest *tnaniucori* of the iticoteris." "Drop your weapons," I repeated. "I'm aiming for your belly, the very place where death lies."

With wide eyes, as if beholding an apparition, the man emerged and stood on the path. He wasn't much taller than me, but he was much more powerfully built. In his hand he clutched his bow and arrows.

"Drop your weapons to the ground," I repeated, stamping my foot on the ground for emphasis. With careful slowness, the man placed his bow and arrows on the path in front of him.
"Why did you hurt my friend?" I asked when I saw Xotomi crawling along the path.
"I didn't mean to hurt her," he said, his eyes fixed on the makeshift, torn, and bloody bandage covering Xotomi's leg. "I meant to hurt you."

- Me!

I felt powerless because of the anger. I opened and closed my mouth several times, unable to utter a single word.

When I finally regained my speech, I stammered out insult after insult in every language I knew, including Iticoteri, which had the most descriptive obscenities.

Petrified, the man remained before me, seemingly more surprised by my offensive words than by the arrow still pointed at him. Neither of us noticed that Arasuwe and Etewa were approaching.
—You cowardly mocototeri— said Arasuwe. —I should kill you on the spot.

"He wanted to kill me," I explained, my voice trembling. I felt all my courage melt away and I began to tremble—. He wounded Xotomi in the leg.

“I didn’t mean to kill you,” the Mocototeri excused himself, looking at me pleadingly. “I only wanted to wound you in the leg to stop you from running away.” He turned to Arasuwe. “You can be sure of my good intentions; my arrows aren’t poisoned.” He looked at Xotomi. “I wounded you accidentally when you were dragging the white girl,” he stammered, as if he didn’t quite want to accept that he had missed his shot.

"How many more of you are there?" Arasuwe asked, crouching down next to his daughter. Not for

a moment, while He felt the wound with his fingers, took his eyes off the mocototeri—. It's not serious —he said, sitting up.

"There are two more." The mocototeri imitated the cry of a bird, which was immediately answered by shouts. similar—. We wanted to take the white girl. Our people want her to stay in our shabono

.

"How do you think I could have walked if you had hurt me?" I asked.

"We could have carried you in a hammock," the man said quickly, smiling at me.

Shortly after, two more mockingbirds emerged from the undergrowth. They looked at me smiling, not at all embarrassed or scared of having been discovered.

"How long have you been here?" Arasuwe asked.

“We’ve been watching the white girl for several days,” one of the men said. “We know she likes to hunt frogs with the children.” The man gave me a broad smile. “There are a lot of frogs around our *shabono.”*

"Why have you waited so long?" Arasuwe asked.

In the most frank terms, the man observed that there had always been too many women and children around me. They hoped to capture me at dawn, when I went to relieve myself, because They had heard that I preferred to go deeper into the jungle, alone.

—But we didn't see her even once.

Smiling, Arasuwe and Etewa looked at me, as if they expected me to elaborate on the subject. I looked at them in turn.

Since the rains began, I had discovered many more snakes in the places designated for bodily needs; but I didn't want to talk about the place where I preferred to go.

With the same enthusiasm as if he were telling a story, the mocototeri continued explaining that they had not come to kill any iticoteri or to kidnap any of their women.

"All we wanted was to take the white girl." The man laughed and asked, "Wouldn't you and your people have been surprised if the white girl had suddenly disappeared without a trace?"

Arasuwe conceded that it certainly would have been quite a feat.

— But we would have known it was your doing, you mocototeris. You're careless enough to leave footprints in the mud. I saw plenty of signs that mocototeris were here when I walked around the *shabono.* Last night I had a feeling something was wrong; that's why I came back so quickly from a trip to the old orchards. —Arasuwe paused, as if giving the three men time to digest his words; then he declared—: If you had taken the white girl, we would have attacked your village and we would have her brought back, along with some of your women.

The man who had wounded Xotomi in the leg picked up his bow and arrows from the ground.

“Today was a good day, I thought. There was only a woman and a child with the white girl”. He looked at me, powerless.

“But I hurt the wrong person. There must be powerful *hekuras* in this village protecting the white girl.” He shook his head, as if full of doubt, and fixed his eyes on Arasuwe. “Why is she using a man’s weapon? We saw her one morning at the river, with the women, shooting fish like a man.” We didn't know what to think of her. That's why I couldn't hurt her. I no longer knew who she was.

Arasuwe ordered the three men to walk towards the *shabono.*

The absurdity of the whole situation was overwhelming. Only the fact that Xotomi had been hurt kept me from laughing, but a convulsive smile kept returning to my lips: although I tried to maintain a sober expression, I felt my mouth twisting. I wanted to carry Xotomi, but he was laughing so hard that his leg started bleeding again.

"It will be easier if I lean on you," she said. "My leg doesn't hurt much." "Are the mocototeris prisoners?" I asked.

He looked at me for a moment, uncomprehending; finally he said:

—No. Only women are taken captive.

—What will they do to them in the *shabono?*

—They will be fed.

—But they're enemies! They wounded you in the leg. They should be punished.

Xotomi looked at me and shook his head as if he thought making me understand was a task beyond his capabilities. He asked me if I would have killed the mocototeri if I hadn't dropped his weapons to the ground.

"I would have shot him," I said, loud enough for the men to hear. "I would have killed him with my poisoned arrows."

Arasuwe and Etewa looked back. The stern expressions on their faces softened into smiles. They knew my arrows weren't poisoned.

—Yes, I would have killed you —Arasuwe told the Mocototeris—. The white girl is not like our

women. White people kill very quickly.

I wondered if I had actually shot my arrow at the mocototeri. I certainly would have kicked him in the groin or stomach if he hadn't dropped his bow and arrows. I realized it was foolish to try to overpower an opponent stronger than myself, but I couldn't see why a small person couldn't surprise an attacker with a sudden kick or punch. I was sure that would have given me enough time to escape. A kick would certainly have surprised the unsuspecting mocototeri even more than my bow and arrows. This thought was very reassuring.

Upon arriving at the *shabono,* the iticoteris greeted us by looking at us over the tips of their arrows,

ready to fire. Women and children were hiding inside the huts. Ritimi came running towards me.
"I knew nothing would happen to you," she said, as she helped me carry her stepsister to old Hayama's cabin. Ritimi's grandmother washed Xotomi's leg with hot water and sprinkled *hepena* powder on the wound.

"Don't get up from the hammock," he warned the girl. "I'll bring some leaves to wrap around your calf."

Exhausted, I went to rest in my hammock. Hoping to fall asleep, I pulled the sides up to cover myself. But Ritimi's laughter woke me. Leaning over me, she covered my face with loud kisses.
—I've heard how you scared the mocototeri.

"Why were only Arasuwe and Etewa rescued?" I asked. "There could have been many." mocototeris.
—My father and my husband did not come to rescue you—Ritimi informed me candidly.

She settled comfortably in my hammock and then explained that no one in the *shabono* had noticed that I had gone with Xotomi and little Sisiwe to catch fish. It was a complete accident that Arasuwe and Etewa, following his premonitions, had gone to look around the *shabono* after our night's journey. Although he suspected something was amiss, he didn't really know there were mocototeris there. His father, Ritimi declared, was only fulfilling his duty as chief and seeing if he could find any traces of intruders. It was a task the chief had to undertake alone, because generally no one wanted to accompany him on such a dangerous mission. It wasn't expected that anyone would.

Only recently had I realized that although Arasuwe had been introduced to me by Milagros as the chief of the Iticoteris, that was an uncertain title. A chief's powers were limited. He wore no special insignia to distinguish him from the other men, and all adult males participated in important decisions. Even when they had made a decision together, each man was free to do as he pleased. Arasuwe's importance stemmed from his kinship ties. His brothers and his many sons and sons-in-law gave him power and support. As long as his decisions satisfied the people of his *shabono,* his authority would not be questioned.

—Why was Etewa with him?

"That was totally unexpected," Ritimi said, laughing. "He was probably coming back from a clandestine rendezvous with one of the *shabono* women when he bumped into his father-in-law."

"You mean no one would have come to rescue us?" I asked, incredulous.

"Once the men know the enemy is near, they don't go out intentionally. It's very easy to fall into an ambush."

—But they could have killed us!

“No one ever kills a woman,” Ritimi said with complete conviction. “You would have been captured. But our men would have raided the Mocototeri village and brought you back,” he stated with astonishing simplicity, as if it were the most natural course of events.

"But they hurt Xotomi in the leg!" She felt like crying. "They wanted to hurt me."

“That was only because they didn’t know how to capture you,” Ritimi said, throwing her arms around my neck. “They know how to handle Indian women; we’re easy to kidnap. The Mocototeris must have been very confused about your case. You should be happy. You’re as brave as a warrior. Iramamowe is sure you’re protected by special *hekuras,* so powerful that they deflected the arrow meant for you and hit Xotomi in the leg.”

"What will happen to the Mocototeris?" I asked, looking toward Arasuwe's hut. The three men were sitting in hammocks and eating roasted plantains as if they were guests. "It's strange how you treat your enemies."

"Strange?" Ritimi looked at me, puzzled. "We treated them well. Didn't they reveal their plan? Arasuwe is glad they didn't get what they wanted."

Ritimi explained that the three men would likely stay with the Iticoteris for some time, especially if they suspected the Iticoteris were planning to attack their village. The two *Shabonos* had fought each other for many years, since the time of their grandfather and great-grandfather, and even before.

Ritimi drew my head toward her and murmured in my ear:

—Etewa has been wanting to take revenge on the Mocototeris for a long time.

“Etewa! But he was so happy to go to your party!” I exclaimed, perplexed. “I thought he liked them. I know Arasuwe thinks they’re treacherous; even lramamowe. But Etewa! I was sure he had…”

I was delighted to dance and sing at your party.

"I already told you once that one doesn't go to a party just to dance and sing, but to find out what the others are planning," Ritimi whispered. She looked at me anxiously. "Etewa wants his enemies to think he has no intention of avenging his father."

—Was your father killed by the Mocototeris? Ritimi put his hand to my lips.

—Let's not talk about this. It's bad luck to mention someone who died in a robbery.

"Will there be an attack?" I managed to ask, before Ritimi shoved a piece of roasted banana into my mouth.

She just smiled at me, but didn't answer. The idea of an attack made me extremely uneasy. I had trouble swallowing the banana. Somehow, I associated the bloody assaults with the past. The few times I'd asked Milagros about them, her answers had been vague. Only now I asked if there was nostalgia in Milagros' voice when she said that the missionaries were very successful in their attempt to put an end to the fighting between villages.

"Will there be a robbery?" I asked Etewa as she entered the cabin.

He looked at me with an angry expression.

—That's not a question a woman should ask.

XX

Night was falling when Puriwariwe arrived at the shabono. I hadn't seen him since my illness, since the night he appeared in the clearing with his arms raised, as if imploring the darkness. I learned from Milagros that the old shapori had taken epena for six consecutive days and nights. The old man had been on the verge of succumbing to the weight of the spirits he had summoned to his chest. Nevertheless, he never stopped begging the hekuras to deliver me from the ravages of the tropical fever.

Ritimi had also insisted that the struggle to cure me had been particularly difficult, because the hekuras resist invocations during the rainy season.
"It was the hummingbird's hekura that saved you," he explained. "Despite its small size, the hummingbird is a powerful spirit. A good shapori uses it as a last resort."
It offered me no comfort whatsoever when Ritimi put her arms around my neck and assured me that, had I died, my soul would not have wandered aimlessly through the jungle, but would have peacefully ascended to the house of thunder, because my body would have been cremated, and my pulverized bones would have served as
food for her and her relatives.

I approached Puriwariwe in the clearing.
"I'm fine now," I said, sitting down next to him.
She looked at me with veiled, almost sleepy eyes, then ran her hand over my head. It was a small, dark hand that moved quickly, yet seemed heavy and slow. A vague tenderness softened her features, but she didn't say a word. I wondered if she knew that I had felt the hummingbird's beak pierce my chest during my illness.

I hadn't told anyone.

A group of men with their faces and bodies painted black gathered around Puriwariwe. They blew epena into their noses and listened to his chants, pleading with the hekuras to emerge from their mountain hiding places. The men's black figures moved like shadows, barely illuminated by the fires in the huts. Softly, they repeated the shaman's chants. I felt a chill run through me.

spine as the accelerated rhythm of his unintelligible words became more threatening and powerful.

Upon returning to the cabin, I asked Ritimi what the men were celebrating.

—They are sending hekuras to the village of the mocototeris to kill the enemy.

—Will the enemy really die?

Raising her knees, she gazed thoughtfully beyond the palm-fringed edge of the roof, up at the well-black sky, empty of moon and stars.

"He will die," he said softly.

Convinced there wouldn't be a real attack, I dozed in my hammock listening to the singing. More than hearing the men, I visualized fragments of the sound rising and falling endlessly, as if dragged along.

because of the smoke from homes.

Hours later I got up and sat outside the hut. Most of the men had retired to their hammocks. Only ten remained in the clearing, among them Etewa. With their eyes closed, they repeated Puriwariwe's song. Their words reached me clearly through the damp air:

Follow me, follow my vision. Follow me over the treetops.

Look at the birds and the butterflies; you will never see such things.

colors on the earth.

I am rising towards the sky, towards the sun.

The shapori's singing was abruptly interrupted by one of the men.

