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A Pure Soul

Carlos Fuentes

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A Pure Soul

CARLOS FUENTES

Juan Luis, I am thinking about you as I take my seat on the bus that will carry me to the airport. I came early intentionally. I don't want to see the people who will actually fly with us until the last minute. This is the bus for the Alitalia flight to Milan; it will be an hour before the Air France passengers to Paris, New York and Mexico board their bus. I'm just afraid I will cry or get upset or do something ridiculous, and then have to endure glances and whispers for sixteen hours. There's no reason why anyone has to know anything. You prefer it that way, too, don't you? I shall always believe it was a private act, that you didn't do it because. . . . I don't know why I'm thinking these things. I don't have the right to explain anything in your name. Nor, perhaps, in mine either. How will I ever know, Juan Luis? Do you think I am going to insult our memories by affirming or denying that perhaps, at such and such a moment, or over a long period of time—I don't know how or when you decided, possibly when you were a child, why not?—you were motivated by dejection, or sadness, or nostalgia, or hope? It's cold. That icy wind that passes over the city like the breath of death is blowing from the mountains. I half-bury my face in my lapels to retain my body heat, although the bus is heated and now is smoothly pulling away, enveloped in its own vapor. We leave the station at Cornavin through a tunnel and I know I will not see again the lake and bridges of Geneva since the bus emerges onto the highway behind the station and moves always away from Lake Lemman on the road to the airport. We are passing through the ugly part of the city where the seasonal workers live who have come from Italy and Germany and France to this paradise where not a single bomb fell, where no one was tortured or assassinated or betrayed. Even the bus adds to the sensation of neatness and order and well-being that so attracted your attention from the moment you arrived, and now as I clean the steamy window with my hand and see these wretched houses I think that, in spite of everything, one mustn't live too badly in them. Switzerland after a while becomes too comfortable, you said in a letter; we lose the sense of extremes that

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are so visible and so insulting in our country. Juan Luis: in your last letter you didn't need to tell me—I understand without having lived it myself: that was always our bond—that all that external order, the punctuality of the trains, honor in everyday transactions, looking ahead in one's job, and saving all one's life, demanded an internal disorder to balance it. I am laughing, Juan Luis; behind a grimace that struggles to hold back the tears, I begin to laugh, and all the passengers turn to look at me and whisper among themselves; this is what I wanted to avoid; at least these people are going to Milan. I laugh when I think how you left the order of our home in Mexico for the disorder of your freedom in Switzerland. Do you understand? From security in the land of bloody daggers to anarchy in the land of the cuckoo clock. Isn't that funny? I'm sorry. I'm over it now. I try to compose myself by looking at the snow-covered peak of the Jura, that enormous sheer grey cliff that now seeks in vain for its reflection in the lake born of its waters. You wrote me that in summer the lake is the eye of the Alps: it reflects them, but it also transforms them into a vast submerged cathedral, and you said that when you plunged into the water you were diving in search of the mountains. Do you know I have your letters with me? I read them on the plane that brought me from Mexico and, during the days I have been in Geneva, in my free moments. Now I will read them on the return trip. Except that on this crossing you will accompany me.

We have traveled so much together, Juan Luis. As children we went every weekend to Cuernavaca when my parents still had that house covered with bougainvillea. You taught me to swim and to ride a bicycle. On Saturdays we cycled into town where I learned to know everything through your eyes. "Look, Claudia, at the kites; look, Claudia, thousands of birds in the trees; look, Claudia, silver bracelets, fancy sombreros, lemon ice, green statues; come on, Claudia, let's go to the wheel of fortune." And for the New Year's festivities, they took us to Acapulco and you awakened me very early in the morning and we ran to Hornos Beach because you knew that the sea was at its best at that hour: that was the only time the snails and octopi, the dark sculptured driftwood, the old bottles, appeared, hurled by the tide, and together we gathered all we could, even though we knew that later they wouldn't allow us to carry it back to Mexico City, and truly, all those useless objects would never have gone in the car. It's strange that every time I try to remember what you were like at ten, at thirteen, at fifteen, I immediately think of Acapulco. It must be because during the rest of the year each of us went to his own school, and only at the shore and precisely as we were celebrating the turning of one year to another,

