

"Books and Roses"

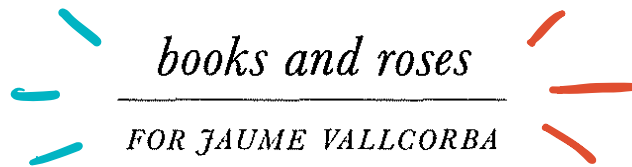
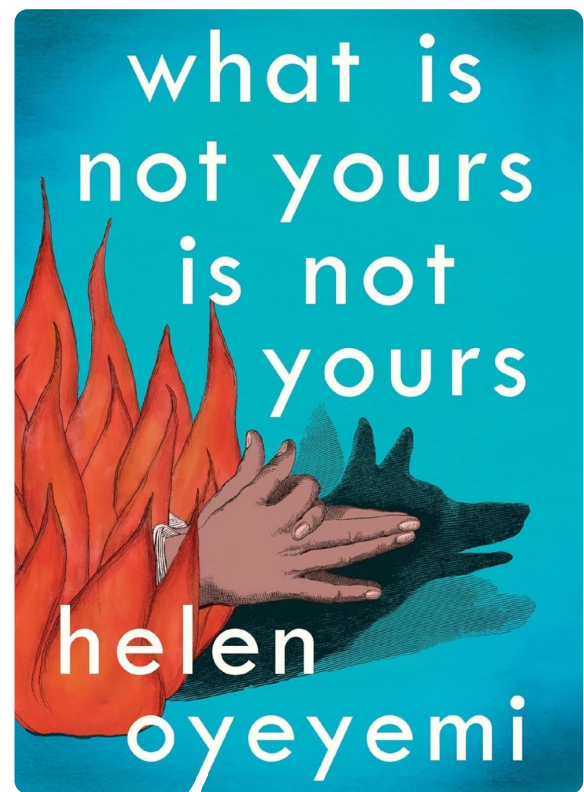
by

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from the collection

What Is Not Yours

Is Not Yours (2016)



Once upon a time in Catalonia a baby was found in a chapel. This was over at Santa Maria de Montserrat. It was an April morning. And the baby was so wriggly and minuscule that the basket she was found in looked empty at first glance. The child had got lost in a corner of it, but courageously wriggled her way back up to the top fold of the blanket in order to peep out. The monk who found this basket searched desperately for an explanation. His eyes met the wooden eyes of the Virgin of Montserrat, a mother who has held her child on her lap for centuries, a gilded child that doesn't breathe or grow. In looking upon that great lady the monk received a measure of her

unquestioning love and fell to his knees to pray for further guidance, only to find that he'd knelt on a slip of paper that the baby had dislodged with her wriggling. The note read:

1. *You have a Black Madonna here, so you will know how to love this child almost as much as I do. Please call her Montserrat.*
2. *Wait for me.*

A golden chain was fastened around her neck, and on that chain was a key. As she grew up, the lock of every door and cupboard in the monastery was tested, to no avail. She had to wait. It was both a comfort and a great frustration to Montse, this . . . what could she call it, a notion, a suggestion, a promise? This promise that somebody was coming back for her. If she'd been a white child the monks of Santa Maria de Montserrat might have given her into the care of a local family, but she was as black as the face and hands of the Virgin they adored. She was given the surname "Fosc," not just because she was black, but also because her origin was obscure. And the monks set themselves the task of learning all they could about the needs of a child. More often than not they erred on the side of indulgence, and held debates on the matter of whether this extreme degree of fondness was a mortal sin or a venial one. At any rate it was the Benedictine friars who fed and

clothed and carried Montse, and went through the horrors of the teething process with her, and rang the chapel bells for hours the day she spoke her first words. Neither as a girl nor as a woman did Montse ever doubt the devotion of her many fathers, and in part it was the certainty of this devotion that saw her through times at school and times down in the city when people looked at her strangely or said insulting things; the words and looks sometimes made her lower her head for a few steps along the street, but never for long. She was a daughter of the Virgin of Montserrat, and she felt instinctively and of course heretically that the Virgin herself was only a symbol of a yet greater sister-mother who was carefree and sorrowful all at once, a goddess who didn't guide you or shield you but only went with you from place to place and added her tangible presence to your own when required.

When Montse was old enough she took a job at a haberdashery in Les Corts de Sarrià, and worked there until Señora Cabella found her relatives unwilling to take over the family business and the shop closed down. "You're a hardworking girl, Montse," Señora Cabella told her, "and I know you'll make something of yourself if given a chance. You've seen that eyesore at the Passeig de Gràcia. The Casa Milà. People call it La Pedrera because it looks like a quarry, just a lot of stones all thrown on top of each other.

An honest, reliable girl can find work as a laundress there. Is that work you can do? Very well—go to Señora Molina, the *conserje*'s wife. Tell her Emma Cabella sent you. Give her this.” And the woman wrote out a recommendation that made Montse blush to read it.

She reported to Señora Molina at La Pedrera the next morning, and the *conserje*'s wife sent her upstairs to Señora Gaeta, who pronounced Montse satisfactory and tied an apron on her. After that it was work, work, work, and weeks turned into months. Montse had to work extra fast to keep Señora Gaeta from noticing that she was washing the Cabella family's clothes along with those of the residents she'd been assigned. The staff turnover at La Pedrera was rapid; every week there were new girls who joined the ranks without warning, and girls who vanished without giving notice. Señora Gaeta knew every name and face, even when the identical uniforms made it difficult for the girls themselves to remember each other. It was Señora Gaeta who employed the girls and also relieved them of their duties if their efforts weren't up to scratch. She darted around the attic, flicking the air with her red lacquered fan as she inspected various activities. The residents of Casa Milà called Señora Gaeta a treasure, and the laundry maids liked her because she sometimes joined in when they sang work songs; it seemed that once she had been just like

them, for all the damask and cameo rings she wore now. Señora Gaeta was also well liked because it was exciting to hear her talk: She swore the most powerful and unusual oaths they'd ever heard, really unrepeatably stuff, and all in a sweetly quivering voice, like the song of a harp. Her policy was to employ healthy-looking women who seemed unlikely to develop bad backs too quickly. But you can't guess right all the time. There were girls who aged overnight. Others were unexpectedly lazy. Women who worried about their reputation didn't last long in the attic laundry either—they sought and found work in more ordinary buildings.

It was generally agreed that this mansion the Milà family had had built in their name was a complete failure. This was mostly the fault of the architect. He had the right materials but clearly he hadn't known how to make the best use of them. A house of stone and glass and iron should be stark and sober, a watchtower from which a benevolent guard is kept on society. But the white stone of this particular house rippled as if reacting to a hand that had found its most pleasurable point of contact. A notable newspaper critic had described this effect as being that of "a pernicious sensuality." And as if that wasn't enough, the entire construction blushed a truly disgraceful peachy-pink at sunset and dawn. Respectable citizens couldn't help but

feel that the house expressed the dispositions of its inhabitants, who must surely be either mad or unceasingly engaged in indecent activities. But Montse thought the house she worked in was beautiful. She stood on a corner of the pavement and looked up, and what she saw clouded her senses. To Montse's mind La Pedrera was a magnificent place. But then her taste lacked refinement. Her greatest material treasure was an egregiously shiny bit of tin she'd won at a fairground coconut shy; this fact can't be overlooked.