"The sun has hit me. My eyes are burning!" he cried, getting up. He looked around in the darkness, looking helpless. His legs gave way and he collapsed with a thud to the ground. No one offered him help. attention.

Puriwariwe's voice grew more insistent, as if trying to lift the men, collectively, toward his vision. He repeated his song again and again for those around him. He told them not to stray following their visions and he warned them of the bamboo leaves, sharp as knives, and of the poisonous snakes that slithered from the trees and roots, along the path that leads to the sun.

Above all, he advised them not to enter into a human dream, but to walk from the darkness of the night to the white darkness of the sun. He promised them that their bodies would be wet with the glow of the hekuras and that their eyes would shine with the precious sunlight.

I stayed outside the cabin until dawn erased the shadows from the ground. Hoping to discover some trace of his journey to the sun, I went from man to man, carefully observing their faces.
Puriwariwe looked at me curiously, a mocking smile on his devastated face.
“You won’t find any outward sign of their flight,” he told me, as if he had read my thoughts. “Their eyes are dull and red from vigil,” he added, gesturing to the men who were staring indifferently into the distance, completely unaware of my presence. “That precious light you expect to see reflected in their pupils shines only within them. Only they can see it.”

Before I had a chance to ask him about his trip to the sun, he left the shabono and went deep into the jungle.

In the days that followed, a sense of grim oppression enveloped the village. At first, it was nothing more than a vague feeling, but eventually, I became obsessed with the certainty that they were deliberately keeping me there, ignorant of some impending event. I became lethargic, distant, and irritable. I struggled with the feeling of isolation. I tried to hide my vague apprehensions, but I felt as if unidentifiable forces were attacking me.

When I asked Ritimi or any of the other women if any changes were about to happen, they didn't even seem to hear my question. Instead, they would recount some stupid incident, hoping to make me laugh.

"Are they going to attack us?" I finally asked Arasuwe one day.
He turned his perplexed face towards me, as if trying to unravel my words.
I felt confused, nervous, and close to tears. I told him I wasn't stupid, that I'd noticed men were constantly on guard and women were afraid to go to the orchards or fish in the river alone.

"Why can't someone tell me what's going on?" I shouted. "Nothing is happening," Arasuwe said calmly.

He folded his arms behind his neck and stretched out comfortably in the hammock. He started talking to me about something unrelated to my question and laughing at his own story. But this didn't reassure me, and I didn't laugh with him; I didn't even pay attention to what he was saying. He seemed completely astonished when I stormed off to my cabin.

I was sad for several days, alternately angry and feeling sorry for myself. I didn't sleep well. I kept telling myself that I, who had so completely embraced this new life, was suddenly being treated like a stranger. I felt offended and betrayed. I couldn't accept that Arasuwe didn't trust me. Not even Ritimi wanted to reassure me. "If only Milagros were here!" I wished fervently. He surely would have dispelled my anxiety. He would have told me everything.

One night, when I couldn't drift off to sleep but instead tossed and turned in a half-sleep state, I suddenly understood. It wasn't a single idea that could be put into words, but rather a whole process of thoughts and memories that flashed before me like images and put everything into perspective.

I felt happy. I began to laugh with a relief that turned into pure joy. I could hear my own laughter echoing through the shabono. I sat down in the hammock and discovered that most of the iticoteris were laughing with me.
Arasuwe sat in my hammock.

"Have the spirits of the jungle driven you mad?" he asked, holding my head in his hands. "Completely crazy," I said, still laughing.

I looked into their eyes, which shone in the darkness. I looked at Ritimi, Tutemi, and Etewa, standing beside Arasuwe, their curious, sleepy faces lit by laughter. Words poured from my mouth in endless procession, piling up with astonishing speed. I was speaking in Spanish, not because I wanted to hide something, but because my explanation wouldn't have made sense in their language. Arasuwe and the others They listened as if they could understand, as if they sensed my need to unload the turmoil inside me.

I realized that I was, after all, an outsider, and that my demand to be informed about events that even the Iticoteris themselves didn't discuss among themselves stemmed from my belief in my own importance. What had made me an intolerable individual was the idea of being excluded, of being left out of something I believed I had a right to know. I hadn't questioned why I believed I had that right. This had embittered me, blinding me to all the joyful moments I once enjoyed so much. The sadness and oppression I felt didn't come from outside, but from within myself, and they were transmitted to the shabono and its people.

I felt Arasuwe's calloused hand on my tonsure. I wasn't ashamed of my feelings, but I was glad it was up to me to restore the sense of magic and wonder I felt in that different world.

"Blow some air into my nose," Arasuwe told Etewa. "I want to make sure that evil spirits stay away from the white girl."

I heard murmurs, a whisper of voices, a stifled laugh, and then Arasuwe's monotonous singing. I fell into a peaceful sleep, the best I'd had for many nights. Little Texoma, who hadn't come to my hammock for several days, woke me at dawn.

"I heard you laughing last night," she said, snuggling up to me. "You hadn't laughed in so long, I was afraid you'd never laugh again."
I looked into her bright eyes as if I could find in them the answer that in the future would allow me to laugh at any anxiety or turmoil in my spirit.

An eerie stillness enveloped the shabono as night's shadows closed in. The gentle touch of Tutemi's fingers, searching my head for lice, nearly lulled me to sleep. The women's boisterous chatter dwindled to whispers as they prepared dinner and nursed their babies.

As if obeying a silent command, the children abandoned their noisy afternoon games and they gathered at Arasuwe's hut to listen to old Kamosiwe's stories. He seemed intoxicated by his own words and gestured dramatically with his hands. But his only eye was fixed on the long tubes of sweet potatoes sticking out of the embers. Impressed, I watched as the old man pulled the roots from the fire with his bare hands. He didn't want the potatoes to get cold and filled his mouth with them as soon as he took them out.

From where I sat, I could see the waning moon rising above the treetops, half-hidden by drifting clouds that gleamed white against the dark sky. A chilling sound pierced the stillness of the night: something between a scream and a growl. An instant later, Etewa, his face and body painted black, materialized from the shadows. Standing before the fires burning in the clearing, he rattled his bow and arrows above his head. I didn't see which hut the others came from, but eleven more men, their faces and bodies similarly blackened, joined Etewa in the clearing.

Arasuwe pushed and pulled each of them until they stood in a perfectly straight line, and after placing the last man in his place, he joined them. The chief began to sing in a deep, nasal tone. The others repeated the last verse of each song in chorus. He could distinguish each of the voices in the mingled I could hear the harmony, but I didn't understand a single word. The more they sang, the more furious they seemed. At the end of each song, they let out the fiercest screams I had ever heard. Strangely, I had the feeling that the louder they shouted, the more remote their anger became, as if it were no longer part of their black- painted bodies.

They fell silent suddenly. The dim light from the bonfires accentuated the angry expression on their faces, rigid as masks,
the feverish gleam in their eyes. I didn't see Arasuwe give the order, but they shouted in unison:

—How I will rejoice in seeing my arrow wound the enemy! How I will rejoice in seeing their blood splatter on the ground!
Holding their weapons above their heads, the warriors broke ranks and gathered in a tight formation circle. They began to shout, first softly, then with voices so piercing that a chill ran

down my spine. They fell silent again, and Ritimi whispered in my ear that they were listening to the echo of their shouts to determine which direction they came from. Echoes, she explained, carry the spirits of enemies.

Grunting and banging their weapons, the men began to stride across the clearing. Arasuwe calmed them.

Twice more they gathered in a tight circle and shouted at the top of their lungs. Instead of going deeper into the jungle, as I had expected and feared, the men approached the huts near the entrance to the sha bono.

They lay down in their hammocks and forced themselves to vomit.

"Why are you doing that?" I asked Ritimi.

"While they were singing, they devoured their enemies," she said. "Now they must rid themselves of the flesh." rotten.

I sighed with relief, but was strangely disappointed that the attack had been depicted only symbolically. Shortly before dawn, I was awakened by the women's wailing. I rubbed my eyes to to make sure I wasn't dreaming. As if no time had passed, the men were outside, in the same formation they had adopted earlier, their shouts had lost their ferocity, as if the women's wails had dampened their anger. They hoisted the bundles of bananas piled at the entrance of the shabono onto their shoulders and marched dramatically along the path that led to the river.

Old Kamosiwe and I followed the men from a distance. I thought it was raining, but it was just dew trickling from leaf to leaf. For a moment, the men stood motionless, their shadows perfectly outlined against the pale sand of the shore. The crescent moon had traveled across the sky and glimmered faintly through the thick, humid air. As if the sand had swallowed their shadows, the

The men vanished before my eyes. I heard nothing but the rustling of leaves and the breaking of twigs, growing ever more distant in the jungle. The fog closed in on us like an impenetrable wall, as if nothing had happened, as if everything we had witnessed had been nothing more than a dream.

The old man Kamosiwe, sitting next to me on a rock, lightly touched my arm.

"I can no longer hear the echoes of his footsteps," he said; then, slowly, he entered the water.

I followed him. The coldness of the river made me shiver. I felt the little fish hiding among the submerged roots pass between my legs, but I couldn't see them in the dark water.

Old Kamosiwe laughed while I dried him with some leaves.

"Look, sikomasik," he said happily, pointing at the white mushrooms growing on a rotten log. I gathered them for him and wrapped them in leaves. Once cooked over the fire, they were considered a delicacy, especially enjoyed by the elderly.

Kamosiwe handed me the end of his broken bow; I pulled him along to help him climb the slippery path that led to the shabono. The fog didn't lift all day, as if the sun were afraid to witness the men's journey through the jungle.

XXI

Little Texoma sat next to me on a log, among the bamboo. "Aren't you going frog hunting?" I asked him.

She looked at me, frightened. Her eyes, always so bright, were dull. Slowly, they filled with tears.

"Why are you sad?" I asked, cradling her in my arms. Children were never allowed to cry, for fear their souls would escape through their mouths. I placed her on my head and headed toward the shabono. "You weigh as much as a basket full of ripe bananas," I said, trying to make her laugh.

But the little girl didn't even smile. She kept her face pressed against my neck; her tears streamed uncontrollably down my chest. Carefully, I laid her down in her hammock. She clung to me tenaciously, forcing me to lay down next to her. She soon fell asleep. It wasn't a peaceful sleep. Every now and then her little body trembled as if she were in the grip of a horrible nightmare.

Ritimi entered the cabin with Tutemi's baby strapped to her back. She started crying as soon as she saw the little girl asleep next to me.

—I am sure that one of the evil shaporis of the mocototeris has taken his soul.

Ritimi was sobbing so inconsolably that I left Texoma's hammock and sat down beside her. I didn't quite know what to say to her. I was sure that Ritimi wasn't just crying for her little girl, but also for Etewa, who had left with the group of warriors almost a week ago. Since her husband's departure, Ritimi hadn't been the same. She hadn't worked in the gardens, nor had she accompanied the women to gather fruit or firewood in the jungle. She wandered around the shabono, listless and sad. She spent most of her time in her hammock, playing with Tutemi's baby. No matter how much I did and said to cheer her up, I couldn't erase the desolate expression from her face. The faint smile with which Ritimi responded to my efforts only made her seem even sadder.

I threw my arms around her neck and planted loud kisses on her cheeks, reassuring her all the while that Texoma only had a cold. Ritimi didn't want me to comfort her. Crying didn't bring her any relief or tire her either; it only increased her sadness.

"Perhaps something has happened to Etewa," Ritimi said. "Perhaps a mocototeri has killed him."

"Nothing has happened to Etewa," I affirmed. "I can feel it in my legs."

Ritimi smiled slightly, as if doubting my words. "But why is my little girl sick?" she insisted.

"Texoma is sick because she caught a chill playing with the frogs in the swamps," I said, with great safety—. Children get sick easily and recover just as quickly.

—Are you sure that's the case?

—Absolutely safe.

Ritimi looked at me doubtfully and said:

—But none of the other children are sick. I know Texoma has been bewitched.

Not knowing how to respond, I suggested it would be best to call Ritimi's uncle. Moments later, I returned with Iramamowe. During his brother's absence, Iramamowe assumed the role of chief. His courage made him the most qualified man to defend the shabono against potential attackers. His reputation as a shaman ensured the village's protection against the evil hekuras sent by enemy sorcerers.

Iramamowe looked at the girl and asked me to bring his drinking cane and the container with the hallucinogenic powder. He had a young man blow the drug into his nose and began chanting to the hekuras, pacing up and down in front of the hut.

Every now and then he would jump into the air, shouting at the evil spirits—which he believed had taken up residence in the girl's body—to leave Texoma alone.

Gently, lramamowe massaged the little girl, starting at her head and continuing over her chest and belly, down to her feet. He repeatedly waved his hands, shaking off the bad hekuras he had taken from Texoma. Several other men drank epena and sang with lramamowe throughout the night.

Alternatively, he would massage the little body and suck on it to draw out the disease.

However, the next day the girl was no better. She lay motionless in her hammock, her eyes red and swollen. She refused food, including the water and honey I offered her.

Iramamowe diagnosed that her soul had escaped her body and proceeded to build a platform of poles and vines in the middle of the clearing. She tied assai palm leaves in her hair and drew circles around her eyes and mouth with a mixture of annatto and charcoal. She paced around the platform, imitating the cry of the harpy eagle. With a branch from one of the bushes growing around the shabono, she thoroughly swept the ground, trying to locate the girl's lost soul.

Unable to find the soul, he gathered several of Texoma's playmates around him. He decorated their hair and faces to match his own and brought them up onto the platform.