were all the hours of the day ours. We played wonderful games there. On the rock castles where I was a prisoner of the ogres and you scaled the walls with a wooden sword in your hand, yelling and dueling with imaginary monsters to free me. In the pirate galleons—a skiff—where terrified I waited for you to end the struggle in the sea with the sharks that menaced me. In the dense jungles of Pie de la Cuesta, where we advanced hand in hand in search of the secret treasure marked on the map we found in a bottle. You accompanied your actions humming background music invented at the moment: dramatic, in perpetual climax. Captain Blood, Sandokan, Ivanhoe: *your* personality changed with every adventure; I was always the embattled princess, nameless, identical to her nebulous prototype.

There was only one empty time: when you were fifteen and I was only twelve and you were embarrassed to be seen with me. I didn't understand, because you looked the same as always to me: slim, strong, tanned, your curly chestnut hair reddened by the sun. But we came together again the next year, going everywhere together, no longer picking up shells or inventing adventures, but seeking now to prolong a day that began to seem too short and a night forbidden to us, a night that became our temptation, a symbol of the new possibilities in a recently discovered, recently begun, life. We walked along the rocky Farallon after dinner, holding hands, silent, not looking at the groups who were playing guitars around the bonfires or the couples kissing among the rocks. We didn't have to say how painful it was to be around anyone else. As we didn't need to say that the best thing in the world was to walk together at night, holding hands, silent, silently communicating that code, that enigma, that between us was never, never occasion for a joke or a pedantic comment. We were serious but never solemn, remember? And possibly we were good for each other without knowing it, in a way I've never been able to explain exactly, but that had to do with the warm sand beneath our bare feet, with the silence of the sea in the night, of the brushing of our thighs as we walked together, you in your new long white pants, I in my full red skirt. We had changed our way of dressing and had escaped the jokes, the embarrassment, and the violence of our friends. You know, Juan Luis, that most of them still act as if they were fourteen—the kind of fourteen-year-olds we never were. *Machismo* is being fourteen all one's life; it is cruel fear. You know, because you weren't able to avoid it either. Actually, to the degree we left our childhood behind and you tried all the experiences common to your age, you tried to avoid me. That's why I understood when after years of hardly speaking to me (but I spied on you from the window, I watched you go out in a convertible

filled with friends and come back late and feeling sick), when I entered Arts and Science and you, Business, you sought me, not at home, which would have been the natural thing to do, but at my college, and you invited me to have a cup of coffee one afternoon in the Mascarones cellar cafe, hot and packed with students.

You stroked my hand and said: "Forgive me, Claudia."

I smiled and thought that all the moments of our childhood were suddenly returning, not to be prolonged, but rather to be brought to an end, to a kind of recognition that would at the same time dissipate those years forever.

"For what?" I answered. "I'm happy we can talk again. That's all I want. We've seen each other every day, but each time it was as if the other weren't there. Now I'm happy we can be friends again, like before."

"We're more than friends, Claudia. We're brother and sister."

"Yes, but that's an accident. You see, because we are brother and sister we loved each other very much when we were children, but we've hardly spoken to each other since."

"I'm going to go away, Claudia. I've already told my father. He doesn't agree. He thinks I ought to finish my degree. But I need to go away."

"Where?"

"I've got a job with the United Nations in Geneva. I can continue my studies there."

"You're doing the right thing, Juan Luis."

You told me what I already knew. You told me you couldn't stand the warehouses any longer, having to learn everything by rote, the obligation to be *macho*, patriotism, lip-service religion, the lack of good films, the lack of real women, girls your own age you could live with. . . . It was quite a speech, spoken quietly across that table in the Mascarones cafe.