THERE WERE A FEW more cultured types who shared Montse's admiration of La Pedrera, though—one of them was Señora Lucy, who lived on the second floor and frequently argued with people about whether or not her home was an aesthetic offense. Journalists came to interview the Señora from time to time, and would make some comment about the house as a parting shot on their way out, but Señora Lucy refused to let them have the last word and stood there arguing at the top of her voice. The question of right angles was always being raised: How could Señora Lucy bear to live in a house without a single right angle . . . not even in the furniture . . . ?

“But really who needs right angles? Who?” Señora Lucy

would demand, and she'd slam the courtyard door and run up the stairs laughing.

SEÑORA LUCY was a painter with eyes like daybreak. Like Montse, she wore a key on a chain around her neck, but unlike Montse she told people that she was fifty years old and gave them looks that dared them to say she was in good condition for her age. (Señora Lucy was actually thirty-five, only five years older than Montse. One of the housemaids had overheard a gallery curator begging her to stop telling people she was fifty. The Señora had replied that she'd recently attended the exhibitions of some of her colleagues and now wished to discover whether fifty-year-old men in her field were treated with reverence because they were fifty or for some other reason.) Aside from this the housemaids were somewhat disappointed with Señora Lucy. They expected their resident artist to lounge about in scarlet pajamas, drink cocktails for breakfast, and entertain dashing rascals and fragrant sirens. But Señora Lucy kept office hours. Merce, her maid of all work, tried to defend her by alleging that the Señora drank her morning coffee out of a vase, but nobody found this credible.

MONTSE FOUND WAYS to be the one to return Señora Lucy's laundry to her; this sometimes meant undertaking several other deliveries so that her boss Señora Gaeta didn't become suspicious. There was a workroom in Señora Lucy's apartment; she often began work there and then had the canvases transported to her real studio. Thirty seconds in Señora Lucy's apartment was long enough for Montse to get a good stare at all those beginnings of paintings. The Señora soon saw that Montse was curious about her work, and she took to leaving her studio door open while she etched on canvas. She'd call Montse to come and judge how well the picture was progressing. "Look here," she'd say, indicating a faint shape in the corner of the frame. "Look here—" Her fingertips glided over a darkening of color in the distance. She sketched with an effort that strained every limb. Montse saw that the Señora sometimes grew short of breath though she'd hardly stirred. A consequence of snatching images out of the air—the air took something back.

MONTSE ASKED SEÑORA about the key around her neck. It wasn't a real question, she was just talking so that she could

stay a moment longer. But the Señora said she wore it because she was waiting for someone; at this Montse forgot herself and blurted: “You too?”

The Señora was amused. “Yes, me too. I suppose we’re all waiting for someone.” And she told Montse all about it as she poured coffee into vases for them both. (It was true! It was true!)

“TWO MOSTLY PENNILESS WOMEN met at a self-congratulation ritual in Seville,” that was how Señora Lucy began. The event was the five-year reunion of a graduating class of the University of Seville—neither woman had attended this university, but they blended in, and every other person they met claimed to remember them, and there was much exclamation on the theme of it being wonderful to see former classmates looking so well. The imposters had done their research and knew what to say, and what questions to ask. Their names were Safiye and Lucy, and you wouldn’t have guessed that either one was a pauper, since they’d spent most of the preceding afternoon liberating various items of priceless finery from their keepers.

These two penniless girls knew every trick in the book, and their not being able to identify each other was one of the downsides of being an efficient fraud. Both women

moved from town to town under an assortment of aliases, and both believed that collaboration was for weaklings. Lucy and Safiye hadn't come to that gathering looking for friendship or love; they were there to make contacts. Back when they had toiled at honest work—Lucy at a bakery and Safiye at an abattoir—they'd wondered if it could be true that there were people who were given money simply because they looked as if they were used to having lots of it. Being blessed with forgettable faces and the gift of brazen fabrication, they'd each gone forth to test this theory and had found it functional. Safiye loved to look at paintings and needed money to build her collection. Lucy was an artist in constant need of paint, brushes, turpentine, peaceful light, and enough canvas to make compelling errors on. For a time Lucy had been married to a rare sort of clown, the sort that children aren't afraid of: *After all, he is one of us, you can see it in his eyes*, they reasoned. *How funny that he's so strangely tall*. Lucy and her husband had not much liked being married to each other, the bond proving much heavier than their lighthearted courtship had led them to expect, but they agreed that it had been worth a try, and while waiting for their divorce to come through Lucy's husband had taught her the sleight of hand she eventually used to pick her neighbor's pocket down to the very last thread. The night she met Safiye she stole her earrings right out of

her earlobes and, having retired to a quiet corner of the mansion to inspect them, found that the gems were paste. Then she discovered that her base metal bangle was missing and quickly realized that she could only have lost it to the person she was stealing from; she'd been distracted by the baubles and the appeal of those delicate earlobes. Cornered by a banker whose false memory of having been in love with her since matriculation day might prove profitable, Lucy wavered between a sensible decision and a foolhardy one. Ever did foolhardiness hold the upper hand with Lucy; she found Safiye leaning against an oil lantern out in the garden and saw for herself that she wasn't the only foolish woman in the world, or even at that party, for Safiye had Lucy's highly polished bangle in her hand and was turning it this way and that in order to catch fireflies in the billowing, transparent left sleeve of her gown. All this at the risk of being set alight, but then from where Lucy stood Safiye looked as if she was formed of fire herself, particles of flame dancing the flesh of her arm into existence. That or she was returning to fire.

They left the reunion early and in a hurry, along with a small group of attendees who'd found themselves unable to sustain the pretense of total success. Having fallen into Lucy's bed, they didn't get out again for days. How could they, when Lucy held all Safiye's satisfactions in her very

fingertips, and each teasing stroke of Safiye's tongue summoned Lucy to the brink of delirium? They fell asleep, each making secret plans to slip away in the middle of the night. After all, their passion placed them entirely at each other's command, and they were bound to find that fearsome. So they planned escape but woke up intertwined. It was at Lucy's bidding that Safiye would stay or go. And who knew what Safiye might suddenly and successfully demand of Lucy? *Stop breathing. Give up tea.* The situation improved once it occurred to them that they should also talk; as they came to understand each other they learned that what they'd been afraid of was running out of self. On the contrary the more they loved the more there was to love. At times it was necessary to spend months apart, coaxing valuable goods out of people using methods they avoided discussing in detail. Lucy sent Safiye paintings and orange blossoms, and Safiye directed a steady flow of potential portrait subjects Lucy's way. The lovers fought about this; it seemed to Lucy that Safiye was trying to trick her into making a "respectable" living. Lucy had promised herself that she'd only paint faces she found compelling and it was a bother to have to keep inventing excuses for not taking on portraits.

