

STRUCTURE OF
PRAYER



DIEGO MAENZA

Translated by Omar Alberto Alarcón



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Structure Of Prayer

«Tektime S.r.l.s.»

Maenza D.

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”Christianity, from a priest and a nun, two stories crossed by the secret, by the suffering of not recognizing themselves in their ”sins”, in denying a reality that is telling them, more and more strongly, that they are weak before the acceptance of their wrong decisions. The characters are just mere figures placed in the plot to delve into a constant and disturbing message: someone is always on top of someone else; someone who sentences with ideas conditioned to their benefit”. ALEXIS CUZME, writer ” Structure of prayer is developed in an environment of religiosity and erudition, because in relation to the famous painting The Garden of Delights, by Hieronymus Bosch, the protagonist - who is a priest - interprets his own behavior and that of other human beings, from the beginning to the end of time”. VERÓNICA FALCONÍ, writer A priest tormented by his instincts. Is this a pointless fight against the devil or a test of the heavens? A pregnant novice. Is it a transgression of the rules or a miracle in times of skepticism? A parade of exalted characters who defend the foundations of doctrine, and others, from miserable existences, whose lives call into question the foundations that support theology. Narrated from different points of view and approached through formal and thematic daring, Structure of Prayer immerses us in dense dramas where the spiritual decomposition of each of the protagonists will shorten the space for redemption, which not all will reach. The theological virtues and the mysteries of faith merge to give rise to the extensive Way of the Cross that circulates throughout these pages through the seven capital sins that are presented in the form of a bestiary, with each demon as a symbol of excess: Asmodeus, lust; Belfegor, laziness; Beelzebub, gluttony; Amon, anger; Leviathan, revenge; Mammon, greed; and, Lucifer, pride. Despite the crudeness of its lines, this novel is a spiritual book.

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Содержание

PART ONE	7
SUNDAY	7
MONDAY	11
TUESDAY AND WEDNESDAY	16
THURSDAY	21
FRIDAY	26
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	29

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STRUCTURE OF PRAYER

PART ONE ON BEHALF OF THE FATHER

SUNDAY

Light and darkness

Pater noster, qui es in caelis...

Darkness is the blindness of thoughts, it is the thunder of silence. Darkness is a plague that turns into dizziness, a caress of nothingness, a cold that pierces the bones, a bitterness that swallows with tears. Darkness is a condemnation to the fears of the past, an uncertainty to the calamities of the future, a nebula that compacts the senses. The darkness. And suddenly, my children, you can contemplate the world. I emerge to the vigil as if excreted from the abyss of the womb. I feel reborn though aware of the deception of my senses. I perceive my morning smell of liver stench adhering to my muzzles, impregnated in the pillow cloth or simply integrated into the atmosphere of the room. Meanwhile, the world remains there. I stand up and the glare coming through the window blinds me and forces me to cover my face. I have woken up from an uneasy sleep that my soul has endured not without shocks. I observe almost in amazement, as if it were the first time, the dryness of the walls of the room, the sadness that distills from its old cracks, the grey photos held in contrast in the colourful frames, the painting of a world enclosed in a glass bubble that may be a protection so that some external danger does not hurt the surface again, or it may remain as a containment so that the evils embedded in that devastated land do not germinate, so that no curious Pandora will ever uncover its stench again. In the background, behind the world, I observe once again the image of God. Closing my eyes, I pray. Beloved Father, deliver me from all sin, for yours is the kingdom of earth and heaven and your designs are pure and unquestionable, cleanse my soul from temptation and bless my day.

I get up and feel the bitterness of the wine established in my entrails, somewhere in my tissues. I slide into the bathroom where the mirror shows the sediments that stain my eyes and that I push away with my fingertips, making the process cause me a shudder. I shake my face with soap and water. The toothpaste rinses my mouth, which gives off the morning stench that I am used to. I excrete with pleasure and notice on the front of my underwear the accumulated splashes that give away the viscosity of the morning and almost daily substance of rare radiance. Oh, Lord, how beautiful and cruel dreams are. Inside a dream is the only space where I can show myself as I am.

