

## THREE STORIES

MÓNICA LAVÍN

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**T**o many North Americans, Mexico is a land fraught with cartels and criminals poised to stream across the southern border. It is a fiction that raises a wall of ignorance. The following trio of stories by Mónica Lavín, one of Mexico's most prolific and respected modern writers, opens a crack in that wall, revealing a country far more mysterious and variegated.

Born in Mexico City in 1955, Lavín is the author of eleven short story collections, eight novels, two works of young adult fiction, five works of nonfiction and essays, and the recently published *México-contemporáneo*, an anthology of interviews with some of Mexico's greatest contemporary creators. She is a multimedia talent: a journalist; a columnist for *El Universal*; a tv and radio personality; and a professor of creative writing at the Autonomous University in Mexico City. Among the high honors she has received are the *Premio Nacional de Literatura Gilberto Owen* (1996) for the short story collection *Ruby Tuesday no ha muerto* (*Ruby Tuesday Hasn't Died*), the *Premio Bellas Artes de Narrativa Colima para Obra Publicada* (2001) for the novel *Café cortado*; and the *Premio Iberoamericano de la Novela Elena*



—*Mónica Lavín. Photograph by Hans-Paul Brauns*

*Poniatowska* (2009), one of the country's highest literary honors, for *Yo, la peor* (*I, the Worst One*) a fictionalized history of the life of seventeenth century poet and scholar Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. From her book-lined studio in Coyoacán, Lavín produces material at a furious pace for print and electronic media. She knows and has interviewed Carlos Fuentes for a documentary about his life; she films a regular television show with her friend, the writer Rosa Beltrán; she has translated several works by Canadian writer Margaret Atwood, who dedicated a poem to her. When interviewed about her writing, Lavín often declares that she would much prefer to ask questions than answer them. She has been a Yaddo fellow, resident at the Hermitage Retreat and the Banff Centre for the Arts, and is an international speaker. She loves playing basketball and dancing flamenco. She prefers to write in the morning, the earlier the better, a fragrant *café cortado* by her side.

I found Lavín's work by chance. I give my students a seventy-five-dollar budget to buy books for me whenever they travel abroad, and two years ago one of them brought me a copy of *Manual para enamorarse* (*How to Fall in Love*) from a trip to San Miguel de Allende. I read the stories and, as they say, nothing was ever the same again. Here was a modern Latin American woman writing about sex, love, desire, and eroticism with a frankness, honesty, and linguistic virtuosity that seared and wounded me. In September of 2015, I proposed myself as her translator. She graciously gave me that opportunity, and these three stories from her 2010 collection *Pasarse de la raya* (*Crossing Over the Line*) are the result.

We begin in the basement apartment of "The Caretaker," where a young office worker finds herself sequestered by a man whose smooth, dark skin and cheap personal accoutrements identify him as working class and of indigenous heritage. We proceed to the ground floor in "What's There to Come Back To," in which a

husband rejects desire and intimacy in favor of middle-class order and ferocious routine. Finally, in “Postprandial,” we take the elevator to the glittering penthouse, where a parade of delicacies provides the appetizer to exuberant feasts in which lovers’ bodies are the main dish and sex is power. In Lavín’s stories, food reveals character and social class: in the basement, we are overwhelmed by the pungent odor of beans, the staple of the poor; on the first floor, fried eggs and supermarket cold cuts communicate a disdain of sensuality; and in the penthouse, exotic cuisine ushers in the consensual cannibalism of unrestrained Eros.

Lavín’s characters are at once molecularly Mexican and universally human. Lavín is also trained biologist, and she focuses her microscope on slender cross sections of time, portentous details, and the primordial emotions that transport her characters over the line from one reality to another. Her stories are haunted by a piquant mixture of familiarity and oddness. Through them we receive answers to questions that we had either repressed or were too ashamed to ask.