"It's all right, you're just not good at gifts," Lucy said, with a smile intended to pacify. Gifts didn't matter when

they were together, and gifts didn't have to matter when they were apart either. But Safiye was outraged.

“What are you talking about? Don't you ever say that I'm bad at gifts!”

If there are any words that Lucy could now unsay, it would be those words about Safiye being bad at gifts; if Lucy hadn't said them Safiye wouldn't have set out to steal the gift that would prove her wrong, and she wouldn't have got caught.

The lovers spent Christmas together, then parted—Lucy for Grenoble, and Safiye for Barcelona. They wrote to each other care of their cities' central post offices, and at the beginning of April Safiye wrote of the romance of St. Jordi's Day. *Lucy, it is the custom here to exchange books and roses each year on April 23rd. Shall we?*

LUCY HAPPILY settled down to work. First she sent for papyrus and handmade a book leaf by leaf, binding the leaves together between board covers. Then she filled each page from memory, drew English roses budding and Chinese roses in full bloom, peppercorn-pink Bourbon roses climbing walls and silvery musk roses drowsing in flowerbeds. She took every rose she'd ever seen, made them as lifelike as she could (where she shaded each petal the

rough paper turned silken), and in these lasting forms she offered them to Safiye. The making of this rose book coincided with a period in Lucy's life when she was making money without having to lie to anyone. She'd fallen in with an inveterate gambler who'd noticed that she steadied his nerves to a miraculous degree. He always won at blackjack whenever she was sitting beside him, so they agreed he'd give her 10 percent of each evening's winnings. This man only played when the stakes were high, so he won big and they were both happy. Lucy had no idea what was going to happen when their luck ran out; she could only hope her gambler wouldn't try to get violent with her, because then she'd have to get violent herself. That would be a shame, because she liked the man. He never pawed at her, he always asked her how Safiye was getting on, and he was very much in love with his wife, who loved him too and thought he was a night watchman. The gambler's wife would've gone mad with terror if she'd known how close she came to losing her life savings each night, but she didn't suspect a thing, so she packed her husband light suppers to eat at work, suppers the man couldn't even bear to look at (his stomach always played up when he was challenging Lady Luck), so Lucy ate the suppers and enjoyed them very much, the flavor of herbed olives lingering in her mouth so

that when she drank her wine she tasted all the greenness of the grapes.

FROM WHERE LUCY sat beside her gambler she had a view through a casement window, a view of a long street that led to the foot of a mountain. And what Lucy liked best about her casement window view was that as nighttime turned into dawn, the mountain seemed to travel down the street. It advanced on tiptoe, fully prepared to be shooed away. Insofar as a purely transient construction of flesh and blood can remember (or foretell) what it is to be stone, Lucy understood the mountain's wish to listen at the window of a den of gamblers and be warmed by all that free-floating hope and desolation. Her wish for the mountain was that it would one day shrink to a pebble, crash in through the glass, and roll into a corner to happily absorb tavern life for as long as the place stayed standing. Lucy tried to write something to Safiye about the view through the casement window, but found that her description of the mountain expressed a degree of pining so extreme that it made for distasteful reading. She didn't post that letter.

Safiye had begun working as a lady's maid—an appropriate post for her, as she had the requisite patience. It can

take months before you even learn the location of a household safe, let alone discover the code that makes its contents available to you. But was that really Safiye's plan? Lucy had a feeling she was being tricked into the conventional again. Safiye instigated bothersome conversations about "the future," the eventual need for security, and its being possible to play one trick too many. From time to time Lucy paused her work on the rose book to write and send brief notes:

Safiye—I've been so busy I haven't had time to think; I'm afraid I'll only be able to send you a small token for this St. Jordi's Day you wrote about. I'll beg my forgiveness when I see you.

Safiye replied: *Whatever the size of your token, I'm certain mine is smaller. You'll laugh when you see it, Lucy.*

Lucy wrote back: *Competitive as ever! Whatever it is you're doing, don't get caught. I love you, I love you.*

On April 23rd, an envelope addressed in Safiye's hand arrived at the post office for Lucy. It contained a key on a necklace chain and a map of Barcelona with a black rose drawn over a small section of it. Lucy turned the envelope inside out but there was no accompanying note. *She couldn't even send a book,* Lucy thought, tutting in spite of herself. She

hadn't yet sent the book she'd made, and as she stood in the queue to post it she began to consider keeping it.

The woman in line ahead of her was reading a newspaper and Lucy saw Safiye's face—more an imperfectly sketched reproduction of it—and read the word “Barcelona” in the headline. Some vital passage narrowed in her heart, or her blood got too thick to flow through it. She read enough to understand that the police were looking for a lady's maid in connection to a murder and a series of other crimes they suspected her of having committed under other names.

MURDER? IMPOSSIBLE. Not Safiye. Lucy walked backward until she found a wall to stand behind her. She rested until she was able to walk to the train station, where she bought train tickets and a newspaper of which she read a single page as she waited for the train to come. She would go where the map in her purse told her to go, she would find Safiye, Safiye would explain and they would laugh. They'd have to leave the continent, of course. They might even have to earn their livings honestly like Safiye wanted, but please, please please please. This pleading went on inside her for the entire journey, through three train changes and the better part of a day. A mountain seemed to follow along

behind each train she took—whenever she looked over her shoulder there it was, keeping pace. She liked to think it was her mountain she was seeing, the one she'd first seen in Grenoble, now trying its best to keep faith with her until she found Safiye.

Safiye's map led Lucy to a crudely hewn door in a wall. This didn't look like a door that could open, but a covering for a mistake in the brickwork. The key fit the lock and Lucy walked into a walled garden overrun with roses. She waded through waves of scent, lifting rope-like vines of sweetbriar and eglantine out of her path, her steps scattering pale blue butterflies in every direction. Safiye had said that Lucy would laugh at the size of her gift, and perhaps if Lucy had found her there she would have. After all she'd never been given a secret garden before. But the newspapers were saying that this woman who looked like Safiye had killed her employer, and Lucy was very much afraid that it was true and this gift was the reason. At nightfall she considered sleeping among the roses, all those frilled puffs of air carrying her toward some answer, but it was better to find Safiye than to dream. She spent two weeks flitting around the city listening to talk of the killer lady's maid. She didn't dare return to the rose garden, but she wore the key around her neck in the hope and fear that it would be recognized. It wasn't, and she opted to return to Grenoble

before she ran out of money. Her gambler was in hospital. There'd been heavy losses at the blackjack table, his wife had discovered what he'd been up to, developed a wholly unexpected strength ("inhuman strength," he called it), broken both of his arms, and then moved in with a carpenter who'd clearly been keeping her company while he'd been out working on their finances. Still he was happy to see Lucy: "Fortuna smiles upon me again!" What could Lucy do? She made him soup, and when she wasn't at his bedside she was picking pockets to help cover the hospital bills. They remain friends to this day: He was impressed by her assumption of responsibility for him and she was struck by the novelty of its never occurring to him to blame anybody else for his problems.

