

Before Armando got home from work the house had better be tidy and she already in
5 her brown dress so she could tend to her husband while he got dressed, and then
they'd leave calmly, arm in arm like the old days. How long since they had done that?

But now that she was "well" again, they'd take the bus, she gazing out the window
like a wife, her arm in his, and then they'd have dinner with Carlota and João,
reclining comfortably in their chairs. How long since she had seen Armando at last
10 recline comfortably and have a conversation with a man? A man's peace lay in
forgetting about his wife, discussing the latest headlines with another man.
Meanwhile she'd chat with Carlota about women's stuff, giving in to Carlota's
authoritative and practical benevolence, receiving again at last her friend's
inattention and vague disdain, her natural bluntness, and no more of that perplexed
15 and overly curious affection—and at last seeing Armando forget about his wife. And
she herself, at last, returning gratefully to insignificance. Like a cat who stayed out
all night and, as if nothing had happened, finds a saucer of milk waiting without a
word. People were luckily helping her feel she was now "well." Without looking at
her, they were actively helping her forget, pretending they themselves had forgotten
20 as if they'd read the same label on the same medicine bottle. Or they really had
forgotten, who knows. How long since she had seen Armando at last recline with
abandon, forget about her? And as for her?

Breaking off from tidying the vanity, Laura looked at herself in the mirror: and as for
her, how long had it been? Her face held a domestic charm, her hair was pinned back
25 behind her large, pale ears. Her brown eyes, brown hair, her tawny, smooth skin, all
this lent her no longer youthful face a modest, womanly air. Would anyone happen to
see, in that tiniest point of surprise lodged in the depths of her eyes, would anyone
see in that tiniest offended speck the lack of the children she'd never had?

With her meticulous penchant for method—the same that compelled her as a student
30 to copy the lesson's main points in perfect handwriting without understanding
them—with her penchant for method, now taken back up, she was planning to tidy
the house before the maid's day off so that, once Maria was gone, she wouldn't have
to do anything else, except 1) calmly get dressed; 2) wait for Armando ready to go; 3)
what was three? Right. That's exactly what she'd do. And she'd put on the brown
35 dress with the cream lace collar. Already showered. Back at Sacré Coeur she'd been
tidy and clean, with a penchant for personal hygiene and a certain horror of

messiness. Which never made Carlota, already back then a bit original, admire her. Their reactions had always been different. Carlota ambitious and laughing heartily: she, Laura, a little slow, and as it were careful always to stay slow; Carlota not seeing the danger in anything. And she ever cautious. When they'd been assigned to read
5 the Imitation of Christ, she'd read it with a fool's ardor without understanding but, God forgive her, she'd felt that whoever imitated Christ would be lost—lost in the light, but dangerously lost. Christ was the worst temptation. And Carlota hadn't even wanted to read it, she lied to the nun saying she had. Right. She'd put on the brown dress with the real lace collar.

10 But when she saw the time she remembered, with a jolt that made her lift her hand to her chest, that she'd forgotten to drink her glass of milk.

She went to the kitchen and, as if in her carelessness she'd guiltily betrayed Armando and her devoted friends, while still at the refrigerator she drank the first sips with an anxious slowing, concentrating on each sip faithfully as if making amends to them all
15 and repenting. Since the doctor had said: "Drink milk between meals, avoid an empty stomach because it causes anxiety"—so, even without the threat of anxiety, she drank it without a fuss sip by sip, day after day, without fail, obeying with her eyes closed, with a slight ardor for not discerning the slightest skepticism in herself. The awkward thing was that the doctor seemed to contradict himself when, while giving
20 a precise order that she wished to follow with a convert's zeal, he'd also said: "Let yourself go, take it easy, don't strain yourself to make it work—forget all about what happened and everything will fall back into place naturally." And he patted her on the back, which flattered her and made her blush with pleasure. But in her humble opinion one order seemed to cancel the other, as if they'd asked her to eat flour and
25 whistle at the same time. To combine them she'd recently resorted to a trick: that glass of milk that had ended up gaining a secret power, every sip of which contained the near-taste of a word and renewed that firm pat on the back, she'd take that glass of milk into the living room, where she'd sit "very naturally," pretending not to care at all, "not straining herself"—and thereby cleverly carrying out the second order.
30 "It doesn't matter if I gain weight," she thought, looks had never been the point.

