

A Death in the Family

The first thing he noticed were the little blood stains on his pillow. Sometimes numerous, sometimes few, sometimes larger, sometimes smaller, they were always there, every morning.

Actually, it was his mother who had first seen them.

“Did you have a nosebleed last night?”

“A nosebleed? No. I don’t know. Why?”

“There are blood stains on your pillow.”

“Blood stains? Are you sure?” He turned red for no apparent reason.

As evidence, his mother showed him the three little brownish spots; they were perfectly aligned, like The Three Sisters in Orion’s Belt.

“Is there something wrong?”

“No. Why should there be anything wrong? Probably just a scab, some scab I scratched in my sleep.”

But no matter how many times he checked and doublechecked later, he found no scabs, no wounds that were healing.

He didn’t make much of it at first; just as they had appeared, they would disappear.

There’s nothing wrong with me.

But the following day they were there again, and the next day and the next and the next.

It can’t last much longer, he kept telling himself.

And as he waited for them to disappear just as they’d appeared, the days became weeks, the weeks months; summer came and went and every morning, with the same regularity as sunrise, there were the stains, refusing to leave.

Though at first he hadn’t taken them too seriously—even now he remained convinced it couldn’t last much longer—or perhaps *because* he still didn’t

take them too seriously, he decided it would be best if his mother didn't find out. Why upset her for no reason? So ever since the day they were discovered, the first thing he did in the morning, as soon as he woke up, so as to give the pillow time to dry off, was wash the stains with a wet rag he would bring from the bathroom on the sly.

It was like being fourteen again, when he would secretly wash his pajamas, soiled after a wet dream.

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The second thing he noticed was his hair. But he'd noticed that himself and, with a little luck, his mother would never find out.

One fine day, as suddenly as with the little bloodstains, his hair started getting more knotted and tangled each morning and harder to comb than the day before. Sometimes it was knotted all over, sometimes in separate, sticky strands as if someone had poured a thick glue on his head during the night, sometimes it stood on end, pointing every which way like porcupine quills.

With skill and patience and constant experiments with new soap and shampoo brands and different kinds of combs and brushes, he'd managed until now to more or less solve every one of these problems so that, even if his hair never looked the same, he could go out without attracting too much attention. The trouble was that each day a new difficulty arose and what had worked yesterday no longer worked today. And as each new solution took longer than the one before, he'd become convinced that very soon he wouldn't be able to get ready in the mornings even if he got up at daybreak.

Luckily most of the tighter knots and more stubborn strands were along his scalp, and he could leave them alone if he covered them with the tamer parts of his hair which still submitted to combing. With time, his hair had formed two layers: the top one people saw, which was more or less combed; and the one underneath, a matted, thick, impenetrable mess.

A complicating factor was that his hair had grown longer than ever, to the point that he had to tie it so that it wouldn't cover his ears. But how could he go to the barber's with his hair in such a state? How would the barber look at him when, by dint of comb, brush and scissors, he finally managed

to make his way to the deeper layer, the matted jungle that had not been untangled in months.

“Next time, big guy, don’t come to me if you haven’t washed your hair first.”

He had been told that when he was little. Now, as a grown up, his humiliation would be much worse.

Maybe a barber shop where no one knew him; maybe one in Buenos Aires, for example...

But what if the barber, once he reached the hair’s underbelly, decided that only a good shave could fix it and shaved his head right then and there like a conscript?

Showing up at home with a shaved head would be like showing up bleached blond or wrapped in bandages from head to toe or in a wheelchair.

But that wasn’t all. He was convinced there was a connection between the bloodstains and the unmanageable hair. Although every day he checked his head and found nothing, he was sure that while he slept an open sore on his scalp must have oozed blood or some other kind of viscous fluid, and that was what made his hair sticky and stained the pillowcases. What he was he really afraid of was that the barber might see what he himself had failed to: some festering fleshy growth or pernicious rash, a bloody exudation or something more terrible yet, something so terrible he couldn’t even imagine it.

How would the barber react then? What if he panicked and called some medical hot line or the police? After all, it would be a matter for a doctor, not a barber.

And how would his mother react hearing about it from a strange voice on the phone?

Lastly there was the chance, potentially even worse, that the barber remained perfectly calm and decided to play surgeon himself, with razor, scissors, coarse brush and cheap cologne for a disinfectant.

The choice between such courses of action and every day letting another day go by doing nothing was an easy one.

And so he'd let one week go by and then another, one month and then another. And now his hair covered his ears.

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Another source of trouble was the combs. Even the "tame" layer was too much for them. Every now and then they would lose their teeth or crack in two. That forced him to replace them constantly with new combs, which he had to buy, to avoid incurring suspicion, in different stores, the result being that they were all different colors and materials. And as he couldn't allow his mother to see that display of combs of all colors, shapes and sizes, the one comb he kept in the bathroom he had there just for appearance's sake; the ones he actually used—more than once he'd broken three combs in a single morning—he kept hidden in his briefcase until nighttime, when he took them out and slipped them under his pillow. The danger was that his mother might find some fallen teeth—which forced him to carefully search his bathroom floor every morning before leaving—or even a whole comb under his pillow if he forgot about it there.

The same way you forgot about the condoms that time.

...

The real problem, the only problem, was that he had to do it all in secret. Now, for example, he needed much more time to get ready in the mornings, but *simply setting* the alarm earlier wouldn't do. Maybe, one day or two it would, but not every day. His mother would have heard it go off earlier and wanted to know the reason for the new schedule.

The solution had been to continue to set the alarm for the same time and teach himself to wake up on his own. That meant waking up several times during the night, always terrified, certain he had overslept. If it was before five o'clock, he'd go back to sleep; if after, he'd stay seated on the bed, in the dark because he didn't want his mother to know he was up, and wait for the sun to rise. Luckily it was still rising quite early. But if this business wasn't sorted soon...

His bedroom and his mother's were separated by the bathroom, but both mother and son kept their doors open when they went to bed. This custom,

which dated back to his childhood, when he was afraid of the dark, was now giving him endless problems. His mother would get up at six, pass through the bathroom without turning on the light to avoid waking him, and tiptoe to his bed to make sure everything was as it should be: that her son was all tucked in and sound asleep; that the window wasn't closed too tight to let fresh air in or open too wide to let a draft in, and that the curtain was drawn to keep the morning light from waking him ahead of time.

