Quebrada

by Mariana Travacio
translated by Will Morningstar

1.

My name is Lina Ramos, and Relicario Cruz is my husband. I've been telling him we need to leave for a long time, but he doesn't want to. He's very attached to this land. He says this is where we were born and this is where we'll die. But everyone's gone, I tell him. And he says we can't abandon our dead, Lina. We can't just go and leave them here, alone without anyone who knows them. That's what he says. You can't just leave like that. And I tell him I'd stay if there were anything to eat. But here, in the quebrada, you can't find a single inch of land that's good for anything. All that grows are these sad, thorny weeds that scratch at the wind. Everything else is rock. It's not easy to get from one place to another because the way forward is always at an incline, with steep dropoffs everywhere you look. The other day I wasn't feeling well and went to see Octavia, who knows how to heal me. It took four hours climbing over the rocks. When I finally got there I felt I could have collapsed. I've been telling Relicario all of this but he's not one for listening. He says you can't abandon your land. He says if you leave, the dead will lose their names. They'll get confused if their people stop coming by to remind them who they were and how they talked and what they liked. You can't do it, Lina. You've got to visit them, bring them a little caña to drink or some soup or whatever they had to eat when they were alive. That's what he says: If we leave, who's going to bring them their caña or remind them things when they need reminding. We can't do that to them, Lina. I try to explain that no one's trying to abandon anyone, but just think about us for a second: There's no future here. This land has nothing for us,

Cruz, and it's got less with each passing day. We don't even get the little rain we used to get. Sometimes a couple of clouds come by and a person can't help but watch, to see if they might let go of some of their water for us, but then they just bounce off the quebrada and go rain somewhere else. That's what I say to him. But he's stuck in his ways and doesn't want to take a chance. He just wants to stay here. And he asks me: Where would we even go, Lina. We're too old for this. And I don't know what to tell him, because I've spent my whole life among these rocks. What could I possibly say, not knowing any world but this one. Enough, Lina, I say to myself when I see it's not going anywhere. My only comfort is knowing I'll try again tomorrow. And then the morning comes and I look up at this big, empty sky of ours and I feel so weary I can hardly stand it. So I steel myself and try again: Let's go, Relicario. The thing is, I wake up every morning and this cloudless, birdless sky is still there, still barren, still devoid of anything that might bring us something new for a change. It's always exactly the same, this sky, and it just makes me feel hollow. I've been telling the same story for fourteen years, but he never hears me. Fourteen years, since my brother went away and took our son, our Tala, who I miss every day. Sometimes I get sick of trying to make Cruz listen so I give up. But if I don't try, it won't be long before death comes and finds us dried up right next to our dead. And we won't have anyone to bring us caña or soup or anything at all. Sometimes I have hope that maybe one day he'll hear me. Sometimes I pray my prayers to diosito santo, but he never seems to hear me either. He must have gone deaf, I think. I'm a person of faith and so is Relicario, but it's been like pulling teeth with God lately. He won't listen to a single one of my prayers. It makes me angry sometimes, and resentful. And the anger can last for days. Whenever this happens, I tell Cruz that diosito must have gone deaf or maybe he's left this place too, tired of all the rocks. When I start talking like this, Cruz tells me to stop making up stories: God is everywhere. And I say sure, maybe he's

everywhere as long as everywhere doesn't include here. He probably can't even find us, Cruz. It's like we're buried up here in this quebrada, where you can't even see above the cliffs unless you crane your neck back as far as it'll go. But he can't stand it when I talk like this. He sucks his teeth and then holes himself up in his workshop and I get so mad it makes me sick and I have to go to Octavia's to be healed. I wish she didn't live so far away. Depending on the winds, it takes at least four, sometimes five hours to get there, where she lives. But she's the only one who knows how to heal me, so she's who I go to. At first it's easy enough to walk quickly, even though it's uphill. But then the path ends and the terrain drops right off. From then on I just have to make it up as I go along, scrambling over the rocks. It takes a long time and a lot of energy but I don't give up until I get there. Octavia always appears right away, as if she's been waiting for me. Sometimes she comes out from inside. Other times I see her walking around from the back of her house, where she grows the herbs she uses in her remedies. Just the sight of her makes me relax. I don't even have to say a word before she ushers me inside to make me some medicine, and soon I'm feeling better and we get to talking. I wasn't very open with her at first. I barely said anything at all, besides thanking her for her kindness. But now I tell her all sorts of things. I tell her I'm tired of repeating myself so much to Relicario and I'm tired of him not even hearing me, not even giving me one drop of hope that someday we might leave this place. I'm getting old, Octavia. I don't know what to do anymore. Sometimes I think Relicario is right, that you can't abandon your dead. But this feeling that I need to leave has grown so strong I can't sleep. When darkness falls not even Jesus Christ could shut my eyes. I lie there all night, so awake I could freeze. And when the sky brightens and I leave our hut to find water for mate, exhaustion comes and creeps up my spine and bends my back from the weight. I need to sleep, Octavia, so that I can walk upright again.