She sat on the sofa like a guest in her own house that, so recently regained, tidy and cool, evoked the tranquility of someone else's house. Which was so satisfying: unlike Carlota, who had made of her home something akin to herself, Laura took such
35 pleasure in making her house an impersonal thing; somehow perfect for being impersonal.

Oh how good it was to be back, really back, she smiled in satisfaction. Holding the nearly empty glass, she closed her eyes with a sigh of pleasant fatigue. She'd ironed Armando's shirts, drawn up methodical lists for the next day, minutely calculated

how much she'd spent at the market that morning, hadn't stopped in fact for even a second. Oh how good it was to be tired again.

If a perfect person from the planet Mars landed and discovered that Earthlings got tired and grew old, that person would feel pity and astonishment. Without ever
5 understanding what was good about being human, in feeling tired, in giving out daily; only the initiated would comprehend this subtlety of defectiveness and this refinement of life.

And she'd finally returned from the perfection of the planet Mars. She, who had never cherished any ambition besides being a man's wife, was gratefully
10 reencountering the part of her that gave out daily. With her eyes shut she sighed in appreciation. How long since she had got tired? But now every day she felt nearly exhausted and had ironed, for example, Armando's shirts, she'd always enjoyed ironing and, modesty aside, had a knack for it. And then she'd be exhausted as a reward. No longer that alert lack of fatigue. No longer that empty and wakeful and
15 horribly marvelous speck inside her. No longer that terrible independence. No longer the monstrous and simple ease of not sleeping—day or night—which in its discreet way had made her suddenly superhuman compared to a tired and perplexed husband. He, with that bad breath he got whenever he went mute with worry, which gave her a pungent compassion, yes, even within her wakeful perfection, compassion and
20 love, she superhuman and tranquil in her gleaming isolation, and he, whenever he'd come to visit timidly bearing apples and grapes that the nurse would eat with a shrug, he paying formal visits like a boyfriend, with his unfortunate bad breath and stiff smile, straining heroically to comprehend, he who had received her from a father and a priest, and had no idea what to do with this girl from Tijuca who had unexpectedly,
25 as a tranquil boat bursts into sail on the waters, become superhuman.

Now, no more of this. Never again. Oh, it had just been a bout of weakness; genius was the worst temptation. But afterward she'd returned so completely that she'd even had to start being careful again not to wear people down with her old penchant for detail. She clearly remembered her classmates at Sacré Coeur saying to her:
30 "You've told it a thousand times!" she recalled with an embarrassed smile. She'd returned so completely: now she got tired every day, every day her face would sag at dusk, and then night would take on its former purpose, it wasn't just the perfect starlit night. And everything lined up harmoniously. And, as with everyone else, each day wore her out; like everyone else, human and perishable. No longer that
35 perfection, no longer that youth. No longer that thing that one day had spread brightly, like a cancer, to her soul.

She opened her sleep-laden eyes, feeling the nice solid glass in her hands, but closed them again with a comfortable smile of fatigue, bathing like some nouveau riche in all

her particles, in that familiar and slightly nauseating water. Yes, slightly nauseating; what did it matter, since she too was a bit nauseating, she was well aware. But her husband didn't think so, and so what did it matter, since thank God she didn't live in an environment that required her to be more clever and interesting, and she'd even
5 freed herself from high school, which had so awkwardly demanded that she stay alert. What did it matter. In fatigue—she'd ironed Armando's shirts, not to mention she'd gone to the farmers' market that morning and lingered there so long, with that pleasure she took in making the most of things—in fatigue there was a nice place for her, the discreet and dulled place from which, so embarrassingly for herself and
10 everyone else, she had once emerged. But, as she kept saying, thank God, she'd returned.