For Lavín, writing is investigatory, “the obligation to inquire into that part of us that is most honest, real, fragile, and daring, the part that is present when we love, when we desire, when eroticism is allowed in or when the sexual becomes a form of power.” Women are central to her work, but male or female, young or old, wealthy or poor, Lavín’s characters all lay themselves bare in the messy, glorious, and sometimes violent arena of desire. The music of the language is crucial to her, but above all Lavín wants to portray an authentic, intense emotion that will engage her reader on multiple levels. With a short story she says, “you want to achieve some sort of high level of beauty, precision and power, and you never know if you’re going to achieve it—but you have to try.”

Lavín speaks English well, and I am grateful that she made

suggestions to improve my translations. I am heartened to join her in the solitary work of searching for words, and I have done my best to make her stories sing in English as they do in Spanish. Of course, any translator is a potential traitor, and I cannot be sure that I will deliver the original text safely over the line—but I, too, have to try.

— DOROTHY POTTER SNYDER

### *The Caretaker*

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That very morning she'd thought to herself, I should write down my name and address on a piece of paper and put it in my purse, I should carry some identification. She always said that as soon as she broke out her new date book she'd fill out the page marked Personal Information, but it was March already and she'd totally forgotten to do it. Now, dangling from the bus's handrail, she looked without seeing at the laps of the passengers in front of her, unable to keep from occasionally brushing against their knees. She was so accustomed to the morning commute after two years of working the same office job that she instinctively knew how to ride out sudden stops, where to place her arm and where to plant her feet. She would've preferred to travel sitting down, so that she could give her lips a final touch-up and pat her puffy, hair-sprayed perm back into place. With the morning rush, it never stayed put like it did on the weekends.

She'd been traveling in a stupor that day, afflicted with a strange exhaustion that felt to her like a hangover from a sleepless night. That was odd, since on Sunday she and Germán had done what

they always did: watched TV with her aunt, ate the quesadillas that Meche sold on the corner for supper, and then, after their music program was over at ten o'clock, Germán had said goodnight as usual, because he had to get to the garage by seven the next morning. The weakness was overcoming her with increasing intensity and, feeling alarmed, she leaned forward so that the air from the open window would blow directly onto her face. She switched her purse to the other arm and changed the position of her feet, and again became lost in contemplation of the other passengers' laps, her head resting in the crook of her elbow. A cold sweat suffused her body, and she couldn't utter a peep to ask for help.

No doubt she'd collapsed right there on top of those very same thighs, all wrapped in different kinds of cloth, had taken a shameless nosedive right onto the laps of the startled passengers in her red dress and pointy high-heeled shoes, with her purse still dangling from her shoulder. Now, gazing at an unfamiliar ceiling, Marisela began to speculate. She had no shoes on. Her feet, still crammed into Lycra stockings, brushed against a synthetic bedspread. Its texture made her shudder. She was groggy and afraid of finding out where she'd ended up. It wasn't a hospital. She knew because of the bare light bulb hanging from the pistachio-green ceiling, the smell of cooked beans, and the quilted bedspread beneath her. Slowly, she turned her head. To her left, in the corner, was a small sink; next to this was a cloth curtaining off what she guessed was a bathroom. She let her gaze travel around the room. To the right, her black purse hung from the back of the nearest chair, which was pulled up to a small table. What assailant would've laid her down on a bed, taken off her shoes, and put her purse within reach? Beyond the room she was in, through a doorway, she saw a stove. The pot on the burner was giving off the smell of beans that permeated the apartment. Near the foot of the bed was another door, also painted

pistachio green, on which hung a calendar. To the right of it was a television topped with a beige enamel vase that held two faded cloth roses. On the other side was a wedding photograph in an oval frame. This sign of human life reassured her. She slowly pulled herself together and sat up.

The little red flowers on the bedspread made her dizzy and, searching for windows, she saw that there were two above a large wardrobe to her right. She lowered her feet to the floor, and, reaching out to steady herself on the chair, she tried to stand. She slowly approached the wardrobe and again felt the same weakness as on the bus. Worried she might pass out again, she took the cologne from the wardrobe's built-in shelf, opened it hurriedly, and sniffed its masculine scent. She caught sight of herself in the round mirror: she was pale, but her hairdo was still in place. Two other aftershaves, a deodorant, a condom, and a comb were also reflected in the mirror. All of these things appeared to belong to a man and, intrigued now, she opened a drawer where undershorts, t-shirts, and socks lived all jumbled up together. She turned the key that was in the wardrobe's door and opened it: inside, skirts of flowered red dresses stood out, bright against blue and brown pants.

