Lies

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Extract

Dead? Me, Isabel, dead? Not a chance. Not while I still have something to say about it. I'm at an inn, the Posada del Caribe. I've been here for nearly a month and a half without seeing a single soul. That's a lie: once a week, Amkiel brings me provisions. On Tuesdays, I believe, although my notion of time isn't too reliable. Out here, all the days look the same.

Posada del Caribe, the Caribbean Inn. What a name! Six rectangular cabins grouped around a larger square one that serves as both dining room and administration centre. All the cabins have palm-frond roofs, and thick tree trunks comprise the lower half of the walls. Big windows in the upper half. Awful mosquito nets. They're so dense they block out almost all of the jungle light, which is scarce enough to begin with, because this is the Petén jungle in northern Guatemala. The Caribbean is very far away.

First, a ten-hour flight from London to Miami. Two more hours to Guatemala City. Fifty minutes in a light plane to Flores. Sixty-two kilometres in a van, along the dirt roads that lead to Sayaxché. Not bad for a woman my age. In Sayaxché, you have to negotiate with the motorboat drivers. It costs more patience than money. I made a deal with Amkiel because I liked the look of him. He had the typical smile – half-discouraging and half-sardonic – of people who make their living from tourism, but he struck me as serious and responsible. My choice was also influenced by the fact that his flat-bottomed boat looked more stable than the others. They call them 'launches' but they're really just motorised canoes. Amkiel's boat is called Pampered Girl, *which would be a memorable name if they weren't all like that:* Pampered, Forgetful, Jealous, Silent. *If such things still interested me, I'd investigate the origins of their names. Who gave his boat the first one, and why?*

Who copied whom? I was good at questions like that in the old days.

Anyway, whichever launch I choose, the money's always going to wind up in the same place: the Boss's pocket. I assume he has a name, but I don't know what it is. Everyone just calls him 'the Boss', and since I arrived in Sayaxché, every step I've taken has required his indirect approval. Although I've never even seen his face, I know that it's to him I owe the privilege of having this inn all to myself, even though it has room for nearly twenty people. This doesn't exactly represent an outpouring of generosity: under normal circumstances, the Posada del Caribe would be closed at this time of year, waiting for the wet season to end and the annual mosquito plague to disappear. But mosquitoes don't bother me.

Pampered Girl *is made of aluminium. Judging by her shade of green, I'd guess she must have belonged to some sort of army in the past. She's about two and a half metres long, and I doubt she has room for more than three passengers, four at a pinch, despite Amkiel's insistence that he's transported as many as seven or eight people in the thing. He also enumerates for me, nearly every time we meet, the advantages of having an aluminium vessel to navigate these rivers. The other boats are made of fibreglass. They're as light and manoeuvrable as his, but much more fragile; if they receive a sharp blow, they don't just dent, they come apart like dried stalks of cane, especially when they're already old and cracked. I explain to him that I like the few remaining wooden boats, and he replies that nobody wants them because they're heavy and impractical. In another period of my life, I would have spoken to him of ships and oceans, of sailing boats and Italian steamers, of all the things I know about the sea. I would have told him the story of my life, my family. Not now. I smile and agree from time to time, as if the conversation really matters to me. It doesn't. It's not his fault. There aren't many things that matter to me now.*

Amkiel brought me here for eighteen dollars. I suppose his share will be five or six; the rest is for the Boss. I don't know how many kilometres we travelled on the Río Pasión. I know we travelled for quite some time, and these launches are very fast. The river is calm, unobstructed and broad, with a channel almost thirty

metres across. The vegetation on both banks grew thicker the further we left Sayaxché behind. First we passed through a zone of savanna, then a tropical forest and finally a premonition of jungle. The thick muddy waters of the river barely reflected the sky in reddish hues. Suddenly, the Río Pasión forked into twin branches; Amkiel took the one on the right. Floating vegetation appeared, a few scattered water lilies at first, then increasingly dense clusters. As we rounded a bend, the islands came into view. Real islands, each one greener and more luxuriant than the last. We spotted bamboo growing there, or something very much like it; rushes and reeds that sometimes reached more than three metres in height, thick tangles of vegetation, floating forests. Amkiel aimed Pampered Girl's *bow at one of these little islands, and approached it at such high speed I thought he was trying to impress me, or maybe simply to scare me. Then I realised it was no mere threat: not even a last-minute manoeuvre could avoid the impact, we had only three seconds left, two, one... and then we were inside. Inside the island.*