And if she sought with greater faith and love, she would find within her fatigue that even better place called sleep. She sighed with pleasure, in a moment of spiteful mischief tempted to go along with that warm exhalation that was her already
15 somnolent breathing, tempted to doze off for a second. "Just a second, just one little second!" she begged herself, flattered to be so drowsy, begging pleadingly, as if begging a man, which Armando had always liked.

But she didn't really have time to sleep now, not even for a quick nap—she thought vainly and with false modesty, she was such a busy person! She'd always envied
20 people who said "I didn't have time" and now she was once again such a busy person: they were going to Carlota's for dinner and everything had to be orderly and ready, it was her first dinner party since coming back and she didn't want to be late, she had to be ready when ... right, I've already said it a thousand times, she thought sheepishly. Once was enough to say: "I don't want to be late"—since that reason sufficed: if she
25 had never been able to bear without the utmost mortification being a nuisance to anyone, then now, more than ever, she shouldn't ... No, there wasn't the slightest doubt: she didn't have time to sleep. What she ought to do, familiarly slipping into that intimate wealth of routine—and it hurt her that Carlota scoffed at her penchant for routine—what she ought to do was 1) wait till the maid was ready; 2) give her
30 money to get meat in the morning, rump roast; how could she explain that the difficulty of finding quality meat really was a good topic of conversation, but if Carlota found out she'd scoff at her; 3) start meticulously showering and getting dressed, fully surrendering to the pleasure of making the most of her time. That brown dress complemented her eyes and its little cream lace collar gave her a
35 childlike quality, like an old-fashioned boy. And, back to the nocturnal peace of Tijuca—no longer that blinding light from those coiffed and perky nurses leaving for their day off after tossing her like a helpless chicken into the abyss of insulin—back to the nocturnal peace of Tijuca, back to her real life: she'd go arm-in-arm with Armando, walking slowly to the bus stop, with those short, thick thighs packed into
40 that girdle making her a "woman of distinction"; but whenever, upset, she told

Armando it was because of an ovarian insufficiency, he, who took pride in his wife's thighs, replied rather cheekily: "What would I get out of marrying a ballerina?" that was how he replied. You'd never guess, but Armando could sometimes be really naughty, you'd never guess. Once in a while they said the same thing. She explained that it was because of an ovarian insufficiency. So then he'd say: "What would I get out of marrying a ballerina?" He could be really shameless sometimes, you'd never guess. Carlota would be astonished to learn that they too had a private life and things they never told, but she wouldn't tell, what a shame not to be able to tell, Carlota definitely thought she was just uptight and mundane and a little annoying, and if she had to be careful not to bother other people with details, with Armando she'd sometimes relax and get pretty annoying, which didn't matter because he'd pretend to be listening without really listening to everything she was telling him, which didn't hurt her feelings, she understood perfectly well that her chatter tired people out a bit, but it was nice to be able to explain how she hadn't found any meat even if Armando shook his head and wasn't listening, she and the maid chatted a lot, actually she talked more than the maid, and she was also careful not to pester the maid who sometimes held back her impatience and could get a little rude, it was her own fault because she didn't always command respect.

But, as she was saying, her arm in his, she so short and he tall and slim, but he was healthy thank God, and she a brunette. She was a brunette as she obscurely believed a wife ought to be. To have black or blonde hair was an excess to which she, in her desire to do everything right, had never aspired. Therefore, as for green eyes, it seemed to her that having green eyes would be like keeping certain things from her husband. Not that Carlota exactly gave her reason to gossip, but she, Laura—who if given the chance would defend her fervently, but never got the chance—she, Laura, grudgingly had to agree that her friend had a peculiar and funny way of dealing with her husband, oh not that she acted "as if they were equals," as people were doing nowadays, but you know what I mean. And Carlota was even a bit original, she'd even mentioned this once to Armando and Armando had agreed but hadn't thought it mattered much. But, as she was saying, dressed in brown with her little collar ... — this daydream was filling her with the same pleasure she got from tidying drawers, sometimes she'd even mess them up just to be able to tidy them again.