Afterward she'd return to the bathroom and, when she was finished, go to the kitchen to have some mate and make breakfast for her children while listening to the radio.

Paula, his sister, would never get up before seven, so he had plenty of time to get his wet rag and return it to its place without anyone hearing or seeing anything. Afterward, wielding the comb that had lain hidden under the pillow, he stood in front of the mirror and began, with the first light, his daily torment.

That was how, by resorting to ruses and the occasional white lie, he had managed so far to preserve a semblance of normality, which was the only thing that mattered to him. But the lack of sleep, his constant worrying, the need to lie, the fear that his secret might be discovered had made him irritable, forgetful, impatient. And whenever his mother or sister got upset over one of his slipups or harsh remarks, he couldn't say, as he would in the office: "Sorry. I haven't been feeling so good, you know." Because what he wanted was precisely to persuade them, whatever the cost, that things couldn't possibly be going better, and there was nothing wrong with him.

The effort it took to keep this illusion alive was greater every day and becoming nearly intolerable. His weariness was deep and permanent. Not even on weekends could he have a bit of peace and tranquility. Go to the movies, a soccer match? See friends at a café? Swing by the sports club? Or simply go for a walk and get some fresh air? Not a chance. He didn't dare leave his house for even a minute. He didn't dare leave his room! Only when he was at home alone could he relax, but that was rare. And why, why couldn't he go anywhere? For a very simple reason: the briefcase.

The briefcase had become the key instrument of his clandestine activities. In it he kept the hairbrushes, which he'd started buying almost every day to see if they gave him better results than the combs. And in it he carried, in addition to shampoo, the bottles of gel, which he used to fasten the shaggy hair clumps behind his ears. The briefcase entered the house every evening full of bottles, combs, soaps, and brushes, and every morning it went out full of broken combs and brushes and empty bottles, not to mention torn and uprooted hair clumps.

That is to say, every morning except Saturday and Sunday. The weekends the briefcase didn't leave home; it stayed in the usual corner of his room, on top of the table which had been a kitchen table and now served as his desk. And every Saturday and every Sunday, as she had always done, his mother made his bed, put away his clothes and tidied up his room. And when she entered, he needed to leave, so she could do her work in peace. What to do?

There were two possibilities: remove from the briefcase and hide somewhere else what he kept in it during the week, or leave everything as it was and trust that his mother wouldn't think to look inside. Like Poe's *The Purloined Letter*: what's in plain sight doesn't raise suspicion.

No. She's sure to open it and discover everything.

So he started to take things out of the briefcase and hide them.

Soon he learned, to his chagrin, that he couldn't hide everything in the same place—say in the wardrobe with his summer clothes—because as his arsenal of tools increased, so too did the number of appropriate hiding spots he needed, which increased the probability that his mother would find one of them. The other danger was that sooner or later, in his Monday morning scrambles, he would leave something forgotten somewhere and afterward be unable to remember where.

How she found out about your sleeping with Julia, because of the damn condoms.

He did manage to leave his room as little as possible. Which didn't go unnoticed. What was this new obsession with never going anywhere and spending all his hours shut inside, reading or listening to soccer games on

the radio? He hadn't even gone to see the game between Gimnasia and Estudiantes! More implausible excuses, more hare-brained stories, more lies. All hanging by a thread which could be cut any moment.

The briefcase—Russian leather, a birthday present from Paula—had become a time bomb.

...

If his mornings were consumed with the anxiety of his not knowing whether he would succeed in taming his rebellious hair, and his weekends consumed by his terror of being discovered, his nights weren't any easier. Convinced that it was absolutely crucial to pretend that everything was fine, even though by dinnertime he was already falling asleep he would never admit it. With surprising stoicism, he would endure every bite of food and table talk without saying a word, concentrating solely on keeping his eyes open, swallowing his yawns and concealing the inevitable bobs of his head. He never had any idea what was being discussed and if he laughed when they laughed or he feigned surprise when they looked surprised, it was all sheer survival instinct.

As soon as he could excuse himself without raising suspicion, he'd get up and go to his corner of the living room, to supposedly read a newspaper or magazine. There he could hear them but they couldn't see him, and with his face hidden behind the paper, he felt safe enough to finally close his eyes and sleep. But never for more than two or three minutes; the danger was too great.

He would always start awake. If the sound of nearing steps didn't wake him, it was the sudden silence in the dining room that did, or the newspaper which fell from his hands, or a voice that whispered his name in a dream. It was risky; some day or other they were going to catch him sleeping. Or worse, they'd let him sleep, and then the same thing would happen to him that happened to him at night, when he slept in his bed, and when he got up from the chair to give them a goodnight kiss—"Night, mom," "Night, Paula"—they would, horrified, see the thin thread of blood trickling down the middle of his forehead.

The worst part was that, deep down, he suspected all those sacrifices wouldn't make any difference. More than once he had caught them whispering before they suddenly quieted on hearing him enter. Other times it was the way they would look at him, or, rather, the way they would look at each other after seeing him enter. But perhaps more significant than what they said was what they *wouldn't* say.

His hair, for example. It was quite possible that his mother had not noticed the wet pillowcases or that, thanks to his ruses, she had not noticed how sleep deprived he was. But his hair? Even people on the street were starting to tease him about it. And yet she gave no reaction? How could it be? After all, she was always the one who insisted he cut his hair whenever she thought it was a bit long, and if her prodding wasn't enough, she would drag him herself to the barber shop.

Everything related to his grooming and personal appearance fell under his mother's jurisdiction. Not only did she iron his pants and shirts and wash his underwear, but she always went shopping with him and even picked out his ties. And anything he didn't have to try on she would buy herself. In fact, he didn't remember ever buying himself undershirts or underwear or even a handkerchief.

And now that same mother kept her silence as if she didn't see or think anything about it? Why?

On further reflection, his mother had not asked him any questions for weeks. He used to come home and be immediately bombarded with questions, but now she would only talk to him if he seemed willing and only about topics that interested him. Why that sudden discretion?

She knows.

Don't be an idiot. How could she know?

Look. She doesn't take her eyes off you.

It was true. She never left him out of her sight. It was even possible that she was conspiring with Paula to keep a stronger watch on him. But it was one thing to suspect and another to know.

In any case, he was sure that every morning, as soon as he left for the office, she went into his room and turned it upside down.