2.

I’m going, Relicario.

Where are you going to go all alone, woman?

Octavia showed me the way.

What way, Lina, there are no ways here.

You have to go down till you reach the stream.

What stream, Lina, be serious.

That’s what Octavia told me. Go down and down and just keep going down until you reach the stream. Then take a good look at where the water is going and follow it. And the water will lead to the river which leads to the sea. Let’s go to the sea, Cruz. Let’s go together.

You’re crazy, Lina. Even if there were a stream, where would the water come from. You know everything’s been dried up for years.

3.

She took both of our big canteens and a bundle of clothes and the fistful of seeds Octavia had given her for the journey. They're good seeds, Octavia had told her, they'll give you strength. Use them when you need them. She was stubborn, Lina, leaving to go look for that stream. We argued on her last night. I didn't want her to go and she didn't want to go alone: she wanted to drag me along with her. She was adamant. Let's go, Cruz. Let's go find the sea. Over and over. But I didn't want any part of this trouble she'd gotten mixed up inside her. You can't just do something like this, Lina. But she didn't hear me. Headstrong, she was. And now God knows where she is. It's been more than a week since she left. I was sure she'd come right back. That's what I told her as she was walking out the door. Don't be stubborn, Lina, enough of this madness. What's the point, if you're just going to come right back. You'll see, in two or three days you'll be right back here. Do you really think you'll be able to get anywhere on your own, if the only place you've ever been is here. But it was no use. No matter how hard I tried, she was stuck on this idea of going to the sea. And now I wake up every morning filled with this pestilential anger. You can't abandon your husband, you can't abandon your land, you can't abandon your dead. You can't abandon them, Lina. What kind of woman does that. We're too old to go taking chances out in the world. But I should have known long ago, before I married her: Lina was a Ramos. And you could never talk a Ramos out of anything. No wonder that brother of hers was the way he was, coming and taking our Tala away and leaving us here with no son, and no help.

4.

Down, she told me. Just keep going down. That's what I'm doing. But I've been going down for three days and I still haven't seen a stream. Maybe I should have stayed put. Three days, more or less, Octavia told me. Maybe two if I went fast. But I can't go any faster than this because the way is steep and getting steeper and there are so many twists I can barely see what's in front of me. It's slow, having to watch where I put my feet. Every step feels like a risk. The way down is covered in rocks with edges like knives. I wonder if one day it will ever flatten out, so I can walk on smooth ground, see some grass or anything growing. I'll keep going down, Octavia, but I don't see the stream and I'm running out of water. I'll keep going for the rest of the day. It shouldn't be long now. Two hours, probably, till the sun lays down to rest. I don't like to walk after dark. There are stars here, but they don't give off much light, not enough to see by. And with the moon waning these days I can't walk without the sun. It's at my back now, coming from the quebrada and stretching my shadow over the path. I feel like a rag doll flopping around on the white rocks, my shadow more graceful than these bones. There's less heat this time of day. I might even be able to reach the stream before nightfall if I can pick up the pace. I'll walk until the last ray of light. If it's really been three days, I might reach the stream tonight and see where the water is going and find some grass to rest my back. These rocks are hard, not much good for resting. I've been sleeping like this for two nights now and still haven't found a way to take the bite out of their sharp corners. But at least the rocks hold on to their heat. When the sky gets dark and the air gets cold, the rocks keep warm. They're almost like a blanket for tired legs. And that's all a body really needs to stop a while, as the stars march on through the unceasing sky.

