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UNTIL AUGUST

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CONTENTS

PREFACE

vii

UNTIL AUGUST

1

EDITOR'S NOTE TO THE SPANISH EDITION

113

THE ORIGINAL MANUSCRIPT

125

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UNTIL AUGUST

1

SHE RETURNED TO THE ISLAND ON FRIDAY, August 16, on the three o'clock ferry. She was wearing jeans, a plaid shirt, plain flat shoes without socks, carrying a satin parasol and a handbag, and her only luggage was a beach bag. In the row of taxis at the dock she went straight to an old model corroded by the sea air. The driver welcomed her warmly and took her jolting across the destitute village, with its mud-walled shacks, palm-thatch roofs, and streets of burning sand beside a sea in flames. He had to swerve around undaunted pigs and naked chil-

dren pretending to be toreadors. On the outskirts of the village he drove down an avenue of royal palms where the beaches and the tourist hotels were, between the open sea and a lagoon inhabited by blue herons. At last he stopped outside the oldest, most dilapidated hotel.

The concierge was waiting for her with the registration card ready to sign and the keys to the only room on the second floor that overlooked the lagoon. She climbed the stairs in four strides and entered the shabby room that smelled of recent fumigation and was almost entirely occupied by an enormous double bed. She took a kidskin toiletry case out of her bag and a book with uncut pages that she put on the nightstand with an ivory paper knife marking her place. She took out a pink silk nightgown and tucked it under the pillow. She also took out a silk scarf printed with tropical birds, a short-sleeved white shirt, and a pair of very worn tennis shoes, and carried them into the bathroom.

Before getting dressed she took off her wedding ring and the men's watch she wore on her

right wrist, put them on the shelf above the sink, and washed her face quickly to get rid of the dust from the journey, scare away the siesta-time fatigue. After she finished drying off she looked in the mirror and appraised her breasts, still round and high in spite of two pregnancies. She stretched her cheeks back with the heels of her hands to remind herself what she'd looked like when young. She ignored the wrinkles on her neck, as there was nothing she could do about them now, and checked her perfect teeth, which she'd brushed after lunch on board the ferry. She rolled deodorant onto her smooth-shaven underarms and put on the fresh cotton shirt with the initials AMB embroidered on the pocket. She brushed her straight black hair, which fell to her shoulders, and tied it up in a ponytail with the bird-print scarf. To complete her look, she rubbed a little vaseline on her lips, moistened her fingertips with her tongue and smoothed down her eyebrows, dabbed a drop of Maderas de Oriente behind each ear, and at last confronted her autumnal, motherly face in the

mirror. Her skin without a trace of cosmetics had the color and texture of molasses, and her topaz eyes were beautiful with their dark Portuguese lids. She scrutinized herself thoroughly, judged herself without pity, and found that she looked almost as good as she felt. Only when she put her ring and watch back on did she notice how late she was: it was six minutes to four, but she allowed herself a moment of nostalgia to contemplate the herons that glided in stillness over the steamy torpor of the lagoon.

The taxi was waiting for her beneath the banana thatch at the entrance. Without needing instructions, he drove down the palm-lined avenue to a gap between the hotels where the street market was, and pulled up to a flower stall. A large black woman snoozing in a beach chair was startled awake by the horn, recognized the woman in the back seat of the car, and, laughing and chatting, handed her an already prepared bouquet of gladioli. A few blocks ahead the taxi turned up a barely passable track that climbed along a ridge of sharp stones. Through air crys-

talized by the heat she could see the wide-open Caribbean, the yachts lined up beside the tourists' dock, the four o'clock ferry on its way back to the city. At the top of the hill was the poorest cemetery. She pushed open the rusty gate without straining and carried the bouquet down the path between burial mounds overgrown with weeds. In the center there was a ceiba tree with huge branches from which she took her bearings to find her mother's grave. The sharp stones hurt her feet through the hot rubber soles of her shoes, and the harsh sun filtered through the satin of her parasol. An iguana emerged from the underbrush, stopped short in front of her, stared for an instant, then scampered away.

She pulled a gardening glove out of her pocket, put it on, and had to clean three grave-stones before she recognized the pale marble with her mother's name and the date of her death, eight years earlier.

She had repeated this trip every August 16 at the same time, with the same taxi and the same florist, under the fiery sun of that destitute

cemetery, to place a bouquet of fresh gladioli on her mother's grave. After that moment she had nothing to do until nine the next morning, when the first ferry went back to the mainland.

Her name was Ana Magdalena Bach. For twenty-seven of her forty-six years she had been in a well-matched marriage with a man she loved and who loved her and whom she married before finishing her arts-and-letters degree, still a virgin and without any previous relationships. Her mother had been a famous Montessori teacher who, in spite of her talents, never in her entire life wanted to be anything more. Ana Magdalena inherited from her the splendor of her golden eyes, the virtue of being a woman of few words, and the intelligence to manage her temper. They were a family of musicians. Her father had been a piano teacher and the director of the provincial conservatory for forty years. Her husband, an orchestra conductor, also the child of musicians, replaced his teacher when he retired. Ana Magdalena and her husband had an exemplary son who was the

first cello of the National Symphony Orchestra by the age of twenty-two, and had been applauded by Mstislav Leopoldovich Rostropovich in a private session. Then there was their eighteen-year-old daughter, who had an almost genius ability to learn any instrument by ear but liked to use it only as a pretext to avoid sleeping at home. She was in the first flush of a fling with an excellent jazz trumpeter but was determined to take her vows with the Discalced Carmelites, against her parents' will.

Three days before she died Ana Magdalena's mother had expressed her wish to be buried on the island. Ana Magdalena had wanted to travel to the funeral, but no one thought it prudent, for she herself did not believe she would survive her grief. Her father took her to the island on the first anniversary to place a marble stone on the grave. The crossing, almost four hours in a canoe with an outboard motor, without a single instant of calm water, frightened her. She admired the golden sand beaches bordered by virgin jungle, the clamor of birdsong, and the

phantasmal flight of the herons above the stillness of the lagoon. She was depressed by the poverty of the village, where they had to sleep outside in hammocks slung between two coconut palms, despite its being the birthplace of a poet and a grandiloquent senator who had once very nearly been president of the republic. She was struck by the number of black fishermen with mutilated arms from the premature explosions of dynamite sticks. However, she understood her mother's wish when she saw the splendor of the world from the height of the cemetery. It was the only solitary place where one could not feel alone. That was when Ana Magdalena Bach decided to leave her mother there where she lay and assigned herself the task of bringing a bouquet of gladioli every year to place on her grave.

August was the month of heat waves and crazy downpours, but she understood it as yet another penance she must fulfill unfailingly and always alone. Her only weakness came in the face of her children's insistence on seeing their

grandmother's grave, and nature made her pay with a terrifying crossing. The motorboat set sail despite the rain so night would not fall on the way and the children arrived petrified and overcome with seasickness. That time, fortunately, they were able to sleep in the first tourist hotel the senator built in his name with state funding.

Ana Magdalena Bach had seen more towering cliffs of glass go up every year while the village grew more and more impoverished. The ferry replaced the motorboats. The crossing still took four hours, but with air-conditioning, a band, and pleasure girls. She alone maintained her routine as the village's most punctual visitor.

She went back to the hotel, lay down on the bed wearing nothing but her lace knickers, opened her book to the page marked by the paper knife, and began to read beneath the blades of a ceiling fan that barely stirred the heat. The book was *Dracula*, by Bram Stoker. On the ferry she had raced with fervor through the