"It's not possible to live here. I mean it. I don't want to serve either God or the Devil; I want to burn the candle at *both* ends. And you can't do it here, Claudia. Just wanting to *live* makes you a potential traitor; here you're obliged to serve, to take a position; it's a country that won't let you be yourself. I don't want to be 'decent.' I don't want to be courteous, a liar, *muy macho*, an ass-kisser, refined and clever. *There's no country like Mexico* . . . thank God! I don't want to go from brothel to brothel. When you do that then all your life you have to treat women with a kind of brutal and domineering sentimentality because you never learned to really understand them. I don't want that."

"And what does Mother say?"

"She'll cry. It doesn't matter. She cries about everything, what else would you expect?"

"And what about me, Juan Luis?"

He smiled childishly: "You'll come to visit me, Claudia. Swear you'll come see me?"

I not only came to see you. I came to look for you, to take you back to Mexico. And four years ago, when we said goodbye, the only thing I said was:

"Think about me. Look for a way to be with me always."

Yes, you wrote me begging me to visit you; I have your letters. You found a room with bath and kitchen in the most beautiful spot in Geneva, the Place du Bourg-de-Four. You wrote that it was on the fifth floor, in the center of the old part of the city, where you could see steep roofs, church towers, small windows and narrow skylights, and in the distance the lake fading from sight towards Vevey and Montreux and Chillon. Your letters were filled with the joy of independence. You had to make your bed and clean and get your own breakfast and go down to the dairy next door for milk. And you had your drinks in the cafe on the plaza. You talked so much about that cafe. It is called La Clémence and it has an awning with green and white fringe and anyone who *is* anyone in Geneva comes there. It's very small, barely six tables facing a bar where waitresses dressed in black serve cassis and say "M'sieudame" to everyone. I sat there yesterday to have a cup of coffee and there I was looking at all those students in their long mufflers and University caps, at Hindu girls with their saris askew under their winter coats, at diplomats with rosettes in their lapels, at the actors who flee from taxes and take refuge in chalets on the lakeshore, at the young Germans, Chileans, Belgians, and Tunisians who work at the OIT. You wrote that there were two Genevas. The ordered conventional city that Stendhal described as a flower without perfume; that's the one where the Swiss live and is the backdrop for the other, the city of transients and exiles, a foreign city of chance encounters, of glances and sudden conversations, without the standards the Swiss have imposed upon themselves in order to free their guests. You were twenty-three when you arrived here, and I can imagine your enthusiasm.

"But enough of that (you wrote). I must tell you that I am taking a course in French literature and that there I met. . . . Claudia, I can't explain what I feel and I won't even try, because you have always understood me without needing words. Her name is Irene and you can't imagine how beautiful and clever, how *nice* she is. She is studying literature here, and she is French; strange that she is studying

the same things you are. Maybe that's why I liked her immediately. Haha." I think it lasted a month. I don't remember. It was four years ago. "Marie-José talks too much, but she amuses me. We spent the weekend at Davos and she made me look ridiculous because she is a formidable skier and I'm not worth a damn. They say you have to learn as a child. I confess I got a little uptight and the two of us returned to Geneva Monday as we had left Friday, except that I had a sprained ankle. Isn't that a laugh?" Then spring came. "Doris is English and she paints. I think she has real talent. We took advantage of the Easter holidays to go to Wengen. She says she makes love to stimulate her subconscious, and she leaps out of bed to paint her gouaches with the white peaks of the Jungfrau before her. She opens the windows and takes deep breaths and paints in the nude while I tremble with cold. She laughs a lot and says that I am a tropical creature with arrested development, and serves me kirsch to warm me up." I laughed at Doris the whole year they were seeing each other. "I miss her gaiety, but she decided that one year in Switzerland was enough and she left with her paintboxes and her easels to live on the island of Mykonos. So much the better. She amused me, but the kind of woman who interests me is not a woman like Doris." One went to Greece and another arrived from Greece. "Sophia is the most beautiful woman I have ever known, I swear it. I know it's a commonplace, but she looks like one of the Caryatids. Although not in the common sense. She is a statue because she can be observed from all angles; I make her turn around, nude, in the center of the room. But the important thing is the air that surrounds her, the space around the statue, do you understand? The space she *occupies* that permits her to be beautiful. She is dark, she has very thick eyebrows, and tomorrow, Claudia, she is leaving with some rich guy for the Côte d'Azur. Desolate, but satisfied, your brother who loves you, Juan Luis."

