

I'm in the rainforest, and it's very hot and humid; at times a warm drizzle falls. Eyes closed, I lift my face to catch the water and drink a little, while a steel-blue and cadmium-yellow macaw watches me without turning its head. This is how I spend my days, among charming monkeys, benevolent serpents, motionless parrots, and foliage that enfolds me. With each step I take, flower-laden branches envelop me. I'd gladly remain here, tasting raindrops and picking the occasional fruit from the lowest branches. The fruit resembles chirimoyas, mangos, bananas.

There's no danger of getting lost in the rainforest. My compass guides me whenever it's time to return. I know I have to head east, and in fifteen minutes I'm in the clearing where the hotel is located. As you approach the hotel in the afternoon, you can smell dinner: there's always rice with vegetables and meat, poultry, or seafood, everything seasoned with fragrant herbs. They raise the fowl in a chicken coop out back. I love to go in there and steal a freshly laid egg for the next morning's breakfast. The chickens here don't get a balanced diet, just natural food, so they have that marvelous, old-fashioned flavor and aroma. It reminds me of an educational poster I always used to look for in the library of the teacher's college when I was studying for my degree. The poster was old and worn: it almost certainly dated back to the nineteenth century when the school was founded, and I used it for a demonstration lesson for an elementary school class. It showed some multicolored chickens and a magnificent rooster, illuminated by a sunbeam streaming across a wire fence. In those hectic, tense years of my youth, when it frightened me to realize that I didn't know what I wanted (I'm practically an old woman now, and I'm still not sure), that chicken coop picture was like a refuge. As a girl, I used to get sick quite often, and Mama was convinced that the country, with its fresh air, was the key to good health. After coming down with measles (regular and German), tonsillitis, and various forms of flu, they brought me to a house with a chicken coop like this one (I don't know where it was

– kids follow their parents just as chicks trot after hens – all I know is that we used to travel by train to a sunny little town where the house was). There I would faithfully spy through the wire fence on the birds, their chicks, and their eggs, their perennial reproduction of life.

The place where I am now is, to be precise, a convalescent facility, although no one uses that term to describe it. They simply call it “the spa.” After a whole day of long walks in the rainforest, I appreciate what I see when I return to the hotel: rough-hewn furniture, a large mirror with a moth-specked frame, the tables in the little dining room, my room and my bed. The recommendation is to sleep on a mattress on the floor, Japanese-style, but that strikes me as a bit too ascetic. I sleep soundly in the bed and awaken to the singing of birds and the fragrance of honeysuckle. I thought I’d have to wear high boots in order to avoid mosquito bites, but none of that’s necessary because this is a safe rainforest. There are ants, true, but I suppose they have some ecological purpose. There they go, marching in long rows, always so disciplined, each one carrying its little leaf or petal. I don’t admire or torture them anymore, as I did when I was a kid, but sometimes, since I have nothing else to do with my time, I get the urge to pick up an ant and place it way back at the end of the line, ever so carefully. How would I feel if an enormous hand were to lift me up and deposit me at the end of the line at the bank or the post office? I think loneliness and the warm, humid, slightly enervating climate that always makes me feel like I’m about to fall asleep are responsible for these silly ideas. When I go back to the hotel at sunset, I sink into a wooden tub full of warm water strewn with huge flower petals.

I wear low-necked dresses, loose and comfortable, because of the heat, which is constant. I’ve learned to perspire without feeling grubby. I have breakfast and dinner at the hotel without exchanging a word with a group of pale Finns who occupy the other tables. I don’t understand the language of the locals – dark-skinned, dark-haired people with black, black eyes, and I don’t understand Finnish, either. The friends who recommended this place to me told me

about the Finns: they come here for reasons like mine; only they don't suffer from confusion but, rather, from a suicidal sadness that descends on them from the cold and the leaden sky they have to endure in their country ten months of the year.

I glance at my watch: six p.m. Leaves and flowers brush my arms, and my tears mingle with the raindrops that have begun to fall. I cry and feel better. I can't see the sky, just the tops of the tall trees and a monkey swinging from a branch. What I wouldn't give right now to be alone on a sultry afternoon, with a storm threatening, at the Buenos Aires Zoo, breathing in the scent of the animals by an algae-covered lake. I lie down on a bed of leaves at the foot of a colossal tree and fall asleep. When I awaken, I see that it's grown dark enough to start back. When a little light filters through the branches, I realize I'm close to the clearing. Before leaving my solitude behind, I let out a scream that's like a howl.

Evening. A bath in the wooden tub in my room. The Ambrée soap that I bought at the duty-free shop lies on a wicker chair next to the tub, where they've also left a good, rough towel. I've taken off my dress and underwear and thrown them on the mosaic tile floor. At home I wouldn't tolerate those crumpled, rain-soaked garments piled up on the floor for even one minute, but here I've succumbed to indolence. Anyway, there's always someone around to take care of my things. When I get back to this room after dinner, they'll have picked it all up, and everything will be in order: the bed turned down, an After Eight mint on the pillow, like a talisman against barbarism.