The alcohol in the aftershave had revived her, and she thought the time had come to leave. She'd write a thank-you note to the couple, including her address, to return their kindness. She sat in the chair where her purse hung and took out a pen and a sheet of paper that she ripped out of her agenda. She smiled, thinking of the ironic usefulness of it. She took the dusty vase from the TV and placed it on top of the note so that the occupants would be alerted to its presence. She slipped her feet into her shoes, smoothing the bedspread with her hand and straightening it, and with her purse once again on her shoulder, she headed for the door. She turned the knob, but couldn't open it. She looked for the deadbolt that

was surely keeping it shut, but in vain. They had locked her in. She would have to wait until someone came back.

She put down her handbag and went to the kitchen to peek through any window that might give her an idea where she was. There was only one, above the sink and, like the windows in the big room, it was like a small air vent, and very high up. She dragged over a chair and climbed up on it, but it was impossible to see anything unless she stuck her face inside the frame of the tiny window, and the chair wasn't high enough to do that. She went back to the bedroom and climbed up on one of the wardrobe's shelves. She heard trucks and voices outside, but there was no other clue that might help her figure out on what street or in what neighborhood it was that she now found herself.

Exhausted, she sat down on the bed. The effort had been too much for her in her still delicate state. She checked the time: it was noon. She should let her job, her aunt, or somebody know where she was. She crouched down in front of the door. Visible through the keyhole was a dark, empty hallway. She stayed there for a while, listening for footsteps, until she thought she heard something. Through the keyhole she saw a woman's legs in stockings and high heels. She brought her mouth close to door and called out: "Ma'am, here, ma'am!" She watched as the legs slowed down and paused for a moment. She imagined the brain above those legs trying to figure out where the sound was coming from. She called out again, this time louder, but the woman walked away. Marisela gave up. She would wait. With luck, the worst they could do at work was dock her pay, and she'd get home at the same time as always. She turned on the tv and stretched out on the old bed.

The sound of the door opening woke her up. It was night, and in the dark she couldn't discern who was coming in. The man turned on the light and apologized.



"Did I wake you up, beautiful?"

Marisela was speechless.

"You must be starving. I'll prepare some steaks and warm up some beans so we can eat."

The man was speaking with feeling as he took off his sweater and hung it from the hook next to the door. He disappeared behind the oilcloth curtain, and Marisela heard the strong flow of his urine, and then the flush whisking it away. Reappearing, he washed his hands at the sink, and casually approached the old bed where Marisela, having tugged her dress down over her legs, stayed perfectly still. He sat on the edge of the mattress, and took her face in his hands as her father used to do.

"How lovely you look."

Marisela figured that she had been ruthlessly taken prisoner by this stranger who was no doubt the apartment's only inhabitant. The man caressed her hair with his thick hand. She couldn't stop her lips from quivering.

"I'll cover you up right away," he said.

He took a shawl from the wardrobe and threw it over her shoulders, closing it in front for her as if she were a little girl. Then he went into the kitchen. Marisela tried to get her wits about her, to regain her power of speech so that she could say thanks, and leave. The man reappeared carrying two plates.

"Come, eat."

He turned on the television and sat at the table. He ate without looking at her, engrossed in the black and white screen. Hungry, Marisela resisted the impulse to interrupt him, and she also ate. When he finished, he remained immersed in the tv. He had a wide, brown face and thick, black hair that was glossy from the tonic that he no doubt used every morning to slick it back. His arms were smooth and hairless, a wristwatch the only thing that interrupted

the dark luster of his skin. Uncomfortable with the silence, Marisela stood up and cleared the plates, which she washed in the kitchen sink. She gathered up the napkins and soda bottles. After she finished, she sat down in her chair, determined to speak.