And Christine, Consuelo, Sonali, Marie-France, Ingrid. . . . The references were ever more brief, ever more disinterested. You became preoccupied with your work and with talking a lot about your friends there, about their national idiosyncracies, their dealings with you, with the subject of meetings and salaries and trips and even retirement pensions. You didn't want to tell me how that place, like all places, finally creates its own quiet conventions and that you were falling into the pattern of an international official. Until a postcard arrived with a view of Montreux and your cramped writing telling about a meal in a fabulous restaurant, and lamenting my absence, signed with two signatures, your scrawl, and an illegible—but carefully copied below—Claire.

Oh, yes. You were gauging this one carefully. You didn't present

her like the others. First it was a new job you were going to be recommended for. Then how it was involved with the next meeting of the Council. Then after that, how you enjoyed working with your new friends but that you missed the old ones. Then that the most difficult thing was getting used to the document officials who didn't know your work habits. Finally that you had had the luck to work with a "compatible" official, and in the next letter: her name is Claire. And three months before you had sent me the postcard from Montreux. Claire, Claire, Claire.

I answered: "Mon ami Pierrot." So you weren't going to be honest with me anymore. How long has it been Claire? I wanted to know everything, I demanded to know everything. Juan Luis, hadn't we been best friends before we were brother and sister? You didn't write for two months. Then came an envelope with a snapshot inside. The two of you with the tall jet of a fountain behind you, and the lake in summertime; you and she leaning against the railing. Your arm around her waist. She, so cute, her arm resting on a flower-filled stone urn. But it wasn't a good snapshot. It was difficult to decide about Claire's face. Slim and smiling, yes, a kind of Marina Vlady, slimmer but with the same smooth long blond hair. Low heels. A sleeveless sweater. Cut low.

You admitted it without explaining anything. First the letters relating facts. She lived in a *pension* on the Rue Emile Jung. Her father was an engineer, a widower, and he worked in Neuchâtel. You and Claire were going swimming together at the beach. You had tea at La Clémence. You saw old French films in a theatre in the Rue Mollard. Saturdays you had dinner at the Plat d'Argent and each of you paid his own bill. During the week, you ate in the cafeteria of the Palace of Nations. Sometimes you took the tram and went to France. Facts and names, names, names, like a guidebook: Quai des Berges, Gran' Rue, Cave à Bob, Gare de Cornavin, Auberge de la Mère Royaume, Champele, Boulevard des Bastions.

Later conversations. Claire's taste in some films, certain books, the concerts, and more names, that river of nouns in your letters (*Drôle de Drame* and *Les Enfants du Paradis*, Scott Fitzgerald and Raymond Radiguet, Schumann and Brahms) and then Claire says, Claire thinks, Claire feels. Carné's characters live their freedom as if it were a shameful conspiracy. Fitzgerald invented the modes, the gestures, and the disillusion that continue to nourish us. The German Requiem celebrates all profane deaths. Yes, I answered. Orozco has just died, and there is an enormous retrospective of Diego in the Bellas Artes. And in return letters, all of it written out, as I had asked you.