A FEW WEEKS after her return to Grenoble there was a spring storm that splashed the streets with moss from the mountaintops. The stormy night turned the window of Lucy's room into a door; through sleep Lucy became aware that it was more than just rain that rattled the glass . . . someone was knocking. Half-awake, she staggered across the room to turn the latch. When Safiye finally crawled in, shivering and drenched to the bone, they kissed for a long time, kissed until Lucy was fully woken by the

chattering of Safiye's teeth against hers. She fetched a towel, Safiye performed a heart-wrenchingly weak little striptease for her, and Lucy wrapped her love up warm and held her and didn't ask what she needed to ask.

After a little while Safiye spoke, her voice so perfectly unchanged it was closer to memory than it was to real time.

"Today I asked people about you, and I even walked behind you in the street for a little while. You bought some hat ribbon and a sack of onions, and you got a good deal on the hat ribbon. Sometimes I almost thought you'd caught me watching, but now I'm sure you didn't know. You're doing well. I'm proud of you. And all I've managed to do is take a key and make a mess of things. I wanted to give you . . . I wanted to give you . . ."

"Sleep," Lucy said. "Just sleep." Those were the only words she had the breath to say. But Safiye had come to make her understand about the key, the key, the key, it was like a mania, and she wouldn't sleep until Lucy heard her explanations.

From the first Safiye had felt a mild distaste for the way her employer Señora Del Olmo talked: "There was such an interesting exchange rate in this woman's mind . . . whenever she remembered anyone giving her anything, they only gave a very little and kept the lion's share to them-

selves. But whenever she remembered giving anyone anything she gave a lot, so much it almost ruined her.” Apart from that Safiye had neither liked nor disliked Señora Del Olmo, preferring to concentrate on building her mental inventory of the household treasures, of which there were many. In addition to these there was a key the woman wore around her neck. She toyed with it as she interviewed gardener after gardener; Safiye sat through the interviews too, taking notes and reading the character references. None of the gardeners seemed able to fulfill Señora Del Olmo’s requirement of absolute discretion: the garden must be brought to order, but it must also be kept secret. Eventually Safiye had offered the services of her own green thumb. By that time she’d earned enough trust for Señora Del Olmo to take her across town to the door of the garden, open it, and allow Safiye to look in. Safiye saw at once that this wasn’t a place where any gardener could have influence, and she saw in the roses a perpetual gift, a tangled shock of a studio where Lucy could work and play and study color. Señora Del Olmo instructed Safiye to wait outside, entered the garden, and closed the door behind her. After half an hour the Señora emerged, short of breath, with flushed cheeks—

“As if she’d just been kissed?” Lucy asked.

“Not at all like that. It was more as if she’d been seized

and shaken like a faulty thermometer. I asked her if there was anybody else in the garden, and she almost screamed at me. *No! No. Why do you ask that?* The Señora had picked a magnificent bunch of yellow roses, with lavender tiger stripes, such vivid flowers that they made her hand look like a wretched cardboard prop for them. Señora Del Olmo kept the roses in her lap throughout the carriage ride and by the time we'd reached home she was calm. But I thought there must be someone else in that garden—the question wouldn't have upset her as much otherwise, you know?"

"No one else was there when I was," Lucy said.

Safiye blinked. "So you've been there."

"Yes, and there were only roses."

"Only roses . . ."

"So how did you get the key?" They were watching each other closely now; Safiye watching for disbelief, Lucy watching for a lie.

"In the evening I went up to the Señora's sitting room, to see if there was anything she wanted before I went to bed myself. The only other people the Señora employed were a cook and a maid of all work, and they didn't live with us, so they'd gone home for the night. I knocked at the door and the Señora didn't answer, but I heard—a sound."

"A sound? Like a voice?"

“Yes—no. Creaking. A rusty handle turning, or a wooden door forced open until its hinges buckle, or to me, to me it was the sound of something growing. I sometimes imagine that if we could hear trees growing we’d hear them . . . creak . . . like that. I knocked again, and the creaking stopped, but a silence began. A silence I didn’t feel good about at all. But I felt obliged to do whatever I could do . . . if I left a door closed and it transpired that somebody might have lived if I had only opened it in time . . . I couldn’t bear that . . . so I had to try the door no matter what. I prayed that it was locked, but it opened and I saw the Señora standing by the window in the moonlight, with her back to me. She was holding a rose cupped in her hands, as if about to drink from it. She was standing very straight, nobody stands as straight as she was standing, not even the dancers at the opera house . . .”

“Dead?”

“No, she was just having a nap. Of course she was fucking dead, Lucy. I lit the lantern on the table and went up close. Her eyes were open and there was some form of *comprehension* in them—I almost thought she was about to hush me; she looked as if she understood what had happened to her, and was about to say: *Shhh, I know. I know. And there’s no need for you to know.* It was the most terrible look. The most terrible. I looked at the rest of her to try to forget it, and I

saw three things in quick succession: one, that the color of the rose she was holding was different from the color of the roses in the vase on the windowsill. The ones in the vase were yellow streaked with lavender, as I told you, and the one in the Señora's hand was orange streaked with brown."

Lucy mixed paints at the back of her mind. What turned yellow to orange and blue, purple to brown? Red.

"I also saw that there was a hole in the Señora's chest."

"A hole?"

"A small precise puncture"—Safiye tapped the center of Lucy's chest and pushed, gently—"It went through to the other side. And yet, no blood."

(It was all in the rose.)

"What else?"

"The stem of the orange rose." Safiye was shivering again. "How could I tell these things to a policeman? How could I tell him that this was how I found her? The rose had grown a kind of tail. Long, curved, thorny. I ran away."

"You took the key first," Lucy reminded her.

"I took the key and then I ran."

The lovers closed their eyes on their thoughts and passed from thought into sleep. When Lucy woke, Safiye had gone. She'd left a note: *Wait for me*, and that was the only proof that the nighttime visit hadn't been a dream.

A DECADE LATER, Lucy was still waiting. The waiting had changed her life. For one thing she'd left France for Spain. And the only name she now used was her real one, the name that Safiye knew, so that Safiye would be able to find her. And using her real name meant keeping the reputation associated with that name clean. She showed the book of roses she'd made for Safiye to the owner of a gallery; the man asked her to name her price, so she asked for a sum that she herself thought outrageous. He found it reasonable and paid on the spot, then asked her for more. And so Safiye drew Lucy into respectability after all.

Señora Lucy's separation from Safiye meant that she often painted landscapes in which she looked for her. Señora Lucy was rarely visible in these paintings but Safiye always was, and looking at the paintings engaged you in her search for a lost woman, an uneasy search because somehow in these pictures seeing her never meant the same thing as having found her. Señora Lucy had other subjects; she was working on her own vision of the Judgment of Paris, and Montse had been spending her lunch breaks posing for Señora Lucy's study of Aphrodite. Montse was a fidgeter; again and again she was told, "No no no no as you

were!” Then Señora Lucy would come and tilt Montse’s chin upward, or trail her fingers through Montse’s hair so that it fell over her shoulder just so. And the proximity of that delightful frown clouded Montse’s senses to a degree that made her very happy to stay exactly where she was as long as Señora Lucy stayed too.