*

The newspaper shows him the same news every time. But he is struck by a headline on the center page that shows the latest statements of the Holy Father. He reads the content printed in small letters and examines the full-color photo that has been placed next to the review. Adorned with a cape and leaning out, as is tradition, over the main balcony of the Saint's Basilica, he announced the eve of the major week. Father Misael, we say his name now, prays and prepares for mass.

*

I can't isolate that image. It's in me and it doesn't leave me. How much I suffer before the altar in the moments of this memory. How I bear that torment at the moment of spouting the worn-out slogans of each mass that the parishioners receive as new words. How much I resist seconds before God's blood and body purify me. And all because of that image. It is reticulated in me and dominates me, it is a curse arising from the underworld that bends my spirit, and I can only have recourse to the safeguard of the Almighty who illuminates my path.

*

Sitting at the table, putting aside one of the vegetable dishes, I consider that I have prepared an excessive lunch. I contemplate with undeserved attention the cleanliness of the furniture, of the floor, of the now dust-free shelf, of the imitation imperial porcelain that sparkles with an unusual brilliance and shows the naked cherubs with their pale spectral faces. Thomas, disciplined, blows from below, making an imitation of a greeting with his tail. The boy sips the orange juice that spills in drops from the corner of his mouth and smiles at his clumsiness. I only eat the salad and half a glass of the fruit juice and put aside the fish that I don't want, as I have put aside the rest of the food. My right eye has again secreted eye booger that I remove with modesty and a little annoyance, since the boy has directed a face of astonishment to me while commenting on some passages of the Bible. Thomas follows me into the kitchen with a martial step, imploring with his panting some satisfaction that will mitigate the emptiness of his stomach and prevent him from running his spit.

*

I'm going upstairs to the bedroom. I try to rest. It's no use. I return to the dream that weighs on me like a sisyphic rock that when I wake up I think has been discarded. The darkness. And suddenly the recurring image is shown, repeating itself over and over again as if I had my eyes inside a kaleidoscope whose refractions will take me at every moment to the only image without distortion. I pray to God that I may be spared this torment and that my spirit may rest from these shocks. Cyclopean ears split by the edge of a knife. It is the image and I know where it comes from. From my memories of the painting in my room, there is no doubt about it. From the permanent and never-tiring evening study that I often make when contemplating the painting every time I allow its doors to open. It is a bastard imitation, and almost ruined, of the great painter's famous triptych, which I paid for with my life's savings. We must admit that it is a futile object in comparison with the original, especially in art, despite being a faithful copy, of equal proportions. I contemplate the world. I allow the doors of the nuanced work to open on the oak board and I look at another parallel world: that of paradise, the garden and hell. I marvel as I do every evening. The painter's art is so flawless that I shudder even through a bad interpreter. I frequent the fresco in the evenings, exploring the gears of its constitution, trying to decipher the alchemy that brought about the now devastated paradise, the art of demiurge that forged hell, and pretending to know, because only by knowing are we in a position to reject, the path of perdition that leads to this Calvary.

*

I leave the dream with the aching body, with the slumber that blushes my flesh and incites me to sin. I have the feeling that I am no longer the same, that I want to escape into some kind of

exile without worrying about carrying on my forehead the stigma that gives me away to men. To flee from God's gaze, so that his eyes no longer rest on me, and thus be able to satisfy my delusions. The sacrilegious thought comes to me every day. I pray that the devil will depart from me and I feel that God is reanimating me in faith, that he is taking Luzbel away from my flesh which is beginning to grow cold. And I pray, I cannot do anything else but beg the heavens to be able to escape the trap of my body, to appease the perfidies that I plot in my felony, to flee from the inclinations towards which my senses are tempted. I resort to some introversion that saves me, at least for the moment. I pray and prepare for mass.