She opened her eyes, and as if the room had dozed off instead of her, it seemed refreshed and relaxed with its brushed armchairs and the curtains that had shrunk in the last wash, like pants that were too short while the person stood comically peering down at his legs. Oh how nice it was to see everything tidy and dusted again, everything cleaned by her own skillful hands, and so silent, and with a vase full of flowers, like a waiting room. She'd always found waiting rooms lovely, so courteous, so impersonal. How rich normal life was, she who had returned from extravagance at last. Even a vase of flowers. She looked at it.

“Oh they’re so lovely,” her heart exclaimed suddenly a bit childish. They were small wild roses she’d bought at the farmers’ market that morning, partly because the man had been so insistent, partly out of daring. She’d arranged them in the vase that very morning, while drinking her sacred ten o’clock glass of milk.

5 Yet bathed in the light of this room the roses stood in all their complete and tranquil beauty.

I’ve never seen such pretty roses, she thought with curiosity. And as if she hadn’t just had that exact thought, vaguely aware that she’d just had that exact thought and quickly glossing over the awkwardness of realizing she was being a little tedious, she
10 thought in a further stage of surprise: “Honestly, I’ve never seen such pretty roses.” She looked at them attentively. But her attention couldn’t remain mere attention for long, it soon was transformed into gentle pleasure, and she couldn’t manage to keep analyzing the roses, she had to interrupt herself with the same exclamation of submissive curiosity: they’re so lovely.

15 They were some perfect roses, several on the same stem. At some point they’d climbed over one another with nimble eagerness but then, once the game was over, they had tranquilly stopped moving. They were some roses so perfect in their smallness, not entirely in bloom, and their pinkish hue was nearly white. They even look fake! she said in surprise. They might look white if they were completely open
20 but, with their central petals curled into buds, their color was concentrated and, as inside an earlobe, you could feel the redness coursing through them. They’re so lovely, thought Laura surprised.

But without knowing why, she was a little embarrassed, a little disturbed. Oh, not too much, it was just that extreme beauty made her uncomfortable.

25 She heard the maid’s footsteps on the kitchen tile and could tell from the hollow sound that she was wearing heels; so she must be ready to leave. Then Laura had a somewhat original idea: why not ask Maria to stop by Carlota’s and leave her the roses as a present?

And also because that extreme beauty made her uncomfortable. Uncomfortable? It
30 was a risk. Oh, no, why would it be a risk? They just made her uncomfortable, they were a warning, oh no, why would they be a warning? Maria would give Carlota the roses.

“Dona Laura sent them,” Maria would say.

35 She smiled thoughtfully: Carlota would think it odd that Laura, who could bring the roses herself, since she wanted to give them as a present, sent them with the maid

before dinner. Not to mention she'd find it amusing to get roses, she'd think it "refined" ...

"There's no need for things like that between us, Laura!" her friend would say with that slightly rude bluntness, and Laura would exclaim in a muffled cry of rapture:

- 5 "Oh no! no! It's not because you invited us to dinner! it's just that the roses were so lovely I decided on a whim to give them to you!"

Yes, if when the time came she could find a way and got the nerve, that's exactly what she'd say. How was it again that she'd say it? she mustn't forget: she'd say—"Oh no!" etc. And Carlota would be surprised by the delicacy of Laura's feelings, no
10 one would ever imagine that Laura too had her little ideas. In this imaginary and agreeable scene that made her smile beatifically, she called herself "Laura," as if referring to a third person. A third person full of that gentle and crackling and grateful and tranquil faith, Laura, the one with the little real-lace collar, discreetly
15 dressed, Armando's wife, finally an Armando who no longer needed to force himself to pay attention to all of her chattering about the maid and meat, who no longer needed to think about his wife, like a man who is happy, like a man who isn't married to a ballerina.

"I couldn't help but send you the roses," Laura would say, that third person so, so very ... And giving the roses was nearly as lovely as the roses themselves.

- 20 And indeed she'd be rid of them.

And what indeed would happen then? Ah, yes: as she was saying, Carlota surprised by that Laura who was neither intelligent nor good but who also had her secret feelings. And Armando? Armando would look at her with a healthy dose of
25 astonishment—since you can't forget there's no possible way for him to know that the maid brought the roses this afternoon!—Armando would look fondly on the whims of his little woman, and that night they'd sleep together.