"Look at the ground from above," he told the children. "Find your little sister's soul."

Imitating the cries of the harpy eagle, the children jumped up and down on the precarious structure built. They swept the air with the branches the women gave them; but they too could not catch the lost soul.

I took the branch Ritimi offered me and joined the others in the search. We swept the paths that led to the river, the orchards, and the marshes, where Texoma had been hunting frogs. Iramamowe traded his branch for mine.

"You took her to the shabono," he said. "Perhaps you can find her soul."
Without giving any thought to the futility of the task, I swept the floor with the same anxiety as everyone else. "How can you tell if a soul is near?" I asked lramamowe as we retraced our steps back to the shabono.
— One simply knows.

We searched every hut, swept under the hammocks, around every hearth, and behind the piles of bananas. We picked up the baskets from the floor. We moved the bows and arrows that were leaning against the sloping roof. We scared the spiders and scorpions out of their nests among the palm fronds on the roof.

I abandoned the hunt when I saw a snake slithering behind one of the beams.
Laughing, old Hayama severed the reptile's head with a swift blow of Iramamowe's machete. She wrapped the headless snake, still writhing, in pishaansi leaves and placed it on the fire. Hayama also gathered the spiders that fell to the ground. She wrapped them in leaves as well and roasted them. The elders had a particular fondness for their soft undersides. Hayama saved the legs to grind them later: it was believed that this powder healed cuts, bites, and scratches.

As night fell, little Texoma showed no signs of improvement. She lay motionless in the hammock, her eyes blank and fixed on the palm-thatched roof. An indescribable feeling of helplessness filled me as Iramamowe bent over the child again to massage her and suck out the evil spirits.
—Let me try to cure her—I told him.

lramamowe smiled almost imperceptibly, looking alternately at me and Texoma.
“What makes you think you can cure my great-niece?” she asked me deliberately. There was

no mockery in her tone: only vague curiosity. “We haven’t found her soul. A powerful enemy shapori has taken it. Do you think you can counteract the curse of an evil sorcerer?”
"No," I quickly assured him. "Only you can do that."
"So what will you do then? You once said you've never cured anyone. What makes you think you can now?"

—I will help Texoma with hot water. And you will heal her with your songs to the hekuras.
Iramamowe hesitated for a moment; gradually, his thoughtful expression relaxed. He placed his hand on the mouth as if hiding a desire to laugh.
—Did you learn a lot from the Shaporis you met?
"I remember some of his healing methods," I replied, but I didn't mention the cure I was thinking of.

Applying Texoma was how my grandmother treated a fever when it wouldn't break. You said you saw hekuras in my eyes. If you sing to them, perhaps they'll help me.
An easy smile appeared and lingered on Iramamowe's lips. He seemed almost convinced by me. reasoning. However, he shook his head as if overcome by doubts.

— Healing isn't done that way. How can I ask the hekuras to help you? Will you take epena as well?

"I don't need to take it," I assured him, and then pointed out that if a powerful shapori could order his hekuras to steal a girl's soul, a great sorcerer like him could certainly order his spirits, who he claimed already knew me, to come to my aid.

—I'll call the hekuras to help you. I'll take the epena in your place.

While one of the men blew the hallucinogenic substance into Iramamowe's nose, Ritimi, Tutemi, and Arasuwe's wives brought me gourds filled with hot water that the old woman had heated in large aluminum pots. I soaked my blanket, cut into strips, in the hot water and, using the legs of my jeans as gloves, wrung out each piece of cloth until not a drop of water remained.

Carefully, I wrapped Texoma's body with them, and covered her with the palm leaves that Some of the guys had cut for me.

I could barely move through the crowd that had gathered at the hut. They silently watched my every move, attentive and alert, as if not wanting to miss a thing. Iramamowe sat beside me, singing tirelessly to the night. As the hours passed, people retired to their hammocks. I didn't
I dismissed their signs of disapproval and continued changing the compresses as soon as they cooled. Ritimi sat in her hammock, silent; her intertwined fingers rested lifelessly in her lap, in an attitude of utter despair. Whenever she looked at me, she burst into tears.
Texoma seemed to ignore my activities. “What if it’s not a cold, but something else?” I thought.

What if it gets worse? My confidence wavered. I murmured a prayer for her with a fervor I hadn't felt since I was a child. When I looked up, I saw Iramamowe watching me. He seemed anxious, as if he sensed the mixture of feelings—magic, religion, and fear—struggling inside me. Determinedly, he continued singing.

Old Kamosiwe joined us. He sat near the hearth. The morning chill hadn't yet entered the cabin, but the mere fact that there was a fire made him instinctively huddle beside it.
Gently, he began to sing. His murmured songs filled me with tranquility; he seemed to carry within him the voices of past generations. The rain pattered on the palm-thatched roof with determined vigor; then it became a light drizzle that plunged me into a kind of stupor.

It was almost daylight when Texoma began to stir in her hammock. Impatiently, she removed the pieces of wet blanket and palm leaves that wrapped around her. With wide eyes of surprise, she sat up and smiled at old Kamosiwe, lramamowe, and me, who were squatting beside her hammock.
"I'm thirsty," she said, and drank the water and honey I gave him.

"Will she be alright?" Ritimi asked hesitantly.
—Iramamowe has brought her soul back. The hot water has broken the fever. Now she needs to be kept warm and sleep peacefully.

I walked to the clearing and stretched my cramped legs.

Old Kamosiwe looked like a child, leaning against a post, his arms tightly clasped to his chest to keep warm. Iramamowe stopped beside me on the way to his hut. We didn't speak, but I was certain we shared a moment of absolute understanding.

XXII

Upon hearing the sound of approaching footsteps, Tutemi signaled me to duck behind the moldy leaves of the pumpkins.
"They are the warriors," I whispered. "Women must not see which direction the warriors are returning from."
Unable to contain my curiosity, I slowly stood up. Three women were accompanying the men; one of them was pregnant.
"Don't look," Tutemi pleaded, pulling me along. "If you see the path the warriors return by, the enemy will capture you."

"How beautiful the men look with the colorful feathers sticking out of their bracelets and the annatto designs all over their bodies. But Etewa isn't here! Do you think they've killed him?" I asked, frightened.
Tutemi looked at me with a bewildered expression. There was no nervousness in her movements as she parted the large
pumpkin leaves to spy on the figures moving away. Her eager face lit up with a smile and she took my arm.

—Look, there's Etewa. —He pressed my head against his so I could see what he was pointing at—. It's *unucai.*

Some distance behind the others, Etewa walked slowly, her shoulders hunched towards
He stood before the camera as if carrying a great weight on his back. He was not adorned with feathers or paint. Only a few pieces of arrow shaft protruded from his pierced earlobes, and he had another shaft tied to each wrist, like a bracelet.

—Is he sick?
—No! It's *unucai* —he said with admiration—. He has killed a mocototeri.

Unable to share Tutemi's joy, I could only gaze at her in mute disbelief. I felt my eyes welling with tears and looked away. We waited until Etewa disappeared from sight, and then slowly made our way to the *shabono.*

Tutemi quickened his pace upon hearing the welcoming shouts of the men and women who were in the huts.

Surrounded by enthusiastic onlookers, the warriors proudly paraded in the clearing. Separating from her husband, Arasuwe's youngest wife approached the three captive women who had not been included in the cheerful greetings. They remained apart and silent, their fearful gazes fixed on the iticoteri woman who approached them.

"Painted with annatto! How disgusting!" shouted Arasuwe's wife. "What else can you expect from a Mocototeri woman? Do you think you've been invited to a party?" Turning to face the three women, she picked up a stick. "I'll give you a beating. If they had captured me, I would have escaped!" she shouted.

The three mocototeris pressed themselves against each other.

"At least she would have arrived crying pitifully," Arasuwe's wife hissed, pulling one of the girls' hair. Arasuwe intervened between his wife and the mocototeris.

"Leave them alone. They've cried so much they've soaked the path with their tears. We made them be quiet. We didn't want to hear their howls." Arasuwe took the stick from his wife. "We asked them to..."

They will paint their faces and bodies with annatto. These women will be happy here. They will be well treated! —He turned to the rest of the Iticoteris who had gathered around his wife—. Give them something to eat. They are hungry just like us. We haven't eaten for two days.

Arasuwe's wife did not seem intimidated.

"Are your men dead?" he asked the three women. "Did you cremate them? Did you eat their remains?"

—He confronted the pregnant woman—. Did your husband die too? Do you expect an iticoteri to turn as the father of your child?

Pushing his wife roughly, Arasuwe declared:
"Only one man died. Etewa wounded him with his arrow. He was the man who killed Etewa's father the last time the Mocototeris attacked us so treacherously."

Arasuwe turned to the pregnant woman. There was no compassion in his eyes or in his voice as he continued:

“You were captured by the Mocototeris a long time ago. You have no siblings among them who can protect you. rescue. Now you are iticoteris. Don't cry anymore”.

Arasuwe continued explaining to the captives that they would be better off in their new home. The iticoteris, she insisted, had had meat almost every day, as well as plenty of roots and plantains during the rainy season. No one had gone hungry.

One of the captives was a girl, perhaps ten or eleven years old. "What will happen to her?" I asked Tutemi.

— Like the others, she will become a wife. I was probably her age when the Iticoteris kidnapped me.

A wistful smile curved her lips. "I was lucky that Ritimi's mother-in-law chose me as Etewa's second wife. He's never hit me. Ritimi treats me like a sister. He doesn't fight with me or make me work too hard."

Tutemi stopped mid-sentence, because Arasuwe's youngest wife continued shouting against the mocototeris.

— How disgusting, all of them arriving painted up! They're practically wearing flowers in their

ears and starting to dance.

She followed the three women to her husband's cabin.

"Were you raped by the men in the jungle?" they asked her. "Why did it take you so long? You must have enjoyed it." Pushing the pregnant woman, they added, "Did they sleep with you too?"

"Shut up!" Arasuwe shouted. "Or I'll beat you until you bleed." Arasuwe turned to the women who had followed him. "You should be glad that your men have returned safe and sound. You should be pleased that Etewa killed a man, that we brought back three captives. Go to your huts and prepare food for your men."

Murmuring, the women dispersed towards their respective cabins. "Why is only Arasuwe's wife so upset?" I asked Tutemi.

"Don't you know?" he asked, smiling maliciously. "He's afraid he'll take one of the women as his fourth wife."

—Why do you want so many?

"He is powerful," Tutemi stated categorically. "He has many sons-in-law who bring him plenty of game and help him work in the orchards. Arasuwe can feed many women."

"Were the captives raped?" I asked.

"One of them was" Tutemi was momentarily taken aback by my expression of disgust, and explained that a captured woman is usually raped by all the men in the attacking group. "She's the one."

—Did they also rape the young girl?

"No," Tutemi said calmly. "She's not a woman yet. They didn't rape the pregnant woman either: they never touch them."

Ritimi had remained in her hammock during the general commotion. She told me there was no reason to I was worried about the Mocototeris women, because I knew Etewa wouldn't take a third wife. I was glad to find that the sadness and listlessness that had haunted her for the past few days had smissing.

"Where is Etewa?" I asked. "Isn't she coming to the *shabono?"*

Ritimi's eyes seemed almost feverish with excitement as she explained that her husband had killed an enemy and was looking for an uncrowded tree where he could hang his old hammock and quiver. However, before he could do that, he had to remove all the bark from the trunk and branches of the tree.

Ritimi's eyes expressed great concern when she spoke to me. She warned me not to look at that tree. She was sure I wouldn't mistake it for the kind of tree whose bark was removed to make barrels and canoes. Such trees, she explained, still look like trees, while those stripped bare by a man he has killed resemble ghostly shadows, white against the surrounding greenery, with the hammock, quiver, bow, and arrows dangling from the bare branches. Spirits—especially malevolent ones—like to hide near such places. I had to promise Ritimi that if I ever found myself near one of those trees, I would run away as fast as I could.

In a voice so low I thought she was talking to herself, Ritimi confided her fears to me. She hoped Etewa wouldn't collapse under the weight of her victim. The dead man's *spirits* lodge in the chest of his killer, where they remain until the deceased's offspring have burned the body and devoured the pulverized bones. The Mocototeris would postpone the incineration of the corpse as long as possible in the hope that Etewa would die of weakness.

"Will the men tell us about the assault?" I asked.

—As soon as they have eaten —said Ritimi.

With his bow and arrows in hand, Etewa crossed the clearing toward the hut where Iramamowe's son had been initiated as a shaman. The men who had accompanied Etewa in the attack on the enemy village covered the sides of the hut with palm leaves, leaving only a small entrance open at the front. They brought him a gourd filled with water and lit a fire inside the hut. Etewa had to remain in this shelter until Puriwariwe announced that the dead Mocototeri had been cremated. Day and night, Etewa had to be vigilant in case the spirit of the dead man haunted the hut in the form of a jaguar. If Etewa spoke, touched a woman, or ate during those days, he would die.

Old Hayama came to our cabin, accompanied by her daughter-in-law.

"I want to find out what's going on at Arasuwe's house," he said, sitting down next to me.

Xotomi sat on the ground, resting her head against my legs, which dangled outside the hammock. A purple scar—a reminder of the arrow wound—broke the smooth line of her calf. This didn't bother Xotomi; she was glad the wound hadn't become infected.