*

The boy crosses in front of my door and stops for a moment, bending down, putting some damage in his slippers. His white pajamas make his flesh transparent and give his figure the appearance of a voluptuous ephebe. But in his face there is innocence, chastity. The artificial light makes her cheeks reverberate with a pale pink that flashes in the half-light of the entrance. He is completely unaware of his powers of seduction, of the dangerous attraction he produces in his wake. He stands up, looks into my room and in his eternal shyness tries to say goodbye to me with a bow that seems distant and annoying. With a gesture I encourage him to come closer. I give him a blessing and mark the imaginary sign of the cross over his eyes. I descend my hand almost transformed into a fist at the height of his mouth, seeing his lips caressing my fingers, contemplating his face close to me and succeeding in making a tremor invade me, since by the aspect of his features he resembles the face of an archangel. I take him by the shoulders and on this occasion I make the sign of the cross with four kisses that I implant on his forehead. I have no choice but to let him go and go to prayer.

*

Young Manuel has placed his trust in the words of Father Misael. Every evening, he invites him to pray the major prayer with him. He instructed him in the mystical art of prayer, the spiritual interiorization that, the priest claims, will purge his soul, leaving him absolved of all sin to become a purified child of God. And Manuel manifests his unconditional surrender. The reverend has imposed the dogma on him. He has shown him that faith is the most important thing to be saved and that one must trust in the designs, always inscrutable, of the Lord. And the boy believes him. Sometimes, when he kneels in front of the bed, the father stands right behind him and squeezes his hands next to the boy's. It's a reinforced prayer, he whispers in his ear. In this way God will hear us better, you as a son and me as a father, he mumbles to him each time, almost inaudibly, manifesting the secret that he does not want him to auscultate the small carved image of the macerated man of the cross that hangs over the head of the bed. On cold nights Manuel finds the company of that double prayer pleasant, but on hot days it seems unbearable, he cannot tolerate the firm, sticky body attached to his buttocks, the longing, warm breath expelled by his father in prayer, and the words of farewell when the doughy kiss on the back of his neck is sealed. But now, kneeling, resting his elbows on the mattress, the boy is praying before the effigy of the prophet and the father has not arrived.

*

I'm not getting up tonight. God has strengthened my faith. God is my shepherd, my guide, my light and my path. Hear my prayer and let it be strong, do not let it fall into the darkness of sin, O beloved God, O beloved Father.

*

What a horrible dream, for God's sake. Save me, Lord. Watch over me and protect me, Father. Watch over me, Lord. What a horrible dream. Help me, Lord, I implore you. I will not sink back into the satisfactions of sin. I swear it. Because I can't stand this darkness. My eyes can't stand this darkness. I walk, I grope my bed, less warm without my body. I feel the wardrobe, hard as the blackness that suffocates me. I can't find the way out that will take me to the light, Lord, lead me to that escape. Don't let my foot stumble again. I feel a wall as cold as my hands, frozen in the cold. Guide me, Lord. In vain I continue to cry out. This house is so sad and so lonely and so big that Father Misael can't hear me. Nevertheless, you Lord, beloved Father, who hears the cries of all your children, guide my legs, welcome them into your light, bring me out of this darkness and I promise to be faithful to the end of my days. I promise to offer up my faith every morning. I promise to do the penances of your divine command. I trust in you, Lord, beloved Father. Your word will be a lamp to my foot and a light to my path. I know, Lord, I trust in you completely. Lead me into the light. Lead me to your light.

*

The door opens and the boy, barefoot, calls to his father's room. He has had to cross the long purgatory of the corridor that separates the rooms as if it were the endless threshold between hell and paradise.

*

And she comes to me with her teeth shaking and chattering, icy, ghostly.

