

**I**t must have been noon when we began to run. We could have put up with the smell for a lot longer, but when Mariéla saw the mailman coming, a guy who never failed to have a drink with Corazón and reminisce about the legendary greats of boxing, she dumped our savings out of their jar and, warning me not to lose them, slipped the coins into my pocket, then told me to run without stopping until I was out of the slum. If we became separated along the way, she would wait for me in front of old Moses's furniture factory. She led me over to the bed where Joséphine was still sleeping. We looked one last time at that face battered by blows and the passing years. You could see the bones beneath the flesh, and those very bones seemed to be sagging, as if the whole body had cried uncle. With the passing years, she had become a transparent thing. At the last, when Corazón struck her, the blows went right through her. In that image where there had once been a woman, now only a blank remained. Asleep, she seemed even more dead than Corazón,

who lay in the middle of the room, his skull split open, his body partly hidden by the chest of drawers and the chairs knocked over when he fell. All the furniture in the house had toppled onto him. The chest. The chairs. The stove and the aluminum plates. The low table where he put his feet while listening to soccer matches on the transistor radio Mam Yvonne gave us, back when she was working in the laundry of that hospital in the Bronx she described to us in her letters as sometimes a paradise and sometimes sheer hell. The kerosene lamp we used when money was tight. The pot of plastic flowers and the big stone ashtray Joséphine had bought as ornamental touches. The four little pink glasses with hearts on them. The décor and all the trimmings. Everything—or almost everything—in the house had been broken over Corazón's big body. The blue of his overalls disappeared in places beneath the debris of incongruous objects. He had lost one of his sneakers and I could see the sole of his foot, as rough as lizard skin. I preferred to look at his foot. Every time my eyes landed on his face, I felt the prickling that comes before tears, and I tried to reassure myself by behaving like Mariéla. She is the strongest, the most honest with herself. The most alone, perhaps. While we stayed in that room, she never showed one sign of weakness. She sat down in the middle of the mess, just long enough to come to a decision. Then, in a burst of energy, she stuffed our skimpy belongings into the big canvas bag where Joséphine tucked away our dirty laundry. I realized that we were going to go. Quite far away from Joséphine, who slept on in the bed where she could finally stretch out at her ease,

without having to huddle up real small, hugging the wall to leave more space for Corazón's huge body. The trouble is, Joséphine has never been willing to sleep alone. As long as I've known her, she has always needed a man in her bed. A husband or a son. Her favorite is Corazón. Was. He's dead. And I won't be around anymore to replace him, now that the future belongs to the authorities. She truly loved him, Corazón. When he came home later than usual, she'd wait for him before she drew the curtain and went to bed. When he was out all night, she sat up in the chair, her mouth full of prayers. Whenever he stayed away for some time, I was his replacement. Joséphine would call me to come get into the bed. She'd hug me close for a while and fall into an uneasy sleep toward dawn, still murmuring complaints and prayers. If you begin at the end, then we are the chief culprits. No one has the right to take life away. But while we never meant to kill it, that life was turning out badly every single day. Whether he really did ever climb into the ring or whether he was just lying to us, Corazón hit everything that moved, except for Mariéla. So he might have expected that someday someone would hit back. And Joséphine, although you couldn't ever accuse her of loving hatred or violence, is not completely innocent. You might think she lives on nothing because she never asks for anything. The truth is, she rarely uses words to say things. Her expectations take a sideways approach. She has hardly any voice and never shouts "I want," or "I mean," or "I demand." She never raises her voice, but in her eyes there's a whole vocabulary. To get something, her face freezes and grows