And she'd have forgotten the roses and their beauty.

No, she thought suddenly vaguely forewarned. She must watch out for other people's alarmed stares. She must never again give cause for alarm, especially with everything
30 still so recent. And most important of all was sparing everyone from suffering the least bit of doubt. And never again cause other people to fuss over her—never again that awful thing where everyone stared at her mutely, and her right there in front of everyone. No whims.

But at the same time she saw the empty glass of milk in her hand and also thought: “he” said not to strain myself to make it work, not to worry about acting a certain way just to prove that I’m already ...

5 “Maria,” she then said upon hearing the maid’s footsteps again. And when Maria approached, she said impetuously and defiantly: “Could you stop by Dona Carlota’s and leave these roses for her? Say it like this: ‘Dona Carlota, Dona Laura sent these.’ Say it like this: ‘Dona Carlota ...’”

“Got it, got it,” said the maid patiently.

10 Laura went to find an old piece of tissue paper. Then she carefully took the roses out of the vase, so lovely and tranquil, with their delicate and deadly thorns. She wanted to give the arrangement an artistic touch. And at the same time be rid of them. And she could get dressed and move on with her day. When she gathered the moist little roses into a bouquet, she extended the hand holding them, looked at them from a distance, tilting her head and narrowing her eyes for an impartial and severe
15 judgment.

And when she looked at them, she saw the roses.

And then, stubborn, gentle, she coaxed inwardly: don’t give away the roses, they’re lovely.

20 A second later, still very gentle, the thought intensified slightly, almost tantalizing: don’t give them away, they’re yours. Laura gasped a little: because things were never hers.

But these roses were. Rosy, small, perfect: hers. She looked at them in disbelief: they were beautiful and hers. If she managed to think further, she’d think: hers like nothing else had ever been.

25 And she could even keep them since she’d already shed that initial discomfort that made her vaguely avoid looking at the roses too much.

30 Why give them away, then? lovely and you’re giving them away? After all when you happen upon a good thing, you just go and give it away? After all if they were hers, she coaxed persuasively without finding any argument besides the one that, with repetition, seemed increasingly convincing and simple. They wouldn’t last long—so why give them away while they were still alive? The pleasure of having them didn’t pose much of a risk—she deluded herself—after all, whether or not she wanted them, she’d have to give them up soon enough, and then she’d never think of them again since they’d be dead—they wouldn’t last long, so why give them away? The

fact that they didn't last long seemed to remove her guilt about keeping them, according to the obscure logic of a woman who sins. After all you could see they wouldn't last long (it would be quick, free from danger). And besides—she argued in a final and triumphant rejection of guilt—by no means had she been the one who'd
5 wanted to buy them, the vendor kept insisting and she always got so flustered when people put her on the spot, she hadn't been the one who'd wanted to buy them, she was in no way to blame whatsoever. She looked at them entranced, thoughtful, profound.

And, honestly, I've never seen anything more perfect in all my life.

10 Fine, but now she'd already spoken to Maria and there was no way to turn back. So was it too late?, she got scared, seeing the little roses waiting impassively in her own hand. If she wanted, it wouldn't be too late ... She could tell Maria: "Listen Maria, I've decided to take the roses over myself when I go to dinner!" And, of course, she wouldn't take them ... And Maria would never have to know. And, before changing
15 clothes, she'd sit on the sofa for a second, just a second, to look at them. And to look at those roses' tranquil detachment. Yes, since, having done the deed, you might as well take advantage of it, wouldn't it be silly to take the blame without reaping the rewards. That's exactly what she'd do.

But with the unwrapped roses in her hand she waited. She wasn't putting them back
20 in the vase, she wasn't calling Maria. She knew why. Because she ought to give them away. Oh she knew why.

And also because a pretty thing was meant for giving or receiving, not just having. And, above all, never just for "being." Above all one should never be the pretty thing. A pretty thing lacked the gesture of giving. One should never keep a pretty thing, just
25 like that, as if stowed inside the perfect silence of the heart. (Although, if she didn't give away the roses, no one in the world would ever know that she'd planned to give them away, who would ever find out? it was horribly easy and doable to keep them, since who would ever find out? and they'd be hers, and that would be the end of it and no one would mention it again ...)