You've got to tread very carefully. One little slip-up and you're done for.

...

Sheltered behind the paper, he falls asleep in his armchair.

He dreams they are in Montevideo, that it's summer and his father is driving them to the beach in his Chevrolet '41. It's a special day; his cousins are also coming today. And because there isn't room in the back for all four children, he rides in the front, on his mother's lap.

Someone calls his name; it's a far off, muffled voice. The voice comes nearer, whispers something in his ear. He would like to open his eyes, pay attention, certain it's important. But he doesn't want to miss the trip to the beach... with his cousins, no less! It's Paula's voice; it has to be her who's stealthily snuck in from the dining room and made her way to his chair.

"No answer. He's asleep. We can talk freely," says Paula.

Then his father gently taps his shoulder and says to him:

"Pretend you're asleep, so you can find out what they're plotting."

He follows his father's advice and continues to breathe deep and slow even as he feels a new hand tapping on his shoulder. Dad's right, he thinks. At last he is going to find out what they say about him behind his back.

But now he is being shaken more forcefully and he loses track, no matter how hard he tries he can't make out the secret his mother is telling Paula, the secret it is so important for him to learn

"Wake up! Wake up! It's 10 o'clock in the morning!"

And now he'll never know what they're plotting, and he'll miss the trip to the beach.

"Are you getting up or not? This is the third time I've come to get you out of bed."

He started awake.

He looked for his paper, which must have fallen; then for the car, which only an instant ago he was happily riding to the beach.

But there was no paper or car or beach or cousins and his father had died more than fifteen years ago.

“Are you not feeling well? Want me to let the office know you’re not coming in?”

He was in his bedroom, lying on his bed, still perfectly made. He had fallen asleep there fully dressed the night before.

“It’s 10 already. Want me to tell them you’re not coming?” asked his mother once more.

“No, no, no.”

“That you’re going to be late?”

“No. Yes. Yes, tell them I’m about to leave. Thanks. That I’ll be there in a few minutes. Thanks, mom.”

Ten o’clock! Not only had he failed to wake up on his own, but he hadn’t heard the alarm, hadn’t even heard his mother come into his room! Three times! And to top it all off, she had caught him lying there fully dressed, as if he’d gone to bed drunk.

He looked at his pillow. This time there were seven stains, in the shape of a bow. His mother must have seen them. What else might she have seen?

And now, to make matters worse, things would get complicated for him in the office too. In fourteen years he had never been late. And now, he’d be hours late. How would they take it?

He was still sitting on his bed, stunned, not knowing where to begin. He felt as if he was carrying the whole world on his shoulders, as if he had been sentenced for the remainder of his days to climb a huge mountain and ask for forgiveness with each step.

The sun was shining through the transom window, as high as in summer. On his bed, quite perversely, a golden beam played with the comforter’s bright colors. A party of light and joy.

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He looked at himself in the mirror: all of his hair had risen in a gigantic cowlick. He touched it gingerly. Hard as bristles.

He took off the sweater in which he'd fallen asleep the night before, and his necktie, but he kept his shirt on. He'd make it last one more day.

He lit up the water heater and turned it on full blast.

If you burn yourself, tough shit. It's what you deserve.

He soaked his hair with almost-boiling water and put a towel over his head. He returned to his bedroom with a wet rag and, while waiting for his hair to soften, washed off the bloodstains. Back in the bathroom, he removed the towel and, wielding a brand-new comb, probed and tested, trying to find a soft spot. His hair was more manageable now; working each strand with both hands and then combing the tips, he might have been able to create a semblance of order. But for that he would have needed all the time in the world and a saint's patience, both in very short supply that morning.

Why had he let this go on for so long? Why did he always trust that everything would just work out in the end? Why had he overslept that morning?

There was only one thing to try today: brute force.

He looked at the comb. It looked strong. It had a handle and a double row of reinforced teeth. He grabbed it with both hands, sank it in the middle of the cowlick and started to pull. He pulled hard. Nothing. He clenched his teeth and pulled harder. Nothing. He pulled and pulled, until tears filled his eyes. Nothing.

He started to grow desperate. Any moment now his mother would come knocking on the door.

He decided to try one more time. He stuck the comb near his forehead, closed his eyes and pulled as hard as he could. This time something gave, like a tear in a piece of fabric.

When he opened his eyes he saw only hair, the hair still tangled in the comb he was holding with both hands. His first thought was that he had torn out a

whole clump by the roots.

Just what I needed!

He wondered if each time he tried to comb his hair he'd lose another patch. He imagined himself the victim of a process of general decomposition: his hair would fall out in patches until he was bald, and after the hair the teeth would follow, and after the teeth...

What nonsense.

He turned and looked at his profile in the mirror: first one side, then the other. Now he grasped what had happened. His hair had not been pulled out by the roots as he'd believed, but had dragged along a large piece of scalp and part of the skin of his forehead, which was now hanging between the comb and his face. The arching tear went from one temple to the other and on the skinned flesh were slowly forming, at regular intervals, seven bright red drops.

He felt a stab of burning pain.

This was serious, worse than he'd imagined. It would have to be disinfected, sewn together with stitches...

There was a knock on the door.

“Are you still there?”

Yes, he meant to answer, but couldn't find his voice. This he couldn't fix by himself; this required a doctor...

The knocks grew louder.

“Don't you hear me? Why don't you answer?”

...Dr. Medina maybe, or the hospital around the corner, or better yet some doctor who didn't know the family...

Now she was knocking with one hand while frantically shaking the latch with the other.

“Why did you lock the door? Open up! Do you hear me? Open up!”

When he finally recovered his voice, a shrill hysterical shriek came from his mouth.

“Yessss!”

He had to calm down. He closed his eyes, touched his throat with his hand and tried to clear his voice.

“Yes,” he repeated in a more natural voice. “I’m coming. Just one second.”

He returned the skin flap to its place, the comb still stuck in his hair, adjusting it as best he could; then he covered his head with the towel and unlocked the door. But he couldn’t bring himself to open it.

“What do you want?” he asked behind the closed door.

There was a real danger of infection...

“Sorry. I was worried because I couldn’t hear you... Are you all right? Do you hear me?” Her words were muffled but audible.

“What do you want?”

He should have covered the tear with some sterile gauze, not that filthy towel.

“I called your office to tell them you’d be late.”