We spent more than half an hour going through these lush islets. In and out; in and out. Without ever striking anything that could be called a shore, and without ever seeing a channel other than the one our boat made when its nose ploughed into the greenery and parted it, the way you open a passage between two curtains with the slightest movement of your hand.

I soon turned my back on Amkiel and fixed my gaze beyond the bow. Maybe he thought I was fascinated by the landscape, but he was wrong. I was thinking about my own affairs, pondering old memories and recent discoveries, things I might not even consider important enough to record here if it weren't for the fact that my alleged death makes me see them in a different and much brighter light. The Russian woman – I was thinking about the Russian woman. Five days in London had been enough for me to find evidence about something I'd long suspected: the Russian woman was a walking, talking lie. I didn't find this astonishing, because I already knew it to be true. What is astonishing is that the entire town of Malespina, not content with believing her lies, dedicated itself to amplifying them and turning them into genuine legends, right from the beginning. During that river journey, I

thought about the Russian woman a great deal, without malice, without blaming her too much, perhaps because we basically belong to the same category. Death suits us both. I didn't think so then, but now that I'm dead, I do. Now that it's assumed I'm dead. Men win themselves a place in the history books by pushing. And yelling. Shouting enhances their stature. Some women find themselves a little niche in the book of legends by means of their silence. The Russian belonged to this category. So do I, I suppose. To a more modest degree, of course, but I too have managed to make my silences so dense that other people could build a minor legend from them. This thought struck me the day before yesterday, when I read my obituaries. When I learned that my children are not capable of recognising me.

I was also thinking about Judith on that trip up the river. Now Judith is dead. Yes, she's the one who's really dead. I can't say I knew her – we spoke for no more than twenty minutes. She sat next to me on the flight to Guatemala City. She was travelling alone, like me. She was an older woman, like me. Sixty-something, perhaps. I didn't ask her. As a matter of fact, I hardly asked her any questions at all. I remember noticing her and thinking, 'She looks like me. If I were a nun, that's the way I'd look.' I went to a convent school, so I'd met a few women like that. One day they might lay their habits aside, but their look would always give them away: the precise length of their skirts, the propriety of their heels, their scrubbed faces, a particular sort of hairdo. But Judith was not and had never been a nun. She was a nurse; for Médecins Sans Frontières. She was most probably German, judging by her accent, although she spoke impeccable Spanish. She acted as a liaison among different aid projects throughout Latin America. Administrative operations. Supervising the transfer of medicines left over from one project and needed in another. Organising emergency evacuations of sick people. She'd dedicated the past fifteen years of her life to this work. I didn't ask her if she had children. Now I'd like to know. After we landed at the airport in Guatemala City, her suitcase came out before mine; she bade me a polite farewell, and as I watched her leave, I thought, 'There goes another legend.' A woman on her own, surrounded by silences. Like the Russian. Like me. If I were writing a novel, I'd say that the bond that was

going to link our two destinies was formed in that last moment. In novels, assertions like this – grandiose words that lend some weight to chance, however ethereal chance may be – can sound appropriate. But not in real life; in real life, it's enough to say that a person I didn't know, someone with whom I happened to exchange twenty minutes' worth of courtesies, died in my place. Poor Judith. Of course, nothing that happened to her was my fault, and when I thought about her, the idea that she would meet such an unpleasant end so soon was farthest from my mind. But poor Judith, all the same.