30 So? and so? she wondered vaguely worried.

So, no. What she ought to do was wrap them up and send them off, without any enjoyment now; wrap them up and, disappointed, send them off; and in astonishment be rid of them. Also because a person must have some consistency, her thinking ought to have some continuity: if she'd spontaneously decided to hand them over to
35 Carlota, she should stick to her decision and give them away. Because no one changed their mind from one moment to the next.

But anyone can have regrets! she suddenly rebelled. Since it was only the moment I picked the roses up that I realized how beautiful I thought they were, for the very first time in fact, when I picked them up, that's when I realized they were beautiful.

Or just before? (And besides they were hers). And besides the doctor himself had
5 patted her on the back and said: "Don't strain to pretend you're well, ma'am, because you are well," and then that firm pat on the back. That's why, then, she didn't have to be consistent, she didn't have to prove anything to anyone and she'd keep the roses. (And besides—besides they were hers).

"Are they ready?" asked Maria.

10 "Yes," said Laura caught by surprise.

She looked at them, so mute in her hand. Impersonal in their extreme beauty. In their extreme, perfect rose tranquility. That last resort: the flower. That final perfection: luminous tranquility.

Like an addict, she looked with faint greed at the roses' tantalizing perfection, with
15 her mouth slightly dry she looked at them.

Until, slow, austere, she wrapped the stems and thorns in the tissue paper. She had been so absorbed that only when she held out the finished bouquet did she realize that Maria was no longer in the room—and she was left alone with her heroic sacrifice. Vaguely afflicted, she looked at them, remote at the end of her outstretched arm—
20 and her mouth grew still more parched, that envy, that desire. But they're mine, she said with enormous timidity.

When Maria returned and took the bouquet, in a fleeting instant of greed Laura pulled her hand away keeping the roses one second longer—they're lovely and they're mine, it's the first thing that's lovely and mine! plus it was that man who
25 insisted, it wasn't me who went looking for them! fate wanted it this way! oh just this once! just this once and I swear never again! (She could at least take one rose for herself, no more than that: one rose for herself. And only she would know, and then never again oh, she promised herself that never again would she let herself be tempted by perfection, never again!)

30 And the next second, without any transition at all, without any obstacle at all—the roses were in the maid's hand, they were no longer hers, like a letter already slipped into the mailbox! no more chances to take it back or cross anything out! it was no use crying: that's not what I meant! She was left empty-handed but her obstinate and resentful heart was still saying: "you can catch Maria on the stairs, you know
35 perfectly well you can, and snatch the roses from her hand and steal them." Because taking them now would be stealing. Stealing something that was hers? Since that's

what someone who felt no pity for others would do: steal something that was rightfully hers! Oh, have mercy, dear God. You can take it all back, she insisted furiously. And then the front door slammed.

Then the front door slammed.

- 5 Then slowly she sat calmly on the sofa. Without leaning back. Just to rest. No, she wasn't angry, oh not at all. But that offended speck in the depths of her eyes had grown larger and more pensive. She looked at the vase. "Where are my roses," she then said very calmly.

- 10 And she missed the roses. They had left a bright space inside her. Remove an object from a clean table and from the even cleaner mark it leaves you can see that dust had been surrounding it. The roses had left a dustless, sleepless space inside her. In her heart, that rose she could at least have taken for herself without hurting anyone in the world, was missing. Like some greater lack.

- 15 In fact, like the lack. An absence that was entering her like a brightness. And the dust was also disappearing from around the mark the roses left. The center of her fatigue was opening in an expanding circle. As if she hadn't ironed a single one of Armando's shirts. And in the clear space the roses were missed. "Where are my roses," she wailed without pain while smoothing the pleats in her skirt.

- 20 Like when you squeeze lemon into black tea and the black tea starts brightening all over. Her fatigue was gradually brightening. Without any fatigue whatsoever, incidentally. The way a firefly lights up. Since she was no longer tired, she'd get up and get dressed. It was time to start.