"Would you kindly tell me where the bus stop is, and what line I should take to get home? It's late and they're waiting for me."

"Your home?"

"Yes. I'm very grateful for your help, but my aunt and boyfriend don't know where I am."

"This is your home," he said.

"Thanks, that's very nice of you. I hope to return the favor one day and invite you to come to dinner at my aunt's house, because my parents live in Michoacán, you know, but all the same, when you go there . . ."

The man didn't seem to be listening. He rose to his feet and removed a cot from behind the wardrobe.

"But there's no need," Marisela insisted, pleading.

The man unfolded the cot on the other side of the table, right next to the kitchen door, and took two blankets out of the wardrobe. Standing in the middle of the room, Marisela didn't know whether to cry or to start punching him in the chest. He gave her a blanket. Again, he took her face between his thumb and forefinger, and turned it towards himself.

"Rest now."

He turned off the light, and went towards the cot. Standing mute next to the table, Marisela watched as he took off his shirt, leaving his smooth, ample belly fully exposed. Intimidated, she lay down on the bed with its flowered bedspread and covered herself with the blanket. She lay her head down on the warm batting, but it only served to inflame her feelings of impotence and fury. She thought about her aunt, who would be out of her mind with

worry, and about Germán, who would have called around to all the hospitals and to her coworker Claudia. Nobody would know why she hadn't made it to the office that day, why she hadn't called in, why she hadn't come home. Between the noisy breathing of the man with whom she shared the room, and the rise and fall of her unresolvable anxieties, she finally fell asleep.

The man rose early. Marisela heard him stir in the cot, and she opened her eyes. As he made his way to the bathroom in the faint light illuminating the room, she noticed something shiny hanging from his neck, and when he came out of the bathroom with his hair wet and his torso still naked, Marisela could make out that the bright object was a key. She slowly concluded that it must be the key to the front door, and that he would wear it beneath his shirt to work, or to wherever the hell he went, while she remained here with her sweaty, dirty red dress and the agony of eight more solitary hours. The man came out of the kitchen with two steaming mugs and approached Marisela.

"Here's your coffee, beautiful."

Marisela gathered herself together, pulling the blanket up to her chest, and took the cup.

The two sipped in silence. He looked at her face, spellbound, and she buried her own gaze in the steam from the coffee.

"If you want to change, there are dresses in the wardrobe. It's been a year already, and the bitch won't complain about it."

He bent down and bestowed a kiss on Marisela, along with a strong smell of deodorant and cheap cologne. He took his sweater from the hook, and closed the door after himself. Marisela heard the key turn in the lock.

She had eight long hours to come up with a plan. She decided that there was no other way. When the man returned that evening, Marisela received him with a smile, wearing one of his wife's

dresses, which featured a low neckline and, since it was a bit small on her, was rather tight around the hips. She'd put on lipstick and eye shadow, washed her underarms with soap, and combed her hair with his tonic. While he cooked, she found excuses to join him in the little kitchen, and managed to brush lightly up against him. He had a beer with dinner, but this time it was hard for him to distract himself with the tv. While Marisela washed the dishes, he drank another beer, and then stood behind her, transfixed by the sight of her hips.

Marisela brought him another beer, told him she was sleepy, and excused herself. Standing next to the bed, she started to undress with deliberate languor. She was watching him as he approached her, his gaze dark. She turned off the light and breathed deeply, summoning up her desire for freedom so that she might find a way to endure the kisses and the enormous body on top of her. She took off his shirt. He squeezed her buttocks and ran a hand between her legs. Marisela caressed the man's back, pressed her mouth against his hairless chest and took the key between her teeth, sliding the chain over his head and disdainfully tossing it to the floor. With his pants around his knees and her naked body beneath him, the man ejaculated quickly and copiously, falling to one side, and breathing hard and unevenly.