After I dry myself off, I toss the used towel on the floor with the rest of the stuff and dress for dinner in clothing that's been impeccably washed and ironed by the hotel staff. A dress very similar to the one I took off, only a different color. My daily wardrobe consists of six short, loose dresses in pastel shades: Nile green, old rose, light blue, cream, chalk white, cerise. Sleeveless, square-necked. A few pair of flimsy sandals, or else I go barefoot. I use only citrus fragrances; it's impossible to consider heavier perfumes in this constant heat. I've arranged my cosmetics, combs, and brushes on the unfinished wooden stand in the bathroom.

My table in the dining room is next to a large window through which you can see only the garden, with its ancient palm trees. I like that: my long daily walk among leafy trees is sufficient for me. At each table there's always a basket overflowing with fruit; the recommendation is to eat at least two pieces of fruit before the rice dish. The fruits resemble those we're familiar with, but, like the chickens, they're larger and tastier. I choose something that looks like a banana, and a fruit that's like a kiwi but twice the size. A delicious combination. The Finns are still pale and serious, hardly exchanging a word among themselves, and it's already been almost four weeks. I guess they don't go down to the beach because they're afraid

of skin cancer. Mostly, none of them looks at me, but today I discovered one of them staring at me with curiosity. Curiosity, and something like passion. He glanced away quickly, coughing a little and covering his mouth with his hand.

By crossing a different part of the rainforest, you can reach the sea, a beach called San Conrado. In order to get there very early, the only time of day when the heat is bearable, you have to leave at dawn. I picked up all this information in Buenos Aires. At the agency specializing in non-touristy spas, the same agency that brought me to this place (a weekly flight from Rio to a neighboring town and from there a helicopter that arrives daily with new guests, mail, and provisions), they explained that as far back as anyone can remember, no one has ever ventured into the rainforest at night, so they can't describe what goes on there. Do the animals go wild at night? I stare at the people at the other tables, and then I discover a man who isn't Finnish. He's sort of blond, but not as blond as they are, athletic build, graying at the temples, blue eyes, and pleasantly tanned skin, lined with the requisite wrinkles (what would I do with a face as smooth as a magnolia?). He's looking at me, too. He's been waiting patiently for me to discover him, his fork poised in midair. When I glance his way at last, he smiles and nods his head, picks up his silverware, plates, and his fruit cup, and moves over to my table. He's a North American, from California; surrounded by so many unapproachable Scandinavians and mysterious natives, we feel a kinship, like a meeting of old friends.

Steve speaks spiritedly, half in Spanish and half in English. He tells me he's a biologist, he does research, he travels a lot, and he's lived in Mexico. Tonight the rice dish is especially tasty, and Steve has brought over a bottle of wine from his table. The dessert is the most delicate orange mousse I've ever tasted, and I smile to think how effortlessly both he and I consume sophisticated wines and desserts in such an apparently primitive place; we realize that the rustic ambience has been carefully orchestrated. After dinner the same helicopter that brought us the orange mousse and the seafood for the rice will carry us over the rainforest to the beach, ringed with twenty-story hotels with revolving cafés. On the top floor of the

tallest building, Steve and I have our first drink together and dance to old songs.

*It only happens*

*When I dance with you*

And I notice that every curve and hollow of my body fits tenderly into the contours of this man I've just met.

When weather conditions are ideal, they say, in the very early morning and at nightfall, the hang gliders launch themselves from the terrace of the twentieth floor.

When I arrived at the rainforest spa, I didn't realize I was going to think so often of Dardo. He's been gone eight years already, eleven months after the fatal diagnosis. During those months, contrary to what I had anticipated, he suffered no extreme pain that couldn't be relieved with drugs, but he became more and more incapacitated, as his doctor had predicted. One year's survival, he said. Dardo was hospitalized for an entire month so that, by using new, sophisticated technology, they might find the microscopic primary tumor that had caused the metastasis to his bones. But the cancer was very advanced, and there was no cure, the oncologist said. He told me first, during a conversation we had while Dardo was in the hospital.

The oncologist was a well-dressed, fat man. I never saw him in a white coat.

"You have a tumor," he told him a few days after the conversation with me. Dardo and the doctor treated each other as equals. They were two professionals: an engineer and a physician.

Dardo received the news with a smile: the meaning hadn't registered. They had dulled his pain with analgesics, and his color was good: that day he had eaten his lunch eagerly; he seemed very calm, even happy. Happiness can also come from the disappearance of pain.

"I'm very glad to be in this hospital," he said. "I feel very well cared for."

The doctor smiled, and I smiled, too.

"Now we're going to find out where the tumor is – that's why we're putting you in the hospital," the doctor continued, "to locate the tumor."

There was no reply. Dardo turned his head, calmly looking at a treetop through the window.