“Every time I listen to you, I say to myself that it’s as if we had realized that we need to consecrate everything that has been condemned up till now, Juan Luis; to turn things inside out. Who mutilated us, my love? There’s so little time to recover everything that has been stolen from us. No, I’m not suggesting anything, you know. Let’s not make plans. I believe as Radiguet does that the unconscious maneuvers of a pure soul are even more singular than all the possible combinations of vice.”

What could I answer? Nothing new here, Juan Luis. Papa and Mama are very sad that you won’t be here with us for their silver wedding anniversary. Papa has been promoted to Vice President of the insurance company and he says that’s his best anniversary present. Mama, poor thing, invents some new illness every day. The first television station is on the air. I’m studying for the final exams of my junior year. I dream a little about everything you’re experiencing; I pretend to myself I find it in books. Yesterday I was telling Federico everything you’re doing and seeing and reading and hearing, and we think perhaps if we pass our exams we could come visit you. Aren’t you planning to come back some day? You could during your next vacation, couldn’t you?

You wrote that fall was different now you were with Claire. On Sundays you often went for walks, holding hands, silent; the scent of rotting hyacinths still lingered in the parks but now it was the odor of burning leaves that pursued you during those long walks that reminded you of ours years ago on the beach, because neither you nor Claire dared break the silence, no matter what came to your minds, no matter what the enigma of overlapping seasons with their juxtaposition of jasmine and dead leaves suggested to you. In the end, silence. Claire, Claire—you wrote me—you have understood everything. I have what I always had. Now I can possess it. I’ve found you again, Claire.

I said again in my next letter that Federico and I were studying together for an exam and that we were going to Acapulco for the last days of the year. But I crossed that out before I sent you the letter. In yours you never asked who Federico was—and if you could ask me today, I wouldn’t know how to answer. When vacation came I told them not to accept his calls anymore; I no longer had to see him at school. I went alone, with my parents, to Acapulco. I didn’t tell you anything about that. I didn’t write for several months, but your letters continued to arrive. That winter, Claire came to live with you in the room on Bourg-de-Four. Why think about the letters that came after that? They’re here in my purse. “Claire, everything is new. We had never been together at dawn. Before, those hours meant nothing; they

were a dead part of the day and now they're the ones I wouldn't exchange for anything. We've always been so close, during our long walks, in the theatres, in the restaurants, at the beach, making up adventures, but we always lived in separate rooms. Do you know what I used to do, alone, thinking about you? Now I don't waste those hours. I spend the whole night close to you, my arms around your waist, your shoulder pressed to my chest, waiting for you to wake. You know that and you turn towards me and smile with your eyes closed, Claire; as I turn back the sheet I forget the places you have warmed through the night and I ask myself if this isn't what we always wanted, from the beginning, when we were playing and walking in silence, holding hands. We *had* to sleep together beneath the same roof, in our own house, isn't that true? Why don't you write me, Claudia? I love you, Juan Luis."

Perhaps you remember how I teased you. It wasn't the same thing to make love on a beach or in a hotel surrounded with lakes and snow as it was to live together every day. Besides, you were working in the same office. You'd end up boring each other. The novelty would wear off. Waking up together. Actually, it wasn't very pleasant. She will see how you brush your teeth. You will see her take off her make-up, cream her face, put on her garter belt. . . . I think you've done the wrong thing, Juan Luis. Weren't you searching for your independence? Why have you taken on such a burden? If that's what you had in mind, you might as well have stayed in Mexico. But apparently it's difficult to escape the conventions in which we have been brought up. In the long run, although you haven't followed the formula completely, you're doing what Mama and Papa and everyone else has always expected of you. You've become a man of routine. After all the good times we had with Doris and Sophia and Marie-José. What a shame.