While we were inside them, all the islets looked the same. But each time we broke out of one, the stretch of water separating it from the next was narrower. I had the impression that we were lost. Every now and then, Amkiel lifted the motor out of the water to keep the propeller blades from striking the isolated tree trunks he spotted in the water ahead. His movement was automatic, instantaneous, like when you lift your foot to avoid a rock in your path without slowing your pace. At these moments, the propeller spun in the empty air above the water, and the echo multiplied the roar of the motor until it sounded as though a squad of light aeroplanes were flying over our heads.

After the umpteenth islet, I said, 'We're lost, right?'

'No, señora. We're in the Petexbatún River.'

Well, it may be a river, I thought, but it looks like a drowned planet. When it finally stopped raining and Noah stuck his head out of the ark, he must have seen something like this. A floating world. A world with no shores.

I don't know exactly how long it took us, but eventually the trip was over. Amkiel slowed the boat down as we approached another islet, but this time, instead of plunging into it, he pulled up alongside. It took me a while to realise what was going on, to discern the muddy sand beneath the greenery and understand that this was terra firma, solid ground you could walk on. The silence that fell upon us when Amkiel cut his motor cannot be described. He jumped out of the boat, gave a slight tug and grounded Pampered Girl *in about eight inches of mud.*

'Now what?' I asked. 'A breakdown?'

'No. This is it. We're here. Lake Petexbatún is behind those trees' – he gestured at the vegetation barely twenty metres ahead of us – 'and that over there is the Posada del Caribe.'

I looked to where he was pointing, and could just about make out the first cabin amongst the dense foliage.

Amkiel put my bag on the ground, held out his hand for his eighteen dollars, thrust the money into his pocket and then took his leave as if he hadn't a moment to spare: 'Enjoy your stay señora this key works for all the doors the Boss gave it to me for you the radio's connected to a car battery all you have to do is press the "on" button and then you operate the microphone with the switch but of course you already know that there are candles in the room under the beds I'll come back next Tuesday if you have any problems you can tell me then.'

He started the motor with a jerk, put it in reverse to extract Pampered Girl *from the mud and disappeared upriver. I was puzzled. During the whole journey, he'd behaved like a man of few words, slightly shy, maybe a little proud, but never disagreeable. My professional obsession led me to think that his sudden haste might be the vestige of some ancient tribal superstition, fear of the jungle spirits or something like that. But after two seconds – or rather, two steps – I understood. Two steps into the jungle, and I was enveloped by what had caused such a hasty departure. Mosquitoes. My old friends. Millions of mosquitoes. I turned back to the shore, got the repellent out of my backpack and smeared it over my face and hands, my ankles, my ears. I'm not afraid of mosquitoes, and I'm not overly concerned about the diseases they can transmit. I've been living for years with sudden, prolonged bouts of high temperature, tropical fevers that doctors can't identify and whose symptoms they can scarcely mitigate. I've learned to put up with them – I don't even take antibiotics. It's part of the job. That's what I was told on my first trip to Africa, and my life has confirmed it. A real anthropologist has no choice but to make fever her friend. As for malaria, I don't underestimate it, but I've learned not to fear it. If it has respected me so far, I don't see why it would decide to consume me now, when all my body has to offer are weakened bones and sagging flesh. Malaria can be fatal in the long run, I know. Well, so is life. When I use*

repellent, it's only so I can avoid the mosquito bites themselves and the stinging sensation that accompanies them. I also do it a little out of nostalgia for the jungle. That's what brought me here, among many other things. And that's why I have five cans of mosquito repellent. Too many – even if I stay here a year, I'll never use them all. Maybe I brought so many because I didn't know when I was going to return. Or I brought them just in case, like smokers who accumulate cartons of cigarettes because they're terrified of going without. Not just any type of repellent will do. It must contain at least forty per cent diethyltoluamide. The smell of this repellent is the perfume of my life. Sometimes I even put a spot on when I'm in Barcelona, just a little, like those preening ladies who dab a few drops of scent behind their ears and along their décolletage. When I die, they should put a can of it inside my coffin, in case the next world is a jungle or I start longing for the old days. I ought to put such a request in writing, but I suppose it's a little late for that. Let them ask my children. Alberto – let them ask Alberto. Let them tell him to smell me to see if he can recognise me.