5.

He was thirteen, el Tala, when Camilo came with his ideas about the rainforest. He said there was work with all the wood. That what we had here was less than nothing. That we should let him go. That he'd bring el Tala too, so he could fulfill his destiny. He really said it like that: I'll take him to fulfill his destiny. And Lina agreed. She had a weakness for him, her brother. Even though he was younger she trusted him. Then fourteen years went by and we never heard another word. Not about Camilo, not about our son. Sometimes I think about the forest. Camilo told us there were rivers and plenty of rain to make things grow. He said that was why there were so many trees and so much work, with all the wood. And they must have all kinds of animals we don't have, because nothing grows here and we barely have any animals. She's right about that, Lina. There's nothing here. Except these rocky spikes that spring up from the earth and the guinea pigs that race by as if being chased by the devil himself and the few goats that graze for whatever they can find in these dried out weeds. But our dead are here. And I was taught you can't leave your dead behind. None of that mattered to her, to Lina. She let Camilo take our Tala and then she left too. I'm the only one who hasn't left yet. But I don't want to. I know there's no future here but I also know there isn't much of a present in other places either. So stubborn, Lina. She shouldn't have left. It's been two weeks now. I thought she'd be back in no time. She must have found the stream, the one Octavia told her about. If she hadn't, she'd be back by now. Or maybe she got lost, who knows.

6.

Octavia's words chased me like a hungry dog. Three days, she said. I was afraid I'd counted wrong. But no. I'd only slept two nights outdoors; it was still the third day. So I pushed on: a little more, Lina, just a little more. But it was already well past nightfall and the sky wasn't offering any light to help with walking. If there was a moon, it must have been off somewhere else. All I saw were these tiny pinprick stars. There were a lot of them glinting up there, but stars aren't enough to see by. It must have been late, too, because the wind was coming down cold. I couldn't imagine going on. So I settled down against the wind and fell asleep. I must have been tired because I slept past dawn. The sun was already high in the sky when I opened my eyes, feeling a little dizzy, maybe from all that sleep. I kicked myself for being stubborn enough to leave, and then Cruz came to me, in my head, asking me not to leave, to stay with him, telling me you just can't do this kind of thing. And I started to answer him out loud, as if he could hear me. I was walking down the mountain and talking to myself. I waited too long for you, Cruz, and now I've walked too far to come back. I'm going to find the stream. Every now and then I got the feeling that these rocks would never end, that I would keep going until I reached the gates of hell itself. This is what I was thinking about when I saw some goats down below. The drop was steep to where they were, as if descending straight down from the sky. Getting to them wouldn't be easy. But seeing those animals gave me hope, so I kept going anyway. And as I got nearer, two women appeared. They came over quickly, as soon as they heard me. I must have looked at them eagerly, because the first thing they said was could they help me somehow. Where's the stream, I asked. They pointed farther down, it's over there, señora, half an hour if you walk fast. That's where we're going as soon as our friend gets here. If you're not in a hurry you can come

with us. I said yes without thinking. I was tired of walking alone. They asked me to sit with them on some rocks. One of them looked more worse for the wear than the other. They could have been mother and daughter. The younger one offered me some milk and I accepted, sipping just a little at a time so they wouldn’t see how hungry I was.

7.

I made a decision, madre. You taught me not to abandon the dead, and I understand. But the house is unbearable since my Lina left and I'm not the kind of man to live alone. I can't get used to it. This land never seemed so bad before, back when it was all talk. But now that she's gone and isn't coming back, I've started waking up every morning sick with spite. Don't take it the wrong way, madre. I know how close you feel to this land but you have to understand that even the little rain we used to get doesn't come anymore. I won't leave you here alone, don't worry. That's why I went to speak with don Amancio the other day. Do you remember Amancio, madre? Right, the one who lives down a ways and sells caña. He got his daughter married and I heard they were looking for a house. So I had an idea. I went to see him and we talked for a long time, past nightfall. I'd gotten to his place in the early afternoon, with the sun still raging. I didn't know how best to bring it up. He offered me a little cold water and some caña and we got to talking. First I asked about his daughter. He told me she'd gotten pregnant and they were looking for a house. I pretended not to know already. So I started telling him. I said Lina had gone away and I was unhappy without her, alone in the house. I made him an offer: I'd give him the house for his daughter if he got me what I needed to leave. It took us a while to come to an agreement, because you'll remember that Amancio has a bit of a tight fist. He doesn't like to let go of things. And he's shrewd. But I didn't have anywhere else to be. So I listened to his reasoning and gave him my own. I made it clear that he could have the house with everything in it. His daughter wouldn't need a thing. Not a table, not even a knife. We closed the deal with some caña as the stars came into view through the half open door.