pitiful. Her face is a lament that weeps over its hopes in a roundabout way. She also invents stories that often have a hidden meaning. For example, she tells how when I was little I used to run away from the clatter of rainstorms on the sheet-metal roofs. How I'd hide in the latrines shared by the small houses of the neighborhood. She believes that story cross-heart and tells it to anyone who'll listen. At that time, Corazón wasn't sleeping in the house. He wouldn't accept the idea of this second child. Joséphine, according to her, used to pry me from my hidey-hole, rub my limbs briskly, and keep me in her bed for the night. I don't remember escaping to the latrines, and I've always loved the sound of rain. Especially after Mariéla taught me how to change the water into music by cupping my palms over my ears. During every downpour, I'd compose songs for myself, merry little melodies. That's what I remember. Me being so scared, Joséphine invented that to express a wish: that I would fill in for Corazón in her bed whenever he spent the night drinking in one of those crummy dives where the rum's too cheap to match the label on its bottle. Joséphine, my mother, has always lived in fear that someone else would swipe her spot in her men's hearts. She wanted me to remain her frail child my whole life long. Joséphine, she's unhappy, she has no guarantee that she'll always be needed. That no other woman will ever come along to replace her. She has always been jealous of Mariéla, who asks nothing of anyone. Joséphine's failing was to worry, to believe that one day Corazón and I would both take off and leave her flat. Corazón liked to frighten her and would

run away every now and then. He'd come back after each fake departure, though, and Joséphine, reassured, would give thanks for that godsend. And yet that blessing may perhaps have worked more like a curse. Each time he returned, he hated her a bit more, and beat her a bit more to make up for lost time. Me, I never thought about going away. Except for just long enough to come back, my arms full of little pink glasses decorated with hearts and my pockets stuffed with gourdes<sup>1</sup> and sourballs, since Joséphine never allowed herself any whims or treats save for the tons of sticky candies she gorged on every Sunday afternoon. During the week she lived on prayers and watching others eat. It was only on Sunday that she turned greedy. I would never have left, except to go get her candies. And drinking glasses just like the ones she bought from a hardware stall at the Salomon market. I'm sure she likes them better than all the lovely luxury items in the whole wide world. Joséphine, she's had a hard life, she's just suffering itself. I didn't want to abandon her. Still, she shouldn't have invented that story about the latrines. It made me feel smaller every time she trotted out that tale for Mam Yvonne or the neighbor ladies. Especially since, really, I never needed any excuse to love her. She comes right after Mariéla. And in life as in school, second place isn't so bad. Mariéla, she's in first place: I see her from inside, as if we were walking in step. To the point that sometimes I forget that we're two people, after all. Whereas Joséphine I've always loved from a certain distance. Now that I'll never see her again, because after what we've done we can't live together anymore, the dis-

tance will grow bigger without changing my feelings. You can love someone from very far away. The way it is in history lessons, which teach about the destiny of navigators who look back on their countries from afar, still feeling affection for that tiny image. Distance, that's something we didn't know how to talk about, Mariéla and I, the day Corazón died. What's far away exists without any outlines. You can't imagine its shape. All you know is, the space isn't defined. It floats a little, like a boat. It's a territory like the night, it needs time to become natural. At the moment we left, when the mailman's footsteps were approaching, Mariéla couldn't manage to explain it to me. The words weren't coming to her. Although she usually didn't have any trouble finding the right words. She has a gift for saying things, but "far away," where we had to go, she just couldn't describe it precisely. The only image that came to me was that we'd be abandoning the slum to live the rest of our lives in a kind of wasteland. I was careful not to walk on the broken glass and crockery or bump into Corazón's long legs, which divided the room almost perfectly in half. His body was still big, too big for a small one-room house with a woman and two children always getting in his way. Only his face had shrunk. He'd fallen on his side and was showing his bad profile. He had chosen, for his death mask, that fake look of a sad child he always wore after some creditor had been by. Before she took the plane to the United States, Mam Yvonne, who knew religion without being devout like Joséphine, often used to tell us that the power of the Evil One lies in guile. And that God's weapon is compassion.