Marisela waited for an hour, maybe two. The man's semen dried between her legs. Slowly, she rolled off the mattress, and, sliding the key along behind her with one foot, she crept over to the bathroom, where she'd left her red dress and shoes at the ready. Hurriedly and quietly, she got dressed, took her purse and the shawl, and made her way to the door, giving one last look at the man who was sleeping, satisfied, with his pants down around his knees. She inserted the key and turned it slowly, rotating the knob and opening the door. She looked back at him—he was still asleep—then she closed the

door behind her. The key fell, and she could hear the creaking of the mattress springs, but she was already out in the street in front of the old building, hurrying away.

It took a while for Marisela to recover, to take in what had happened to her during those two days, to get over her own daring and the memory of the smell of the man's cologne and beer engulfing her. She didn't tell the whole story to anyone, not exactly the way it happened. On Sunday, as usual, they ate Meche's delicious quesadillas, and Germán held her especially close. She needed his attention, his caresses, and she let herself take shelter in his embrace. After her aunt said goodnight, she and Germán parted with a long kiss.

Marisela put on her nightgown. She removed the bedspread from the bed, but somehow the quilted texture of it and the little red flowers made her dizzy. A voice from the window consoled her.

"I told you this was your home, beautiful."

### *What's There To Come Back To?*

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When a woman leaves, you shouldn't let her come back home. But how was I supposed to ignore her if she stayed out there all night? She knocked, and I said, *Who's there?* When she didn't answer, I told her, *Go away.* I heard her woolen coat rub against the wooden door as she slid down to a sitting position on the step. I imagined her hugging the bag she'd left with that big weekend bag, the one we used when it occurred to us to leave the city. I threw the eggs into the frying pan; the sizzling of the oil drowned out the sound of her blowing her nose. It was November, and at this altitude it's always cold at night. She got all stuffed up with it. I took the eggs out of the pan and put them on a plate with a slice of ham—the last slice. Since she left, I buy very little. I'd never done the shopping before, and at first I'd order a half kilo, but after a week, when I had to throw out most of the cold cuts because they'd gone all slimy and green, I realized that one hundred grams was enough. I started to enjoy going to the supermarket. It was clean, well-lit. At home, I only turned on the lights in the TV room and the bedroom. Never again did I turn on the little lantern at the front door where Marta was now huddled in the shadows.

I attacked the yolks with a piece of bread, and then gazed deeply into the yellow magma as it slid into the coagulated whites. It annoyed me to hear her breathing out there. We never should have bought this house with its cheap materials. You can hear everything. When we moved here, we could even hear the neighbors flush the toilet, and with our last unmarried kid, Julian, still in the house, we would try to guess who it had been. Marta would laugh. Back then, with Julian at home, she used to laugh a lot. He spoiled her, and she did the same to him. Girls. It would have been easier if we'd had a girl to spoil *me*. I always suspected that the son-of-a-bitch she left

with was just like Julian: cheerful, affectionate. But flattery and the lingering hug are not my cup of tea. For me, a penetrating look is enough, like when I said goodbye to Marta as she was taking her brown coat.

"You're not going to stop me?" she asked, hurt.

"You want to leave. There's nothing to do about it."

"Maybe you think that it's paradise living here with you?"

"It's just here, with me."

Why are you there behind the door? Three months apart weren't enough to stitch up my soul. The pain bubbled up like the yolks that I kept wolfing down, as if I were trying to eradicate her inevitable return with my jaws.

If she's a bitch, let her sleep like a bitch, I thought, finishing off the beer that I drank every night to put myself to sleep. It's hard not to indulge in melodrama and to accept how difficult it is to sleep without Marta's body next to me every night, without her smell of creams and dried-up woman. I felt the shameless desire to say goodnight to her as I shuffled upstairs in my slippered feet.

Didn't she leave for love? Didn't she have the integrity to wound me with the truth? *You need a guy to be with, right? You're good for nothing by yourself.* I wasn't good for anything by myself, either. That's what I resented. I hated her for being gone, I hated her for being humiliated right there behind the door, and I hated her for wanting to come back to me. She had betrayed me. No, not when she left. Even in my pain, I admired her openness to change, every man for himself. Maybe life could've been more invigorating. But she'd chosen this shared death again. Because habit shelters and obliterates, and tacit understandings fill the silences. One becomes like a subscriber to life, saddled with a predetermined fate, unable to choose one thing over another.