We didn't write each other for a year and a half. My life didn't change at all. My studies became a little useless, repetitive. How can they *teach* you literature? Once they put me in touch with a few things, I knew that my thing was to go my own way, read and write and study on my own, and I continued going to class only for the sake of discipline, because I had to finish what I had begun. It's so foolish and pedantic when they go on explaining things you already know based on their phony diagrams and illustrations. That's the bad thing about being ahead of your teachers, and they're aware of it, but hide it in order to keep their jobs. We were coming to Romanticism and I was already reading Firkbank and Rolfe and I had even discovered William Golding. I had my professors a little scared and my only satisfaction during that time was the praise I received at the college: Claudia has

real promise. I spent more and more time locked in my room. I arranged it to my tastes, put my books in order, hung my reproductions, set up my record player, and Mama finally got tired of telling me that I should meet boys and go out dancing. They left me alone. I changed my wardrobe a little, from the cotton prints you knew to white blouses and dark skirts, tailored suits—to things that make me feel a little more serious, more severe, more distant.

It seems we've arrived at the airport. The radar screens are revolving and I stop talking with you. It's going to be an unpleasant moment. The passengers are stirring. I take my handbag and makeup case and my coat. I sit waiting for the others to get off. It's humid and cold and the fog conceals the mountains. It isn't raining, but the air contains millions of unformed, invisible droplets: I feel them against my skin. I smooth my straight blond hair. I enter the building and walk towards the airline company office. I tell my name and the clerk nods silently. He asks me to follow him. We walk along a long well-lighted corridor and then emerge into the icy afternoon. We move across a long strip of pavement that ends at a kind of hangar. I am walking with my fists clenched. The clerk does not attempt to converse with me. He precedes me, a little ceremoniously. We enter the storage room. It smells of damp wood, of straw and pitch. There are many large boxes lined up in orderly fashion as well as rows of barrels and even a small barking dog in a cage. Your box is partly hidden behind some others. The clerk points it out to me, bowing respectfully. I touch the edge of the coffin and for several moments I stand there without speaking. My weeping is buried deep in my belly, but it is as if I were crying. The clerk is waiting and when he thinks it seemly he shows me the various papers I have been negotiating during the last few days, the permits and authorizations from the police, the department of health, the Mexican consulate and the airline company. He asks me to sign the final embarkation documents. I do it, and he licks the gummed back of some labels and sticks them on the closing of the coffin, sealing it. I touch the gray lid once more and we return to the central building. The clerk murmurs his condolences and says goodbye.

After clearing the documents with the airline company and the Swiss authorities, I go up to the restaurant, with my boarding pass in my hand and I sit down and order a cup of coffee. I am sitting next to a large window and I can see the planes appearing and disappearing on the runway. They fade into the fog or emerge from it, but the noise of their engines precedes them or lingers behind like the silent wake of a ship. They frighten me. Yes, you know I am deathly afraid of them and I don't want to think what this return trip with you will be like, in the middle of winter, showing in every airport the documents with your

name and the permits that allow them to pass you through. They bring my coffee and I take it black; it's what I needed. My hand does not tremble as I drink it.

Nine weeks ago I tore open the envelope of your first letter in a year and a half and spilled my cup of coffee on the rug. I stooped down hurriedly to wipe it up with my skirt, and then I put on a record and wandered around the room looking at book jackets, my arms crossed; I even read a few lines of Garcilaso, slowly, stroking the covers of the book, sure of myself, far removed from your still mysterious letter concealed in the torn envelope lying on the arm of the chair.

Sweet souvenirs of love now sadly pondered,
Yes, sweet they seemed when God did so assign,
In memory joined and bound, mine not to sunder,
With memory, too, they work my death's design.