“Matuwe captured one of the women,” Hayama declared proudly. “It’s a good time for him to take another wife, and I’d better choose the one who suits him best. I’m sure he’ll make a mistake if he’s left to choose.”

"But he already has a wife," I stammered, looking at Xotomi.

“Yes,” the old woman conceded. “But if he is to have a second wife, this is the best time. Xotomi is young. It will be easy for him to make friends with another woman now. Matuwe should take the youngest of the three captives.” Hayama stroked the tonsure on Xotomi’s head. “The girl is younger than you.

She will obey. If you have your period, she will cook for you. She can help you in the gardens and with gathering firewood. I'm getting too old to work much.

Xotomi examined the three mocototeris that were in Arasuwe's hut.

—If Matuwe is to take another wife, I wish him to take the young girl. I will like her. She can warm his hammock if I am pregnant.

"Are you?" I asked.

"I'm not sure," she said, smiling contentedly.

Hayama had told me some time before that a pregnant woman generally expected three to Four months, sometimes even longer, before informing her husband of her condition. The man was a tacit accomplice to this deception because he, too, feared the restrictive taboos surrounding food and behavior. When a woman suffered a miscarriage or gave birth to a deformed child, she was never to blame. The husband was always blamed. In fact, if a woman had repeated miscarriages, she was advised to become pregnant by another man.

Her own husband, however, had to submit to the restrictions and raise the baby as his own. Hayama went to Arasuwe's cabin.

"I'll take this Mocototeri girl with me. She'll make a good wife for my son," he said, taking the girl by the hand. "She'll live with me in my hut."

"I captured a woman," Matuwe objected. "I don't want this girl. She's too thin. I want a strong woman who can have healthy children."

“She’ll grow strong,” Hayama replied calmly. “She’s still green, but she’ll be ripe soon. Look at her breasts. They’re already large. Besides,” he added, “Xotomi won’t mind if you take her.”

Hayama turned to face the men surrounding Arasuwe’s hut. “No one is to touch her. I’ll take care of her until she becomes my son’s wife. From now on, she’s my daughter-in-law.”

No one objected, and Hayama led the girl to our hut. Shyly, the mocototeri sat on the ground near the hearth.

"I won't hit you," Xotomi said, taking the girl's hand in his own. "But you must do what I tell you."

Matuwe smiled shyly at us from the other end of the hut. I wondered if he was proud to have two women or ashamed of being forced to take a girl after capturing a woman.

"What will happen to the other prisoners?" I asked.

"Arasuwe will keep the one who is pregnant," Hayama declared.

— How do you know?

Without waiting for an answer, I asked him about the third one.

— She will be given as a wife to someone, after all the men in the *shabono* who wish to have had their way with her.

"She's already been raped by the warriors!" I said indignantly. Old Hayama burst out laughing.

— But not the men who did not participate in the attack.

The old woman patted me on the head. “Don’t make that angry face. It’s the custom. I was captured once. Many men raped me. I was lucky and found a chance to escape. No, don’t interrupt me, white girl,” Hayama said, placing her hand over my lips. “I didn’t escape because I was raped. I forgot that very quickly. I escaped because I had to work too much and

they didn't give me enough food. As the old woman had predicted, Arasuwe stayed with the pregnant woman.

"You already have three wives!" the youngest one shouted, her face contorted with fury. "Why do you want another one?"

The other two women from Arasuwe laughed nervously, watching from their hammocks as the youngest pushed the pregnant woman onto the burning coals of the hearth. Arasuwe jumped out of her hammock, grabbed one of the burning logs from the fire, and held it out to the fallen Mocototeri woman.
"Burn my wife's arm," he ordered the mocototeri while holding his wife against one of the posts of the cabin.

Sobbing, the pregnant woman covered her burned shoulder with her hand.

"Burn me!" Arasuwe's wife challenged him, writhing to escape her husband's grasp. "If you do, I'll burn you alive, but no one will eat your bones. I'll scatter them throughout the jungle, so we can urinate on them..."

She stopped, her eyes wide in genuine astonishment at discovering the extent of the burn that the other woman had something on her shoulder—. You've really burned yourself. Does it hurt a lot?

Looking up, the mocototeri wiped the tears from her face.
—It hurts a lot.

"Oh, poor woman!" Arasuwe's wife solicitously helped her up and guided her to her own hammock. She picked some gourd leaves and gently placed them on the woman's shoulder. "She'll be well again very soon. I will make sure that happens."

"Don't cry anymore," said the eldest of the Arasuwe women, sitting down next to the Mocototeri woman. She stroked her head affectionately. "Our husband is a good man. He will treat you well. I will make sure that no one in the *shabono* mistreats you."

"What will happen when the baby is born?" I asked Hayama.

—That's hard to say—the old woman conceded. She remained silent for a while, meditating intensely. He may kill him. But if it is a child, Arasuwe can ask his eldest wife to raise him as her own.

Hours later, Arasuwe began his account of the attack. He spoke in a slow, nasal tone.

—We traveled slowly on the first day and stopped to rest frequently. Our backs ached from the weight of the bananas. That first night we hardly slept because we didn't have enough firewood to We tried to warm ourselves. The rain was falling so hard that the night sky seemed to melt into the darkness that surrounded us. The next day, we walked a little faster and arrived near the Mocototeri village. We were far enough away that enemy hunters wouldn't discover our presence that night, but so close that we didn't dare light a fire in our camp.

She could only see the profile of Arasuwe's face. Fascinated, she gazed at the red and black markings on his cheeks that moved to the lively rhythm of his speech, as if they had a life of their own. The feathers in his ears softened his stern, weary face and added a playful air that belied the horror of his tale.

— For a few days we carefully observed the enemy's comings and goings. Our goal was to kill a mocototeri without alarming the *shabono* with our presence. One morning we saw that the man who had Etewa had killed his father as he entered the undergrowth following a woman. Etewa wounded him in the stomach with one of his poisoned arrows.

The man was so surprised that he didn't even cry out. By the time he recovered from his shock, Etewa had already shot a second arrow that also wounded him in the stomach and another in the neck, right behind the ear. He fell to the ground, dead.

“Walking as if dazed, Etewa headed home, accompanied by my nephew. Meanwhile, Matuwe had found the woman hiding in the thicket. He threatened to kill her if she so much as opened her mouth to cough. Matuwe, along with my younger son-in-law, headed toward our village with the woman, who I walked reluctantly. We were all supposed to meet later at a prearranged location.

While the rest of us were deciding whether to split into even smaller groups, we saw a mother with her little boy, a pregnant woman, and a young girl heading into the jungle. We couldn't resist the

temptation. Silently, we followed them.

Lying back in the hammock, with his hands behind his head, Arasuwe gazed at his fascinated audience.

Taking advantage of the chief's pause, one of the men who had participated in the attack stood up. Signaling to the people to make room for him to move, he began his narration with the exact same words Arasuwe had used.

—We traveled slowly on the first day.

But that was all the two accounts had in common. Gesturing wildly, the man dramatically portrayed the moods and expressions of the various members of the attacking party, thus adding a touch of humor and melodrama to Arasuwe's dry, realistic chronicle. Encouraged by the laughter and shouts of his audience, the man devoted a long chapter to the two youngest members of the group. They were no more than sixteen or seventeen years old. Not only had they complained of sore feet and cold, and of various aches and pains, but on the second night, when they had slept without lighting a fire, they were afraid of the jaguars and spirits that haunted them. The man interspersed his account with detailed information about the game and ripe wild fruits—their color, size, and shape—that he had unearthed.

Arasuwe continued his own report as soon as the man stopped.

—When the three women and the girl were far enough away from the *shabono,* we threatened to shoot them if they tried to escape or scream. The boy managed to slip away into the bushes. We didn't chase him, but we retreated as quickly as possible, taking care not to leave any traces. We were sure the Mocototeris would follow us as soon as they discovered the dead man.

“Immediately before nightfall, the mother of the runaway child began to scream in pain. Sitting on the floor, she clutched one foot in her hands. She wept bitterly, complaining that a poisonous snake had bitten her. Her heartbreaking cries saddened us so much that we didn't even checked for snakes. “What good did it do,” she sobbed, “for my little boy to run away, if he no longer has a mother to care for him?” Screaming that she couldn't bear the pain any longer, the woman threw herself into the bushes. It took us a few moments to realize she had tricked us. We searched the jungle extensively, but we couldn't discover which direction she had fled.

The old man Kamosiwe laughed from the heart.

"It's better that she deceived you. There's no benefit to kidnapping a mother who has left a young child. Those women cry themselves to death, and worse, they almost always escape."

The men continued talking until the rainy dawn enveloped the *shabono.* In the middle of the clearing stood the solitary hut where Etewamwas shut up. It seemed very quiet and secluded: so close and yet so separate from the voices and laughter.

A week later, Puriwariwe visited Etewa. As soon as he had eaten a roasted banana and some honey, the old man asked lramamowe to blow *epena* on his head. Singing, Puriwariwe danced around Etewa's hut.

"The dead man has not yet been cremated," I announced. "His body has been placed in a barrel. It is rotting high in a tree. Do not break your silence yet. The dead man's *spirits* remain in your heart."

Prepare your new arrows and bow. Soon the mocototeris will burn the rotting meat because the maggots are already emerging from the vat.

The old *shapori* circled Etewa's hut one more time, and then danced his way into the jungle. Three days later, Puriwariwe announced that the Mocototeris had burned the dead man.
"Take the sticks out of your ears and untie the ones on your wrists," he told Etewa, helping him to his feet. "In a few days, take your old bow and arrows to the same bare tree where you hung your hammock and quiver."

Puriwariwe led Etewa into the jungle. Arasuwe and some of the men who had participated in the attack followed them. They returned late in the afternoon. Etewa's hair had been cut and his tonsure shaved off. His body had been washed and repainted with annatto. Thin reeds, decorated with red parrot feathers, had been inserted into his ears. He also wore new leather bracelets, adorned with feathers, and the thick Arasuwe offered Etewa a cotton belt that Ritimi had made for him. He also offered Etewa a basket full of small fish that he had cooked for him in
pishaansi leaves.

Three days later, Etewa ventured out for the first time only in the jungle.
"I've caught a monkey," he announced a few hours later, standing in the clearing.
As soon as a group of men had gathered around him, he gave them precise information about the exact location where they could find the animal.

To ensure the help and protection of the *hekurus* on future hunts, Etewa went hunting alone two more times. On each occasion, he returned without his quarry and told the others where they could find it. Etewa did not eat the monkey and the two peccaries he had killed.

One afternoon, he returned with a guaco bird slung over his back. He plucked the bird and preserved the strip of skin to which the black, curly feathers were attached. It could serve as a bracelet. He also kept the wing feathers to make arrows. He roasted the bird, which was more than half a meter long, on a wooden platform that he built it over the fire. He tested if the guaco was properly roasted and then proceeded to divide it between his sons and his two wives.

"Is the white girl your daughter or your wife?" shouted old Hayama from her hut when Etewa offered me a piece of the dark breast.

"She's my mother," said Etewa, joining in the laughter of the other iticoteris.

Days later, Arasuwe oversaw the preparation of a plantain porridge. Etewa placed a small bowl in the soup. Ritimi told me it was what remained of the pulverized bones of Etewa's father. Tears streamed down the cheeks of the men and women as they drank the thick soup. I took the pumpkin dish Etewa offered me and wept for her dead father.

As soon as the vat was empty, Arasuwe shouted at the top of his lungs:

— What a *waiteri* man we have among us! He has killed his enemy. He has carried the dead man's *hekurus* in his chest without succumbing to hunger or loneliness during his confinement.
Etewa went around the clearing.

— Yes, I am *a waiteril*— he sang. —The *hekuras* of a dead man can kill the strongest of the

Warriors. It's a heavy burden to carry them for so many days. A person could die of grief. — Etewa began to dance—. I no longer think of the man I killed. I dance with the shadows of the night, not with the shadows of death.

The more he danced, the lighter and faster his steps became, as if through movement she could finally rid herself of the weight he had carried in his chest.

Many nights, the men recounted the details of the attack. Even old Kamosiwe had a version. The only thing the stories had in common was that Etewa had killed a man and that three women had been captured. Over time, only a vague memory of the real events remained, and they became a chronicle of the distant past, like all the stories the Iticoteris loved to tell.

XXIII

The pressure of tiny feet digging into my belly woke me from my dreams. As if only a moment had passed, memories of the days, weeks, and months gone by paraded through my mind with vivid details. The words of protest died on my lips when Tutemi put Hoaxive on top of me.

I cradled the baby in my arms so as not to wake little Texoma, who had fallen asleep in my hammock while waiting for me to get up. I took the frog skulls from Hoaxive that hung from the head of my hammock, strung together by a cord of vines, and rattled them in front of his face. Gurgling with delight, the baby tried to grab them.

"Are you awake?" Texoma stammered, gently touching my cheek. "I thought you were going to sleep all day."

“I’ve been thinking about all the things I’ve seen and learned since I got here,” I said, taking her little hand in mine. The narrow palm, the long, delicate fingers, were strangely mature for a four-year-old, and contrasted sharply with her dimpled face. “I didn’t realize the sun was already high.”

"You didn't even notice my brother and cousins jump out of your hammock as soon as the bananas were ready," Texoma said. "Were you overthinking things?"
"No." I laughed. "It was more like a dream. It feels like no time has passed since the day I arrived at the *shabono."*

"That seems like a long time to me," Texoma remarked seriously, stroking the soft hair of his stepbrother-. When you arrived, this baby was still sleeping in Tutemi's womb. I remember very well the day my mothers found you. —Laughing, the girl hid her face in my neck—. I know why you cried that day. You were afraid of my great-uncle lramamowe: he has a horrible face.