A doctor. He needed a doctor. But not Medina. Anybody but him.

“They asked if you could stop by at the Bank of the Republic on your way to the office. You hear me?”

“Yes, yes, I hear you. Bank of the Republic.” The first thing Medina would do would be to run to the phone to let her know.

“There are some vouchers to cash and some checks to deposit; they say you know all about it.”

The public clinic was just a few blocks from his place, on 4th Street; no one would know him there.

“You know what they’re talking about?”

“Yes, yes.”

Except that he had no way of knowing which doctor would be on duty.

“And there’s something else. You hear me?”

“Yes, yes, I hear you.”

But it was so close... Just a quick run and he’d be there.

“They say to deposit the checks from the province, or from the Bank of the Province, something like that...”

But he couldn’t go out in the street with a towel on his head; he’d have to go the whole way holding the skin flap in place with one hand.

“...they’re all to go into the current account. Do you understand?”

“Yes, yes, I understand.”

If at least it was windy outside, then he could pretend he was just keeping his hair in place...

“And that you’re to bring the cash from the vouchers to the office... Did you hear me?”

“Yes, yes. Bring the cash to the office... Listen, is it windy outside?”

“What? Outside?”

“Windy. I’m asking you if it’s windy outside.”

“What does the wind have to do with anything?”

“It’s just that I... Nothing, nothing. Don’t worry.”

“What do you mean nothing? What do you mean don’t worry? Here I am screaming my head off to tell you all that mess about the bank and you can’t even open the door for me. As if I were a maid, worse than a maid. And you come up with some nonsense about the wind!”

“Mom, I didn’t open the door because I had soap in my hands and, besides, there was no need. And, just in case you haven’t noticed,” he continued, his tone growing harsher, “I didn’t open it because it’s late, worse than late, and I’m in a hurry. A HU-RRY. Do you get what a hurry is?”

“I would understand better if you opened the door,” she answered icily.

“The door’s unlocked. If you want to get in so badly, you can open it yourself.”

“I don’t want to get in!” his mother cried, near sobs. “What I want is respect. And if you can’t open the door for your own mother...”

Goddamn nag! he thought, yanking the door open in rage. He was tempted to remove the towel from his head and shout at her: “If you want to know so badly, go ahead, take a look. Look! Look at your son, your sweet little boy!”

But he restrained himself and said only:

“Are you happy now?”

When he saw her in the doorway, sort of curled up, her arms tight against her chest, her little face wrinkled as a raisin, her white hair, her downcast eyes, shaking all over like a leaf, his heart shrank. She looked so small, so frail, so old! He could have picked her up like a child.

He was overwhelmed with tenderness. He would have liked to be a boy again to climb onto her lap, hug her tightly and, pressing his face against her blond hair, tell her as he used to: “I love you mommy! I love you mommy!”

In a conciliatory tone, he said softly:

“Come on in. See? Nothing wrong. See? Nothing to worry about.”

His mother looked at the towel, the sink full of steaming hot water, the shirt he’d worn the day before and still had on. Her eyes searched the rest of the bathroom for an answer to a puzzle that clearly had none.

“You didn’t take a shower, did you?”

“No. No, I didn’t shower.”

“But you washed your hair?”

He stiffened. She knew quite well that he only washed his hair when he took a shower. Paula was the one who washed her hair in the sink.

“Yes,” he lied. “What’s so odd about that?”

“I don’t know. Didn’t you say you were in such a big hurry? Couldn’t it have waited until tomorrow?”

“No, no it couldn’t wait until tomorrow. It was dirty.”

“But you washed it yesterday...”

“Look, Mom—” his tenderness had suddenly evaporated—“If I washed it or didn’t wash it, what does it matter to you? Don’t you think I’m old enough to decide when I wash my hair or don’t wash my hair? Or do you think I’m still a helpless little boy who has to be told what to do at every step? Or that I enjoy your always sticking your nose in my business? If you don’t like the way I am, if you have something to reproach me for, go ahead and tell me. But don’t beat around the bush.

She turned pale as a ghost.

“Me? Tell you? *You?*”

She said the word like a lash. She only spoke to him like that when she was truly wounded.

“What can I possibly tell you?” She fixed him with a stare that also struck him like a lash. “I’m an ignorant old woman. If I couldn’t teach you respect, decency and love when I wasn’t a worthless old woman, what can I tell you now? All of us old people are just useless nuisances that only get in your way. And some of us old people—” her eyes grew wet—“are such nuisances we don’t even have the good sense to die on time.” And she fled crying, but only after she had turned her back and he could no longer see her.

I love you so much, Mommy!

Why couldn’t she have remained blond and he small and innocent forever?

You’ve made Mom cry again.

...

There was no time to waste. He took off the towel and looked once more at the skin flap. It wasn’t easy because to see it he had to turn sideways and look out of the corner of his eye. He also had to lift it, but not so much that

any more skin became detached. He drew closer to the mirror. The blood drops had condensed into a dark blob that ran from just in front of his ear down to his neck. But the blood didn't appear fresh. If he was still bleeding somewhere, he couldn't see it. He wiped himself clean with the towel and stopped to think.

He had to keep the flap in place somehow. The best thing would probably be to place a big gauze patch on it with sticky tape. That would not only allow him to stretch back his skin and disguise the folds of loose skin that were starting to form in the upper part of his forehead—in addition to concealing his stubborn hair—but would automatically explain why he had come to the public clinic. The hard part would be to leave the apartment without being seen by his mother or the neighbors.

But first he had to find gauze and tape and then, once the patch was in place, make sure that the tape was stuck fast to his scalp. But even before that he had to untangle the comb. And he would have to do it with great care if he didn't want his skin to keep falling off him.

As he held his hair with one hand, he tried to untangle the comb with the other. But it was no use; after a while, he realized it was hopeless. It had to be cut.

He grabbed some scissors, got closer to the light—he needed to make sure he was cutting hair, not skin—and raised the comb. He was about to cut when he noticed something on his forehead. Below the line where the skin remained attached, dozens of tiny vesicles were forming. When he pressed his finger against them, they seemed to migrate away, leaving behind nothing but smooth skin. But the moment he released the pressure, they appeared again.

Evidently the skin had come loose and air bubbles had formed underneath. Evidently the process he'd begun with that blind, violent pull would continue its irreversible course. Evidently...