He said he'd need a few days to get everything together. That's why I came to see you today, madre. In a few days, you're coming with me. And don't get mad, padre's coming too. The only thing I can't do, madre, is take all the rest of your dead. I'm sorry, but Amancio said he could only get me one donkey. I asked him for two donkeys and a good wagon. But he said he couldn't get ahold of two donkeys, so I'd have to make do with the one. You know we can't go overburdening the animal, madre, because the land is steep. And you know too that the only wagons around here are narrow ones, seeing as there aren't any paths wide enough to pull anything too big. So you'll have to forgive me, but I'm taking you two and no one else.

8.

It was a long time before the women's friend turned up. I started getting antsy at one point but didn't want to complain. Instead I kept quiet and held back the urge to ask why she was taking so long, this woman. They didn't seem to be in much of a hurry: they told me they came down this way every afternoon so the goats could have some water. This was the only place they ever went. Day after day, down and up, leading the goats, letting each passing year weigh down on their shoulders just like I had done back home, staring at that same sky. But now I had a path to follow. Still, I decided to wait. There was no rush. The stream would be there whenever I got to it, and then I could see where it led and I'd know which way to go. The idea of finding the stream was a comfort, knowing Octavia hadn't been wrong. The woman they were waiting for was very young. She came late in the afternoon, alongside her goat. She didn't look like she was in a hurry. Her name is Hermelinda, they told me. That was how they introduced her, when she got there. And you almost couldn't look at her she was so beautiful: she seemed like a creature from another world. God must have been pleased with himself, making such a marvelous thing. Never in my life have I seen someone like her. Her black eyes seemed to hold an incredible strength. And her hair spilled straight down to her waist. It was hard to look away, once you were looking. But I pretended to be thinking about other things and we continued down, the four of us, to the stream. I was a little surprised when I saw it. Is that the stream down there, I asked. Yes, they said. Is there any water, I asked. It looks empty. It's what there is, they said. When we got closer, I could see better: the stream was nothing more than a thin thread of water sunk between the rocks. There's barely any water, I said. That's it, doña. That's all that's left. There was more water before but now this is it. They seemed happy enough, these women and their

goats. I didn’t want to offend anyone so I held my tongue. But my eyes drifted to the meager little stream. I tried to figure out which direction the water was going, but it didn’t seem to be going anywhere. It didn’t look like there was any movement at all. I stood there watching anyway. It must have been going somewhere. What’re you looking at so hard, doña, they asked. I was embarrassed to tell them. I’m just happy to see the water, I said, as I cupped my hands to take some. It was wonderful, drinking from the stream. The water was cold and I was thirsty. As I drank, the women told me they were going to head back. I felt both relieved and a little upset. Suddenly I was alone again with no idea where I was going, but at least I wouldn’t have to answer any more questions. They were already on their way back when Hermelinda turned around: Where is it you’re going to, she asked. I didn’t get the chance to answer because the others were already telling her I was on my way to the sea. I nodded, and that was that.

9.

