

Closed Rooms

Care Santos

(First pages)

Translation: Lawrence Schimel

For the children, grandchildren, and
great-grandchildren of my children,
who won't know who I was.

*Promise This --
When You be Dying --
Some shall summon Me --*
Emily Dickinson

Time: the only subject.
Yasmina Reza

Absent Teresa, 1936

Fresco, 300 x 197 cm

Currently not visitable

Teresa Brusés was the great obsession and also (it is said) the great disgrace of the life of the painter Amadeo Lax. Of the thirty six portraits he made of her, only a third are dated during the eight years that their marriage lasted. The most atypical of them, considered the artist's masterpiece, was this large scale fresco created during the renovation of the patio of the family home and dated 1936 (probably from the beginning of the summer). The technique used was what's known as "buon fresco", which consists of painting with pigment diluted in water upon a still-wet coat of plaster, which Lax used here for the first and (curiously) final time. The work shows the model from the waist up, with her body at an angle and the face almost in profile. She looks toward a point that's outside the painting, with a certain air of unease or of displacement. All this is underscored by the color range used (dark colors predominate: blues, blacks, ochres, indigos...) and by the thick strokes, one could say careless, with which some details have been resolved, such as the hair or the hands. It is a curiosity in the work of a meticulous painter, who always took care with the outline and the brush stroke and who on this occasion shows a kinship to the expressionists not seen before in his career. Of course, much has been written about the style of this work, which the majority of specialists blame on the critical moment in which it was conceived: precisely just before the model would abandon the painter for another man. Lamentably, the fresco is not available to the public, due to being located inside what was the artist's home, whose conversion into a museum has been awaiting for some years now for institutional approbation, among them from the autonomous government, who Lax named as inheritor of the house and his work.

Treasures of Catalan Art

Ediciones Pampalluga, Malagrat de Mar, 1987.

From: Silvana Gentile
Date: February 8, 2010
To: Violeta Lax
Subject: Important message

We don't know one another. My name is Silvana and I live with my family in Nesso, a small town near Lake Como, in the north of Italy. I write to you on behalf of my mother, who wants to send you a letter. Would you be kind enough to send us a mailing address?

I await your reply and send you an affectionate greeting.

Silvana

Nesso (Italy), February 10, 2010

Dear Miss Lax:

You will think that this letter reaches you from another world. Forgive me for not sending it via that enviably quick method that machines have placed at our service, but I am one of those who still think that handwritten lines contain much more than a message: the pulse of the hand that drew them, the moisture of the tear that accompanied them, and perhaps even the tremble of emotion that justifies them. You will think that the person writing to you is disenchanted with modernity, or one of those people who is a lover of traditions, and without a doubt you will have guessed correctly. It must be this place where I was born (and which I have only left few times) which has made me mistakenly believe that the world is slow and placid. And at my age, the truth is, I prefer to remain mistaken. Let me only add to this preamble my appreciation of your generosity. If it is any consolation for having offered your postal details to a stranger, I confess that it would have been difficult for me to tell you anything if I had to use those ugly plastic keys.

The subject for my writing to you might seem, at first, of little interest: my mother died a few weeks ago. I hope to have the chance to explain to you what she was like and how she loved this place, where she arrived as little more than a girl. Her absence has left us with a desolation that nothing can console. Only, perhaps,

to fulfill her final wishes, despite these being for us (for my daughter and myself) as surprising as, I suppose, they will be for you.

Although at first we didn't understand the reason, my mother named you in her will. That clause was not the only one which left us perplexed. It is for this that we have needed (I, at least) a brief time to collect data and assure us that what we at first took for the fantasies of a mind that was exhausted with life, was in truth the basis of our family history and (I suspect) also of your own.

All this, as you will understand, requires a few hours of conversation. There are things which should be dealt with in person, over something to eat and with a good landscape in the background. Forgive me, please, the brevity of my words. I could not reveal myself in a letter. Not even in a real one, like this.

Therefore, Violeta, this letter travels with my formal invitation to visit us. Our home is a small oasis of peace with views of one of the most idyllic spots on earth. You can stay as long as you wish, beyond the subjects which concern us which we must deal with. If the information that I have is correct, my daughter, Silvana, is the same age as yourself. She now runs our little hotel, where she has a room reserved for you. You only need to let us know the day of your arrival and we will collect you in person.