The bed is cold, frozen, like beds always are when we mistreat them. Look how it's wrinkled and full of crumbs, deprived of the

kindnesses Marta used to bestow on the sheets that once awaited our serene slumber. Now it's enemy territory. Life has become enemy territory for me. At first, I was angry enough to think about finding them and duking it out with my rival. But it was she who'd left, and the punches weren't for the guy who'd offered her a transitory stop. Perhaps that's love, platforms on a long journey. There are people who never leave the station. They're always missing something in their suitcases. Marta had gone off so sad that she'd forgotten her suitcase entirely. Not triumphant, but broken. She couldn't get angry with me, she never could, even when I greeted her chatter about book club or jazz class with silence.

What's there to come back to? Did she reassess? Did the hunk turn out to be not so hunky after all? Does he have bad breath? Is he grumpy in the morning? She's come back to grow old with me. To struggle with being sixty, with the silence, our postscript after thirty-five years of marriage. I hate her. May she die of cold, may she snuffle and blow all night long, may the snot turn into stalactites on her sore, red nose.

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Fried eggs again for breakfast, the TV news. I think she's left. Maybe she froze to death. Maybe we both froze to death. Marta always shouted: *A sweater, Victor, don't forget to take a sweater!* I wasn't a child, but I put it on, reluctantly. Wives turn into mothers, husbands become children. Julian and I never got along. One day, he told me he was going to take his mother out to dinner. *You don't like to go out at night, Pop.*

They came back laughing, stinking of wine. I didn't speak to them the next day. *You have bad breath*, I told them. For sure, Marta there behind the door would have that sour, up-all-night breath. The yellow lava once again spread out on the egg white, and I



trapped it with a piece of stale bread. Then I heard her move. She heard my slippers brushing against the floor and dared to call out to me.

*Victor, please.*

There are bitches that live indoors, too, I thought, and I opened the door. She was leaning up against it and lost her balance, falling backwards onto the floor. Without looking at her, I returned to the table. *Thank you, Victor*, she said, as she patted her hair back into place. Clutching her bag, and hugging her coat around her, she stood there, shaking off the night's chill. *I don't know how to be without you.*

Her first steps were uncertain. She asked permission to prepare herself some breakfast, to shower, to watch TV with me, to call Julian. The circles under her eyes, the fear and the meekness began to disappear, until she became the lady of the house again. Nothing changed. It's just that occasionally, when I'd look at her flabby arms sticking out of her flowered blouse, I'd imagine them wrapped around another body, and I hated her. I'd hear her laugh at something on the TV, and her happiness reminded me of the bed that had been wrinkled for three months, and her laughter that had been someplace else. How she must have laughed it up! We never talked about our stuff. Silence as habit, and habit, in silence, finally put all the pieces back in their places again.

We would rarely look at each other directly, and we didn't make love anymore. Marta didn't dare to call a halt to my punishment of her, and I didn't want to stir up hard feelings. One morning, with her gaze fixed on the sunny egg yolk on my plate, Marta reached out and touched my forearm. *I need your caresses, Victor.* I gripped my fork and speared her hand, pinning it to the table.

Now the silence is complete. She strokes her wound while we have breakfast, when we watch TV, when we lie in bed, and when she absently gazes at that door that I once opened to her.

*Postprandial*

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At the restaurant, you linger in front of the lectern and examine the menu's offerings.

The décor is attractive, a high-tech bistro style. Its entrance opens onto the hotel's lobby. It's mid-afternoon, so there aren't any dinner guests to make uncomfortable when you peek in. The waiters are busy putting out the place settings and flower arrangements.