BUT THESE WEREN’T the paintings that sold. It was Señora Lucy’s lost woman paintings that had made her famous. The lost woman was thought to be a representation of the Señora herself, but if anybody had asked Montse about that she would have disagreed. She knew some of these paintings quite well, having found out where a number of them were being exhibited. Sunday morning had become her morning for walking speechlessly among them. Safiye crossed a snowy valley with her back to the onlooker, and she left no footprints. In another painting Safiye climbed down a ladder of clouds; you turned to the next picture frame and she had become a gray-haired woman who closed her eyes and turned to dust at the same time as sweeping herself up with a little brush she held in her left hand.

“And the garden?” Montserrat asked.

Lucy smiled. “Still mine. I go there once a year. The

lock never changes; I think the place has been completely forgotten. Except maybe one day she'll meet me there."

"I hope she does," Montse lied. "But isn't there some danger there?"

"So you believe what she said?"

"Well—yes."

"Thank you. For saying that. Even if you don't mean it. The papers said this Señora Fausta Del Olmo was stabbed . . . what Safiye described was close enough . . ."

MONTSE THOUGHT that even now it wouldn't be difficult to turn half-fledged doubt into something more substantial. She could say, quite simply, I'm touched by your constancy, Señora, but I think you're waiting for a murderer. Running from the strangeness of such a death was understandable; having the presence of mind to take the key was less so. Or, Montse considered, you had to be Safiye to understand it. And even as herself Montse couldn't say for sure what she would have done or chosen not to do in such a situation. If that's how you find out who you really are then she didn't want to know. So yes, Montse could help Señora Lucy's doubts along, but there was no honor in pressing such an advantage.

“And what about your own key, Montserrat?”

Lucy’s key gleamed and Montse’s looked a little sad and dusty; perhaps it was only gold plated. She rubbed at it with her apron.

“Just junk, I think.”

ALL THE SHOPS would be closed by the time Montse finished work, and the next day would be St. Jordi’s Day, so Montse ran into the bookshop across the street and chose something with a nice cover to give to Señora Lucy. This errand combined with the Señora’s long story meant that Montserrat was an hour late returning to the laundry room. She worked long past dinnertime, wringing linen under Señora Gaeta’s watchful eye, silently cursing the illusions of space that had been created within the attic. All those soaring lines from ceiling to wall disguised the fact that the room was as narrow as a coffin. Finally Señora Gaeta inspected her work and let her go. Only one remark was made about Montse’s shamefully late return from lunch: “You only get to do that once, my dear.”

MONTSE WENT HOME to the room and bed she shared with three other laundry maids more or less the same size as her.

She and her bedfellows usually talked until they fell asleep. They were good friends, the four of them; they had to be. That night Montse somehow made it into bed first and the other three climbed in one by one until Montse lay squashed up against the bedroom wall, too tired to add to the conversation.

WHILE MONTSE had been making up her hours the other laundry maids had attended a concert and glimpsed a few of La Pedrera's most gossiped about couples there. For example, there were the Artigas from the third floor and the Valdeses from the fourth floor, lavishing sepulchral smiles upon each other. Señor Artiga and Señora Valdes were lovers with the tacit consent of his wife and her husband. Señora Valdes's husband was a gentle man many years older than her, a man much saddened by what he saw as a fatal flaw in the building's design. The lift only stopped at every other floor; this forced you to meet your neighbors as you walked the extra flight of stairs up or down, this was how Señora Valdes and Señor Artiga had first found themselves alone together in the first place. It was Señor Valdes's hope that his wife's attachment to "that popinjay" Artiga was a passing fancy. Artiga's wife couldn't wait that long, and had made several not so

discreet inquiries regarding the engagement of assassins until her husband had stayed her hand by vowing to do away with himself if she harmed so much as a hair on Señora Valdes's head. Why didn't Artiga divorce his wife and ask Señora Valdes to leave her husband and marry him? She'd have done it in a heartbeat, if only he'd ask (so the gossips said). Señor Artiga was unlikely to ask any such thing. His mistress was the most delightful companion he'd ever known, but his wife was an heiress. No man in his right mind leaves an heiress unless he's leaving her for another heiress. "Maybe in another life, my love," Artiga told Señora Valdes, causing her to weep in a most gratifying manner. And so in between their not so secret assignations Artiga and Señora Valdes devoured each other with their eyes, and Señora Artiga raged like one possessed, and Señor Valdes patiently awaited the vindication of an ever-dwindling hope, and their fellow residents got up a petition addressed to the owners of the building, asking that both the Artigas and the Valdeses be evicted. The *conserje* and his wife liked poor old Señor Valdes, but even they'd signed the petition, because La Pedrera's reputation was bad enough, and it was doubtful that this scandalous peace could hold. Laura, Montse's outermost bedmate, was taking bets.

ON THE MORNING of St. Jordi's Day, before work began, Montse climbed the staircase to the third floor. *To Lucy from her Aphrodite*. The white walls and window frames wound their patterns around her with the adamant geometry of a seashell. A book and a rose, that was all she was bringing. The Señora wasn't at home. She must be in her garden with all her other roses. Montse set her offering down before Señora Lucy's apartment door, the rose atop the book. And then she went to work.

"MONTSERRAT, have you seen the newspaper?" Assunta called out across the washtubs.

"I never see the newspaper," Montserrat answered through a mouthful of thread.

"Montserrat, Montserrat of the key," Marta crooned beside her. The other maids took up the chant until Montse held her needle still and said: "All right, what's the joke, girls?"

"They're talking about the advertisement that's in *La Vanguardia* this morning," said Señora Gaeta, placing the newspaper on the lid of Montse's workbasket. Montse

laid lengths of thread beneath the lines of newsprint as she read:

ENZO GOMEZ OF GOMEZ, CRUZ AND MOLINA AWAITS
CONTACT WITH A WOMAN WHO BEARS THE NAME
MONTSERRAT AND IS IN POSSESSION OF A GOLD KEY
ONE AND ONE HALF INCHES IN LENGTH.

Without saying another word, the eagle-eyed Señora Gaeta picked up a scarlet thread an inch and a half long and held it up against Montse's key. The lengths matched. Señora Gaeta rested a hand on Montse's shoulder, then walked back up to the front of the room to inspect a heap of newly done laundry before it returned to its owner. The babble around Montse grew deafening.

"Montse don't go—it's a trap! This is just like that episode in *Lightning and Undetectable Poisons*—"

"That's our Cecilia, confusing life with one of her beloved radio novellas again . . . so sordid an imagination . . ."

"Let's face it, eh, Montse—you're no good at laundry, you must have been born to be rich!"

"Montserrat, never forget that I, Laura Morales, have always loved you . . . remember I shared my lunch with you on the very first day?"