I am sure that we will treat you as part of the family.

With the desire that this shall soon take place, I send you an affectionate greeting,

Fiorella Otrante

From: Violeta Lax
Date: March 1, 2010
To: Arcadio Pérez
Subject: Trip to Europe

Dear Arcadio:

I have finally decided to travel to Europe. Drina, my assistant, is trying to get me a ticket for next week. Tell me how long you think it is best for me to stay, to plan my trip properly. You know that what I am most interested in is seeing the fresco of Teresa before it is removed from the wall of the old patio, but I will accompany you (as scholar, heir, or friend, whatever works best for you) to those terrible meetings you tell me of. I warn you, though, that politicians drive me crazy.

Otherwise, I am also thinking of going to Italy. My intention, at first, was to go there first and then make the hop to Barcelona, but this morning I suddenly remembered that the restoration works must be about to begin and I wouldn't miss this final chance to see my grandfather's masterpiece in its original setting. Especially when it is a work about which I have spoken, written, and even pontificated for years.

In short: I await your news.

Kisses,

Vio

P.S.: By the way, if you invite me to a glass of wine I promise to tell you the strange circumstance by which a mysterious old-fashioned woman has invited me to visit her at Lake Como. I swear that this is not a joke. And I want to go. Daniel says that I'm crazy. Oh, Daniel sends his greetings. Lately he is so busy with his novel that he doesn't even have time for his family.

From: Drina Walden
Date: March 1, 2010
To: Violeta Lax
Subject: Europe

I'm attaching all the information about the European flights you requested: Chicago-Barcelona and Barcelona-Orio al Serio (Bergamo/Milan). I have checked that this is the closest airport to Lake Como, which is where you plan to go, right? Let me know if you'd like to do a little sightseeing in Milan or if it's OK as is. I also need to know when you are returning and from where.

I know that you hate these things but there is something I need to ask you. Not as your assistant, for once, but as a friend. After all, I've been the latter for much longer than the former.

Oh, Vio, are you sure that this trip is not really a way of fleeing? I don't know, you've decided to go in such a hurry, and at such a peculiar moment. I don't understand why you go right now, when the Art Institute is about to inaugurate YOUR exhibit of the portraitists! And this part of your email confuses me even more: "To make peace with a part of my past that I let escape."? I can't imagine what could be so important to you that you'd give up the satisfaction of giving a talk in front of all the head honchos the day of the inauguration. I know you say that that is just collateral, that in truth it's a bunch of reasons that are taking you to Europe, beginning with the fresco of Teresa, but I still don't see it clearly.

Perhaps I am going too far in my role as friend, but I have the suspicion that all this has more to do with the crisis you told me about the other day. Daniel's work, your lack of faith in your relationship, the obligations the kids now impose on you... All that will pass, my dear. Or change form. It happens to all of us. It's just a question of time until you see it differently. In short: I only want to say that I am very concerned about you. I have the impression that many things are happening to you at once, and I don't understand any of them.

Promise me that you'll take care? And that you'll count on me, if you need anything, beyond just planning your agenda for you?

I.

"One day I'll tell you everything I remember and the dead will roll in their graves," Concha once whispered to her beloved Aurora.

Life didn't give her many chances to speak for very long. Although perhaps that is only one of the reasons Concha never told anyone all that she remembered.

She never told, for example, that on Saturday, December 24, 1932, Lax's widow, Maria del Roser Golorons, after hearing the nine o'clock mass in the church of the Belén, spent almost the entire day visiting the El Siglo department store. She spent a long time in the section of children's linens on the second floor, where she bought a complete set for her first grandson, who should be born in the middle of spring: diapers of Russian fabric, scalloped shawls, Dutch cambric shirts and even half a dozen embroidered madapolam petticoats with British frills (in case the grandchild was a girl). In the toy department, she chose a marvelous leaping dog, a cardboard horse, and a tin cart with trotting little horses. Later, she visited the basketry section to purchase a walker, a bumper with woolen tassels, and a crib with a canopy, which was made of wicker but cost as much as if it were made from the finest wood. The lady's enthusiasm to overwhelm Amadeo's first son, his firstborn, and his beloved Teresa was evident in the volume of her purchases.