He didn't want to wait to see his whole face grow covered with those little blisters. With one strike of the scissors, he set the comb free at last and he grabbed his scalp with both hands.

Before he pulled, he looked at himself in the mirror. He felt like he was about to do something terribly wrong, but he didn't quite understand what. He was looking at himself in the mirror without knowing it was the last time he would be seeing himself that way.

He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and started to pull. He didn't feel any pain or resistance, just the soft rustling of something being detached little by little. It was almost like taking off a tight glove.

Finally he reached his chin. One last pull, gentle but firm, and his face—what had been his face—became totally detached.

He knelt down and, with great care, placed it on a small stool next to the sink. He stretched it with his fingers, set aside a lock of hair covering the forehead, and stared at it.

It's me. This is me.

Nothing was missing. The same furrowed brow, the scar left by a childhood fall, the chicken pox mark, even the tiny whiskers he hadn't shaved that morning. He could see every pore, every little imperfection, every blackhead. He could see marks, wrinkles and thin veins he had never seen in the mirror. Under his bushy eyebrows his eyes were closed, some crust even in his eyelashes. But he didn't appear to be asleep.

This is me. This is me, dead.

...

He felt terror.

It was a fear so elemental it could not be articulated in logical thoughts. He was afraid of death, but more afraid of what was happening to him at this moment, which he didn't understand and was all the more terrible as a result.

What had he come to? What had he been reduced to? If that thing he had placed on the stool was his face, what had been left in its place? What would he see if he looked in the mirror? A shapeless mass of raw flesh? Or an intricate maze of veins and arteries, nerves and muscles, ligaments and tendons, now fully exposed, without any protection, like some cadaver on

the dissection table? Where had his humanity gone? What monstrous creature had he become?

He would never look in a mirror again. He didn't dare even touch himself. He might do some harm, infect the exposed tissues. He didn't dare even lick what had been his mouth. Did he still have lips? Would he be able to speak as he used to? He didn't want to find out.

He didn't want to suffer any more. He didn't want any more humiliation or shame. He wanted to put an end to it all. It could be no worse than it was already. He wanted to die.

But if I truly want to die, why am I so terrified to feel I am dead?

...

For the second time that morning, he felt the whole world was collapsing on top of him.

He didn't know whether he wanted to live or die, to fight or give up. He didn't even know whether there was still time to do anything.

One way or another, now he wouldn't be able to go out until dark, and even then he would have to find something to cover himself. But he also couldn't let his mother find out. The shock would destroy her. That meant that he would have to find a place to hide until dark, and quickly.

On the other hand, it was becoming more and more urgent for him to see a doctor. Not only would they have to wash and disinfect him, they might have to put him under because of the pain. The germs, of course, wouldn't wait. They were probably proliferating already. By nightfall, he would have a massive infection.

Lastly, he had to do something about his face. Almost imperceptibly, it had already started to dry up and shrink. He would have to stabilize it somehow, keep it stretched; maybe pour some oil on it to keep it from shriveling. It had to be preserved. Not that he had much hope, but—maybe his disease wasn't incurable, after all? What if he found a plastic surgeon able to rebuild his face? Wasn't everybody marveling at the feats of modern surgery?

Maybe some kind of board would do. He had to find some kind of board somewhere, and thumbtacks or pins to nail the face down.

His mother's voice came in from the dining room:

“Your milk is on the table!”

Still kneeling, staring at his face, he had completely forgotten that his mother was waiting for him to come out. She was somewhere in the dining room and the bathroom door was unlocked!

He jumped up, covered his head with the towel, picked up his face, folded it carefully, trying to do as little damage as possible, and hid it under the towel, pressing it hard against his chest. It was his only hope for salvation.

He stopped to listen. The footsteps in the dining room were getting closer. He darted for the door to his bedroom. He yanked it open clumsily, letting the towel fall to the floor. He was already bending to pick it up when he heard the other doorknob move. There was no time. He kicked the towel into his room and closed the door behind him just as his mother entered the bathroom.

He stood there with his back against the door, his hand still on the doorknob, the towel at his feet, unable to take another step. His heart was beating wildly; he couldn't breathe.

“Did you hear me?” asked his mother as she knocked softly on the door that separated them. “Your milk is getting cold”.

“Yes, yes. I'm coming.”

He answered without thinking, forgetting that he might not be able to speak the way he used to. But he was lucky. Except for his trembling voice, the sounds came out normally.

He had barely escaped. But not quite. He realized that he had left his comb on the bathroom shelf, the one with a double row of reinforced teeth, the one with the tangled clump of hair.

...

The situation was critical. He could lock the other two doors of his room: the one that went to the dining room and the one that went to the service corridor; but the one he was leaning against now could be locked only from the bathroom. And his mother had not locked it; she could come in, knocking on the door first or without knocking, any time she pleased. He was at her mercy.

His face would have to wait. There were more urgent matters to deal with.

A desperate plan had occurred to him: make his mother think that he was leaving for work and hide instead in the maid's bathroom. It had been many years now since they'd had a sleep-in maid and, except on Tuesdays, when the cleaning-lady came, it was hardly used. It was more a storeroom for old junk.

The danger was that now, as he needed both hands, he would have to set the towel aside and, for a few minutes, work with no cover.

If she sees me, she sees me. There's nothing more I can do.

He picked up the towel. It was stained with blood and probably teeming with germs. Millions of them.

He pulled back the bedspread and hid both face and towel between the scarcely wrinkled sheets.

He needed a clean shirt or undershirt to wrap his face. He was about to turn around to get one from the wardrobe, when he remembered: That wardrobe was his parents'; it had three huge mirrors; no matter how hard he tried not to look or to look elsewhere, his parents' wardrobe would betray him.

He'd better make do with the sweater he had just dropped at the foot of the bed.

He removed his face from between the sheets, smoothed it as best he could—it was getting drier and brittler—and wrapped it in his sweater.

More germs.

Then he stuck the sweater and a necktie in his briefcase. He would finish dressing as soon as his mother went out on her morning errands.

There was something else he needed. He yanked the bottom drawer of the dresser open, giving the whole piece of furniture a violent shake, and the picture of his mother he kept on top came crashing down. The photo had been taken when she was young: long hair down to her waist, one bare shoulder. He had always marveled at that picture; she looked like a movie star.