“When she moves into her new mansion she can have us all to stay for a weekend—come on, Montse! Just one weekend a year.”

“Ladies, ladies,” Señora Gaeta intervened at last. “I have a headache today. Quiet, or every last one of you will be looking for jobs in hell.”

Montse kept her eyes on her work. It was the only way to keep her mind quiet.

THE SOLICITOR ENZO GOMEZ looked at her hands and uniform before he looked into her eyes. Her hands had been roughened by harsh soap and hard water; she fought the impulse to hide them behind her back. Instead she undid the clasp of her necklace and held the key out to him. She told him her name and he jingled a bunch of keys in his own pocket and said: “The only way we can find out is by trying the lock. So let’s go.”

THE ROUTE they took was familiar. “Sometimes I go to an art gallery just down that street,” Montse said, pointing. He had already been looking at her but when she said that he began to stare.

“You sometimes go to the Salazar Gallery?”

“Yes . . . they exhibit paintings by—”

“I don’t know much about the artists of today; you can only really rely on the old masters . . . but that’s where we’re going, to the Salazar Gallery.”

Gomez stopped, pulled a folder out of his briefcase, and read aloud from a piece of paper in it: *Against my better judgment but in accordance with the promise I made to my brother Isidoro Salazar, I, Zacarias Salazar, leave the library of my house at 17 Carrer Alhambra to one Montserrat who will come with the key to the library as proof of her claim. If the claimant has not come forth within fifty years of my death, let the lock of the library door be changed in order to put an end to this nonsense. For if the mother cannot be found, then how can the daughter?*

Enzo put the folder back. “I hope you’re the one,” he said. “I’ve met a lot of Montserrats in this capacity today, most of them chancers. But you—I hope it’s you. Are you . . . what do you know of the Salazar family?”

“I know that old Zacarias Salazar was a billionaire, left no biological children but still fathers many artworks through his patronage . . .”

“You read the gallery catalog thoroughly, I see.”

A gallery attendant opened the main gate for them and showed them around a few gilt-wallpapered passages until they came to the library, which was on its own at the end of a corridor. Montse was dimly aware of Enzo Gomez

mopping his forehead with a handkerchief as she placed the key in the lock and turned it. The door opened onto a room with high shelves and higher windows that followed the curve of a cupola ceiling. The laundry maid and the solicitor stood in front of the shelf closest to the door. Sunset lit the chandeliers above them and they found themselves holding hands until Gomez remembered his professionalism and strode over to the nearest desk to remove papers from his briefcase once again.

“I’m glad it’s you, Montserrat,” he said, placing the papers on the desk and patting them. “You must let me know if I can be of service to you in future.” He bowed, shook hands, and left her in her library without looking back, the quivering of his trouser cuffs the only visible sign of his emotions.

Montse wandered among the shelves until it was too dark to see. She thought that if the place was really hers she should open it up to the public; there were more books here than could possibly be read in one lifetime. Books on sword-swallowing and life forms found in the ocean, climatology and the aurora borealis and other topics that reminded Montse how very much there was to wonder about in this world: There were things she’d seen in dreams that she wanted to see again and one of these books, any of them, might lead her back to those visions, and then

further on so that she saw marvels while still awake. For now there was the smell of leather-bound books and another faint but definite scent: roses. She cried into her hands because she was lost: She'd carried the key to this place for so long and now that she was there she didn't know where she was. The scent of roses grew stronger and she wiped her hands on her apron, switched on a light, and opened the folder Enzo Gomez had handed her.

This is what she read:

Montserrat, I'm very fond of your mother. I was fond of everyone who shared my home. I am a fool, but not the kind who surrounds himself with people he doesn't trust. I didn't know what was really happening below stairs; we upstairs are always the last to know. Things could have been very different. You would have had a home here, and I would have spoiled you, and doubtless you would have grown up with the most maddening airs and graces. That would have been wonderful.

As I say, I was fond of everyone who lived with me, but I was particularly fond of Aurelie. I am an old man now—an old libertine, even—and my memory commits all manner of betrayals; only a few things stay with me. Some words that made me happy because they were said by exactly the right person at exactly the right time, and some pictures because they

formed their own moment. One such picture is your mother's brilliant smile, always slightly anxious, as if even in the moment of delighting you she wonders how she dares to be so very delightful. I hope that smile is before you right now. I hope she came back to you.

Please allow me to say another useless thing: Nobody could have made me believe that Aurelie ever stole from me. The only person who could possibly have held your mother in higher esteem than I did was my brother, Isidoro. He told me I should give my library to her. Then he told me she'd be happier if I gave it to her daughter. Do it or I'll haunt you to death, he wrote. The rest of this house is dedicated to art now; it's been a long time since I lived here, or visited. But the library is yours. So enjoy it, my dear.

Zacarias Salazar

PS: I found Aurelie's letter to you enclosed among my brother's papers. I am unsure how it got there.

Aurelie's letter made Montse stand and walk the paths between the shelves as she read, stopping to sit in the cushioned chairs scattered across the library's alcoves. She kept looking up from the page, along the shelves, into the past.

Dear Montserrat,

I should make this quick because I'm coming back for you, so really there's no need for it. I suppose really I'm writing this to try to get my brain working properly again. It will be hard to let you go even for a little while, but Isidoro thought that even if worse comes to worst (which it won't) the library key will bring you back here somehow.

I'll tell you about your key: A wish brought it to me. It was my birthday, my thirtieth birthday, and Fausta Del Olmo was the only one who knew. There are people who are drawn to secrets as ants are to jam. Fausta's one of them. She searches out all things unspoken and unseen—not to make them known, but to destroy them so that nobody knows they ever existed. That's what makes her heart beat faster, the destruction of invisible foundations. Why? Because she finds it funny. The master once told us about a cousin of his, a lovely, cheerful girl, but touched in the head, he said. This cousin committed suicide one day, quite out of the blue. She did it after talking to her friend on the telephone. That friend now spends her days searching her brain for those disastrous words she must have said, and has become ill herself. As our master was telling us this I watched Fausta Del Olmo out of the corner of my eye. She was laughing silently, but the master didn't notice until Fausta's laughter grew so great that she began to choke. She explained that she was overcome by the sadness and the mystery of it all, and she made the sign of

the cross. By then I was already so frightened of her that I didn't dare contradict her. There's no stopping Fausta because she believes in hell. The master thinks this belief in hell keeps her on the straight and narrow, but the truth is she's so sure she's going there that she doesn't even care anymore. When Fausta brought me a little cake with a candle in it and told me to make a wish I wanted to say no. It's stupid but I didn't want Fausta to know my birthday, in case she somehow had the power to take it away. If she made it so I was never born I'd never have had a chance to be me and to hear your father's honey-wine voice and to fall in love with him. He ran off, your father, and if I ever find him I won't be able to stop myself from kicking him in the face for that, the cowardly way he left me here. I didn't yet know I was pregnant, but I bet he knew. He must have developed some sort of instinct for those things. He once said, "Babies are so . . ." and I thought he was going to say something poetic but he finished: "expensive."