In hotels, dinner service begins at six o'clock. At a table underneath a small lamp attached to the wall, a man catches sight of you and nods in greeting. You smile and feel a strong urge to leave, since you already had a look around, but he signals you with his hand to come closer. He seems like the manager, with his navy-blue jacket and red tie. You say hello and tell him that the place is very lovely, that you hadn't known about it. We just remodeled it, he answers, and asks you to sit down. I came to get a gift from Larios, you say, hedging. He tells you it'll just take a few minutes, that he wants you to taste a few dishes, that everything's new, the menu, the chef. Faced with his calm smile and slate-blue eyes, you weakly tell him that you're not hungry. He reaches out his big hands—you take note of just how big they are—and he orders the waiter to bring a few sample dishes. You think, why not? You like to eat, and this man wants your opinion.

It's five o'clock, and the waiter sets down two wine glasses and pours a splash into the glass of the man in the blue jacket. He buries his nose in it, inhales, and then asks you if you wouldn't mind accompanying him in a little tasting. It would be a pleasure, you say, and he explains what a good year it was for this French wine, the harvest of that vintage was fantastic, that this sort of pinot noir goes well with a tuna steak, a little serving of redfish, nearly

raw and crusted with pepper, an intensely-flavored slice that your tongue lingers over and that you swallow with your eyes half-closed, afterwards taking a sip from your glass. He watches you, having not even tried his own serving, and he catches you in your gesture, a pleasant expression in the eyes, a pleased sigh. The servings—loin of lamb in puff pastry, a bit of endive with goat cheese, veal with morels—all flow delicately and each in its turn across the white tablecloth and your palate. He tells you that he used to be a dishwasher, and now he's the restaurant's manager. The story intrigues you. He's been to wine tastings all over the world, he personally knows sommeliers who have identified regions, varieties, and vintages while blindfolded.

He calls the waiter and tells him to straighten a painting on the wall and to fill up the salt shakers, his eyes all the while focused on the man's shoes—they must be perfectly polished at all times, he explains. His slate-blue eyes gaze at you steadily and with a certain pleasure as you taste the Chateau Lafitte that the waiter has uncorked, and you listen to him and observe him as if you were part of a play in which you had the role of submitting to the designs of the leading man. Finally, he offers you a serving of bitter chocolate on a small, white, seashell-shaped plate, and he assures you that it tastes best accompanied by champagne. So, he takes you by the hand with that big hand of his, and he sweeps you along through the hallways while you discover that he's tall, and that you like his light chestnut hair and the way he carries himself, and you don't know whether it's the mix of French and Scotch heritage or what you learned amidst the dishes, implements, tables, chefs, and waiters that is seducing you.

He takes you to Room 704, and you don't understand how the bottle of Champagne arrived before you do and is now reclining there in a silver ice bucket. You sit on the sofa next to the bed and

wait for him to offer you a glass while you silently observe through the window and from seven floors up this strange city and your own acquiescence. You feel out of place in this position. You smile, and he of the slate-blue eyes brings over the glass, and while you drink he silently removes your shoes, unbuttons your blouse, and delicately searches for the center of each of your breasts to play with the nipple. Once again you half-close your eyes and you surrender yourself to the big hands that have just stripped you naked and that hold you there on the sofa with the afternoon sun streaming through the window, and the rug, and his long nose sniffing at your neck, and his Champagne-flavored tongue savoring your breasts, sucking from them the secret of their whiteness. He sucks on your navel, nibbles your legs, salivates on your feet, and strokes your belly as if he were checking the freshness of a Dover sole. He observes the response of the flesh, and searches with an artisan's hands for your throbbing clitoris. He stimulates it delicately, as if he were seasoning a dish that afterwards his mouth had to savor, his tongue to wound. You've turned to jelly: a jumble of moist flesh, a cream of cockles, a dripping sieve of spit and membranes. You're completely edible, and he's gotten you to the point where you want nothing more than to taste him, to feel his sex growing in your mouth, drowning you, leaving you breathless, exalting your desire that he should pierce you, break you down, and skewer you, as at last he does, leaving you limp and abandoned like leftovers on a plate.