—That day —I whispered conspiratorially— I was afraid of all the iticoteris.
I felt a warm wetness in my belly and pulled Hoaxive away from me. Etewa, sitting crosswise

in his hammock, smiled amusedly as he watched the arc of his son's urine pass over the fire.
"All of us?" Texoma asked. "Even my father and grandfather? Even my mothers and old Hayama?" Leaning over my face, he looked at me with an expression of disbelief, almost anguish, as if searching my eyes for something. "Were you afraid of me too?"

"No. I wasn't afraid of you," I assured him, making Hoaxive jump onto my knees, who was dying of laughter.

“I wasn’t afraid of you either.” Sighing with relief, Texoma lay back in my hammock. “I didn’t hide like almost all the other children did when you came into our cabin. I’d heard that white people were tall and hairy like monkeys. But you looked so small, I knew you couldn’t really be white.”

As soon as she had the basket securely strapped to her back, Tutemi took the child from my lap. With sure movements, she placed him in the wide, soft bark cradle she carried across her chest.
"Okay," he said, smiling, and looked questioningly at Etewa and Ritimi.
Smiling, Etewa picked up his machete, bow, and arrows. "Will you come back later?" Ritimi asked me, adjusting the long, thin stick that pierced the side of his nose.
The corners of her lips, free of the soft sticks she usually wore, lifted in a smile that revealed dimples in her cheeks. As if sensing my hesitation, Ritimi didn't wait for my answer, but followed her husband and Tutemi toward the orchards.
— Hayama is coming —Tutemi whispered—. He's wondering why you haven't gone to eat his roasted banana. The little girl slid out of my hammock and ran towards the group of children playing outside.

Muttering, Hayama made her way through Tutemi's hut. Her loose skin hung in long, vertical creases along her thighs and belly. Her face wore a stern grimace as she handed me a bowl half-full of banana porridge. Sighing, she sat down in Ritimi's hammock, letting her hand brush the ground as she swayed, seemingly lost in a trance by the rhythmic creaking of the vines against the post.

"It's a shame I couldn't fatten you up," said the old woman after a long silence.

I assured her that her bananas had worked wonders; that perhaps with a little more time I could even get fat.

"There isn't much time left," Hayama said gently. "You're going on the mission." "What?" I shouted, frightened by the firmness of his tone. "Who says so?"

— Before leaving, Milagros made Arasuwe promise that if we had to move to our old orchards deeper in the jungle, we wouldn't take you with us.

The nostalgic, almost dreamy look in his eyes softened Hayama's expression as he reminded me of the various families who had marched weeks before toward the old orchards. I hadn't paid close attention to their departure, believing they would soon return. Hayama explained to me that Arasuwe's family, as well as his brothers, cousins, sons, and daughters, had not yet followed the others for the simple reason that the chief was waiting for news of Milagros.

"Are you going to abandon the *shabono?* " I asked. "What will happen to the vegetable gardens you have here? They were only recently expanded. What will happen to the new banana plants?" I said nervously.

“They’ll grow up.” Hayama’s face crinkled with amusement. “The old folks and many of the children will stay here. We’ll build temporary shelters near the banana plantations, because nobody likes living in a solitary *shabono* . We’ll look after the orchards until the others return. When the bananas and *rasha* fruits are ripe, it will be time for another feast.”

—But why are so many iticoteris leaving? —I asked—. Isn't there enough food here?

Hayama didn't actually say there was a food shortage, but he pointed out that the old gardens, which they hadn't visited for a long time, would become overrun with monkeys, birds, agoutis, peccaries, and tapirs. The men could easily hunt, and the women would still find plenty of roots and fruits in those gardens to feed themselves until the hunting was over.

"Furthermore," Hayama continued, "a temporary transfer is always a good thing, especially after a..." attack. If I weren't too old, I'd go too.

— Like a vacation.

"Yes. A vacation!" Hayama laughed when I explained what the word meant. "Oh, how I'd love to go and sit in the shade, stuffing myself with *kafu* fruit!"

The *kafu* tree was valued for its bark fibers and phloem. Clusters of fruit, each about twenty-five centimeters long, hung from a common stem. The gelatinous, fleshy fruit was full of tiny seeds and tasted like very ripe, fresh figs.

“If I can’t go with Arasuwe and his family to the old orchards,” I said, sitting down at the head of Hayama’s hammock, “I’ll stay here with you. There’s no reason for me to return to the mission.”

We will wait together for the others to return.

Hayama's eyes shone with an otherworldly gleam as they rested on my face. In a slow, deliberate tone, he explained that, although it wasn't common to raid an empty *shabono* or kill the old people and children, the Mocototeris would certainly cause trouble if they found out, as he assured me they would, that I had remained in an unprotected village.

I shuddered, remembering how weeks earlier a group of mocototeris, armed with clubs, had

They arrived at the *shabono* demanding the return of their women. After both groups had exchanged threats and insults, Arasuwe told the Mocototeris that he had intentionally released one of the kidnapped women on the way back. He insisted that he hadn't for a moment believed the woman's trick about being bitten by a snake. However, after some verbal skirmishes between the two sides, the chief reluctantly handed over the young girl Hayama had chosen as his youngest son's second wife. Threatening to take revenge later, the Mocototeris left.

Etewa explained to me that although the Mocototeris had no intention of starting a war—they had left their bows and arrows hidden in the jungle—the chief acted wisely in returning the girl so quickly. The Iticoteris were outnumbered, as several men had already left for the abandoned orchards.

"When will Arasuwe join the others in the old orchards?" I asked Hayama.

—Very soon. Arasuwe has sent several men to look for Milagros. Unfortunately, they haven't been able to find him so far.

I smiled silently.

—It seems that despite Arasuwe's promise, I will have to accompany Ritimi and Etewa—I said, satisfied.

"You won't," Hayama assured me. Then he smiled maliciously. "Not only do we have to protect you from the mocototeris; a *shapori* could kidnap you on the way to the orchards and keep you as a wife in a secluded hut."

"I doubt it," I objected, laughing. "You once told me that no man would want me being so skinny." I told the old woman about the incident in the mountains, with Etewa.

Folding his arms across his lap, Hayama laughed until tears rolled down his wrinkled cheeks.

"Etewa would take any woman he could find. But he's afraid of you." Hayama leaned over his hammock and whispered, "A *shapori* isn't an ordinary man. He wouldn't want you for his pleasure. A *shapori* needs to have femininity in his body." He leaned back in the hammock. "Don't you know where femininity is?"

-No.

The old woman looked at me as if she thought I was mentally deficient.

"In the vagina," she finally said, almost choking with laughter.

"Do you think Puriwariwe could kidnap me?" I asked mockingly. "I'm sure he is too old to worry about women.

Genuine astonishment made her eyes widen.

—Haven't you seen? Has no one told you that an old *shapori* is stronger than any man in the *shabono?*

There are nights when that old man goes from hut to hut, thrusting his cock into every woman he can find. And he never tires. At dawn, when he returns to the jungle, he's as eager as ever. Hayama assured me that Puriwariwe could not kidnap me in any way, because I no longer needed anything. However, he warned me that there were other shamans, less powerful than the old man, who could do it.

Closing her eyes, she let out a heavy sigh. I thought she had fallen asleep, but as if sensing my movement to get up, the old woman turned abruptly toward me. She placed both hands on my shoulders and asked me in a voice that made me tremble with emotion:

—Do you know why you like being with us?

I looked at her, uncomprehending, and as I opened my mouth to reply, Hayama continued:

—You're happy here because you have no responsibilities. You live like us. You've learned to speak quite well, and you know many of our customs. To us, you are neither a child nor an adult, neither man nor woman. We ask nothing of you. If we did, you would be angry. Hayama's eyes were so dark as he held my gaze that they made me uncomfortable. On his wrinkled face, they seemed too large and bright, as if they flashed with inexhaustible inner energy. If you were to become a *Shapori* woman , you would be very unhappy.

I felt threatened. However, as I babbled nonsense to defend myself, I suddenly realized he was right, and I was overcome by a desperate urge to laugh.

Gently, the old woman pressed her fingers against my lips.

—There are powerful *shaporis* who live in remote places inhabited by the *hekuras* of animals and plants. In the darkness of night, these men marry beautiful female spirits.

— I'm glad I'm not a beautiful spirit.

"No. You're not beautiful." It was impossible for such an unflattering statement to bother me coming from Hayama, with her infectious laughter and mocking gaze—. However, to many you are strange.

There was a great tenderness in her voice as she tried to make me understand why the Mocototeris wanted to take me to their *shabono.* Their interest in me wasn't for the reasons Indians usually approach white people—to obtain machetes, aluminum pots, and clothing — but because the Mocototeris believed I had powers. They had heard that I had cured little Texoma, about the incident with the *Epena,* and that Iramamowe had seen *hekuras* reflected in my eyes. They had even seen me use a bow and arrows.

All my attempts to make the old woman understand that I hadn't used special powers, but only common sense, to help a little girl with a cold were in vain. I argued that one could even say Hayama herself had healing powers: she set bones and applied secret ointments, made from animal parts, roots, and leaves, to bites, scratches, and cuts. But my reasoning was useless. For her, there was a vast difference between fixing a broken bone and bringing a child's lost soul back into her body. This, she insisted, could only be done by a *shapori.*

—But it was lramamowe who brought his soul back —I stated—. I only cured his cold.

"He didn't do it," Hayama insisted. "He heard you sing."

— That was a prayer—I said weakly, realizing that a prayer was not at all different from the *hekuras* songs of lramamowe.

“I know white people aren’t like us,” Hayama interrupted, determined to stop me from arguing. “I’m talking about something very different. If you had been born an Iticoteri, you would still be different from Tutemi, Ritimi, and me.” Hayama touched my face, running her long, bony fingers over my forehead and cheeks. “My sister Angelica would never have asked you to come with her to the jungle. Milagros wouldn’t have brought you to live with us if you were like the other white people she knows.” She looked at me thoughtfully; then, as if a new idea had occurred to her, she added, “I wonder if other white people would have been as happy with us as you have been.”

"I'm sure they are," I said softly. "There aren't many white people who have the opportunity to come here." Hayama shrugged.

"Do you remember the story about lmawaami, the *shaporz woman?"* he asked.

"That's a myth!" Afraid that the old woman might try to draw some connection between lmawaami and me, I quickly added, "It's like the story of the bird that stole the first fire from the alligator's mouth."

“Perhaps,” Hayama conceded dreamily. “Lately I’ve been thinking about the stories my father, my grandfather, and even my great-grandfather used to tell about the white men they saw traveling up the great rivers. There must have been white men traveling through the jungle long before my great-grandfather’s time.”

Perhaps Imawaami was a white woman—Hayama brought his anxious face close to mine, and continued in a whisper—: It must have been a *shapori* who captured her, believing the white woman to be a beautiful spirit. But she was more powerful than the *shapori.* She stole his *hekuras* and became a sorceress herself.

Hayama looked at me provocatively, as if challenging me to contradict her.

The old woman's reasoning didn't surprise me. The Iticoteris were accustomed to updating their myths, or else they incorporated new data into them.

—Do Indian women ever become *shaporis?*

“I asked. “Yes,” Hayama hastened to reply. “Shapori women *are* strange creatures. Like the men, they hunt with bows and arrows. They decorate their bodies with the spots and broken circles of the jaguar.”

They take *epena* and lure the *hekuras* to their breasts with songs. *Shaporis* women have husbands who serve them. But if they have children, they become ordinary women again.

—Angelica was a *shapori,* wasn't she? —I asked, not realizing I had been thinking out loud.

The idea had arisen with the certainty of a revelation. I remembered the night Angelica woke me from a nightmare at the mission, the way her incomprehensible song calmed me. It didn't resemble the melodious songs of the iticoteris, but rather the monotonous chanting of shamans. Like them, Angelica seemed to possess two voices:

One voice rose from the deepest part of me, and the other came from my throat. I remembered the days traveling through the jungle with Milagros and Angélica and how Angélica's words about the jungle spirits that moved in the shadows had bewitched me, and her advice that I should always dance with them, but never to allow them to become a burden. I clearly saw Angelica dancing again that morning, her arms raised above her head and her feet hopping quickly, in the same way that the iticoteris dance when they are in the trance of the *epena.* Until now it hadn't seemed at all strange to me that

Angelica, unlike the other Indian women of the mission, considered it very natural that I went hunting in the jungle.

Hayama's voice pulled me from my thoughts.

—Did my sister tell you that she was a *shapori?*

A deep sadness filled Hayama's eyes; tears pooled at their edges: they didn't roll down his cheeks, but were lost in a network of wrinkles.

"She never told me," I murmured, and lay down in my hammock. I pushed off with one foot on the ground to rock back and forth, adjusting my rhythm to that of Hayama's hammock, so that the knots of the vines groaned in unison.

"My sister was a *shapori,* " Hayama acknowledged after a long silence. "I don't know what happened to her after she left our *shabono.* When she lived with us, she was a respected *shapori ,* but she lost her powers when she had Milagros."

Hayama sat down abruptly. “Her father was white.” Afraid that my curiosity might betray me, I closed my eyes. I didn’t even dare breathe, lest the slightest noise shatter the old woman’s reverie. There was no way of knowing what country Milagros’s father came from. Regardless of their origin, anyone who wasn’t Indian was considered a “ nape.”