I should be making you understand about the key! When I blew out my birthday candle I wished for a million books. I think I wished this because at that time I was having to force my smiles, and I wanted to stop that and to really be happier.

The master has a husband, Pasqual Grec. Not that they were married in church, but that's the way they are with each other. Some of the other servants pretend they've no eyes in their

heads and say that Pasqual is just the master's dear friend, but Fausta Del Olmo says that they definitely share a bed and that since they are rich they can just do everything they want to do without having to take an interest in anybody's opinion. Your key doesn't seem to want me to talk about it, but I will. I will. The master is not an angry man, but he's argumentative in a way that makes other people angry. And Pasqual is an outdoorsman and doesn't like to wait too long between hunts; when he gets restless there are fights—maybe three a week. The master retires to the library for some time and takes his meals in there, and Pasqual goes out with the horses. But when the master comes out of the library he's much more peaceful. I thought it must be all the books that calmed the master down. Millions of books—at least that's how it looks when you just take a quick glance while pretending not to be at all interested. And the day after I made my wish the key to the library fell into my hands. The master had left it in the pocket of a housecoat he'd sent down to me in the laundry. Of course it could have been any key, but it wasn't. The key and the opportunity to use it came together, for the master and Pasqual had decided to winter in Buenos Aires. I was about four months pregnant by then, and had to bind my stomach to keep you secret and keep my place in the household. I went into the library at night and found peace and fortitude there.

I didn't know where to begin, so I just looked for a name that I knew until I came to a life of Joan of Arc, which I sat down and read really desperately. I read without stopping until the end, as if somebody were chasing me through the pages with a butcher's knife. The next night I read more slowly, a life of Galileo Galilei that took me four nights to finish because his fate was hard to take. I kept saying, "Those bastards," and once after saying that I heard a sound in another part of the library. A library at night is full of sounds: The unread books can't stand it any longer and announce their contents, some boasting, some shy, some devious. But the sound I heard wasn't the sound of a book. It was more like a suppressed cough or a sneeze, or a clearing of the throat, or some convulsive, impulsive mix of the three. Everything became very still. Even the books shut up. I looked at the shelf directly in front of me; I read each title on it, spine after spine. There was a gap between the spines, and two eyes looked out of it. Not the master's, or Pasqual's, not the eyes of anybody I could remember having met.

I found the courage to ask: "What are you doing here?"

"What are YOU doing here?" asked the man. I could hear in his voice that he wasn't well, and then fear left me; I felt we both had our reasons.

"Can't you see I'm reading?" I said. "Maybe you should read too, instead of SPYING on people."

“Maybe I should,” he said. “It’s just that I thought you might be like the other one.”

“The other one?”

“Yes. But don’t tell her you’ve seen me.”

“Why not?”

“Because then she’d know that I’ve seen her . . . and I don’t want her to know that until I’ve spoken to my brother.”

“Your brother?”

“Too much talking, pretty thief. I have to rest now. But promise you won’t tell her.”

He didn’t need to describe her; it had to be Fausta he was talking about. I didn’t even want to know what she’d been up to.

“I’m not a thief,” I said. “And I won’t say anything to her. I haven’t seen you, anyway. Only your eyes.”

“Well? What do you think of my eyes, pretty thief?”

“They are an old man’s eyes,” I answered, and I held the Life of Galileo up in front of my face until I heard him walking away. He walked all the way to the back of the library, and up some stairs—I hadn’t known there was a staircase in the library until I heard him going up it—look, Montserrat, and you’ll see that there is one, built between two shelves, leading up to a door halfway up the wall. Through that door is a wing of the main house that only a few of the servants were familiar with, though we all knew that Isidoro Salazar, the master’s younger brother, lived in that part of the house. Lived—well, we

knew the man was dying there, and did not wish to be talked to or talked about. A special cook prepared his meals according to certain nutritional principles of immortality that a Swiss doctor had told the master about, and Fausta had told us how she laid the table and served the meals in Isidoro's rooms. He waited in the next room while she did it, and no matter what he ate or didn't eat he was still dying. When I thought about that I worried that my words might have added to Isidoro's troubles.

The next day, after Fausta had brought him his lunch, I wrote: "I should not have been like that to you—Rude and thoughtless maid from the library" on a piece of paper, ran up to his rooms and pushed the note under his door. And I stayed away from the library for a while, only returning when the chatter of the books reached me where I slept in the maids' dormitory on the other side of the house. He wasn't there that night, but when I went to my shelf of choice to take down Galileo, I saw a slip of paper sticking out of the neighboring book. The slip read: "To the pretty thief—read this book, and then look for more."

I loved some of the books he chose, others sent me to sleep. I turned his slips of paper over and wrote down my thoughts. One of the books he chose was a slim pamphlet of poetry that didn't make much sense to me: I dismissed it with a line borrowed from other poems he'd introduced me to: It may wele ryme but it accordith nought. He responded with a really long

and angry letter—I think he must have been the author of those poems I didn't think were good.

Isidoro wouldn't come near me, even when I began to want him to. We'd spend nights reading together, on separate sides of a shelf, not speaking, listening to the books around us. According to Stendhal it takes about a year and a month to fall in love, all being well. Maybe we fell faster because all was not well with us: every day it got harder for me to keep you to myself, and he could not forget that he was dying; he fought sleep until the nightmares came to take him by force. He fell asleep in the library one night—he had done this twice before, but out of respect for him I had left using a route that meant I could pass him without looking at him. But when I heard him saying: "No, no . . ." I went to him without thinking and leaned over him to try to see whether I should wake him. He was younger than the look in his eyes suggested. I don't know what his sickness was—it had some wasting effect—even as I saw his face I saw that its beauty was diminished. You can read character in a sleeping face, and his was quite a face. The face of a proud man, vengeful and not a little naive, a man with questions he hadn't finished asking and answers to some questions I had myself. He opened his old man eyes and took a long, deep breath, as if breathing me in. It must have looked as if I was about to kiss him. Our faces were very close and curtains of my hair surrounded us; if we kissed it would be

our secret to keep. I kissed him. Then I asked if it had hurt. He said he wasn't sure and that we'd better try it again. And he kissed me back. I didn't want to leave him after that, but I had to be back in bed by the time the other maids began to wake up.

Montserrat, I wrote that being in love with your father was nice, but being in love with Isidoro Salazar was like a dream. Not because of money or anything like that—! The man loved foolishly and without regard for the time limit his learned doctors had told him he had; he made me feel that in some way we had always known about each other and that he would be at my side forever. When Fausta Del Olmo took me aside and asked: "Is there anything you want to tell me?" my blood should have run cold, but it didn't. After all she could have been asking about the pregnancy.

Beyond Isidoro's staircase is a door that connects to a walled garden. The garden is Isidoro's too: he planted all the roses there himself and took care of them until he got too sick to do anything but just be there with them of an evening. We were often there together. It's a long walk from the top of the garden to the bottom, and I'd carry him some of the way. Yes, on my back, if you can imagine that. He was drowsy because of his medication—he had to take more and more—but even through the haze of his remedies he remembered you. "The baby!" I told him you didn't mind (you don't, do you?) and that his weight

was balancing me out. He grew more lucid when we lay down on the grass. He was so fond of the roses; one night I told him that he wouldn't die, but that he would become roses.