Corazón must have taken after both of them. I realized this on the day he died. Joséphine experienced both those sides of him every day. Why else would she protect her face whenever he approached her with a bottle in his hand? And why did she speak to him at other times as if in supplication? Begging for his presence like a blessing! He was both her demon and her Good Lord. Even in death, he hadn't changed: Corazón was many men, all of them quite different. He could have written the book on schemes to get drunk whenever he liked and never pay his debts. He could also waver like a reluctant convalescent hesitating between the cure and a relapse. He took the worst of life and talked only about the best. That was my father: a brute who could be as gentle as a sheep. Before leaving for the United States, Mam Yvonne often used to visit us to speak heart-to-heart with Joséphine and shower her with advice. As soon as people start living better than you do, that sort of makes them an authority. Mariéla didn't much appreciate Mam Yvonne's way of lecturing us. Mariéla doesn't like wisdom. Mam Yvonne really needed to say those words to us. She felt a touch guilty about Corazón's behavior and meant to pass on to her daughter-in-law her expertise as a capable woman. Men, they're all pigs. A smart woman uses men and doesn't let them push her around. All of them, without exception: pigs, and nothing more. My son's just like the rest of them. And Joséphine, who had a loving heart right out of the movies, would start defending Corazón. Mam Yvonne admitted that he wasn't bad through and through. But watch out. When he was little, I caught him several

times putting burning cigarette butts in the ear of the milkman's donkey or ripping the pages from a schoolbook to avoid doing his homework. He fought frantically to escape the spankings he'd earned. He would put on the face of an angel and soon you'd forgive him. Mam Yvonne warned Joséphine: even as a child, he was always capable of doing terrible things. And now Corazón would lose his temper, start choking, sucking up all the air in the room, and we'd all feel the tension mount. Before the impassive Mam Yvonne, Corazón would be fuming, almost shouting, but he never dared challenge her openly. Yes, you used to do that, she would insist. Then you'd go bragging to your friends, whose mothers would tell me about it. Mam Yvonne would search her memory for years, dates, witnesses, while Corazón gave way, reduced to telling us that his mother had made up that business about the cigarette butts in the donkey's ears just to make us think badly of him and to cause trouble in his own home. Joséphine already doesn't respect me, so if you start sticking your nose in . . . I have to admit that I agreed with him. Mothers, they always come up with stuff that doesn't exactly reflect reality, it's more like the idea they have of their sons. Take Joséphine and those latrines. A mother, she's fine. Except when she sets about telling the story of your life. The more the son grows up, committing his own fresh follies, the more the mother clings to the follies of the past. When there aren't enough, she invents them. On that point, Joséphine was like Mam Yvonne, constantly claiming the right to meddle by deciding what my favorite meal was, or putting her seal on my child-

hood memories. With a mother, things get complicated if she decides to know you better than you know yourself. Mam Yvonne was describing her son the way she'd wanted him to be, while he put on his lost-child face and seemed about to burst the seams of his overalls, his muscles swelling with vexation. And knowing that soon Mam Yvonne would no longer be there to protect us from the storm she had a talent for stirring up, Joséphine would ask Mariéla and me to go get some Barbancourt rum on credit at old man Eliphète's variety store. Softly she'd remind us to make sure Eliphète put it on her tab, since Corazón had long since exhausted his credit in every business in the neighborhood. We'd bring back the rum. At the sight of the bottle, Corazón would simmer down, relax his muscles, and trot out his favorite saying: Life holds only bad surprises, and the last one will be death. When it comes, I won't put up a fuss. Well, death came. Despite what people say, we didn't go out looking for it. It wasn't cooked up in advance. Violence attracts more violence, and Mariéla lifted up that wrench as if she had become a kind of robot hand-picked by horror, or Providence. The teacher had explained to us that despite what historians say (they only ever know the outside of events), it wasn't the lunatic Défilée who gathered up the remains of Emperor Dessalines the evening of his assassination, but a brave spirit passing across the bridge who took over the old madwoman's body.<sup>2</sup> History, she told us, hides a wealth of mysteries and as many surprises. No one knows beforehand who among us will become a hero or a monster. As for Corazón, although there