Dardo had had two accidents in a row, one involving his hip and the other his arm. The orthopedists dealt with him as orthopedists do, and our family physician's intervention was necessary in order to



send him to another specialist who would investigate more carefully and interpret the X-rays correctly.

The first accident took place in Buenos Aires. After a fall Dardo started to feel a pain in his hip that wouldn't go away, but he insisted on continuing to work, overcome by pain and taking a ton of medications.

I went on a business trip for a week. When I returned, I was surprised to find Dardo at home. Opening the door to the apartment, I saw him sitting in a chair, smiling broadly at the other end of the living room, surrounded by people: his mother; Sebastián and Federico, my older boys; and two friends who had stopped by to visit. He didn't get up to greet me, but at that moment I was aware only of his unexpected presence at home at eleven o'clock in the morning; it took me a few more seconds to realize why he hadn't stood up to meet me: his right arm was in a sling. There had been another "accident": he had been mugged while crossing the street. They had knocked him to the ground, grabbed his briefcase, and left him at the mercy of the oncoming cars as the light turned green. Some passersby managed to spot him. Traffic stopped, an ambulance arrived; he was taken to a hospital, where a cast was applied to his broken right arm. Dardo hadn't wanted to disrupt my trip or frighten me, so when he saw me come in, he smiled and smiled; he explained, everyone explained. The next day the pain was so unbearable that he decided to go to another clinic, where they determined that the cast was on wrong, and they reset the arm in a different position.

In the X-rays both parts of his fractured humerus appeared like two veal bones placed randomly on a butcher counter. Once the break was reduced, the two sections looked more aligned, but there was still a little space between them.

The bone didn't heal as quickly as expected. The orthopedists changed the cast a few more times, varying the position of the arm. Dardo suffered from severe pain in his arm and hip; he took powerful painkillers, he slept a lot. Weeks later the X-rays showed that his fracture still hadn't healed.

Finally, they took off the cast, replacing it with a bandage. Dardo

took sick leave from his job; I continued working. The household functioned as usual. Every morning the cleaning woman turned it into a pleasant, orderly place smelling of floor wax and the good food she prepared and left for us. As Dardo's pain continued, the new orthopedic specialist recommended by the clinic ordered a CT scan that revealed the cause of the problem: a primary tumor of unknown origin had metastasized to the bone. The most agonizing thing wasn't so much the time lost in useless treatments but the fact that the cancer was quite advanced and now nothing could save Dardo from pain and death.

Me, Cecilia, hang gliding? There's something about Steve that convinces me immediately that anything he suggests is all right. These flying devices are simple and apparently very safe – in fact, as safe as airplanes. There are thousands of flights every day, and people travel as calmly as if they were on a bus. Once in a while, in a very great while, one falls down. It must be that famous exception that proves the rule, although I never did understand why an exception had to prove a rule. In San Conrado, at least, I never heard anyone say there had been an accident. So, without knowing quite how, one morning I found myself seated and firmly secured in a contraption designed for two people, with Steve at my side commanding the controls that could change the flight's direction.

This is a sport that depends totally on weather conditions, like flying a glider. Flight instructors for gliders, just like flight instructors for hang gliders, are weather experts. At the lecture given by the San Conrado instructor, I learned which clouds predicted rain, which ones meant wind, which ones simply a cold front. In any event I didn't have to do anything, just sit next to Steve, well protected by seat belts, and launch myself into the void alongside him.

As we took the elevator up to the top floor of the café, I was seized by terror, but the same thing happens to me whenever I have to get on a plane: I'm frightened beforehand, but when I'm in the air, I'm never afraid. I wasn't even scared when they made us stand on a parapet on the unrailed terrace – which you could reach as soon as a guard opened the imposing iron gates – and the technicians activated the machine and set it in place. I can't recall the moment when they launched us into the air. I only felt, to my great relief, that, instead of falling, we were rising. The wings inflated; the air carried us upward. Steve was at the controls, and I recovered just enough to look around as we flew over the beach. It was a glorious day, not a single cloud; the greenish blue of the sea was punctuated by many-colored ships and the sunbathers' umbrellas on the beach.

The only thing that frightened me a little was my own elation. I had felt this way in Spain, when I arrived at El Escorial with a group of friends during a snowstorm, and as we walked into a bar filled with heat and light, they gave each of us a cup of hot chocolate laced with cognac. I felt the blood rushing through my veins like a torrent. In normal situations nobody feels their own blood, and yet blood flows all the time. At that moment I felt it coursing downward in strong waves from my head to my feet, and it was also something like understanding, even vaguely, why some people believe in God. You never see your own blood rushing through your veins, I thought, and yet it flows, it flows all the time along with your life.

In the distance you could see other hang gliders in full flight. Only then did I dare turn my head a little to look at Steve, and I noticed him looking at me, smiling, his eyes slightly misty. Now we were flying in large circles along the shoreline, going down, down, until we landed gently on the pure white sand, a judicious distance away from the sunbathers and their umbrellas.