It took me barely two minutes to settle into the Posada del Caribe. I shifted my backpack onto a shaky old bed. Then I went to the central cabin and checked that the pantry had been filled in accordance with the instructions I'd passed on to the Boss the previous day. I hadn't asked for much. I've always been told I eat like a bird, so it must be true. I suppose my profession has accustomed me to frugality. A lot of white rice. I can make a feast out of some pasta and a clove of garlic. After seeing that everything was in order, I went over to the radio and disconnected it. In my line of work, it's good practice not to let a battery run down even if you don't plan on using it. I could cite that as the reason why I disconnected the radio, a mere precaution, but I'd be lying. One of the advantages of these words I'm writing is that I don't need to lie, because no one's ever going to read them. I don't even think I'm going to read them myself. These pages aren't a monument to the truth, nor are they a pedestal for exhibiting it; they're more like a sewer for the truth, a place where I can get rid of it. I disconnected the radio because I had come here to be alone. Alone and in silence. When I want to break that silence, I connect the

radio, I ask the Boss for what I need and I disconnect it again. Then Amkiel brings me what I've requested. I'd also be lying if I said I left the radio disconnected because I'd anticipated what was going to happen. No one can anticipate a thing like that.

It's a joke. The whole thing's a joke. A colossal, hysterical, monumental joke. A clumsy move on the part of chance, aggravated by an unpardonable mistake on the part of my children. The reasons why don't matter much. If I insisted on uncovering whatever made this random combination of circumstances possible and – especially – what led to such a mistake, I'd wind up like my daughter Serena. Serena treats the past the way flies treat a windowpane: she runs up and down it, bangs her head against it and wears herself out trying to reach the light, without noticing that the light and the glass are two separate things. Poor Serena. Poor all of them. When I think about them, it makes me feel like rising from the dead. Going back, in other words. But if I didn't do that the day before yesterday, when I learned about this absurd confusion, I don't see why I should do it now. I don't know. The moment will come. If it comes.

That isn't to say that their grief doesn't affect me. And I know that it's in my power to put an end to it. All I'd have to do is call on the radio and ask Amkiel to come and pick me up and take me to Sayaxché, where I could make a phone call. In fact, I wouldn't even have to do that. I could just ask the Boss to call on my behalf and say I'm alive and well. On the other hand, I don't feel I can destroy this perfect construction that fate has woven together out of several loose strands. However ridiculous it may seem, however absurd and macabre, this situation has its own transparent logic. Nobody chose it and nobody's entirely responsible for it, although if I had to distribute blame, my son Alberto would probably receive the largest share. Nonetheless, the situation is so absolutely coherent that if it were the work of a playwright, I could do nothing but beat my hands sore applauding his mastery. In the first place, think of all the times I dreamed of a solution such as this, maybe without realising it. All the times I thought about not going back. On almost every trip, I found something that held me, something that begged me to stay, but I never dared. Fear of the sorrow my desertion would cause Julio and our children always

won out. Perhaps it's different now; after all, they're grown up. My desire to remain far away from them didn't mean I didn't love them. The mere thought that I could cause them irreparable harm was enough to prevent me from staying. Sometimes I imagined a brilliant solution to my problem, very much like the one that has just been handed to me on a plate: I would fake my own death. It would be the best for everyone. For me and for them. I'd avoid going back to a life that seemed less like life every time. And they... well, I supposed a mother's death would be easier to accept than her disappearance. But I've never been capable of plotting a situation like this. Besides, if I had *been capable of doing such a thing, I would have done it twenty or thirty years ago, not now. What would be the point? Soon I'm going to be seventy. Inventing a death for myself isn't going to give me any more time. What happened may have coincided with my wishes, but that doesn't mean it was the result of my will. Sometimes life does things for you that you don't do for life.*