The glass shattered on the floor. He didn't pay it any attention. He rummaged through the drawer also now lying on the floor until he found it: a hooded sweatshirt to wear when he ventured out that night.

Not a sound was coming from the bathroom, not even the dripping of the faucet. His mother must have seen the comb. And she must have heard the crash in the next room.

He had only seconds left.

Without returning anything to its place, he covered his head with the towel, grabbed his jacket, sweatshirt and briefcase and darted out into the back entryway, shouting:

“Bye, Mom!”

From the floor, behind the broken glass, his mother's image seemed to implore, with that languishing look of stars in silent films, not to leave her there.

...

On his way out, he thought he heard his mother say something from the bathroom, but he didn't understand what. Or he didn't want to understand.

As he reached the back door, he shouted again very loudly:

“Bye!” And he opened the door and slammed it shut.

The shout and the slam resounded in the hall. There was no answer.

The hall bent at the end so that, standing there, next to the back door, he could not be seen, not even if his mother came out and looked.

He had a moment of indecision. He could still change his plan. They lived on the third floor. Going up, the stairs took you to the roof, where there

lived, since the earthquake of San Juan, in a shabby little room, Don Ramón, a poor relative of the landlady.

He thought he might take cover in the flight of stairs between his floor and the roof. There was no one during the day and from there he would hear his mother the minute she went out to the street. But what if that day Don Ramón happened to come down the stairs? Or some people came up to the roof to fix something? How would they react to an intruder with no face? How would he himself have reacted? Would they see him as a monster? As a threatening creature, half-human, half-supernatural? Or just some wretched cripple? Would they attack him or pity him or run away in panic? Better never to find out.

He turned around, ready to retrace his steps. Except that he had run to the door making as much noise as possible and now he was returning quietly, stealthily; pausing to listen after each measured step; avoiding brushing against the flowerpots; standing motionless for what seemed an eternity every time he heard the slightest sound; sharpening his senses to make out, among all the normal rustles of a house, those which might announce some imminent danger—a turning doorknob, a grinding hinge, a creaking wooden floor.

He felt like a thief. But what he was about to do was much worse than stealing. He was about to betray someone he loved.

His mother had taught them never to lie. If you lie, you debase yourself, she would say. Never be afraid of the truth; never fear to tell it or to hear it. She had also taught them that there could be no love without truth. That to love is to never lie. She had thus raised both her children with the utmost respect for honesty, an inviolable pact under which love and truth went hand in hand.

He had always tried to be straightlaced, a good son, to be at peace with the truth. Unfortunately, the twists and turns of life had not always allowed him to follow the straight and narrow path and, more than once, much to his regret, he had been forced to take a little side step here and there. But one thing was not to tell the whole truth or smooth it over or say nothing; quite another was to knowingly deceive. What kind of a son could have his

mother believe he was on his way to the office and furtively return instead to bury himself in the bowels of the house?

Which was the straight and narrow path in this case? Uncover himself and reveal to her, where he had once had a face, a huge amorphous blister, with no eyebrows or eyelids or smiling lips or any trace of humanity?

Was that love?

Why had his mother never taught them that some truths are too terrible to be told, even to the person we love most? *Especially* to the person we love most.

...

In the service bathroom there was a whiff of basement. Lying on the floor there were some demijohns, paint cans, a bag filled with quebracho logs for the wood-burning stove and other bits of junk he couldn't see because the light went out as he closed the door.

It was less a small bathroom than a latrine. Or it had been a latrine. Now it was a kind of common grave where the most disparate cast-off objects had come to die, saved from the trash only out of love by someone. There they lay scattered against the walls, in unmarked boxes and cans, scattered and neglected, piled up all the way to the ceiling, shrouded in mold and spiderwebs. Inside one of them would he find his electric toy train, his roller skates, Paula's Marilu doll?

He didn't dare move. Where he had planted his feet, that's where they would stay. He just barely managed to take off the towel, which was suffocating him, and let his arms down, keeping them close to his body in his fear that he might knock something down and set off an avalanche of boxes and cans, a deluge from the past that would bury him.

By just moving his head a few inches, he could put his ear to the door and listen. The bathroom faced his bedroom and wasn't far; if his mother was around, he'd hear her.

She should have been inspecting the drawer on the floor, the broken picture, the nearly intact bed, the wet pillowcase; verifying that her son had not changed his clothes; that neither his jacket nor his briefcase were anywhere

to be seen and that he must indeed have left for work; searching for the towel she had seen covering his head and that she had been unable to find on the rack or in the hamper; opening and closing drawers; going through his papers and, most of all, rummaging through his garbage in search of other clumps of hair or a clue to the comb mystery.

But he heard nothing. No doors, no drawers, no footsteps. Just the traffic on the street and the downstairs neighbor's faint voice. What could she be doing? How was it possible, that after all that had happened that morning, she had not started an immediate search? It was extremely strange.

But perhaps even stranger was the fact that, deep down, he suspected that there was a very simple explanation and he only had to open his eyes to see it. An explanation that, in addition to being obvious, would mean his undoing.

...

As long as his mother didn't go out, he was condemned to stay in that dark, coffin-like confinement, unable to move. How long would he have to wait? With all the things he needed to do! He felt defeated once more.

It wasn't just the need to find a doctor as soon as possible. Any doctor wouldn't do. He needed a surgeon, a specialist in plastic surgery, and moreover someone willing to see him that very night.

Phone calls, queries, inquiries... How was he supposed to do all that by himself? He needed help. But whom could he ask? What explanation would he give? Who was there he could turn to and say: "Something terrible has happened to me; don't ask me any questions, just do as I say?" He did have friends, but not that kind. Julia, then?

Years earlier Julia would have done anything for him. Julia had truly loved him. And he had loved her. But from the beginning, his mother had been against the relationship, just as she had been against all the previous ones. And when she found out that he'd been serious about this one, her initial disapproval became unrelenting war. After ten turbulent years, twice on the brink of marriage and permanently on the verge of breaking up, with Julia tired of promises made in good faith and never fulfilled, and him tired of

being caught in the crossfire, overwhelmed by the reproaches of two women he loved and could not please, they decided to put an end to their engagement.

The breakup was neither easy nor friendly. After much bitterness, many recriminations and crying fits, they went their separate ways and never saw each other again. He had tried very hard to convince himself that it was for the best for everyone. But how he wished now things had been different and Julia was by his side!