You let a week pass. You needed time to enjoy the postprandial, and you thought that choosing the same day and time would allow for a repeat encounter. Before leaving home, you carefully polished your black shoes, and you drove there, all the while trying to ignore the feeling of inevitability. It could've been just the moment's enchantment, but nevertheless you had already drunk from the cup, and your body clamored for his mouth endlessly sucking on

your breasts. It was five o'clock when he saw you walk in. As you approached, he stood up with his pale-yellow shirt peeking out from beneath his gray jacket. The two glasses were already on the table, waiting. Everything proceeded like a concert directed perfectly by his blue eyes and expert hand, the hand that you were craving. The parade of food began, the snails bourguignon that he pried from their shells trembling as if still alive when he placed them on your tongue, the garlic and oil providing lubrication; and later he offered the Spanish Matarromera to soften the flavors and heighten the desires, that were then soothed with some oysters *al parmesano*; and a new appetite was born that would not be satisfied with any other tastes than those of skin and sweat in another and different room, with the same afternoon light and the tumult of his taking you right in front of the mirror while he observed your movements, your flushed skin, your wild eyes, and he grabbed onto your breasts like the peaches that he had chosen that very afternoon to infuse with wine and sugar. And you sought the source of this pleasure in his slate-blue eyes reflected there in the mirror, the duration of this pleasure that then became lost as the glass misted over with vapor from the bath.

You took refuge in the ritual, became an addict, relinquished your own ordinary good sense every Friday for months, between the wine and food and Champagne that were like a prelude to the ever-new and wild carnal pleasures that required neither the soul's cooperation nor the reassurance that there would be an encore. That's how it was. That's how it was until the afternoon when his slate-blue gaze received you more darkly, and he reprimanded the waiter on duty for his scuffed shoes, and he sent back the saltcellar that had grease marks on it, and said that the flowers' aroma spoiled the meal. There were dishes that you ate with a certain disquiet—words hadn't been the currency of exchange between the two of you—and

he regarded you with a nostalgia foretold. He uncorked a Vega Sicilia that you finished on the eighteenth floor. Closer to heaven every time, you told him. In response, he made love to you with sweet frugality, he touched you delicately, kneeling next to the sofa in the blushing afternoon light and letting you drink from his glass. He absorbed your moisture so that he might leave you dry as a shell, and he rammed you up against the wall and entered you as if he were raping you in a dark alleyway, your anxious hands clawing the wall. He drew the bath while you looked out at the tranquility of the approaching darkness, unaware of the whirlwind that would also be yours. He told you about it once you had lowered yourself into the tub, while he watched you float and your hair spread out on the surface of the water. *I am going to a hotel in Niza.* Speechless, you submerged, letting your face sink below the water. *When?* you asked when you finally resurfaced. *Tomorrow,* he said, *tomorrow afternoon.* *Why?* you asked him while he used a sponge to wash your foot, which was sticking out of the tub. *It's better work.* You looked at him, furious. *You should have stayed a dishwasher.* You wounded him, but he kept sculpting your skin, insistently, and then he took your leg and scrubbed it hard, his hands plunged into the water, scrubbing your belly, your chest, your reddened nipples, and you, looking at his desperate face, pulled yourself together enough to embrace him, get him wet, kiss him, take the sponge away from him, and lower yourself down on him to make love on the bathroom floor, like one last, lacerating howl.

He was so kind as to recommend you. Perhaps, you thought, it was a way of prolonging the time that you had been his. He spoke with the owner about your gastronomic sophistication, your exquisiteness, your taste buds, of the wines you knew and could recommend, and you said yes. It was a good job, and now you could sit at the table against the wall, underneath the lamp, giving orders,

distributing and inventing pleasures for others, keeping a close watch on the waiters' shoes. You saw a young man come in with his notebook, a fellow that was writing a piece for a magazine. Sit, you signaled to him with your hand, and you told the waiter to serve the parade of dishes and your preferred wines. The young man half closed his eyes while he savored a piece of salmon *aux fines herbes*, and you smiled. You gestured at the waiter. The Champagne would be waiting for you in Room 704.