"Of course, we've quarreled. She goes out slamming the door behind her and I almost weep with rage. I try to get interested in something but I can't and I go out to look for her. I know where she is. Across the street, at La Clémence, drinking and smoking nervously. I go down the creaking stairs and out into the plaza and she looks at me across the distance and pretends not to notice. I cross the garden and walk slowly up to the highest level of Bourg-de-Four, my fingers brushing the iron bannister; I reach the cafe and sit down beside her in one of the wicker chairs. We are in the open air; in summer the cafe spills out onto the sidewalk and one can hear the music from the carillon of St. Pierre. Claire is talking with the waitress. They are making small talk about the weather in that odious Swiss sing-song. I wait until Claire stubs out her cigarette in the ash tray and I do the same in order to touch her fingers. She looks at me. Do you know how, Claudia? As *you* looked at me, high on the rocks at the beach, waiting for me to save you from the ogre. You had to pretend that you didn't know whether I was coming to save you or to kill you in the name of your jailer. But sometimes you couldn't contain your laughter and the fiction was shattered for an instant. The quarrel began because of my carelessness. Claire accused me of being careless and of creating a moral problem for her. What were we to do? It would have helped even if I had had an immediate answer. But no, I retreated into my shell, silent and uncommunicative, and didn't even try to escape the situation by doing something intelligent. There were books and records in the house, but I dedicated myself to working some crossword puzzles.

"*You* have to decide, Juan Luis. Please."

"I'm thinking."

“Don’t be stupid. I’m not referring to that. I’m talking about *everything*. Are we going to spend our whole lives classifying documents for the United Nations? Or are we just living some inbetween step that will lead to something better, something we don’t know about yet? I’m willing to do anything, Juan Luis, but I can’t make the decisions by myself. Tell me our life together and our work is just an adventure, and it will be all right with me. Tell me they’re both permanent; that will be all right, too. But we can’t act any longer as if our work is transitory and our love permanent, or vice versa, do you understand what I’m saying?”

“How was I going to tell her, Claudia, that her problem was completely beyond my comprehension? Believe me, sitting there in La Clémence, watching the young people riding by on bicycles, listening to the laughter and murmurs of those around us, with the bells of the Cathedral chiming their music, believe me, little sister, I fled from this whole confining world. I closed my eyes and sank into myself, I refined in the darkness of my soul my most secret knowledge; I tuned all the strings of my sensitivity so that the least movement of my soul would set them vibrating; I stretched my perception, my prophecies, the whole trauma of the present, like a bow, so as to shoot into the future, which wounded, would be revealed. The arrow flew from the bow, but there was no bull’s eye, Claudia, there was nothing in the future, and all that painful internal construction—my hands felt numb from the effort—tumbled down like sand castles at the first assault of the waves, not lost, but returning to that ocean we call memory; to my childhood, to our games, our beach, to a joy and warmth that everything that followed could only imitate, try to prolong, to fuse with projects for the future and reproduce with present surprise. Yes, I told her it was all right; we would look for a larger apartment. Claire is going to have a baby.”

She herself wrote me a letter in that handwriting I had seen only on the postcard from Montreux. “I know how important you are to Juan Luis, how the two of you grew up together, and all the rest. I want very much to see you and I’m sure we will be good friends. Believe me when I say I already know you. Juan Luis talks so much about you that sometimes I get a little jealous. I hope you’ll be able to come see us some day. Juan Luis is doing very well in his job and everyone likes him very much. Geneva is small but pleasant. We’ve become fond of the city for reasons you can guess and here we will make our life. I can still work a few months; I’m only two months pregnant. Your sister, Claire.”

And the recent snapshot fell from the envelope. You’ve gained weight, and you call my attention to it on the back of the photo: “Too

much fondue, Sis." And you're getting bald, just like Papa. And she's very beautiful, very Botticelli, with her long blond hair and coquettish beret. Have you gone mad, Juan Luis? You were a handsome young man when you left Mexico. Look at yourself. Have you looked at yourself? Watch your diet. You're only twenty-seven years old and you look forty. And what are you reading, Juan Luis, what interests you? Crossword puzzles? You mustn't betray yourself, please, you know I depend on you, on your growing with me, I can't go ahead without you. You promised you were going to continue studying there; that's what you told Papa. The routine work is tiring you out. All you want to do is get to your apartment and read the newspaper and take off your shoes. Isn't that true? You don't say it, but I know it's true. Don't destroy yourself, please. I have remained faithful. I'm keeping our childhood alive. It doesn't matter to me that you're far away. But we must remain united in what matters most, we mustn't concede anything to demands that we be anything other (do you remember?) than love and intelligence and youth and silence. They want to maim us, to make us like themselves; they can't tolerate us. Do not serve them, Juan Luis, I beg you, don't forget what you told me that afternoon in the Mascarones cafe. Once you take the first step in that direction, everything is lost; there is no return. I had to show your letter to our parents. Mama got very sick. High blood pressure. She's in the cardiac ward. I hope not to have to give you bad news in my next letter. I think about you, I remember you, I know you won't fail me.