There are many reasons to welcome this mistake. After all, death is my speciality. Not the dead, but death itself. Or rather, what we the living do with our dead. I've travelled around half the world, following the rituals of grief, trying to find out how men and women of every race and culture face up to the loss of a loved one. I've published seven books on the subject and hundreds of articles, field studies, comparative analyses. I'm supposed to know everything about how the living grieve for the dead. Had I been offered the possibility of mounting the ultimate investigation, producing the definitive thesis, I couldn't have found a better way of doing it – to live my own death without being dead. It's something I've even dreamed about. Should anyone want to blame me because chance has placed this opportunity within my reach, I'll accept that blame with a smile.

There's still another reason, no less important. This could have happened to me anywhere in the world. The jungle doesn't have exclusive rights to an accidental death in murky circumstances. Nevertheless, it had to be here, in a place like this, a place I didn't even know about two months ago, but where I feel I absolutely belong. So much so, I could die here. So much so, I could live here. I don't exactly know why.

I often have my moments of doubt. Ever since I discovered I was dead, I've done nothing but think about righting this wrong. About putting my few soiled belongings in my bag and retracing the steps that brought me here.

I think about my children crying. How they must have wept for me, how they must be weeping for me still. I don't count the quantity of their tears as a measure of their grief; weeping is a learned skill, and everyone cries the way they know how, the way they can. In the south-eastern Bay of Bengal, in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, when a funeral is held, the men weep with a degree of intensity inconceivable to any Westerner. They tremble and howl in such a savage way that their bodies appear to be on the point of bursting apart. They suffer a kind of acute pulmonary convulsion, yet somehow they manage to take in enough air to emit shrieks capable of shattering the thickest glass. The first anthropologists to visit the islands couldn't believe their eyes. When they returned home, they announced their discovery in the academic journals. Their essays were dense, teeming with imaginative hypotheses, in which the authors asserted that they had found a community which, when faced with the death of its members, manifested feelings much more profound and more authentic than those of any other group. Then the technicians, the sceptics, arrived on the scene. They landed on the islands with their cameras and their tape recorders, calculated and registered the amount of weeping per person per death, measured the precise characteristics of every howl. Soon, they came up with a whole series of explanations related to Andamanese familial structures, or to the Andamanese males' lack of inhibition around weeping, or to a particularly dolorous conception of the afterlife. Rubbish. Nobody stayed there long enough to find out the truth or ask the necessary questions at the appropriate time. Except for me. This wasn't especially praiseworthy; the other groups were financed by large institutions and were driven by the necessity to return home and publish. Return and publish, make and broadcast documentaries, place photographs in magazines, as if these were the only ways to demonstrate that they'd been there. This was all during the first flowering of anthropology. Publishing a curious photograph was beginning to prove more profitable than

possessing a thorough knowledge of the reality behind it. But I digress ...

I went about freely, my disadvantages accidentally working in my favour. I had less money than the others because Julio paid for my first trips. He sold a few paintings and told me, 'We have a million pesetas. You can go wherever you want.' It was the Julio Fellowship – that's what we called it. Without it, I would never have been able to travel. Official research grants for a female anthropologist at the end of the 1950s? Properly speaking, anthropology didn't even exist.

So I financed my trips with the family savings. It wasn't much money, of course. I had to travel on cut-price tickets, stay in the most uncomfortable places and limit my field work to projects that could be carried out alone. In exchange, I was free to go wherever I liked, I could stay longer than anyone else and, above all, I was in no hurry to publish. I travelled all over the Andamans for two months without ever having the good fortune to come across a funeral. My trip was a disaster, a waste. I decided to stay another month. I moved around constantly, from island to island. I witnessed a wedding. The men wished the bride happiness by laying their heads on her shoulder and weeping with her. They literally broke down in tears. I didn't say anything to anyone. I didn't rush to publish. A short while later, I found two men weeping in the street. Several other people were looking on. I asked where the funeral would be held, but they told me there wasn't going to be any funeral. These were two old friends; it had been years since they'd seen each other, and they were celebrating their reunion in this way. I took notes, but continued to say nothing.