But, her lips dry, she tried for a second to imitate the roses inside herself. It wasn't even hard.

- 25 It was all the better that she wasn't tired. That way she'd go to dinner even more refreshed. Why not pin that cameo onto her little real-lace collar? that the major had brought back from the war in Italy. It would set off her neckline so nicely. When she was ready she'd hear the sound of Armando's key in the door. She needed to get dressed. But it was still early. He'd be caught in traffic. It was still afternoon. A very
30 pretty afternoon.

Incidentally it was no longer afternoon.

It was night. From the street rose the first sounds of the darkness and the first lights.

Incidentally the key familiarly penetrated the keyhole.

Armando would open the door. He'd switch the light on. And suddenly in the doorframe the expectant face that he constantly tried to mask but couldn't suppress would be bared. Then his bated breath would finally transform into a smile of great unburdening. That embarrassed smile of relief that he'd never suspected she noticed.

5 That relief they had probably, with a pat on the back, advised her poor husband to conceal. But which, for his wife's guilt-ridden heart, had been daily reward for at last having given back to that man the possibility of joy and peace, sanctified by the hand of an austere priest who only allowed beings a humble joy and not the imitation of Christ.

10 The key turned in the lock, the shadowy and hurried figure entered, light violently flooded the room.

And right in the doorway he froze with that panting and suddenly paralyzed look as if he'd run for miles so as not to get home too late. She was going to smile. So he could at last wipe that anxious suspense off his face, which always came mingled with the
15 childish triumph of getting home in time to find her there boring, nice and diligent, and his wife. She was going to smile so he'd once again know that there would never again be any danger of his getting home too late. She was going to smile to teach him sweetly to believe in her. It was no use advising them never to mention the subject: they didn't talk about it but had worked out a language of facial expressions in which
20 fear and trust were conveyed, and question and answer were mutely telegraphed. She was going to smile. It was taking a while but she was going to smile.

Calm and gentle, she said:

"It's back, Armando. It's back."

As if he would never understand, his face twisted into a dubious smile. His primary
25 task at the moment was trying to catch his breath after sprinting up the stairs, since he'd triumphantly avoided getting home late, since there she was smiling at him. As if he'd never understand.

"What's back," he finally asked in a blank tone of voice.

But, as he was trying never to understand, the man's progressively stiffening face had
30 already understood, though not a single feature had altered. His primary task was to stall for time and concentrate on catching his breath. Which suddenly was no longer hard to do. For unexpectedly he realized in horror that both the living room and his wife were calm and unhurried. With even further misgiving, like someone who bursts into laughter after getting the joke, he nonetheless insisted on keeping his face
35 contorted, from which he watched her warily, almost her enemy. And from which he

was starting to no longer help noticing how she was sitting with her hands crossed on her lap, with the serenity of a lit-up firefly.

In her brown-eyed and innocent gaze the proud embarrassment of not having been able to resist.

5 “What’s back,” he said suddenly harsh.

“I couldn’t help it,” she said, and her final compassion for the man was in her voice, that final plea for forgiveness already mingled with the haughtiness of a solitude almost perfect now. I couldn’t help it, she repeated surrendering to him in relief the compassion she had struggled to hold onto until he got home. “It was because of the
10 roses,” she said modestly.

As if holding still for a snapshot of that instant, he kept that same detached face, as if the photographer had wanted only his face and not his soul. He opened his mouth and for an instant his face involuntarily took on that expression of comic indifference he’d used to hide his mortification when asking his boss for a raise. The next second,
15 he averted his eyes in shame at the indecency of his wife who, blossoming and serene, was sitting there.

But suddenly the tension fell away. His shoulders sagged, his features gave way and a great heaviness relaxed him. He looked at her older now, curious.

20 She was sitting there in her little housedress. He knew she’d done what she could to avoid becoming luminous and unattainable. Timidly and with respect, he was looking at her. He’d grown older, weary, curious. But he didn’t have a single word to say. From the open doorway he saw his wife on the sofa without leaning back, once again alert and tranquil, as if on a train. That had already departed.