Two letters arrived. First, the one you sent me, telling me that Claire had had an abortion. Then the one you sent Mama announcing that you were going to marry Claire within the month. You hoped we would all be able to come to the wedding. I asked Mama to let me keep her letter with mine. I put them side by side and studied your handwriting to see if they were both written by the same person.

"It was a rapid decision, Claudia. I told her that it was too soon. We're young and we have the right to live a while longer without responsibilities. Claire said that was fine. I don't know whether she understood everything I said to her. But you do, don't you?"

"I love this girl, I'm sure of it. She's been good and understanding with me even though at times I've made her suffer; neither of you will be ashamed that I would want to make it up to her. Her father is a widower; he is an engineer and lives in Neuchâtel. He approves and will come to the wedding. I hope that you, Papa, and Claudia can be with us. When you know Claire you will love her as much as I, Mama."

Three weeks later Claire committed suicide. One of your friends at work called us; he said that one afternoon she had asked for permission to leave the office; she had a headache; she went to an early movie and

you looked for her that night, as always, in the apartment; you waited for her, and then you rushed about the city but you couldn't find her; she was dead in the theatre, she had taken the veronal before she entered and she had sat alone in the first row where no one would bother her; you called Neuchâtel, you wandered through the streets and restaurants again and you sat in La Clémence until they closed. It was the next day before they called you from the morgue and you went to see her. Your friend told us that we ought to come after you, and make you come back to Mexico: you were maddened with grief. I told our parents the truth. I showed them your last letter. They were stunned for a moment and then Papa said he would never allow you in the house again. He shouted that you were a criminal.

I finish my coffee and a waiter points towards where I am seated. A tall man with the lapels of his coat turned up, nods and walks towards me. It is the first time I have seen that tanned face, the blue eyes and the white hair. He asks my permission to sit down and asks me if I am your sister. I tell him yes. He says he is Claire's father. He does not shake hands. I ask him if he wants a cup of coffee. He shakes his head and takes a pack of cigarettes from his overcoat pocket. He offers me one. I tell him I don't smoke. He tries to smile and I put on my dark glasses. He puts his hand in his pocket again and takes out a piece of paper. He places it, folded, on the table.

"I have brought you this letter."

I try to question him with raised eyebrows.

"It's signed by you. It's addressed to my daughter. It was on Juan Luis's pillow the morning they found him dead in his apartment."

"Oh, yes, I wondered what had become of that letter. I looked for it everywhere."

"Yes, I thought you would want to keep it." Now he smiles as if he already knew me. "You're very cynical. Don't worry. Why should you? There's nothing anyone can do now."

He rises without saying goodbye. The blue eyes look at me with sadness and compassion. I try to smile, and I pick up the letter. The loudspeaker:

"... le depart de son vol número 707. . . . Paris, Gander, New York and Mexico. . . . priés de se rendre à la porte número 5."

I take my things, adjust my beret, and go down to the departure gate. I am carrying my purse and the makeup case and the boarding pass in my hands, but I manage, between the door and the steps of the airplane, to tear the letter and throw the pieces into the cold wind, into the fog that will perhaps carry them to the lake where you dived, Juan Luis, in search of a mirage.

—translated by Margaret S. Peden from the Spanish