...

Meanwhile, with each passing minute what had been his face, wrapped up in that dirty sweater, was becoming a bit more contaminated, a bit more withered. And, as it faded, so did his hope.

And, on top of everything, his office. He had to call them as soon as he could. If he didn't, they'd call him. They'd want to know what happened to the cash. They'd want to know if he was coming in or not. And if he didn't plan on coming in, why had he asked someone to tell them he would?

His mother would find out he hadn't shown. But there was no reason for her to assume he hadn't gone to the bank. She'd heard him leave, and she knew that he was wearing his suit and tie and was carrying his briefcase. It wasn't too farfetched to imagine that he had indeed gone to the bank, cashed the vouchers, and run off with the money. She might even fear that, like a character in a recent movie which she had thought morbid and terrifying, he'd end up on the bottom of a swamp.

He had lied to her, he had deceived her, he had made her cry. And now he was about to make her go crazy with anxiety and fear.

How can you be so awful to your mother?

...

As usual, it was all his fault.

In the first place, he shouldn't have overslept. If he hadn't overslept, he would have had time enough to untangle his hair; if he'd disentangled it, it wouldn't have been necessary to pull it; and if he hadn't pulled it...

Secondly, the bloodstains on the pillowcase. He should never have washed them. His mother would now know that the reason she had been finding damp pillowcases every morning for the past few months was not saliva but blood secretly washed away.

Thirdly, the towel. Bloodstains or no, he should have left it in plain view. Now, if she decided to turn the house upside down until she found it, she would surely...

A noise, a far-off door, interrupted his thoughts. Footsteps followed, and more doors. The footsteps seemed as likely to get closer as grow more distant. More doors opened and closed. He thought he heard his mother's voice. But that was impossible!

What was she doing?

She was out in the hall now. Her heels clicked against the floor tiles.

She's walking quickly. She's coming closer, coming to the kitchen. She's entering. Stopping. Turns on the light. Turns it off. She's coming out again. She's right outside now. No more than a meter. She's walking away. She's stopping. What is she doing?!

And then, all of sudden:

“Are you still here?”

No! No! No! It can't be! She can't know I'm still here!. But she spoke. I heard her distinctly.

She's looking for me! She's looking for me!

No. She doesn't know. She's not looking for you. She's walking away. She's reached the end of the corridor. She's opening the door, closing it. She's going out.

Distant heels clicking on the stairs.

She's walking down the stairs! At last! But she's moving so slowly, so slowly! She's gotten so old! No more footsteps. She's gone now. Gone! At last!

...

This was the moment he'd been waiting for all morning. She was finally out on her errands and he could deal with his face, find a doctor, and call his office.

Without wasting a minute, he went to the kitchen. There were no treacherous mirrors there. He could work without being disturbed.

He looked behind the cupboard. He knew she kept a cutting board there. He washed it as best he could, rinsed the water and dried it with a dishtowel.

Inside the bottom drawer of the cupboard he found some thumbtacks. He took the sweater out of his briefcase. He was afraid of what he might find inside.

Suddenly he stopped. He could hear voices coming from the stairs. His mother had probably run into the downstairs neighbor.

He opened up the sweater... and he saw himself again.

A bit more wrinkled, a bit older. Still grey, dead grey. But it was his only hope.

He turned the board over and placed his face on top. He poured a few oil drops on it and started to spread them slowly with his fingertips, trying to smooth the face out simultaneously. The parchment-like tissue turned slowly into skin again; it was reviving like a withering flower when given water.

Voices were still coming from the stairs. One was a man's. Who could it be at that hour?

When his face recovered its elasticity, he stretched it and attached it to the board with the thumbtacks. He wrapped everything in heavy-duty brown paper and placed it inside the sweater. He might still be able to save it...

Again, the clicking heels. His mother continued down, ever so slowly. He could still hear the voices.

He put the sweater inside the briefcase. He tried to close it but couldn't; the board was too big. Then he put the brown paper he hadn't used back in its place, and was about to do the same with the oil can...

She's not leaving! She's coming back!

The footsteps and voice were getting closer.

He put away the last thumbtacks, closed the drawer, hung the dishtowel, grabbed the briefcase, and looked around. He thought he was leaving everything as he'd found it: dishtowel, paper, thumbtacks, oil can...

He darted out. His mother was nearing the landing.

The door! Had it been open or closed? How had he found it?

Open! And he hid inside the service bathroom.

From the end of the corridor, he heard her shouting:

“Say hello to Conce and Mauricio!”

And Don Ramón's faraway answer:

“I will!”

“And, please, forgive the bother.”

“No bother at all!”

Don Ramón! She hadn't gone down! She'd gone up! No wonder she was moving so slowly! But—why would she do that? She talked to Don Ramón only rarely, to ask him to bring her back fresh fish if he went fishing in Punta Lara.

Again, the clicking heels in the corridor. She was coming straight to the kitchen.

The light! I didn't turn out the kitchen light!

...

The little service bathroom was an excellent hideout as long as his mother thought he had left the apartment. She went in there two or three times a year at most. But if she suspected that he was still in the apartment, that would be the first place to look. Or the flight of stairs going up to the roof...

The footsteps reached the kitchen, and there they came to a sudden stop. He thought he heard her gasp. The kitchen light was switched on and off

several times in a row.

He heard a drawer being opened, probably the one in the cupboard. Did she keep track of every single thumbtack? The amount of brown paper?

The inspection had begun in earnest.

Other drawers were opened and closed. Noise of cutlery, dinnerware being rummaged. Now it was the faucet's turn. On, halfway on, off. Had he left it dripping?

Back to opening and shutting drawers and rummaging through the cupboard. Could she have noticed the missing cutting board? Could she ever dream what her son might need it for?

Now the trash can. Thank goodness he had not thrown the oil-stained brown paper out! She would only find the orange peel and the yerba she herself had thrown out earlier.

What else? What else had her son taken with him? And for what?

He imagined her as a fox terrier after a fresh trail: sniffing, digging, searching. The rat had passed through here. Where was it hiding now?

...

He had been so afraid to leave clues that would betray him; so afraid, for example, that his mother, looking for the missing towel, would suddenly come upon him. Now he realized she must have known from the very first that he hadn't left the apartment.

It was obvious!