I had a horrible dream, Father. I dreamt of a puppet in the teeth of a huge beast. The freak was to be feared. It had enormous red eyes and it looked at me while it held me in its mouth because that puppet was no other than me. How it looked at me. It snorted like a bull and its slime was very liquid and fell down sticky, disgusting. Everything was dark. But his eyes, oh God, his horrible eyes.

"Come in, beloved son," I say. And I welcome him into my bed, and I smile within me at his childish fear of the dark.

*

Come in, young man. Enter, triumphant in your Jerusalem, where you are acclaimed.

*

One more night Father Misael will not be able to fall asleep, while leaning out of the window, with the boy asleep on his bed, he wishes only for a glass of wine, not the sacred chalice that metamorphoses into the blood of the Lord but the one that palliate the contained nerves and the repressed desire to be another. Below the city sleeps. In the distance it sees no window with light and realizes that his sleeplessness is infinite, that it cannot be compared to anyone else's. It is a solitude without end or interval. He recognizes the fact that he has no one like him. The world would not understand. It will not understand. God, in His infinite wisdom and with His omnipresent gaze, would not understand. It will not understand.

MONDAY

Prayer and blasphemy

...sanctificetur nomen tuum

The chest creaks and a miniature earthquake born from the bronchi widens the thoracic cavity, germinating in the rings of the trachea purring an unconscious and collective response invoked by millions of bacilli avid for substances, convulsing, in its path, pharynx and larynx. The microscopic avalanche flows and spreads its halo with the trepidation of the entire epiglottis. The tiny cyclone reverberates in the pituitary membrane and distributes the alluvium between nose and palate, causing congestion in the sudden burst of snoring.

*

I spent the whole of the night in vigil, imploring mercy from heaven, listening to the whisper of my jaculatory prayers mixed with the clatter of the boy's breath. The sound of his swollen chest has been another incentive for my vigil. I'll call the doctor first thing in the morning. On each occasion when I was seized by the desire to contemplate his anatomy resting on my bed, I submitted to an incredulity stimulated by my desire to remain a child of God. Follow in the footsteps of the prophet and do not give in one iota to the instigation of evil. I want to serve you Lord and defeat the temptation of the devil and tell him that man does not live by flesh alone. He tries to tempt me, to take me away from you, O beloved Father, but I will submit exclusively to your commands.

*

Thomas sees shadows where there are none. He makes them up. Sometimes, on sunny summer mornings, he chases lizards, little animals that sneak in between the stone walls of the garden, in the crevices of the mud bricks in the backyard, in the cracks on the edge of the windows, where those vandalous vermin come out to get some sun. Thomas rebukes them with his old voice, with his thick grunts charged with slowness and scant impetus. Though on many other occasions he barks with unusual energy, as if to assert his former authority as a domineering dog, his sentry-like disposition of a part-time Cerberus lurking in the wake of his weak antagonists, making sure that no one usurps his domain. Right now he jumps with a sudden boldness that has taken who knows where from his dusty anatomy and warns the vermin that he has surely sought refuge in some branch of the old almond tree where the animal performs stalking pirouettes while barking and barking. But usually it is his tired imagination that outlines, in his colour-blind fantasy, exacerbated by his worn-out olfactory acuity, the demons that always torment him. I tell myself, after observing him, that we are not so different after all. Simple instinctive animals succumbing to the whims of our nature. All this if it weren't for our soul. Thank you, dear God, for having given us a soul.

*

I celebrated the Eucharist without the boy's presence, and although the charitable hand that waved the incense was not absent, it was not an experience similar to those I perceive when he is present. Not seeing him for a couple of hours was more tormenting than having him lying inches away from my skin.

*

The doctor's verdict has been final. It's a bad cold that breaks the young man's defenses, he tells me in a deep voice, smiling as usual, but with a couple of days of rest and a good dose of painkillers his health will be back. We both walk to the door, whose hinges scream in a rusty voice, and are shaken by the hearing damage. After the mishap the doctor turns solemnly, submissively bends his gaze and asks for a blessing. He draws a cross in the air just at the level of his face, then bids farewell with a salute. The boy goes back to sleep, breathing in and out with difficulty. I feel his forehead to explore the pain, but all I get is a tremor in my body and excessive perspiration flowing from my hands.