"Children today are more complicated than before, they need more things," she said to justify her purchases.

Before continuing on, she stopped before a doll's house of two stories that cost ten pesetas. For a moment, Concha feared that that vision would evoke in her the worst memories of her late Violeta, but Concha was surprised to hear: "This will be my Christmas present for your daughter. Do you think she will like it?"

A young woman dressed in the elegant black uniform of the establishment's attendants smiled to both ladies from the other side of the wooden counter.

Concha brought her lips to Doña Maria del Roser's ears and with the greatest of discretion told her: "I don't have children, miss. Perhaps you mean Laia, the daughter of Vicenta, the cook."

"Exactly, that lovely girl, with those sparkling eyes." The lady seemed to grow excited, but immediately frowned. "No. It's not a good idea. I don't think that girl is still interested in doll's houses."

"She's twelve year's old," Concha clarified, "and she's never had one. I think

she'd love it."

"No, no, no." The lady waved the idea away as if it was bothersome and began to walk, forgetting the diminutive house.

In the cookware section she wanted her faithful companion to choose. This was her role, to a certain degree, the reason for her presence there. Her eyes transformed her into a sort of omniscient advisor, diviner of needs and even of catastrophes which could happen with not a few acquisitions. In reality it was Teresa, the new lady of the house, who insisted that Concha not leave her mother-in-law alone for even a second. She not only accompanied her and assisted her (her health was already delicate) but was also on guard that the matriarch's advanced dementia didn't cause unpleasantness for the family.

In front of a solicitous salesgirl who displayed pots and pans with the same pride as she would have shown silks and organdies, Doña Maria del Roser blamed her eyes, called to Concha with a gesture and said: "You choose, you're an authority in this."

She never knew if that ignorance was real or pretend, although Concha always suspected that the lady knew more about the governing of a household than she was willing to admit in her life and that her absent-mindedness was a product of her lack of interest more than any inability. Her illness didn't dispel any of these doubts.

That afternoon, studying a skillet whose bottom reflected a caricature of herself, the lady said: "We need at least a dozen of these, isn't that correct, Conchita?"

Without knowing how, the servant managed things so that they only took two. The lady also became infatuated with two pots and four saucepans of different sizes, all of them of cast iron and blue enamel, of the highest quality. In truth, they didn't need any of them for the kitchen overflowed with cookware, but Doña Maria del Roser didn't know how she could leave El Siglo without having spent at least ten pesetas in the cookware section of the ground floor.

"I like pots more than diamonds," she would say, smiling, when she still had her full faculties.

That day, she got stuck on the idea that the house had an urgent need for a fine crystal glassware that cost more than one hundred pesetas and she added it to the order without batting an eye, just before passing on to the women's clothing department for the final trying of the banquet dress she had commissioned. She added half a dozen cambirc petticoats and two

embroidered linen camisoles to the bill. Maria del Roser Golorons was too rebellious by nature to be slave to anything, not even fashion, and during her entire life she had dressed according to criteria ruled by cleanliness, comfort, and an appropriate use of colors, but just as the final act of her life approached, she insisted on returning to bustles and skirts with a train that swept the tiles.

"The elegant woman should only show the tips of her shoes" she declared, to the desperate glance of the dressmaker, who a moment before had been showing her some sketches of the latest Parisian fashions: some coats with a single sleeve that the lady found to be most strange, just like their name: asymmetricals. "Those French don't know what to do to swindle us," she said, changing the subject.

Concha followed her through the crowded establishment, happy as a child. Since the year Violeta had died, she had not seen the lady as enthusiastic as she was now with the preparations for Christmas. Without a doubt, the upcoming birth had a lot to do with this good humor. Thanks to that, the house resembled earlier times again, those times when silence had not yet come to stay.

After her purchases, Doña Maria del Roser wanted to refresh herself a little in the cafeteria. She arranged the folds of her skirts around her and sat in one of the armchairs, requesting Concha to bring her some fashion magazines from the reading room -"so long as they are not French," she clarified -and asked for a glass of fresh water and an order of croquets. She also expressed her desire to see the owner, who she wished to greet, as she always did when she visited that establishment.