A few weeks later, the family whose house I was staying in invited me to attend a festival. Two neighbouring villages, long-time enemies because of an old dispute over the ownership of a well, were sealing a peace agreement reached after years of negotiation. About two hundred people were there, mostly men and boys, sitting on the ground in two separate groups. A representative from each village stepped forward. They exchanged things: sacks of corn, some tools. Then they embraced. At that moment, everyone who was present broke down and wept. I'm

certain that such weeping, such a river of collective tears, has never been seen in Europe. Not even in the most dramatic moments of its history. Almost forty years have passed since that day, and I still get goose pimples every time I remember it. Later that afternoon, I left the village to take a walk in the countryside. On my way, I met a group of farm workers. I did what I should have done from the beginning: I asked. It was as simple as that. I stopped the four men and asked them how they could produce such heart-rending tears, and how those tears could express even the most radiant jubilation. My perplexity amused them. They answered that it was easily done. Laying their staffs aside, they sat on the ground and burst into unrestrained, convulsive weeping, as though they had just received news of the death of the person dearest to them in all the world.

For them, weeping is a convention, like shaking hands to establish a bond. I went back home and published my report. The most powerful figures in the international anthropological community had to accept my theory, but not before they'd wasted two years in a polemic that seemed perfectly ridiculous to me; unfortunately, it was but the first of many. I've been at the centre of disputes far more bitter than that one, although those who know me know I've never pursued notoriety. Well, the upshot of all this is that these days no one doubts that weeping is a form of cultural expression, a reaction that can be learned.

I'm not saying that my family doesn't love me or that their tears are false. Far from it. I'm just saying that almost everything they attribute to emotion is cultural. I admit I'd love to be watching them through a peephole, but I don't really need one. I know them well enough. The one I feel the least bad about is Julio. Maybe he doesn't even know I'm dead yet. How that man loved me! Despite all his tricks, despite that way he had of absenting himself from reality, how he loved me. Right from the beginning. So much so that he ended up inventing me. Nevertheless, the news of my death may not even have registered with him. Or maybe it has; maybe he heard it one minute and forgot it the next. Better for him.

And then there are my children. Alberto will have shed the correct amount of tears. Not one more, not one less. Not because he's mean. On the contrary, he's no doubt been so busy consoling

the others, so immersed in resolving the practical matters related to my death and making sure no one else has to worry, that he won't have yielded to his grief for any longer than was strictly necessary. I must be fair: even though Alberto is the principal cause of this confusion, even though I still haven't forgiven him for his mistake, I can't deny the evidence – he's a good man. Generous to a fault, always busy solving everyone else's problems. Now he'll be more devoted than ever to his son Luis. The sick boy. To tell the truth, at nineteen he doesn't seem like a boy to me any more. And not in the least bit sick. Maybe his brain is different, but sometimes I envy him. If anyone's going to say something beautiful and true about my death, it will surely be him.

I know that Pablo, the middle one, has made up for any shortfall in Alberto's tears. He'll be overwhelmed. Undone. Incapable of speech. By now, his face must be as swollen as a toad's. Poor Pablo. I'm sure he's smoking like a chimney. I'd give anything if I could see him for a moment. Or rather, if he could see me. I'd have a few things to tell him. Stop crying. Take a deep breath. Look at yourself. You look fifty years old. Don't smoke so much. Go to the bathroom and shave. And do me the favour of running a comb through your hair. Has he composed something in my honour? I can imagine it: a tremendous piece, like piano strings played with a bow. Or maybe not, maybe he's chosen the tribute of silence instead. In that case, he's capable of locking up the piano and leaving it untouched for years.