“Milagros’s father was white,” Hayama repeated. “A long time ago, when we lived closer to the great river, a *Nupe man* came to live in our village. Angelica believed she could acquire his powers. Instead, she became pregnant.”

— Why didn't she have an abortion?

A broad smile crossed Hayama's weathered face, and he murmured:

“Perhaps Angelica was overconfident. Perhaps she believed she could still be a *Shapori* after having a child with a white man.” Hayama’s mouth opened in a laugh, revealing his yellowed teeth. “Milagros isn’t white at all,” he observed mischievously. “Even though my sister took him with her. Despite everything she learned from the white man, Milagros will always be an Iticoteri.”

Hayama's eyes shone with a strong and unyielding gaze, and his face revealed a certain indefinable and haughty triumph. The idea that I would soon have to return to the mission filled me with dread. On several occasions, since my illness, I had tried to imagine what it would be like to return to Caracas or Los Angeles. How would I react to seeing my relatives and friends? Thinking about that, I knew I would never leave of my own accord.

"When will Milagros take me back to the mission?" I asked.

"I don't think Arasuwe will wait for Milagros to arrive. The chief can no longer postpone his departure," Hayama said. “lramamowe will take you back”.

"Iramamowe!" I exclaimed incredulously. "Why not Etewa?"

Patiently, Havama explained to me that Iramamowe had been near the mission on several occasions; he knew the way better than any of the Iticoteris. It was possible that Etewa would be discovered by the Mocototeri hunters, in which case they would kill him and kidnap me.

— On the other hand, lramamowe —Hayama assured me— can make itself invisible in the jungle.

— But I can't!

“The *hekuras* of Iramamowe will take care of you ,” Hayama said with complete conviction. The old woman got up heavily, rested for a moment with her hands on her thighs, and taking my arm, walked slowly to her own hut. “Iramamowe has protected you before,” Hayama reminded me, and lay down in her hammock.

— Yes. But I can't go on the mission without Milagros. I need sardines and crackers. "Those things will only make you sick," she said dismissively.

He assured me that I wouldn't go hungry on the journey, because lramamowe's arrows would find plenty of targets.

In addition, he would give me a basket full of bananas.

—I am too weak to carry such a heavy burden

—I objected, knowing that Iramamowe would bring nothing but his bow and arrows.

Hayama looked at me with gentle mockery. She stretched out in the hammock, opened her mouth in an endless yawn, and quickly fell asleep.

I entered the clearing. A group of children, mostly girls, were playing with a puppy. One after another, they tried to get the little animal to suckle at their tiny nipples.

Except for a few old men resting in their hammocks and several menstruating women squatting near the fire, most of the huts were deserted. I went from hut to hut, wondering if they knew I had to leave very soon. An old man offered me his ball of tobacco. Smiling, I declined. “How can anyone refuse such a gift?” his eyes seemed to say as he placed the tobacco back between his lower lip and gum.

As evening approached, I went to Iramamowe's hut. His eldest wife, who had just returned from the river, was hanging two gourds filled with water from the rafters. We had become good friends since his son Xorowe was initiated as a *shapon,* and we had spent many afternoons talking about him. From time to time

When Xorowe returned to the *shabono* to cure people suffering from colds, fevers, and diarrhea.

He sang to the *hekuras* with the same zeal and strength as the most experienced shamans. Without

However, according to Puriwariwe, it would still be some time before Xorowe could send his own spirits against the enemy village. Only then would he be accepted as a sorcerer in the fullest sense of the word.

Iramamowe's wife poured some water into a small gourd and added a little honey. I greedily gazed at the smooth paste teeming with bees in various stages of metamorphosis. After stirring it thoroughly with her finger, she offered me the bowl. Clicking my lips between each sip, I drank the liquid and licked the bottom of the bowl.

"What a treat!" I exclaimed. "It must be from the *amoshi bees."*

It was a stingless variety, highly prized for its dark and aromatic honey.

The Iramamowe woman nodded, smiling, and motioned for me to sit beside her in the hammock. She checked my back for flea or mosquito bites. She found two fresh bites and sucked out the venom. The light entering the hut grew paler. It seemed as if a long time had passed since my

Morning conversation with Hayama. Sleepy, I closed my eyes.

I dreamt I was with the children at the river. Thousands of butterflies flew out from the trees, swirling in the air like autumn leaves. They landed on our hair, faces, and bodies, covering us with the soft golden light of dusk. I gazed sadly at their wings, like delicate hands waving goodbye.
"You can't be sad," the children said.

I looked at each little face and kissed the laughter from their lips.

XXIV

Instead of the bamboo knife he always used, Ritimi cut my hair with a sharp blade of grass. Frowning in a gesture of concentration, she made sure that the hair was the same length. around the head.

"Not the tonsure," I said, covering the top of my head with my folded hands. "It hurts."

"Don't be a coward," Ritimi scolded me, laughing. "You don't want to arrive on the mission looking like that."

I couldn't make her understand that among white people I would look very strange with my bald head. Ritimi insisted that I had to shave my tonsure not only for aesthetic reasons but also for practical ones.

"Lice prefer this particular area. I'm sure Iramamowe won't be picking at you at night."

—Maybe you should shave my head completely

—I suggested—. It's the best way to get rid of them. Horrified, Ritimi stared at me. "Only very sick people shave their heads. You'd look awful."

I nodded and submitted to her care. When she finished, she rubbed the shaved area with annatto. Then she painted me.

She carefully applied the red paste to her face. She drew a wide, straight line right under my bangs, and wavy lines across my cheeks, with dots between each one.

"What a shame I didn't pierce your nose and the corners of your lips when you arrived!" she lamented, disappointed. She removed the thin, polished stick from her nose and held it beneath mine. "How beautiful you would have been."

She sighed with comical resignation and proceeded to paint my back with wide lines of annatto that curved toward my buttocks. On the front, she drew wavy lines that started below my breasts and reached down to my thighs. Finally, she encircled my ankles with wide red bands. Looking at my legs, I had the feeling I was wearing socks.

Tutemi placed a newly made cotton belt around my waist, the front fringe resting on my pubis. Pleased with my appearance, she clapped and jumped several times with enthusiasm.

"Oh, the ears!" she cried, signaling Ritimi to give her the little white feathers held together with a thin thread. Tutemi tied them to my earrings. Around my arms and below my knees, she fastened strips of red-dyed cotton.

Ritimi took me by the waist and led me from hut to hut so that the iticoteris could admire me.

For the last time, I saw myself reflected in the women's bright eyes and greeted by the men's mocking smiles. Kamosiwe stretched his thin arms, yawning until they seemed about to dislocate. He opened his eye and studied my face as if trying to memorize my features. With slow, deliberate movements, he untied the small bag around his neck and took out the pearl I had given him.

—Whenever I roll this stone in the palm of my hand, I will think of you.

I couldn't believe that I would never again be in the *shabono,* that I would never again be awakened by the laughter of children climbing into my hammock at dawn, and I started to cry.

There were no goodbyes. I simply followed Iramamowe and Etewa into the jungle. Ritimi and Tutemi followed behind me, as if we were going to gather firewood. We walked in silence along the path for a whole day, only stopping to eat something.

The sun was setting behind the horizon of trees when we stopped beneath the dark shadows of three gigantic ceiba trees. They had grown so close together they looked like one. Ritimi strapped the basket she had brought for me to my back. It was filled with bananas, roasted monkey meat, a honey gourd, several empty bowls, my hammock, and my backpack, which contained my jeans and a torn shirt.

—If you paint your horn with annatto every time you bathe in the river, you won't get sad—said Ritimi, tying a small container to my waist.

It had been polished with abrasive blades. Smooth and white, it hung from my belt like a huge teardrop.

The jungle and the three smiling faces faded before me. Without another word, Ritimi led the way into the undergrowth. Only Etewa turned around before disappearing into the shadows. A smile lit up her face as she waved her arm the way I'd seen Milagros say goodbye so many times.

I gave free rein to the vast desolation I felt inside. Crying didn't make me feel better; it only increased my sadness. Yet, despite how wretched I felt, I had a vague awareness of the three ceiba trees that stood before me. As if I were dreaming, I recognized the trees. I had been in this very spot before. There, Milagros had squatted before me and impassively watched as the rain washed the ashes of Angélica from my face and body. Now it was Iramamowe who gazed at me from the same place, watching the uncontrollable tears roll down my cheeks.

—This is where I first saw Ritimi, Tutemi, and Etewa.

Suddenly, I realized that Ritimi had intentionally chosen to accompany me there. I understood how much she hadn't told me and how deeply she felt. She had returned a basket and a gourd, the two objects I had carried that distant day. Only now the gourd wasn't filled with ashes, but with *annatto,* a symbol of life and happiness. A quiet, humble, and accepted solitude filled my heart. I carefully dried my tears, so as not to smudge the *annatto designs.*

"Perhaps Ritimi will find you here again someday," said lramamowe, a fleeting smile softening his usually stern face. "Let's walk a little further before we stop for the night."
He lifted the heavy bunch of bananas from my basket and slung it over his shoulder. His back was slightly hunched, and his belly was sticking out.

Iramamowe must have felt the same need to walk as I did. My feet seemed to move independently of my will, knowing exactly where to step in the darkness. I never lost sight of Iramamowe's quiver, which hung motionless under the weight of the bananas. As we moved forward in the dark, I was under the illusion that it wasn't me, but the jungle that was leaving.

— We'll sleep here —Iramamowe decided, inspecting the half-ruined shed that stood to one side of the path.

He lit a small fire inside the shelter and hung his hammock next to mine.
I lay awake, gazing out of the cabin's entrance at the stars and the faint moon. The mist thickened the darkness until all light vanished.
The trees and the sky formed a single dark mass through which I imagined arcs falling from the clouds like a dense rain, and *hekuras* emerging from invisible cracks in the earth, dancing to the rhythm of a shaman's chant.

The sun was already high in the trees when Iramamowe woke me. After devouring a roasted banana and a piece of monkey meat, I offered him my honey gourd.
"You'll need it for the travel days," he said. A friendly look softened his words of rejection. "We'll find more along the way," he promised, taking the machete, the bow, and the quiver.

We walked without stopping, at the fastest pace I can remember ever walking. We crossed rivers, climbed and descended hills where I saw no familiar landmarks. The days of walking and the nights of sleeping followed one another with predictable rapidity. My thoughts never went beyond each day and each night. There was nothing between them except the brief dawn and the short dusk, during which we ate.

"I know this place!" I exclaimed one afternoon, breaking the long silence.

I pointed to the dark rocks jutting out of the ground. They formed a perpendicular wall along the shore of the

river. But the more I looked at the river and the trees, already tinged with violet by the sunset, the less certain I felt I had seen them before. I climbed onto a log lying in the river. The day had been absolutely still, but now the leaves were beginning to stir gently, producing a cool murmur along the riverbed.

Arched branches and climbing plants grazed the surface of the water, sinking into the dark liquid that contained no fish and attracted no mosquitoes.

"Are we close to the mission?" I asked, turning back to lramamowe.

He didn't answer me. After a moment, as if bothered by the very silence he didn't want to break, he indicated that we should continue.

I felt tired and each step required an effort, but I didn't remember walking much that day.

I raised my head at the sound of a bird's cry. A yellow leaf, like a gigantic butterfly, detached itself from a branch. As if afraid of falling and rotting on the ground, the leaf stuck to my thigh. lramamowe stretched out his hand from behind him, signaling me to stay still. Stealthily, he moved forward along the riverbank.

"We'll eat meat tonight," he whispered, and disappeared into the uncertain light, where her body was nothing more than a line against the shimmering surface of the river.

Lying on the dark sand, I watched as the sky burst into flames for a moment, while the earth swallowed the sun. I drank the rest of the honey Iramamowe had found that morning and fell asleep with its sweetness on my lips. I was awakened by the crackling of the flames and rolled onto my stomach. On a small platform placed over the fire, Iramamowe was roasting an agouti more than half a meter long.

"It's not good to sleep at night without the protection of a fire," he said, looking at me. "The spirits of the night can bewitch you."

"I'm so tired!" I lamented, yawning and moving closer to the fire. "I could sleep for days."

"It's going to rain tonight," Iramamowe announced, as he planted the three posts that would form our shelter around the campfire.

I helped him cover the roof and sides with wild banana leaves that he had cut while I slept.

He tied the hammocks near the fire, so we could push the logs over the embers without having to get up.

The agouti tasted like roast pork, tender and juicy. Iramamowe tied what was left to a stick and placed it high over the fire.

"We'll eat the rest in the morning." Smiling, as if pleased with himself, he stretched out fully in the hammock. "It will give us strength to climb the mountains."
“Mountains?” I asked. “When I came with Angelica and Milagros, we only passed hills.” I leaned over lramamowe. “The only time we climbed a mountain was when Ritimi, Etewa, and I returned to the *shabono* after the mocototeris festival. Those mountains were near the *shabono. ”* I touched his face. Are you sure you know the mission path?
"What a question!" he exclaimed, closing her eyes and crossing her arms over her chest.
His rough eyebrows curved towards his temples. There was a sparse mustache at the corners of his upper lip. The skin was taut over her high cheekbones and only a faint trace of the *annatto drawings could be distinguished.* As if my gaze bothered him, he opened his eyes: they reflected the light of the fire, but revealed nothing.
I lay down in my hammock. I ran my fingers over my forehead and cheeks, wondering if the *annatto* lines had also disappeared from my face. “I’ll bathe in the river tomorrow,” I thought. And my unease, which was probably a result of exhaustion, would vanish as soon as I’d reapplied the *annatto.* However, even though I tried to reassure myself, I couldn’t quell the growing distrust.