"Sit down, Conchita, you're making me nervous," she said, indicating the other chair.

Don Octavia Conde appeared as she was savoring the second croquet, as punctual and gallant as ever.

"The family is well?" he asked, inclining himself to kiss the hand of dear Maria del Roser.

"Can you imagine, sir," she replied, "I've just learned that Conchita has no children."

"At my age, I should rather have grandchildren," joked the servant, who had known Don Octavio since he was a child. And in a whisper against the lady's ear: "It is Octavio. It will seem strange if you call him sir."

Octavio smiled, understanding, although he had a certain anxiety or it might have been a sort of sadness in the way he pursed his lips while he

watched his best friend's mother.

"Conchita is a little bit the mother of all of us," he added. "And she will also be to the third generation that is on the way."

"That's it, that's it," Maria del Roser agreed distractedly, before suddenly coming to herself again. "How did you know?"

Octavio gave a sort of start. It was a barely-evident gesture, which only eyes trained in observation -like those of Conchita -would have been able to recognize.

"Because your son and I have been friends since school. We met at the Jesuit boarding school in Sarrià. As you know," he tried to laugh, but the chuckle came out forced, "the hardships of barracks life are great forgers of friendships."

"Ah, yes, the boarding school." Maria del Roser rolled her eyes and crossed her feet beneath her skirts, making herself more comfortable. "How I liked to visit on Sundays," she whispered, nostalgic.

"We also liked Sundays," Octavio continued, "although I'm afraid for other reasons: in the presence of the families, the priests became human again. How we envied Amadeo when he escaped them! He was also smarter than the rest of us. And no doubt continues to be so."

Eager to abandon such a thorny issue, the lady changed the subject. She didn't like to speak of the years when her son was a student of the Jesuits of Sarrià.

"Intelligent, yes," muttered Maria del Roser, biting into a croquet, "a shame he has become so difficult, don't you think? What were we talking about? Oh, yes. Will you spend the holidays with your family."

"I'm afraid not," Octavio replied, rubbing his hands together in a nervous gesture that was very odd in him. "In fact, tomorrow I am off to New York to take care of some business."

Maria del Roser opened her eyes so much that her forehead wrinkled like an accordion. Concha was even more surprised.

"New York? For very long?" the servant asked.

"I can't tell, it all depends on how things turn out." And in an abrupt turn of the conversation, he offered an apology, "It has been a pleasure to see you, Doña. If you will excuse me, I still have many things to prepare before the journey."

"Of course, of course, we understand," Concha said.

Maria del Roser made no notice of the surprising news she'd just heard.

"Greet your parents on my behalf," she continued, in a logical order of

farewells that had been programmed into her for many years. "I will see you after the holidays, when we come to buy the baby basket. He should be born in... Conchita, when are we expecting my grandson?"

"In May, Ma'am."

"My poor daughter-in-law already had a miscarriage, did you know? But this time, everything is going well, thanks be to God."

Conchita began to be uncomfortable by these intimacies. Octavio Conde didn't seem pleased with the turn the conversation had taken, either. Wishing to depart, he repeated the handkissing, bowed his head toward Conchita and before leaving the cafeteria indicated to the waiter that both were to be invited by the house.

He had barely disappeared when annoyance crossed Maria del Roser's complexion. "We didn't remember to ask if his wife was better. How uncivil of us."

"Don Octavio is single, ma'am. Surely you are referring to Doña Cecilia Gómez del Olmo, who was his mother," Conchita said, prudently, while the lady acknowledged this was so with a nod. "You remember that she died years ago, the poor woman."

"Is that so? And did her husband re-marry?"

"No, Ma'am. Don Eduardo Conde was always faithful to the memory of his beloved wife. Until his own death, which was also many years ago."

Doña Maria del Roser furrowed her brow.

"Let's go, Conchita, we're beginning to get all muddled."

They took a few steps, and on reaching the elevator the lady stopped again. An employee dressed in scarlet livery opened the door for them to enter.