was nothing historic about his death, he was definitely and forever fresh out of surprises. He still lay there, and Mariéla didn't spare him even a single glance. Me, I would have liked to speak with him one last time. To talk. Present our case. Argue with his corpse. Find words that would be halfway between a "Sorry" and "Goodbye." Explain to him. Lecture him. But Mariéla would not have tolerated such a compromise. The mailman's footsteps were drawing closer, leaving us little time. It must have been noon. I could hear the little kids shouting over at the elementary school. Their shrill tumult drowned out the ringing of the bell announcing the end of classes. I recognized the voices of my friends in the uproar: Roland, Ambroise, and all the others. Marcel. And especially Stammering Jhonny, but his voice you can't hear because he needs at least an hour to say the slightest thing. So, he prefers to keep quiet. Jhonny is my best friend. If Corazón hadn't drunk up Mam Yvonne's last check, I would have been out yelling with them, yanking the back hem of the proctor's jacket, and maybe Mariéla wouldn't have done what she did. Or she would have done it all by herself. In a way, you might say that it was a blessing in disguise, that habit Corazón had fallen into, of spending my school fee money in the bar. Spending that money, that's one thing I've forgiven him. School I never liked. And I was always a slow learner. Unlike Mariéla. She understands everything right away. My essays, she used to write them for me in no time, while it took me forever to compose the first line. The teacher used to emphasize the importance of an outline, the sequence of ideas, the

structure of paragraphs. “You went on a picnic with your parents: tell us about it. Describe a sunset. Draw up the portrait of your favorite animal.” I’d try to plan an outline. But I couldn’t decide on the right trees and animals to invent. Should I begin the description with the roots or the fur or the tail, the moral or the physical portrait, the frame or the color? Mariéla would take the pencil from my hand. In the time it took me to jump a hedge, or pull on a rope, or lob some dumb I-dare-you at Marcel or Stammering Jhonny, or stroll around the neighborhood spying on the pretty girls who went to the Baptist church without obeying the commandments, she’d whipped me up a landscape all my own, a sea just right for a voyage, a dog, a cat, a big house with real windows and a door set straight on its hinges. She’d even written me some wonderful parents: a father who didn’t beat me and a mother with a gift for smiles. At first the teacher had ranked me among the poorest pupils. As Mariéla kept writing for me, my compositions improved along with my grades until I was even held up as an example. Until the day the teacher told Joséphine that I was a born writer. And Joséphine, while she wasn’t a blabbermouth, once she’d drawn the curtain and shut herself in with Corazón at the back of the room, after begging us to go play outside so we wouldn’t hear her sighs, well, she couldn’t keep anything secret from him. Corazón, he soon figured out that Mariéla was the author. He said it was a father’s place to keep an eye on his son’s work and that he would go to the school to talk with the teacher. Joséphine gave him the money. When I was sent home because my fees were late, she didn’t dare

ask Corazón about it for fear he'd fly into a rage and beat the hell out of us both. About school, though, it's not so serious. It's really something I never regretted. Mariéla stopped going after she got her certificate. And I mean, school is no party. Fortunately, it's not because of this that Mariéla did what she did. That we did what we did. Together. Corazón's death, I can't say that I'm proud of it. It wasn't worked out ahead of time. You shouldn't claim credit for actions unless you planned them. And it wasn't a success, either, like a discovery you make or when you create something new. We fell into it, Corazón's death. It's a trap life had set for us a long time before. An event that will live on in the annals of the city. Given that neither time nor other people will allow us to forget it. Don't ever think I'm proud of it. Ever since that day, though, Mariéla and I, we're like a community. Even if they separate us, we'll always be together. A team. I'm the one who held Corazón's feet to make him slip. Before that, Mariéla had had to do her best for the both of us. When I was really little, she used to take care of me when Joséphine was lost in her prayers. When I was sick with malaria, it was Mariéla who gave me my medicine, checking the instructions to figure out the dosage. If I had the power, there are times when I'd like to bring him back to life, Corazón. Especially at night. He isn't mean when he's asleep. No, I'm not proud of what we did. But, on the other hand, it's good that she didn't have to do it alone. Mariéla is too all alone. This time, at least she'll be able to say: My little brother helped me.