Please, madre, I'm asking you to understand. Forgive me for speaking to you like this, I mean no disrespect. But the fact is I can't go on without Lina. You can come with me if you want. But your parents will have to wait. There's no way to bring them along right now. We can come back to get them later, after we find Lina. You never know, maybe we'll find her right away and we can all come back here. But in the meantime, please don't ask me for that, madre. I just can't bring all of your dead. I can barely manage you and padre. I'm sorry, but I can't climb all over the quebrada with so much company. Remember, Lina has a month's headstart and we have to catch up with her somehow. I'm going to see doña Octavia before we leave. I want to ask her what she told Lina so we can be sure to go in the right direction. We'll have to feel our way out no matter what: the paths around here are devious, and who knows if Lina even followed Octavia's advice. But we have to keep faith that we'll find her. She was walking alone but we'll have a wagon. Not that the donkey will be much help, but at least we won't get so tired. With Octavia's directions, maybe we'll pick up her trail. Amancio still has to let me know how he's made out. I asked for a few things so we'll see if he can get his hands on them. I offered him everything I have in exchange. At the time it seemed like a fair trade. I hope Lina doesn't get angry with me, leaving her without a house. I just didn't have anything else to offer. To be honest, she wasn't entirely wrong, Lina. Things here have gotten pretty hard. The land looks so empty these days. Anyone with any life left in them has already gone away to try their luck somewhere else. It's just us old folks here now, watching each day come and go, same as the last. If you could see it, madre, it would make you cry. It's just us here, alone with the mountains, in this land without water. Not even the weeds grow like they used to. They're

already dry by the time they come up, and they give out before the first leaf even has a chance. The only thing they leave us are thorns, so harsh that even the wind makes a fuss when it passes by.

10.

Those women liked to talk. While we were waiting for their friend to show up, they'd started asking questions about where I was coming from and where I was going to. I didn't want to say too much. I just told them I was going to find the sea. But I hadn't even finished talking before I started to regret it: I was afraid they would think I was crazy. They didn't say anything more, but after a while the older one asked where that was. I told them what Octavia had told me: You have to follow the stream until you come to a river and then the river will take you to the sea. You have to go where the water goes. That's what I told them. They listened thoughtfully. Then they started talking to each other and I stood up from the rock I'd been sitting on and walked a few steps to stand off by myself. They were talking about a field, about a place where there was grass and rain and where there was work. It sounded like they wanted their friend, the one we were waiting for, to go get a job there. They said she was young and needed work and she should go and give it a try. I walked back over to them and they explained: Out there, see, there's land that's giving. Not like this stingy one of ours. They were standing up now, showing me the way to that place. They gestured to the mountains in front of us. You couldn't see anything beyond those cliffs, but they were insistent, pointing the way: Over there, beyond the mountains, are some hills. Beyond the hills, that's where the field is. We hear there's good land, doña, and water, and work. I couldn't even imagine a place like that, but the idea of it seemed to give them hope.

11.

Octavia wasn't surprised when I showed up at her house. She came out calmly from inside to welcome me. What can I do for you, compadre. I've come to see you, doña, because my Lina left me and the days have been hard. The house is lonely now: it's been fourteen years without el Tala, and now without my wife. When she left she said she was going to the sea. And I've decided to go and look for her. Don Amancio is finding me a wagon and a donkey, so I'll be leaving soon. I'm bringing my people. That's why I had to ask him, don Amancio, for the wagon. But before I go, I had to come and ask you if you have any idea where I should look.

Doña Octavia was silent for a moment, as if she were searching for the words. After a while, she spoke: What you are asking of me is not easy. It's true I told Lina where to go, but I couldn't tell you where she went. All I can tell you is which path I told her to take, but it won't be enough to track her down. There's no way to give you the certainty you seek: you know how the path will unfold only once a person sets out to walk.

And that was all Octavia said. I spent four hours going and four hours coming just for that old witch to tell me absolutely nothing. I thanked her anyway, because I have my manners, but I climbed down from her house cursing every single twinkling star in the sky that night. And I was still cursing when I curled up in my cot to rest my bones.

12.

Deep down, I was relieved when the women with the goats left: now I could move on without having to give any more explanations about where I was going. I felt much better being there, next to the stream, because it meant Octavia was right: there really was a stream. And if there was a stream, there might be a river. It was encouraging. I even wanted to keep going, but the day's end was so close, the sky already getting dim. It seemed like a good idea to stay and sleep next to the water. I was happy to see that the wind was still blowing around up there, where I had come from, and hadn't had the urge to come make trouble down here. When the sky went black, I stopped watching the water. It was almost as though the river was singing me to sleep. And I drifted off, to that song, that night.

13.