*

I did some clerical work and had short, otherwise uninspiring interviews with the parishioners. Free of my responsibilities, I walk along the paved promenade on the river bank that connects this small town with the neighboring village, hit by the breeze that stirs up a deep whistle, like every occasion, the loop of my hairstyle. The end of the summer brings beautiful murmurs. The swallows encourage the well-known annual exodus towards the west in a pilgrimage that has a lot of regret, since in their scatological anarchy the birds, which during this time travel precisely in the central park area, decorate cars, sidewalks, squares and passers-by with an unparalleled excremental feast.

It is precisely now that I walk near the central park that I can perceive the choral trill of these tiny birds hooked on the electric cables, a collective chirp that is hindered for brief intervals by the thunder of the transports that circulate unceasingly along the avenue. I continue my walk along the most discreet street I find in this aspiring city, a dead-end street for vehicles that has become my obligatory itinerary every time I go shopping. Everything here is serenity, without the noise of engines and horns so annoying. And suddenly there is a roar from the billiard room that has been inaugurated in previous days. Insults in ever obscener tones rumble out of the mouth of a young man who is not afraid of the strength of his enemy, who is proud to show off his syncopated tattoos that encourage him to be labelled as a convict from some remote prison. I opt for a quick retreat and turning on my heels, with my back to the hostilities, I can hear the dry blows that shake the flesh. I go out to the main avenue. I walk around trying to forget the boy. Neither the bustle of the cars, nor the howling of angry drivers with their toe on the pedal, nor the rain of trills that falls on me like a crock, nor the recent street conflict, can make me stop thinking about him and stop my torment. I try to distract myself by devising a peaceful conclusion to the quarrel in the alley. I reach my destination, but without having shaken off my shoulders the huge stone that is tormenting me.

*

The market is a fire of sounds. The shouts that impregnate the crowded environment of vendors eager to negotiate the fruits, vegetables, grains, food in general, give a touch of euphoria typical of places frequented by the common people. As always, I go to the fish area and ask for my usual

Monday supply. Here it is, Father," says Leandro, the salesman who has known me for years, "and he wraps up the still epileptic fish in sheets of old newspapers without any consideration." As I leave the market I hear the police sirens complaining with their scream, threatening and persuading the indiscreet ones who crowd the scene to recreate their curiosity and judge with their eyes. As I pass near the alleyway of the battle, I can see the big troublemaker being handcuffed and taken into the patrol car, not without resistance. Of the intrepid young man I detect no trace. I walk away imagining once again a far-fetched conclusion to the story of the bar fight. The image of the boy falls on me, the memory of his voice that throbs in my eardrums like a choral society of angels. I understand that this is a greater blasphemy than the insults of the great man with the tattoos. I say a few prayers on my way home.

*

Mrs. Salome parades the broom in front of me without any concern, always guarded by Thomas. She has adapted herself to my presence on the sofa, to my customary prostration which plunges me into trances of sensations that she would never suspect. At times I understand that I am the one who is used to the shadow of her anatomy moving around the room. I sit up with tedium and go to my bedroom.

*

Music penetrates my sensitivity and imprints a mark with its melodic alchemy. I close my eyes and it transports me to another more pleasant world, to a place demarcated by endless joys, to a paradise made of all the flowers, tulips, dahlias, agerates, chrysanthemums, orchids, lilies, where being lost is a blessing. It is the only way to escape from the incessant and fragile thought.

*

A rales are shaking the young man's body. The force, which compresses and violently releases the diaphragm, emanates from the lungs and bursts hard, slipping roughly through his tongue, piercing the vocal chords that transform the impulse into a hoarse, cloudy sound. The cough materializes in the sputum that crosses the throat and ends in a trip from the window to the garden. The boy coughs long, with pauses that barely give the burning tonsils a rest. At the same time, Thomas' impetuous barking floods the house despite being in the courtyard, and you can tell that his watch has not been fruitless, as he has surely detected some slippery bug, or perhaps it is simply a fable of his aged senses.