My body and my mind ere tense, as if under a vague premonition. I couldn't put it into words. The air was growing cold. I bent down and pushed another log into the flames.
"It will be even colder in the mountains," murmured lramamowe. "I will make a drink with some plants to keep us warm."

Reassured by her words, I began to inhale and exhale with exaggerated depth, pushing away
I deliberately silenced all my thoughts, until I only perceived the sound of the rain, the air warmed by the fire, the smell of damp earth. And I slept peacefully and undisturbed all night.

In the morning we bathed in the river and then painted our faces and bodies with *annatto.* Iramamowe explained the specific designs he wanted: a serpentine line across his forehead, down to his jaw and around his mouth; circles between his eyebrows, at the corners of his eyes, and on each cheek. On his chest, he wanted wavy lines reaching to his navel, and on his back, the lines were to be straight. A gentle, teasing smile softened his face as he covered me from head to toe with identical circles.

"What do they mean?" I asked anxiously. "Ritimi has never decorated me like this before." "Nothing," he said, laughing. "You don't look so thin like that."

The climb up the narrow path was easy at first. The low undergrowth contained no sharp grasses or thorny bushes. A warm mist enveloped the jungle, creating a clear light through which the crowns of the tall palm trees seemed to hang suspended from the sky. The sound of waterfalls echoed eerily in the humid air, and every time I moved aside a branch or a leaf, tiny drops of water sprayed me. But the afternoon rain turned the path into a treacherous quagmire. Several times I injured my toes against the roots and stones hidden beneath the slippery surface.

We camped late in the afternoon, halfway to the summit. Exhausted, I sat on the ground and watched as lramamowe drove three long poles into the earth. I didn't have the strength to help him cover the triangular structure with giant palm fronds and leaves.

—Are you going back this way, back to the *shabono?*

I asked him, not understanding why he was reinforcing the cabin so well. It seemed too sturdy to be a one-night shelter."

lramamowe glanced at me sideways, but did not answer.

"Is there going to be a storm tonight?" I insisted in an exasperated tone.

An irrepressible smile played around her lips, and his face seemed brazenly childlike as he sat down next to me. A mischievous sparkle shone in his eyes, as if he were about to do something naughty.

"You'll sleep well tonight," he finally said, and proceeded to light a fire inside the cozy little cabin.

He hung my hammock in the back and put hers near the narrow entrance. "We won't feel the cold air tonight." he assured me, looking for the gourd in which the pale yellow leaves and flowers were soaking I had found it the day before, among some rocks, in a sunny spot on the riverbank.

He opened the pumpkin, added more water, and put it on the fire.

Gently, he began to sing, his eyes fixed on the boiling, dark liquid.

While trying to understand the words of his song, I fell asleep. He woke me up shortly after.

—Drink this — he ordered, holding the bowl close to my lips—. It has been refreshed by the mountain dew.

I took a sip. It tasted like herbal tea, bitter but not unpleasant. After drinking a little more, I handed him the gourd.

"Drink it all," Iramamowe insisted. "It will keep you warm. You will sleep for days."

— Days? —I emptied the pumpkin, laughing at his words as if it were a joke.

A faint hint of malice seemed to flicker within him. By the time I fully realized he wasn't joking, a pleasant numbness was already coursing through my body, melting my anxiety into a comforting

heaviness, and my head felt like lead. I felt as if my neck might snap. The thought of my head rolling on the floor, like a ball with two glass eyes, made me burst into spasms of laughter.

Squatting by the fire, Iramamowe watched me with growing curiosity. I stood up slowly. I had lost control of my body, I thought. I couldn't control my legs as I tried to put one foot in front of the other. I gave in and fell to the ground, near Iramamowe.

"Why aren't you laughing?" I asked, surprised by my own words.

What I really wanted to know was whether the patter of raindrops on the palm-thatched roof was a storm. I wondered if I had actually spoken, because the words kept echoing in my head.
distant. Afraid I wouldn't hear his answer, I approached him.

Iramamowe's face tensed as the cry of a night monkey broke the stillness of the night.
Nose flared, thick lips pressed into a straight line. Her eyes, piercing mine, widened: they shone with a profound loneliness, a sweetness that contrasted strangely with the
severe mask of his face.

As if propelled by a slow-motion mechanism, I crawled to the far end of the cabin; each movement required a colossal effort. It felt as if all my tendons had been replaced by elastic cords. I relished the sensation of being able to stretch in any direction, into the most absurd positions I could imagine.

From the small bag hanging around her neck, Iramamowe poured some *epena* onto the palm of her hand. She inhaled the hallucinogenic powder deeply through her nose and began to sing. I felt her singing inside me, surrounding me, drawing me towards him. Without any hesitation, I drank from the bowl he again brought to my lips. The dark liquid no longer had its bitter taste.
My sense of time and distance distorted. Iramamowe and the fire seemed so far away that I feared I had lost them in the vast expanse of the cabin.

Yet, a second later, his eyes were so close to mine that I saw myself reflected in his dark pupils. The weight of his body crushed me, and my arms buckled beneath his chest. He whispered words in my ear that I couldn't hear. A sudden breeze parted the leaves and revealed the somber night, the treetops brushing against the stars: countless stars clustered together as if about to fall. I reached out, and my fingers found leaves adorned with diamond-like droplets. For an instant, they clung to my skin, then disintegrated into dew.

Iramamowe's heavy body held me captive; his eyes sowed seeds of light within me; his sweet

voice beckoned me to follow him through dreams of day and night, dreams of waterfalls and bitter leaves. There was nothing violent in the way his body imprisoned mine. Waves of pleasure mingled with images of mountains and rivers, distant places where the *hekuras dwelt.* I danced with the spirits of animals and trees and glided with them through the mist, among roots and trunks, over branches and leaves.

I sang with the voice of birds and spiders, jaguars and snakes. I shared the dreams of all those who feed on *epena,* on flowers and bitter leaves.

I no longer knew if I was awake or asleep. At times, I vaguely remembered the words of the old Hayama spoke of how shamans needed to acquire femininity for their bodies. But these memories were neither clear nor lasting; they remained as blurry, unreflective premonitions.

lramamowe perceived always the moment when I was about to enter true sleep, when my tongue was about to ask, when I was on the verge of tears.

"If you can't dream, I'll force you to," he said, taking me in his arms and drying my tears with his cheeks.

And my desire to reject the bowl, which seemed to sit beside the fire like a jungle spirit, vanished. I eagerly drank the dark brew of visions, until once again I was suspended in a timelessness that was neither day nor night. I melted into the rhythm of Iramamowe's breathing, the beating of his heart, as if I were dissolving into the light and darkness within him.

At one point I felt like I was moving through a dense undergrowth of motionless trees, leaves, and vines. I knew I wasn't walking; yet I was descending from the cold, mist-shrouded jungle. My feet were bound, and my dangling head jerked as if being emptied. Visions seeped from my ears, nose, and mouth, like a flowing liquid that left a faint trail on the steep path. And, for the last time, I glimpsed *shabonos* inhabited by shamans of bygone days.

When I awoke, Iramamowe was squatting by the fire, his face illuminated by the flames, and a faint moonbeam shone into the hut. I wondered how many days had passed since the night he offered me the first sip of the bitter brew. The bowl was no longer by the fire. I was certain we were no longer in the mountains. The night was clear. The gentle breeze rustling through the trees untangled my thoughts, and I drifted into a dreamless sleep, listening to the monotonous murmur of Iramamowe's *hekuras* songs .

The persistent rumbling of my stomach woke me. I felt dizzy, and as I stood up in the empty cabin, my legs felt unsteady. My body was painted with wavy lines. How strange it all had been, I thought.

I felt no anger; I wasn't filled with hatred or repulsion. Nor was I overcome by any emotional paralysis. Rather, I had the same indescribable feeling one experiences upon waking from a dream that one cannot fully explain.

Near the fire was a bundle containing roasted frogs. I sat on the ground and devoured the meat

down to the tiny bones. Iramamowe's machete, leaning against one of the posts, assured me he was nearby.

Following the murmur of the river, I walked through the tangled undergrowth. I was surprised to see Iramamowe docking a small canoe a few steps away, and I hid in some bushes. I recognized the craft as a Maquiritare make. I had seen that type of canoe, made from a hollowed-out log, at the mission. The thought that we might be near one of their villages, or perhaps the mission itself, made my heart race. Iramamowe didn't seem to have seen or heard me. Stealthily, I returned to the shelter, wondering how he had gotten the canoe.

Moments later, with a large bundle hanging from a vine on his back, lramamowe entered the hut.

"Fish," he announced, dropping the rope and the load.

I blushed, and, embarrassed by my blush, I laughed. Without hurrying, he placed the fish wrapped in plantain leaves between the logs, making sure they received warmth but not direct flame. He squatted by the fire, absorbed in the sizzle of the cooking fish. As soon as the juices had evaporated, he removed the wrapping from the fire with a forked stick and opened it.

"It's good," he said, putting a handful of soft, white meat in his mouth, and handed me the wrapper.

"What happened in the mountains?" I asked.
Startled by my belligerent tone, he opened his mouth. A small, unchewed piece of fish fell into the ashes. Automatically, without dusting it off, he put the piece back in his mouth and reached out to pick up the vine rope from the ground.

An irrational fear gripped me. I was convinced that lramamowe was going to tie me up and take me deep into the jungle. I no longer remembered that just a few minutes before I had been certain that we were near a Maquiritare village or even the mission. I could only think about what Hayama had told me about shamans who keep women captive in hidden, remote places. I was convinced that lramamowe

He would never take me back to the mission. Not for a moment did I consider that if he had wanted to keep me hidden in the jungle, he wouldn't have made me come down from the mountains.

I didn't trust hsr smile or the kind twinkle in his eyes. I picked up the bowl of water that was by the fire and held it out to her. Smiling, he dropped the rope. I approached as if I intended to bring him the I held the pumpkin to his lips, and instead, I smashed it between his eyes with all my might. Taken completely by surprise, he fell backward, staring at me in mute disbelief as blood trickled down both sides of his nose.

Ignoring the thorns, roots, and sharp grasses, I ran through the undergrowth toward the canoe. But I misjudged where Iramamowe had anchored it, because when I reached the river, I saw nothing but rocks along the bank. The canoe was farther upstream. With a speed I didn't think I was capable of, I leaped from rock to rock. Trying to catch my breath, I jumped down beside the boat, which lay half-stranded in the water. A cry escaped my lips when I saw Iramamowe standing before me.

He sat down, opened his mouth, and began to laugh. His laughter erupted in bursts, traveling from his face to his feet with such force that the ground shook beneath me. Tears streamed down his cheeks, mingling with the blood that trickledfrom the gash between his brows.

"You forgot this," he said, showing me the backpack and swinging it in front of me. He opened it and gave me my pants and shirt. "You'll arrive on the mission today."
"Is this the river next to the mission?" I asked, staring at his blood-stained face.
I don't recognize the place.
— You were here with Angelica and Milagros—he assured me. —The rains change the rivers and the jungle like the clouds change the sky.

I put on my pants; they hung loosely from my waist, threatening to slide down my hips to the floor. The damp, musty-smelling shirt made me sneeze. I felt clumsy and glanced uncertainly at Iramamowe.
— How am I?
He walked around me, meticulously examining me from every angle. Then, after a moment of reflection, he sat back down and said with a laugh.
— You look better painted with *annatto.*
I sat down beside him. The wind had died down; there was no movement on the river. The shadows of the towering trees stretched across the water, darkening the sand at our feet. I wanted to apologize for hitting him with the gourd and explain my suspicions. I wanted him to tell me something about the days when
We had spent time in the mountains, but I didn't dare break the silence.
As if he understood my dilemma and found it amusing, lramamowe put his face on his knees and laughed softly, as if to share his joy with the drops of blood that fell between his spread feet.

“I wanted to take away the *hekuras* I once saw in your eyes,” he murmured. He went on to say that not only he, but also Puriwariwe, the old *shupori,* had seen the *hekuras* inside me. “Every time I lay with you and felt the energy burst within you, I hoped to draw the spirits to my chest. But they wouldn’t leave you.” He turned his eyes to me again, filled with protest. “The *hekuras* wouldn’t answer my call; they wouldn’t hear my chants. And then I was afraid you would take the *hekuras* from my body.”
Anger and indescribable sadness left me speechless for a moment.

"Were we in the mountains for more than a day and a night?" I finally asked, overcome by curiosity. lramamowe nodded, but didn't tell me how long we had stayed in the cabin.

— When I was sure that I couldn't change your body, when I realized that the *hekuras* wouldn't come out of you, I brought you to this place hanging on my back.

— If you could have changed my body, would you have kept me in the jungle?

Iramamowe looked at me shyly. A smile of relief parted her lips, but her eyes were veiled with a vague regret.

“You have the soul and the shadow of an iticoteri,” he murmured. “You have eaten the ashes of our dead. But your body and your head are those of a *nape. ”* A silence punctuated his last sentence; then he added softly, “There will be nights when the wind will carry your voice, mingled with the cries of monkeys and jaguars. And I will see your shadow dancing on the ground, painted with moonlight. On those nights I will think of you.” He stood up and pushed the canoe toward the water. “Stay close to the shore; otherwise the current will carry you away.”