When he had said: "Bye!" she had answered, "Wait!" He never left without kissing his mother first, especially if they had quarreled. But quarrel or no, it had not been the time for him to wait, let alone turn back. His mother had then done something quite normal; she had run to the balcony to shout a last recommendation or reproach—how can you leave without a kiss?—or, who knows, maybe just wave to him goodbye. Except on this day she had waited and waited and waited and he'd never come out.

Then she had looked for him all over (“Are you still here?”) and, unable to find him and already suspecting that he must have hidden, had gone to look for him on the stairs.

Now she was back and knew her son had been in the kitchen. And she knew there were only two places left to look: the maid’s bedroom and the little bathroom.

Any moment now she’d be upon him. She was going to find him hiding in the servant’s latrine, like a filthy rat; with no face, no dignity, no shame left. What could he do? How could he explain his secret to her? How was he going to justify his deception? What had happened to the sacrosanct truth, that inviolable pact?

Once again he was overcome by terror. How could everything end this way? How was he going to beg for forgiveness? How could he tell her: “In spite of everything, I love you.”

His mother had come out of the kitchen. Now she was standing in front of his door. Would she enter little by little or come upon him suddenly?

He unscrewed the light bulb so that she couldn’t turn the light on. He curled up on the floor, pressing hard against a stack of old Billiken magazines, and covered himself as best he could with a gabardine raincoat that had belonged to his father. He wished to be swallowed by the darkness, to disappear in the family detritus, turn into a handful of dust.

Curling up a little more, covering himself a little more, he made a can fall, and it rolled away with a racket.

He started to shake, unable to control himself. Something warm and wet ran down his legs and slowly widened into a puddle.

Oh mommy dearest! I’m dying, mom, I’m dying! I have only hours left, maybe minutes. Please, please, don’t enter! I beg you. I want to die alone. Please! Let me die in peace!

And he started to sob, softly at first, then with an anguish the likes of which he had never felt before, not even when his father died. This time, he was mourning his own death.

...

If his mother entered or didn't, if she saw him or not, if she felt pity or disgust, compassion or disdain, he never learned. He could only weep, and, weeping like a small child, he cried himself to sleep.

He woke up a number of times, and a number of times he dreamed that he was waking up. He was uncomfortable, wet and sore.

In the middle of the night, a strong wind blew the doors and windows open.

"Shut them, shut them, before the dead themselves are blown through the doors!" his mother was shouting.

I have to look for Dad, he thought. Maybe he could give me some advice.

"Don't be afraid. There's nothing wrong with you," his father said. "It's just a skin molt."

"What do you mean 'a skin molt'? Can't you see I don't have a face?"

"Of course you do! It's just different..."

"How do you mean, 'different?'"

"Now you have a new face, that's all. Here. Look in this mirror."

"How do you mean, 'new'? I don't want a new face! I want my face!"

"This is your face now."

"And what is Mom going to say? Paula? What are my friends going to say? They won't recognize me!"

"Don't be afraid. They'll get used to it. Look, look at yourself in the mirror."

But no matter how hard he tried, he could see nothing in that mirror; it was either a blind mirror or an empty frame or he still had no face for the mirror to reflect.

"They'll get used to it. Give them time," his father's voice kept repeating as it grew fainter.

He woke up in a panic, trying to feel with his fingers the features his eyes had been unable to see.

He was still curled up on the wet floor, cramping and freezing cold. He must have lain like that for hours because from the dining room he could hear voices and the sound of cutlery.

He started to explore again, millimeter by millimeter: eyelids, eyelashes, lips, nose, ears; even some growing whiskers. And hair. Short and soft, all over his head. The rest of his scalp had come off as he slept. The molt was complete.

“Don’t be afraid. There’s nothing wrong with you.”

With the briefcase and the remaining scalp in one hand, his jacket and sweatshirt in the other—it didn’t even occur to him to cover himself—he ran out, sprinted across his bedroom and shut himself up in the bathroom.

“Is it you?” his mother asked from the dining room.

“Yes, it’s me.”

He approached the mirror.

“Are you better?”

“Yes, mom.”

He looked at himself, shocked.

“Don’t you want to eat something?”

“Yes, mom.”

It wasn’t him. It was someone else!

“Come. We’ll wait for you. We’ve just sat down to dinner.”

It was a completely different face!

“I made potato pie, the way you love it.”

He took the board out of the briefcase and stared at the two faces. They were different. Two different people!

“And I made rice pudding for dessert.”

The face in the mirror looked younger, healthier. Even his scar was less noticeable, as if better matched to his new traits. And it was a living face. The other one... The other one was the face of a dead man. But it was him! That was the only face he had ever shown to the world.

Which one is me? The one everyone knows, the dead one? Or this one, the living one, that I don't even know myself? Who am I?

“And Paula brought you a bottle of Canciller.”

He looked again at the face in the mirror. It wasn't so bad. There even might be some resemblance between the two. In his dream, what was it his father had said?

“And there's chickpea soup. If you hurry up... It's still hot.”

“They'll get used to it.” That was it. *“Give them time. They'll get used to it”*.

He lit up the water heater. He needed a hot shower.

“What are you doing? You're not joining us?”

“Thanks, mom. I will later. Later.”

...

For the first time in many years he was feeling clean, inside and outside. Clean and at peace. As if that terrible weeping a few hours earlier had washed him clean once and for all.

And he felt immensely relieved; he wasn't going to die. Not only was he not going to die—he wasn't even sick!

A huge burden had been taken off his back. “They'll get used to it.” They were the ones who had to get used to it! It was their problem, not his! He was the way he was. He had done everything within his power. He could do no more. And if that wasn't enough...

He finished dressing and went out to the corridor.

“So you're leaving. Just like that. You're leaving us!”

“How can you do this to your mother?”

When he passed in front of the dining room, he stopped to take in the silhouettes of their bodies through the stained glass. They were eating in silence.

“You’re going to leave, just like that, without even having a bite?”

“How can you be so ungrateful? Don’t you feel even a tiny bit of remorse?”

He could still hear their voices inside his head; he would probably continue to hear them for the rest of his life. But it was almost as if they were no longer talking to him, or as if they were talking to someone who had already left.

He had always loved them dearly. Dearly. And he always would. But what about them? How would they react if he opened the door now and showed them who he was? Would they still love him? Would they love him tomorrow?

Give them time.

Without saying a word, he waved goodbye to them and went out to breathe.