*

The recurrent ringing moves the silence as I listen behind me to Mrs. Salome's shoes sliding down the tile in a hurry and stopping at their destination to give way to the plastic sound of the headset being lifted. The tinkling of the table service utensils rises to the ears of Tomás, organs tired but more awake than his almost lost sense of smell. Perhaps I am exaggerating and he has come to the table because of the smell of fish. The boy rests. I carefully chew the texture of the food. The salty softness delights my palate and I hear the annihilation of some thorn between my teeth. Mrs. Salome removes the dishes. She informs me, very formally, that today she must leave earlier due to a domestic mishap, due to which she will have to be absent for a couple of days. Seat in a confirmatory gesture.

*

I open the triptych after examining the collapsed world. My gaze falls on the right side which is impregnated with complex illustrations. Could hell be such a noisy place?, I wonder, could it be an infinite scream that makes the brain and the guts explode and then incites us to pick up our rubble? Or are all these musical instruments dyed in the paint really soundless and is hellish silence the fate of heretics? Hell is not the sweet howl of silence, that is for sure, it is the torrent of crackles that melt to bend the soul. That is why this wretched one is embedded in the strings of the harp, that is why this other wretched one is sacrificed on the giant lute. Then I think of my damnation. I scrutinize this sad sodomite impaled by a flute as the initiator of a long line of sufferers and it is as if I heard his torment, as if in some enigmatic way his fictional pain was transfigured into complicity within my intestine and made me remember the horrors of sin. I contemplate the man who is embraced by a pig in a nun's veil, and it is as if I had been introduced into the picture, for I feel the stench of the obscene whispers in the constant ruminating around me, within me. I urgently close the doors of this terrible spiritual world and the image of the earthly world appears, a landscape that seems to me to be more horrifying. You are full of sin, world. Protect us, God. Save me, God. I'm preparing for mass.

*

Hail Mary, most pure. Conceived without sin. I have sinned, Father. Tell me your sins, daughter. I have had thoughts of lust. Last night I saw him almost naked and I desired his body, I desired it with intensity and passion. Is that so bad, Father?

*

The priest listens and suppresses a sigh of complicity. It is the same story of every believer, partially disfigured by a slight nuance. It is desire. The sinful, abhorrent desire. At the end of each rite of a similar nature, Father Misael will add the appropriate formula and express it as he is doing at this moment, with the most normal intonation, after having heard all the intimate paraphernalia that a confession of spirit implies. May God, the merciful Father, who reconciled the world with himself through the death and resurrection of his Son and poured out the Holy Spirit for the remission of sins, grant you, through the mystery of the Church, forgiveness and peace. And I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. In the confessional, there is an amen loaded with relief.

*

I stand behind the headboard and shake the jar of the nard colony with which I moisten my hands. I anoint the surface of his face and I think I perceive a blink that is immediately quenched by the feverish force of the heat. The boy burns. I think I do too, but for other reasons. Sleep, son, I'll take care of you. On the verge of falling asleep, I wake up and notice that the drugs have mitigated the infection. I rub my hands once more and rub his feet with the balm. I go to my room somewhat relieved.

*

Praise the holy water of the nards that have been smeared on your body. Rest, for tomorrow you will rise and walk.

*

I am delirious, for I have looked closely at the face of the beast, and this can only happen in my dreams. It is the fever. Its drool floods my body. I hear its exhalation and have no strength to scream, only bravery to spit in its face, not even with spittle, but with a look of disgust and horror. I cry, as is normal in moments of terror, and implore heaven, as is natural for a believer. Cast the beast into hell, Lord. Protect me. Watch over me, Lord. Be my refuge. You, Lord, are my shepherd. With you I shall not want. Nothing and no one can hurt me.