"What do they say they are going to name my grandson, Conchita?" the lady asked as she dragged her skirts into the elevator. "I never remember. "

"Modesto, Ma'am. Supposing it is a boy. If it is a girl, they don't know," she said fearfully.

Fearful of the sleeping pain which could wake at any moment.

"I'd like it to be Violeta," the matriarch opined. "There should be another Violeta in the family as soon as possible."

The pain still slept, the servant noted, calmer now.

"Imagine, wanting to give my grandson the name of an elevator attendant" Maria del Roser spat out, ignoring the employee before them. "And do you know why they have chosen such a horrible name? With all the saints there are to choose from."

"It's in honor of the painter who was your son's master, Ma'am."

They had had this same conversation a dozen times. But the repetition left no impression on either of them.

"Ah, yes, that's right. My son paints. Not too badly, I believe."

"Not at all, Ma'am. He is very successful. He is highly regarded," Conchita replied, with maternal pride.

This conversation took place beside the large advertising poster which took up almost the entire side wall of the elevator. In it, one saw an elegantly-dressed young woman. The artist's name was visible in one corner, written with a thick black line: Amadeo Lax. The painting acted as an inducement for clients, just as it had done when it was the advertising poster for the department store, a dozen years earlier.

"Didn't Octavio seem off to you today? He didn't act like himself," Maria del Roser suddenly asked.

Conchita had had the same impression. She'd put it down to nervousness about the trip he had just told them about.

"If my son had put as much effort into running his father's and grandfather's factories, we wouldn't be poor now," the lady exclaimed, before bursting forth with: "We're getting off here, young man. Remove yourself from our way!"

Conchita emerged from the elevator blushing to her ears. The lady acted as if it were nothing, hard-pressed by some urgency that existed only in her head.

"You are not poor, Ma'am," Conchita dared to answer as soon as they had left the elevators sufficiently behind them. "You are only a little less rich than before."

"Than before what?" Various delicate parallel creases appeared on the lady's brow.

"Before the crisis. They say it affects everyone, not just those from Barcelona. Some more than others, but everyone has lost something."

"No, Conchita, don't let yourself be fooled. The truly rich almost never lose anything. The only thing they lose, perhaps, is their brazenness, because there are so many anarchists about they need to blend in. Do you know any anarchists?"

"No, ma'am, not one."

"That's good. May you stay that way. Anarchists get into homes and steal the rugs. Then, they set fire to everything. But first the rugs. They love the rugs." Again she started. "But what are we doing here chatting as if we had

nothing else to do. We must return home, Conchita. Have we bought all the necessities? Think carefully."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Are you sure we're not missing anything? A pot for tomorrow's lunch, perhaps?"

"No, ma'am. We have enough pots."

"Are you certain?"

"Very certain, ma'am."

"Well, then I don't know what we're doing here."

With somewhat weary steps, but as elegant as ever, Doña Maria del Roser emerged onto Las Ramblas. Julián waited a few meters further on, at the wheel of the Renault. As soon as he saw the women emerge he hurried to emerge from the vehicle, open the back door and offer his arm to the matriarch to help her climb in. Then he did the same with Concha, although with somewhat less zeal. Both clung to the veteran chauffeur's arm with more emphasis than courtesy allowed. For both women who had survived six decades of life, it was not an easy task to climb into that modern contraption, even less when the only available assistance was a chauffeur of almost seventy.

The lady at last settled into her place, puffing, and then Concha, Julián sighed, perhaps relieved that the boarding operation had concluded without calamities, to return to his position behind the wheel.

As soon as the motor began to purr, the lady said, giving a final look at the illuminated doors of the department store:

"Those croquets didn't sit well with me, Conchita. I have something here..."

She pointed to her stomach, compressed by her corset. "Let us return home, Felipe," she added. "These are not hours for two decent women to be about in the streets."

The veteran chauffeur was not offended that the lady did not recall his name. In fact, he felt very honored that she referred to him by his father's name, who spent his life in the driver's seat of the carriage of the first señor Lax, diligent and silent, as all good servants should be. He had worshiped him when he was alive as much as he remembered him after his death, and ultimately felt thanks that the lady brought him back to life with her distracted memory.