Tomorrow, Amancio told me. That's why I came to see you, padre. Because there isn't much time left. Madre says she wants me to bring her parents with, but just imagine me trying to find Lina with so many people. I can't, padre. I know you don't worry so much and you wouldn't go asking for things like that, but you know her, you know madre: she's relentless. She doesn't want to hear a word about leaving without her people. And it's no good to explain that there are too many of them because she already told me she doesn't just want to bring her parents. She wants to bring her brothers and her grandfather, too. Imagine, padre, if I tried to bring everyone along. You remember what the paths around here are like, barely wide enough for a narrow wagon to squeeze by. I should be traveling lighter, without the wagon, without anything. But that's the way it is and I'm bringing you both, call me stubborn. I don't want to leave you all alone. Ay, padre, if only you could change her mind. I know, you don't have to tell me twice: you could never change her mind about anything. You always knew how to stand by her side. Anyway, padre, that's where we are. We'll have to leave soon. I went to Amancio's today, after catching my breath from that useless visit to doña Octavia's. The old witch was no help at all. She just told me the path she'd told Lina to take but then she said that wasn't enough. And of course it wasn't, because how could we know where Lina actually went. Not to mention what she ran into on the way. I didn't go to that witch's place for her to tell me something anyone could have figured out on their own. I went so she'd give me something to be sure about, but I've got nothing. All I'm sure of now, padre, is that we will leave this place very soon. And it's hard, because while this land isn't much, we were born here. We are who we are here. If we leave we'll have to keep explaining where we're from and where we're going. And that doesn't sound

very promising. But like I told madre, it's not like we have a whole lot to keep us going here. Lina had been telling me for a while but I wasn't much for listening. I'm still not even sure if I really agree. Because it all depends, padre. On the one hand, it's true that this land has seen better days. On the other, it's no small thing to abandon everything when you have no idea what's waiting for you out there. I always liked the calm of our little house, each day the same, with my Lina. There was a certain kind of peace, I can't explain it, even though el Tala wasn't with us. I think we got used to passing the days alone, anyway. Or I did, at least. Because Lina was never the same after her brother left with el Tala. She started to resent this land. She said it never gave us anything and we should go find a better life. I think Lina ended up leaving out of regret, for having let her brother take el Tala away. It was too late by the time she started having second thoughts. They'd left without knowing where they were going, so how could she have found them. Wherever they ended up, things must have turned out well, because they never came back. Or else they died on the way, God only knows. We wondered more than once about where the rainforest could be. And there were many times we wanted to go and find them, but we didn't have a clue about where they could have gone. That's why now is the time for me to go and find her, my Lina. I think it's still early enough, and I have an idea of which way she might have gone. We can't be completely sure, padre, but I want to try. See if you can talk to madre and explain that the wagon will only fit the two of you.

14.

I woke to the sound of water stumbling over the rocks. I don't know what happened to it, to the stream, but when the morning came there was so much water I had to rub my eyes to get a better look. It must have really rained up there in the sky or in some other part of the world for so much water to make it all the way down here. I looked again and now there was no question: I knew exactly where the stream was going. I was so happy that I looked up to the sky and thanked diosito. I wanted to tell Cruz that God was really here, in this part of the world: You should have come, Relicario, because he's here. You were wrong. He isn't everywhere. He wasn't there, I'm sure of it. But he really is here: this stream was empty yesterday and today it's full. I should have known, because I could almost hear it whispering as I slept. But I never imagined that sound could have been all this water coming down. You really should be here, Relicario, to see all this water.

I tried to look into the distance, to see where the stream was going: I was so curious about what lay ahead. But the path was a devious one: the stream snaked around too much to see where it would end up. I had to know. So I gathered up my clothes and got to walking along the stream. I had no idea now how many days it would take to get to the river but at least I didn't have to keep weighing every step. My feet could set their own pace on that ground, and all I had to do was follow the water.

15.