*

The young man finally sleeps, this time without nightmares, after the outbreak of fever. The father, in his room, is preparing to change his attire for a suit that will provide him with the comfort to rest. He undresses and contemplates his body in front of the mirror. The hairs converge on the pubic area like a whirlpool coming from the thighs and the navel and surround the pelvis reaching the epicenter of his private part, which gradually rises in a powerful erection. Deliver me from sin, Lord, implore, without success. His desire is greater than his capacity for abstinence. But suddenly he feels invaded by an impulse, by an unnatural squall that makes his chest enlarge as a sign of satisfaction and that depresses the flow of blood that his nature has impelled towards his penis. He thanks God, puts on his sleeping clothes and drops to his knees in front of the bed. Thank you, Father, he goes forward to express, with tears of conformity running down his cheekbones. Today his eyes will rest with serenity. His ears are stretched out into the deep silence of the peaceful night. God, it seems, has heard him. At least that is what Father Misael insists on believing.

TUESDAY AND WEDNESDAY

Fragrance and stench

Adveniat regnum tuum

It circulates in the environment, evaporating at times, fleeing, having fun, and then peeping out with shyness, once again harassing my sense of pleasure with the impertinence of its appearance. I receive the fragrance and feel the muscles of my face stretch in a smile of delight. I satisfy my need to smell by infiltrating my nose with the charged balsamic air, I calm the odorous rush by inhaling more deeply and I lose myself in the sweat of the flowers. When I open my eyes, the appearance of the boy's face beside me brings me back to the reality of my routine perceptions, for in greeting him I take in the air that has changed from the aroma of his cheeks to the horrid stench of the liver in my morning breath.

I decided that the boy should continue his rest, so I officiated the mass without his help. On this occasion I found his absence more tolerable. I motivated the pendulum movement of the censor whose smoke marked my skin with an essence of resin. Now I see him leaning against the armchair, shaking his nose in a khaki handkerchief while introducing a varied dose of the mobile drawings that pass through the screen. I go out to the street, to the market.

*

Boardwalk is deserted. The freshness of the river gives me a smell of fresh water that mixes with the simple aroma of the palm trees that adorn the contours. The traffic is light. The usual alley welcomes me with the stench of watered beer, of urine implanted in carefree corners, with posts stained with pestilence. I speed up the pace while I observe the name of the new place graphed in capital letters and italics. A place of perdition, Lord, and in my favorite alley.

*

The market is a whirlwind of smells. Legumes and herbs, grains and seafood, processed foods and fruits, spill a wide range of sensations that invade the sense of smell. I rule my body towards the room of the spices. I am impregnated with the pungent emanation of cinnamon, cumin, cloves, sweet pepper. I pay for the spices with some coins that Isaac, the salesman, a bachelor with a fleshy face, receives with a gesture of sympathy.

*

I cut the sea bass into thick slices that I first soak in water and then clean the meat in lemon and salt. I fry and place the foodstuffs on a porcelain plate. The aroma is appetizing and strong, so much so that Tomás has left his daily battle district to watch me with his hungry tongue in the kitchen, a fact that may refute my skepticism about the capacity of his nose. I grind the peppercorns, the cinnamon sticks, the cloves and the cumin. I add vinegar. A tearful liquid runs down from my eyes

and I throw the chopped onions into the pan with their sweet smell. I add the fish along with some sherry. I cover it and let it simmer.

*

I have resorted once again to imploring divine forgiveness. I am sorry for having sinned in thought and word, in deed and omission. Lord, welcome this pleading sinner so that he may return to your way and be saved in you.

*

They're there, dancing with joy in the rot. Enraptured by the lasciviousness. Lust is satisfied in the mud of carnal gloating and lust. Dishonest pleasures are sublimated in hideous fish, in abysmal shells, in slime of shit. Goats, dromedaries, horses and birds eager for enjoyment endorse the unbridled. Space reeks of sin, of lust. They corrupt the environment with a plague emanating from the darkest side of our being. I stop looking at the picture and make sure I have a few minutes to rest before the bells ring.