Above the marquee of the main entrance of the department store, a family of children's puppets announced the Christmas season. The window displays overflowed. In the largest of them, an electric train with wagons

overflowing with tiny packages circled without stopping. The Ramblas were a-bustle with busy people to-ing and fro-ing. Very nearby, one could hear a carol being sung. A constant flow of people entered and emerged through the spinning door.

The Renault navigated the city's most popular passage toward the sea. The lady half-closed her eyes. Concha let herself be rocked by the joy of the festivities, by the final rays of the sun on a frozen day, by the animation of the streets. The rich ornamentation of the façade of the Compañía de Tabacos de Filipinas caught her eye, and she crossed herself on passing through the parish of Belén, where she had made her obligatory annual visit in the earlier hours of that very morning, like so many Barcelona's inhabitants. She glimpsed the flower stands in the distance, and felt a little nostalgic of the time when no motors accosted the flowers with their belching exhaust. She would have liked to stop and buy a bouquet of white daisies, the favorite of Doña Maria del Roser, but they were already pressed for time and dallying was not an option.

On reaching the street Portaferrissa, the car turned around to head in the opposite direction, along the Moja Palace, which had its shutters open, as if someone had decided to air out the noble estate. Some passerby had noticed, like Concha, and looked curiously at the paintings and the medallions of the roof, pausing in the middle of his wandering.

The curve woke the lady from her dreaming. "Have you checked to see if the change of mules is ready?" she asked. "I don't want to lose more time."

"These modern cars don't need mules, ma'am. The motor does everything."

The car had been a whim of Don Rodolfo. He ordered it to be bought in France, almost three decades earlier, encouraged by an advertisement that offered: "Renault 14HP, with elegant limousine-torpedo bodywork." No advanced spirit could resist such a description. It was one of the first automobiles in the city (registration number four) and so celebrated that during the earliest days passersby applauded when it drove past.

"Don't trust anyone and see if the mule is there..." the lady replied, before letting her head fall against her chest and falling soundly asleep again.

In what was once the Coliseum Theater, the gala session of a Harold Lloyd film was announced for the evening of Christmas day. Some people waited beside the ticket office; just a few meters beyond, a pair of gentleman spoke, gesticulating and raising their voices. Concha yawned from boredom: so much enthusiasm could only be awoken by the question of Catalan nationalism or the economic crisis. As it seemed they spoke in that

sweet and rich language which served both for proclaiming republics as for selling melons, she decided it was likely the former.

They arrived at their destination long past the lunch hour. In other times, this conduct would have been unthinkable for the lady. The schedule, meticulously met, was always the machinery which assured the proper functioning of the Lax home. They breakfasted at eight fifteen, went for a walk between twelve and one thirty, had lunch at two on the dot, recited the rosary at seven (a quarter of an hour later on Wednesdays), and ate immediately thereafter, without any possible alteration. On Wednesdays the lady held her meetings in the library, on Thursdays she received visitors, and on Sundays all attended the noon mass of the parish of the Conception, whose parson (Father Eudaldo) usually ate with the family afterward. And it was thus, invariably, week after week, until Christmas, Holy Week, or the summer altered the routines.

That December 24 of 1932, the lady requested that tea be served in her room and she retired without greeting anyone. Her son, who had been waiting seated at the table (his back straight against the padded backrest), began to eat, tired of watching the soup cool, and, of course, he was infuriated. Teresa, the daughter-in-law, tried to excuse the lady, mentioning her illness. The couple's lunch was, though not only because of this, lackluster and sad. And silent.

In the afternoon, a pair of attendants from the department store brought the purchases, meticulously wrapped. The servants placed them in the storage room beside the pantry, awaiting instructions. The kitchen was a-boil with preparations for the following day's lunch. On the other hand, the family did not usually have a special Christmas Eve dinner: everything was reserved for lunch on Christmas day.

The lady Maria del Roser didn't emerge from her rooms all afternoon. That night she summoned Antonia to help her prepare for bed. The woman, who had come to the household only five years earlier, at the same time as Teresa, emerged from the room with her face twisted in fright, saying that she had never seen the lady so broken down, nor saying so many absurd things.