Don Amancio came by with his daughter. He told me they would be coming, that I'd have to forgive him but his daughter wanted to get acquainted with the place, if I didn't mind. It's no problem, I told him. And so they came, the two of them, to get acquainted. As it happened, don Amancio had already been to the house once. But that was a long time ago. He must have been a year old, el Tala, when he was struck with that fever, the one that left him shaking all through the night. We didn't know what to do. I went down to the village, desperate for help. And it was don Amancio who stepped forward that night. He came with the healer who took care of his family, may he rest in peace. A good man. He saved the boy, el Tala, and I never forgot it. And since then I've had a lot of respect for don Amancio; he might be a little miserly with his things, but he was generous with us. How could I mind his daughter wanting to come and get acquainted with the house. Although it did make me a little embarrassed, this visit, because I didn't have much to show them. The girl came inside with an eager look in her eyes. Amancio let her. And when she was done, she thanked her father and thanked me too, for the visit, and right then and there Amancio told me he could deliver what I'd asked for the next day. And I don't know where I got the nerve but I asked him to give me just a few more days, to wrap up everything here. He looked at his daughter and then turned to me with those gray eyebrows of his and asked if I could manage to have everything wrapped up in three days' time.

16.

No one told me it would be so long before I'd cross paths with another soul. I didn't meet a single pair of eyes after the women with the goats. My legs were already getting weak when I saw the dogs. They were drinking greedily, and had two goatherds with them and a few goats and some women gathering water in jugs. I was so happy to see so many people. They must have noticed because soon the women came over and asked if I needed anything. I didn't know what to say. I told them I'd been walking and hadn't seen anyone for a while. Are you lost, they asked. I told them I wasn't exactly lost, more like the walk had been longer than expected. I was looking for a river, I said, and asked if they knew how much walking was left. They looked at me strangely and called to the goatherds. Soon they were all talking about the river. None of them seemed to remember ever seeing a river around here. They pointed this way and that and couldn't agree. In the end, they handed down the verdict: No, doña, no river here. And hearing that, it was as if my bones melted at the seams: I felt myself falling to the ground like a dirty rag. Later, I learned they spent a long time trying to wake me up, so long that they decided to take me home with them. When I opened my eyes I was in a small house. A couple lived there. I thought I must have been in their way. I was so embarrassed when I realized what had happened: That a few of them had carried me here and left me on the cot before going to find help. That there was a woman who knew about things like this and she had come to see me and told them my stomach was completely empty. They let me eat and drink for a long time. And they even offered to let me stay with them until I felt strong enough to move on. The more I bothered them, the more embarrassed I felt. So I told them that I didn't want to be a bother, that they shouldn't worry, that I'd be all right. But they stood so firm that I agreed to stay. The woman of the house got to

talking with that voice of hers, soft like a lullaby. Her name was Balbina. I liked listening to her and how she didn't ask questions. Instead she gave advice: That I'd have to get strong before continuing on my journey. That if not, I'd never reach the river, or anywhere else. That if the path ahead was uncertain, I shouldn't just barrel through; I had to learn to prepare. That maybe it would be good to work, even for a short while, before moving on. She said she had heard from her husband about a field where there was work. I listened closely, because her words were making sense. And eventually I mentioned the women with the goats, who had already told me of that land, where the grasses grew. But I had come away with the idea that it was very far away, that place. I wondered how I could possibly make it there alone without getting lost. I could see myself trying to walk, exhausted and aimless. So I told her I would continue along the stream. I was sure I would reach the river if I just kept going. The river leads to the sea, I told her, and I want to go to the sea. As I said this, she looked at me with respect, not a hint of disapproval in her eyes. The next day she came to tell me that she had told him, her husband, about the situation I was in. They'd been thinking about how they could give me a hand. She confessed that I'd brought her memories of her mother and that was why she wanted to help me so badly, because the likeness gave her good feelings: my eyes had the same spirit as her mother's. That was what she said. I was moved, when I heard that. It turned out that the husband went to talk to someone he knew, a man who had experience with the place. They did so much for me, I don't know how I can ever repay them. In the end, it sounded as though this man could take me there. He said he would know for sure the next day. He'd take me with him if he could, so I could ask for work. I thought: I'll stay there if they give me work. And I'll come back if they don't. I couldn't sleep that night, but it wasn't the same sleeplessness as before. I didn't have to

resent looking up at the same sky every day anymore. Now I was in an unfamiliar house with this unfamiliar a feeling of hope, for tomorrow.

17.