"Too fast," he advised, indicating that I should board. "Aren't you coming with me?" I asked, alarmed.

"It's a good canoe," he assured me, handing me a small paddle. It had a beautifully crafted handle-carved, with a round stem and an oval paddle shaped like a concave, pointed shield—it will take you on your mission safely.

"Wait!" I shouted, before he let go of the canoe. My hands were trembling as I rummaged in the inside pocket of my backpack. I pulled out the small leather bag and held it out to him. "Don't you remember the stone that the shaman Juan Caridad gave me?" I asked. "Now it's yours."

Something between fear and surprise seemed to momentarily paralyze his face. Slowly, his fingers closed around the bag and his features relaxed into a smile. Without saying a word, he pushed the canoe into the water.

He folded his arms across his chest and watched me drift downstream. I turned my head several times until he disappeared from sight. For a moment I thought I could still see his figure, but it was nothing more than the wind playing with the shadows, deceiving me.

XXV

The trees along the riverbank and the clouds passing across the sky obscured the river. Hoping to shorten the passage from the world I was leaving behind to the one that now awaited me, I paddled as fast as I could. But I soon grew tired and began using the paddle only to free the canoe when it drifted too close to the shore.

The river was clear and reflected the brilliant green with exaggerated intensity. There was something peaceful about the darkness of the jungle and the profound silence that surrounded me. The trees seemed to bid me farewell as they bowed. Gently stirred by the evening breeze, or perhaps they were simply mourning the passing of the day, the last rays of sunlight fading into the sky. Shortly before twilight faded, I steered the canoe toward the opposite shore, where he had discovered stretches of sand between the rocks.

As soon as the boat touched the sand, I jumped out and pulled the canoe toward the edge of the jungle, where vines and branches leaning over the water's edge formed a safe, shadowy hiding place. I turned and gazed at the distant mountains, violet in the twilight, and wondered if I had been up there for more than a week before lramamowe had taken me to the hut where I had woken up that morning. I climbed onto the highest rock and scanned the distance for the mission lights. It must be farther away than lramamowe had calculated, I thought. Only darkness rose from the river, creeping up the rocks, as the last vestiges of sunlight disappeared from the sky. I was hungry, but I didn't dare explore the sandy bank for turtle eggs.

I didn't know whether to put my backpack under my head like a pillow or wrap it around my feet, lying in the canoe. Through the tangle of branches that covered me, I gazed at the clear sky, filled with countless stars that shone like golden dust. As I drifted off to sleep, my feet wrapped in the backpack, I wished that my feelings, like the starlight that dominated the sky, would reach those I had loved in the jungle.

I awoke soon after. The croaking of frogs and the chirping of crickets filled the air. I sat up and looked around as if I could dispel the darkness. Moonlight burst forth in arrows through the branches, casting grotesque shadows on the sand that seemed to come alive in the breeze. Even with my eyes closed, I could see the unsettling shadows shifting around the canoe. And each time a cricket broke its song, I opened my eyes, waiting for it to continue. Finally, dawn silenced the cries, murmurs, and hisses of the jungle. The damp leaves seemed sprinkled with a fine silver dust.

The sun rose above the trees, painting the clouds orange, purple, and pink. I bathed, washed my clothes with the fine river sand, and hung them to dry on the canoe. Then I painted myself with annatto.

I was glad I hadn't arrived the day before the mission, as I had initially hoped, and had still time to watch the clouds transform the sky. To the east, heavy storm clouds were gathering, darkening the horizon. Lightning flashed in the distance, followed by thunder at long intervals. White streaks of rain streaked across the sky to the north, ahead of me. I wondered if there were alligators basking in the sun among the logs piled on the beach. I hadn't gone far when the river widened.

The current became so strong that only with great effort could I prevent it from leaving me spinning in the shallow, rocky waters near the shore.
For a moment I thought I was hallucinating when I saw a long canoe slowly making its way

upstream on the opposite bank. I jumped up, waving my shirt frantically, and then shouted with pure joy as the canoe crossed the wide channel and headed toward me. With calculated precision, the nearly ten-meter-long boat docked a few steps away.

Smiling, twelve people climbed out of the canoe: four women, four men, and four children. They had and looked very strange, with her Western clothes and lilac-colored drawings on her face. Her hair was cut like mine, but they didn't have a shaved crown.

"Maquiritas?" I asked.

They nodded. The women bit their lips as if trying to stifle laughter. Their chins trembled, and finally, they burst into uncontrollable guffaws, which the men echoed. I hurried to put on my pants and shirt. The older woman approached. She was short and stout; her sleeveless dress revealed fat, rounded arms and long breasts that hung down to her waist.

- You're the one who went to the jungle with the old woman iticoteri - he said, as if it were the most natural thing in the world to find me paddling downriver in a canoe made by his people. We know about you from the mission priest

After formally shaking my hand, the old woman introduced me to her husband, her three daughters, their respective husbands, and their children.
"Are we close to the mission?" I asked.
— We left early this morning —said the old woman's husband—. We've been visiting some relatives who live nearby.

“She’s become a real savage!” exclaimed the youngest of the three daughters, pointing at my calloused and injured feet, with such a scandalized expression that I couldn’t help but laugh nervously. She rummaged around in my canoe and shook the empty backpack. “She doesn’t have any shoes!” she said incredulously. “She’s a real savage!”
I looked at her bare feet.

— Our shoes are in the canoe—he stated, and proceeded to bring out from the boat a whole sample of footwear—. See?
We all have shoes.
"Do you have any food?" I asked.

"Yes," the old woman assured me, and asked her daughter to leave the shoes in the canoe and bring one of the bark boxes.

The box was lined with plantain leaves and filled with cassava bread. I settled down next to the food, almost hugging it, as I dipped one piece after another into a gourd filled with water before putting them in my mouth.

"My stomach is full and happy," I said when I had devoured half the contents of the box.

The Maquiritar people lamented not having meat, only sugarcane. The old man cut a piece a little over a meter long, peeled the bark, similar to that of bamboo, with his machete, and handed it to me.

"It will give you strength," he said.

I chewed and sucked the light, tough fibers until they were dry and tasteless. The Maquiritas had heard of Milagros. One of the sons-in-law knew him personally, but none of them knew where he was.

"We'll take you on the mission," the old man decided.

I made a feeble attempt to convince him that there was no need to retrace our steps, but my words lacked conviction. Anxiously, I climbed into the canoe and sat among the women and children. To harness the full force of the current, the men steered the canoe right into the middle of the river.

They rowed without speaking, each so adapted to the rhythm of the other that they could anticipate each other's needs.

I remembered that Milagros had once mentioned that the Maquiritas were not only the best canoe builders in the Orinoco area, but also the best navigators.

Exhaustion weighed heavily on my eyelids. The rhythmic splashing of the oars made me so sleepy that my head kept falling forward and to the sides. The days and nights that had passed flashed through my mind like fragmented dreams from a distant time. Everything seemed so vague, so remote, as if it had all been an illusion.

It was already midday when Father Coriolanus woke me up, entering the room with a bowl of coffee for me.

“Eighteen hours of sleep is a good start,” he said. His smile had the same reassuring warmth with which he had greeted me the day before, when I disembarked from the Maquiritare canoe.

My eyes were still heavy with sleep as I sat on the canvas cot. My back ached from the position. Slowly, I sipped the hot, dark brew, so strong and so thick with sugar that it made me nauseous.

“I also have chocolate,” Father Coriolanus offered. I straightened the percale dress they had given me to sleep in and followed him to the kitchen. With the vain air of a chef preparing a banquet, he stirred two tablespoons of powdered milk, four of Nestlé chocolate, four of sugar, and a few grains of salt into a pot of water boiling on a kerosene stove.

He drank the coffee I had left, while I took spoonful after spoonful of the delicious chocolate.

—I can radio your friends in Caracas to have them pick you up in their small plane whenever you want. "Oh, not yet," I refused, without the will to move.

The days passed slowly. In the mornings I wandered around the orchards, along the riverbank, and at midday I sat under the large, fruitless mango tree by the chapel door. Father Coriolano didn't ask me what my plans were or how long I intended to stay at the mission. He seemed to have accepted my presence as inevitable.

In the evenings, I would chat for hours with Father Coriolanus and Mr. Barth, who came to visit us often. We talked about the harvests, the school, the dispensary—always about impersonal topics. I was grateful to them because neither of them asked me where I had been for over a year, what I had done, or what I had seen. I wouldn't have been able to answer, not because I wanted to seem mysterious, but because there was nothing to say. If we exhausted the conversation, Mr. Barth would read us articles from newspapers and magazines, some from twenty years earlier. Regardless of whether we could hear him or not, he continued reading whenever he wanted, pausing occasionally. when with a laugh.

Despite their good humor and affable nature, there were nights when the shadows of loneliness crossed the faces of the two men as, sitting in silence, we listened to the rain pounding on the undulating roof or the solitary cry of a howler monkey settling in for the night. Then I wondered if they, too, had learned the secrets of the jungle: secrets of the misty caves, of the murmur of sap coursing through the branches and trunks, of the spiders weaving their silvery webs. At those moments, I wondered if this was what Father Coriolanus had tried to warn me about when he spoke of the dangers of the jungle. And if that was what prevented them from returning to the world they had left behind.

At night, locked within the four walls of my room, I felt an enormous emptiness. I longed for the proximity of the huts, the smell of people and smoke. Carried away by the murmur of the river that ran beneath my window, I dreamed I was with the iticoteris. I heard Ritimi's laughter, saw the smiling faces of the children, and Iramamowe always appeared, squatting at the door of his hut, calling for the *hekuras* who had escaped.

One afternoon, as I was walking along the riverbank, an uncontrollable sadness washed over me.

The sound of the river was very powerful and drowned out the voices of the people chatting nearby. It had rained at midday, and the sun peeked through the clouds, without quite shining. I wandered aimlessly, up and down the sandy beach. Then, in the distance, I saw the solitary figure of a man approaching. Dressed in khaki pants and a red plaid shirt, he was indistinguishable from any of the Westernized Indians who lived around the mission. Yet there was something familiar about the man's waddling gait.

"Milagros!" I shouted, and waited until he was in front of me. His face looked strange under the tattered straw hat from which his hair escaped like blackened palm fibers. "I'm so glad that you came."

Smiling, he motioned for me to sit next to him. He ran his hand over the top of my head.

—Your hair has grown. I knew you wouldn't leave without seeing me.

—I'm going back to Los Angeles.

I wanted to ask him so many things, but now that he was with me, I no longer saw the need for explanations. We watched the twilight settle over the river and the jungle. The darkness was filled with the croaking of frogs and crickets. The full moon rose in the sky. It grew smaller and smaller as it climbed higher, covering the river in silvery lace.

"Like a dream," I murmured.

"A dream," Milagros repeated. "A dream you will always dream. A dream of walking, of laughter, of sadness."

There was a long pause before he continued. "Although your body has lost our scent, a part of you will always hold something of our world," he concluded, gesturing into the distance. "You will never be free."

— I didn't even thank them. There's no way to say thank you in your language.

— There is no goodbye either.

Something cold, like a drop of rain or dew, touched my forehead. When I turned to look at him, Milagros was no longer by my side. From the other side of the river, as if coming from the distant darkness, the wind brought me the laughter of the Iticoteris. His voice passed skimming between the ancient trees and vanished, like the silvery shimmer of the water.

GLOSSARY

ASHUKAMADI. Vine used to thicken curare.

AYORI-TOTO. A climbing plant used to poison fish.

EPENA. Inhalable hallucinogenic powder derived from the bark of the *epena* tree or the seeds of the hisioma tree. Both substances are prepared

and taken in the same way.

HEKURAS. Tiny humanoid spirits that dwell in rocks and mountains. Shamans make contact with the *hekuras* using the inhalable powder of

epena. Through their chants, the shamans draw the *hekuras* into their chests. Skilled shamans can control these spirits.

MAMUCORI. Thick vine from which curare is extracted.

MOMO. Edible seed similar to a nut.

NABRUSHI. A 1.80 m long club used for fighting.

NAPE. Outsider. Anyone who is not Indian, without distinction of color, race or nationality.

OKO-SHIKI. Magical plants used for purposes malevolent.

ONOTO. A red vegetable dye derived from the ground and boiled seeds of *Bixa orellana.* The dye is used to decorate the face and body, as well as baskets, arrowheads, and ornaments.

PISHAANSI. Large leaves used to wrap meat before cooking or as containers.

PLANTAIN. Large, wide, and resistant leaf used for wrapping or covering the ground.

POHORO. Wild cacao.

RASHA. A cultivated fruit palm with a spiny trunk. Highly valued for its fruit, which it produces throughout the year.

fifty years or more. After the banana, it is probably the most important plant in orchards. These trees are the individual property of whoever plants them.

SHABONO. Permanent *Yanomama* settlement consisting of a circle of huts surrounding an open clearing in the center.

SHAPORI. Shaman, doctor, sorcerer.

SIKoMASIK. Whitish and edible fungus that grows on rotting logs.

UNucAI. Man who has killed an enemy.

WAITERI. Valiant warrior.

WAYAMOU. Ceremonial, formal and ritualized language, used by men in bargaining and commercial exchange.