"I wouldn't mind this dying so much if that were true," he said, slowly. "But wait a minute . . . roses die too."

"Well, after that you'd become something else. Maybe a wasp, because then you could go around stinging people who don't like your poems."

It was around that time that I kept finding gifts on my bed. Little gifts, but they got bigger and bigger. A mother of pearl comb, a calfskin purse, a green cashmere shawl. I told Isidoro to stop giving me gifts. The other servants were asking about them. Isidoro simply smiled at first, but when he asked me to show him the gifts I saw that he was perplexed and that they hadn't come from him.

"Are you sure there's nothing you want to tell me?" Fausta Del Olmo asked, and maybe it was just a beam of sunlight that struck her eye, but I thought she squinted at my stomach. She added that the master would return in two weeks' time. I didn't even answer her. Suddenly she pushed me—if I hadn't clutched the stair rail I would have fallen—and as she passed me she hissed: "Why should it be you who sees him?"

That afternoon I found the last gift under my pillow. It was a diamond ring. I put the box in the pocket of my apron and kept it there until nighttime, when I went to the library. I showed the

ring to Isidoro and asked him what I should do. He said I should marry him. He had instructed Fausta Del Olmo to put the ring beneath my pillow; he was sure that she had been responsible for the other gifts, even though they were nothing to do with him. She was planning something, but it didn't matter, or wouldn't if I married him.

"Time is of the essence," Isidoro said. All I could do was look at him with my mouth wide open. And then I said yes. He said I must fetch a priest at once, and I didn't know where to find a priest, so I went and woke Fausta Del Olmo up and asked her to help me. She gave me the oddest look and said: "What do you want a priest for?"

"I'm marrying Isidoro Salazar tonight," I said.

"Oh, really? And I suppose he's the father of your child too?" she whispered, her eyes glinting the way they do when she gets hold of a secret at last.

"Please just hurry."

Fausta Del Olmo put on her coat and slippers and ran out to fetch a priest, and the man of God arrived quickly; he was calm and had a kind face and took my hand and asked me what the trouble was. "But didn't you tell him, Fausta, that this is a wedding?"

Fausta shrugged and looked embarrassed and I began to be frightened of her all over again. Something was wrong. I took the priest to the library, and Fausta Del Olmo followed us.

Isidoro wasn't there, but when I opened the library door, a door at the far, far end of the room slammed shut. Isidoro had seen Fausta and escaped into the rose garden. I went after him, but Fausta and the priest didn't follow me—they were talking, and Fausta was pointing at something . . . I now realize it was the door to Isidoro's rooms that she was pointing at.

Isidoro wasn't in the garden; after searching for him I went back into the library, which was also empty. I could hear a lot of noise and commotion in the rest of the house, footsteps hurrying up and down the wing where Isidoro's rooms were. I saw his rooms, the inside of them, I mean, for the first time that night. The priest Isidoro and I had sent for was praying over a waxen body that lay in the bed. When the priest finished his prayers he said that I must not be afraid to tell him the truth, that no one would punish me, that I'd done well to send for him.

"What do you mean?" I said.

"This man has been dead for at least a day. No, don't shake your head at me, young lady. See how stiff he is. He'd been very ill, poor soul, so this is a release for him. You came here this morning and found him like this, isn't that what happened? And your master is away, so you worried all day about who to tell and what you would say until the worry made you cook up this story in your head about a wedding. Isn't that so?"

All the servants were listening, but I still said no, that he was wrong. I put my hand in my pocket to take out my ring and show it to him, but the ring was gone too.

“My ring,” I said, turning to Fausta Del Olmo, who replied in the deadliest, most gentle voice: “What ring, Aurelie? Be careful what you say.”

After that I stopped talking. I looked at the body in the bed and told myself it was Isidoro and no one else. This was a truth that I had to learn, things would go very badly for me if I refused to learn it, but the lesson was very hard indeed.

The priest left, promising to write to the master as soon as he got home, and all we servants went to bed. Fausta was the last to leave Isidoro’s room, closing the door behind her as quietly as if he was just sleeping. Then she took my arm and dragged me downstairs to the maids’ dormitory, where judge and jury were waiting. Was I mad or was I simply a liar? They’d already taken out the little gifts I’d received and were talking about them: Now Fausta told them where the gifts had come from. I’d taken the key to the library from the master’s laundry, she announced, and I’d been selling off a number of his valuable books. I inferred from this that this is what Fausta herself had been doing before I’d interrupted her with my library visits.

“But how stupid, to spend the money on things like this,” the cook said, flapping the green shawl in my face.

“Some people just don’t think of the future,” Fausta Del Olmo said. A couple of the other maids hadn’t joined in and looked as if they didn’t entirely believe Fausta Del Olmo. Perhaps they’d had their own problems with her. But then Fausta announced that even Isidoro Salazar had known I was a thief. She showed them some of the slips of paper Isidoro had left for me in the library, slips he must have left that time I stayed away. The words “pretty thief” persuaded them. The master is a generous man and stealing from him causes all sorts of unnecessary difficulties. Now that some of his books are gone he may well become much less generous. The servants drove me out of the dormitory. They went to the kitchen and took pots and pans and banged them together and cried: “Shame! Shame! Shame!” I stayed in my bed for as long as I could with my covers pulled over my head, but they were so loud. They surrounded my bed, shame, shame, shame, so loud I can still hear it, shame, shame, shame. I fled, and Fausta and the servants chased me through the corridors with their pots and pans and screeching—someone hit me with a spatula and then they all threw spoons, which sounds droll now that it’s over, but having silver spoons thrown at you in a dark house is a terrifying thing, you see them flashing against the walls like little swords before they hit you. It would’ve been worse if those people had actually had knives: they’d completely lost their minds.

I made it into the library by the skin of my teeth and locked the door behind me. I wrote, am writing, this letter to you, my Montserrat. The servants have given up their rough music and have gone to bed. You will be born soon, maybe later today, maybe tomorrow. I feel you close. I know where I will have to leave you. As for this letter, I will give it to the roses, and then I must get out of here for a while. How long? Until I am sure of what happened, or at least the true order of it all. Did I somehow give him more time than he would have had on his own? The entire time I have been writing this letter I have felt Isidoro's eyes on me. He seems to be telling me that we could still have been married, that if I'd only brought the priest and not Fausta we could still have been married. Of course he cannot really be telling me anything: I have seen him as a dead man. Why am I not afraid?

Montse found that she'd walked the length of the library as she read her mother's letter. Now she stood at the door to Isidoro's garden, which opened with the same key. Outside, someone in the shadows took a couple of startled steps backward. Señora Lucy.

"I saw all this light coming out from under that door," Lucy said. "That was new." She peered over Montse's shoulder. "Swap you a rose for a book," she said.