I'd been warned that it wouldn't be easy to go digging up the dead. I had some new coffins with me, because I'd also been warned that the old coffins wouldn't still be in one piece. It was a good thing I remembered to ask don Amancio for them. And it was a good thing I remembered to ask him for a sturdy shovel, too. I got there early because there's not much a person can do when the sun is beating down on them. It was still dark when I arrived, but it wasn't so cold under that moonless, nearly starless sky. The moon doesn't show itself much around here. It was like working with my eyes closed at the start, but I knew the sun would be up soon and then I'd be able to see better. Meanwhile, there I was with the shovel, next to my mother's grave. I didn't want to go rooting around in someone else's space so I was careful to find the right spot. That set me back longer than I thought it would, but I was still feeling hopeful. I had the wagon I'd gotten from don Amancio, and my donkey. And having them felt almost like sanctuary. It's true there was no light, no moon, nothing more than our same old barren sky, but I had the wagon and I had my donkey and on top of that I had a good shovel and the two shiny coffins I'd asked for. That was enough for me. I didn't care anymore about what my mother or her dead had to say. The rest of them would just have to stay put and wait. All I could think about now was leaving to look for my Lina, just me and my things. I wasn't even upset about giving up the house anymore. The point is, it was still dark as I went over to my mother and father's graves, when I told them it was time for us to go. But the first shovelfuls tested everything I'd been so sure about. I was alone. The dark sky winked with what little light it had to offer. I'd have to settle for that. After a while, your eyes get used to it, anyway. Digging up madre took more than two hours. I talked to her the whole time, gently, so she wouldn't get angry. I told her: I'm sorry to come and disturb

you like this, madre, but tomorrow we're leaving and I have no choice but to get you out now. And so I kept talking and shoveling and as the sky started to brighten I could see there was no coffin left. The earth had devoured it. My mother was no more than bones in a hole in the ground. I took her out bone by bone, carefully putting her in her new coffin. Then I fastened the coffin with rope and heaved her up onto the wagon. By the time I finished with madre, I didn't think I had it in me to dig up padre. I looked at my donkey: I don't have it in me, I confessed. Not for digging up padre, not for going anywhere at all. But there was no turning back, seeing as I'd already promised the house to don Amancio. It started to seem like a terrible idea. I don't know how the hell I got myself mixed up in all this excitement. My donkey looked at me with those enormous eyes of his and didn't say a word. I clicked my tongue, slung my shovel over my shoulder, and went over to work on the next grave.

18.

They said his name was Feliciano, the goatherd. He was going to leave the next day, early in the morning. And he could take me if I wanted. They knew the way well, he and his donkey, because they went back year after year to those fields for work. The way was long, they said. It would take us at least two weeks to cross the mountains. But if I was up to it, I could go with him tomorrow. He had already agreed to stop here first, on his way. That was what Balbina and her husband told me that night. And I grasped her hands, Balbina's, and looked deep into those sad eyes of hers and said I would never forget her or all the help she had given me. A tear fell from my eye, and I looked at her husband and thanked him too and thanked diosito santo and I remembered Octavia and thanked her too and I think when I fell asleep I was still giving thanks, in my dreams.

19.

I took padre out bone by bone too. He was the same as madre, no coffin. They must have been pleased, these two, to have gone one after the other like they did. There was always such pride in their eyes when they looked at each other. That was the one thing they never lacked. Every day, they fell asleep and woke up at the same time, as if they were a single person. And seeing each other again every morning gave them so much joy. The days could have been of feast or famine, it didn't matter. Just opening their eyes and finding themselves still together seemed to be enough. Padre's eyes started to fade as soon as madre got sick. And when madre died and padre came back from the burial he went to sleep and never woke up. We buried him the next day, in the next grave over. It was a comfort to know they could sleep side by side down in the earth too. And now I have them here, on this narrow wagon. They barely fit, one on top of the other. It was a relief, knowing I could take them with me, together.

Don Amancio and his daughter came to see me off. They helped put my things on the wagon, around the coffins. Not long after setting out, I turned back to look at the house. Amancio was still standing there, next to the door. He raised his hat. I responded in kind. Then I looked at the way ahead and said, to my donkey: Let's go, donkey, let's go find Lina.