"I would have gone mad if I heard her a minute more," she added.

Teresa took care of everything. She apologized to the maid and took her place herself, solicitous and sweet. She entered her mother-in-law's rooms as a doctor would have done in the face of an emergency. In a little while she emerged and asked for Conchita. Her hands and voice shook when she

asked her: "Concha, for the love of God, do you know where the key to Violet's room is kept?"

"Oh, I'm afraid not, ma'am. We gave it up for lost years ago, the day that..." she interrupted herself, thinking again of the sleeping pain, which no spoken word must ever wake. She continued, "Your mother-in-law used it to close and bolt the door. I've never seen it again after that day."

These words did not discourage Teresa. "Well, she must have hid it. She is convinced that it is located under her bed and she doesn't stop insisting that I look for it. She says that she wants to hold it," Teresa explained. "And I have looked for them, but there is nothing there. Not even dust."

"The lady speaks nonsense, you know it as well as I do. And you should not crouch like that in your condition," she indicated Teresa's barely-swollen belly with a glance.

"This is more than nonsense, Conchita. I have never seen her this bad. She has just asked me to summon her son, Juan. She says she wants to see him again before she dies. I am very frightened. Do you know if Amadeo is home yet?"

Concha shook her head. She had seen Amadeo a little while ago, without a chauffeur, at the wheel of the Rolls Royce. And of course, no one knew at what hour he planned to return. As always.

"You must help me, Concha."

"Do you think that the lady plans to enter Violeta's room?" she dared to ask. "I am horrified even to think it. It would be dreadful for her. Remember that everything is just as she left it."

Teresa had a sad look. Blue bags hung under her eyes. She placed her hands on her belly and arched her back. She was exhausted.

"We need to find that key," she said, "or she won't sleep at all tonight. It must be someplace."

Teresa recruited a brigade from the staff and set them to hunt for that tiny piece of iron. It had still not appeared when the lord returned, at nine fifteen, as elegant and as cold as ever. He glanced disinterestedly at the activity, summoned Conchita and requested that his dinner be served in his study. Right afterward he banged his head against the too-low molding of the marble staircase and fell back a step before beginning to climb, but no one made any fuss. Not even him.

On learning that her husband was home, Teresa climbed to the study to tell him what had happened and request his permission to summon his brother. She came down a few seconds later, her eyes full of tears. Conchita

waited anxiously at the foot of the stairs.

"Has he authorized us to call Juan?"

Teresa shook her head no.

"I feared it, muttered the veteran servant, with an annoyed gesture.

Half an hour later, young Laia (who had grown weary of the search immediately, so her mother sent her to the kitchen) climbed the stairs to the attic carrying a tray heaped with food.

The daughter-in-law continued searching for the key, unperturbed by her husband's indifference and not giving in to discouragement. Concha begged her to retire to bed a few times, promising that they would continue searching, but Teresa didn't listen to her.

"You shouldn't push yourself so much," Conchita said, again glancing at the young lady's belly. "You will not forgive me if the events of last spring repeated themselves."

"Nothing will happen to me," Teresa smiled, sweetly. "I am already four months along. The doctor told me that everything is going well."

Teresa had long ago learned to make of tenacity her best weapon.

The key appeared at last at eleven, inside the bureau the lady kept in her antechamber, which served as her private salon. Teresa's fingers rescued it from there, triumphantly, and offered it to her mother-in-law, who grabbed them together with the hand that held them.

"Stay a moment, Teresa," she ordered, "and make the others leave."

Their meeting lasted some fifty minutes. When Teresa again crossed the door of the room of Doña Maria del Roser her eyes were red and her cheeks very pale. She went to bed without eating. The tea with Swiss rolls which Concha left upon the table of her salon were intact the next day.

The night passed in absolute stillness. Not even the night watchman passed before the house's great front door calling the hours. It could be that this was that great stillness which, they say, precedes a great storm.

In the following hours, which were already those of Christmas Day of 1932, three terrible things took place: the El Siglo department store burned down, the lady Maria del Roser Golorons died in her bed, and for the first time Amadeo Lax spent part of the night in the room of Laia, the cook's twelve year old daughter.