The one I'm most worried about is Serena, the youngest. She'll be weeping questions. I'm sure she doesn't understand a thing, as always. Where did she get that burning need to know and the naivety to believe she can? *Serena's determined to learn the truth about the past, without realising that the past, like the future, can only be imagined. There must be a law that requires such a silent mother to have such an imaginative daughter. And so full of questions. As a child, Serena listened to her father's stories as if her life depended on it. Her head would be filled with Simóns and Russian women and Chinese tales and medieval battles, and then she'd have bad dreams and would not be pacified. Sometimes she'd even run a fever. I should have intervened, because Julio didn't notice. I did, but it never seemed important. Mistakes always come*

back to you in the end. By the time she was a teenager, Serena knew that stories were only stories, and whereas her brothers accepted them quite naturally and kept them stored in the musty trunk of nostalgia, she did not; she took them as an injustice, she felt deceived and she insisted that Julio should indemnify her with the truth. She started asking questions at all hours. She insisted on knowing. When she was about to turn seventeen, her father asked her what she wanted for her birthday. The truth, she said, I want you to give me the truth. The truth about what, her father said. The truth about every story you've ever told me. She subjected him to pitiless interrogations and noted down his replies, forever scribbling in her notebooks. She dragged some answers from her father and worked others out for herself, without understanding that the alleged truth that was supplanting those stories was nothing but an even bigger story, much more complex and therefore more difficult to take apart. She was always striving for certainty. That's why she worries me more than her brothers. If I don't go back, if I decide not to clear up this mistake, the days will pass and life will resume its normal course for them. I'll be dead, and they'll go on as before. But not Serena. Serena will keep asking questions and looking for explanations. Why, Mama, why that boat, that river, that jungle, since when, what for, and what happened before and before and before? She'll go back into our family history, years and years, centuries if necessary, until she finds something she can be certain of. God, how naive she is. She's spent half her life like that, indignant and surprised when the rest of us didn't join her in the struggle. She has a fabulous memory, like her father, like – or so they say – her grandfather Simón, her father's father. But she notes everything down so she won't forget. Now that I mention it, I'm sure she'll be having another go at Simón's story. I can't blame her. Two imaginary shipwrecks in the same family is far too tempting for someone like her.

What obstinacy – she should have studied law. Alberto's a great lawyer, but she would have been even better. No court would have been able to resist her perseverance, that determination of hers to submit everything, including the inexplicable, to logic. Maybe I should have tried to set her straight, but I never felt capable of doing so. I don't know, I suppose I wanted to give my children

the freedom of choice I never had. They've all done pretty well and that should be enough for me, but I regret not having intervened in their lives more often. Maybe I reinforced their mistakes with my silence. Maybe I spent too much time away from them. Back then, it seemed like a good idea; I was convinced it would help them mature more quickly and learn to make their own decisions.

Of course, I can't pretend that these words will correct whatever mistakes I may have made in the past. Words have formidable power, not always for the good, but they're not capable of swimming back up the river of time and changing its course. Besides, I don't want to waste them. They are life. In Africa, in north-west Uganda, the Lugbara use the same term to refer to an achievement, an event and a word. When a man is about to die, it's his duty to gather his children around his deathbed and speak his final words to them. His final words, in a sense so literal that even if death holds back, even if the man survives for years, he will not speak again. The word is authority itself. When the man finally dies, a period of chaos begins. This is a common feature in all the cultures I know. Death introduces social chaos until the living undertake to reorder reality in some way. That's what funeral rites are for: to symbolise the arrival of a new order. In the case of the Lugbara, when someone dies, it's said that 'his words have ended'. Chaos recedes only when the local witch doctor makes contact 'with the mouth of the dead man' to inform him that his heirs have accepted the order established by his final words. Only then can the spirit of the dead man rest in peace and cease to represent a threat to the living.

This has never happened before. Apart from my professional work, I've rarely written anything more than the occasional letter. But now the words are boiling up furiously, and I need to get them out, to leave a record of them, even though no reader is possible in this kingdom of the dead. Maybe it's because I'm alive, and I don't have anything else. Maybe it's because one day I really am going to die, and that day can't be so very far off. These will be my final words. The day before yesterday, when I learned I was dead, I decided to write them down. It's the only way to get rid of them.