*

I'm about to go to mass with a huge muscle fatigue. I ingest two glasses of water that calm the roar of my liver, or at least that is what I imagine or desire. I put on my cassock. I feel purer.

*

The boy has been bothering me with a question that's been bothering me for a while. He forces me to back off until I fall flat on the couch. I encourage him to sit next to me. He agrees, not without anticipating a gesture that warns me not to transgress his purpose. I caress a tuft of hair that slides down his forehead and place it behind his ear, which is his rightful place. I feel the look charged with expectation. I try not to disappoint him and tell him that God is a good and merciful being and that we cannot know him physically or imagine him with the anatomical profiles to which we are accustomed, but this invocation of catechesis does not satisfy his curiosity. I am strong. I tell him the truth, that we must love God and not pretend to know him. He tells me, with a face of defeat and resignation, that God is complicated. I only have life to breathe in the sweet smell of musk that permeates my nose when I take his buttocks off the furniture. I call him. He turns with a luminous look, with that look that incites me to grab him by the cheeks and satisfy my impulses. But I beg the help of the Lord, who can do everything, and then, with renewed strength, I send the boy to my room. I tell him it's a secret. I reveal to him that I know God. I show him.

*

God is not small, although he seems so at first sight. He's distant for a greater perspective on the world, that's all. His gaze, we know, is ubiquitous. Sitting on his throne, his head is crowned with a tiara and on his legs rests the holy book. His back is protected by a long imperial cloak. I can see him now, while Father Misael shows me this peculiar painting. The darkness of the painting makes me afraid. Nevertheless, I resist it. On the horizon, behind the mist that covers the sky enclosed in the concave glass, there is God, and I can see him. I know him now. And I see his smile.

*

I'm preparing to take sleep with the fragrant stench of its back of the head. We have prayed together, body to body, and have asked God never to turn us away from his way, so that we might ingratiate ourselves with his precepts. There is something charged in the air that prevents me from breathing normally. I feel the absurd premonition that I am about to fall into a nightmare from which I will not be able to wake up. Outside the rain has started to beat down, very softly.

*

The morning is cold. The downpour has cooled the environment. I slept peacefully, at peace with my spirit and welcomed by God's infinite mercy. I am reassured to know that the nightmares have finished their work of nightly torture and have given way to a truce. My optimism does not reach the certainty of having defeated them. One part of me knows that I will succeed in this battle against the devil, but another part, the most fragile, shows me the extent of my failure, for at every moment my mind succumbs to temptation and every part of my body breaks the law that my soul demands.

*

I've decided to take a bath. I have felt the sensation of impurity in my skin, and not only because of the stench of my armpits loaded at night, but also because of the mountain of procreation that I carry in thought. Before going up to the altar I must be purified. Cooling a little will not hurt me, so I am about to lather my skin. I also rinse my soul with prayers.

*

The winter season is approaching and the signs are being felt with the sense of smell. This can be done by any mortal, but especially by those beings who are better equipped for such tasks. So Tomas, contrary to what the clergyman thinks, knows this better than anyone else. He recognizes as alien the ethereal aroma that distills from the soil near the almond tree. That is why he often marks out his territory. The summer season, already in its end, is defeated by the elemental humidity of the cycles. The geosmin emerges and floods the portal with its ether. The ancients assured that the petrichor was the blood of the gods, the essence that ruled their veins. Today it is nothing more than a striking aroma that from time to time, as long as its fleeting quality does not fade away, causes us slight discomfort, without us realizing that it is and has been, throughout immemorial times, the true sweat of this earth, its sweating surface. Thomas understands this. His nose has not worn out to the point that he is indifferent to the world. He knows something about smells. He has understood something in his long life as a dog. That is why he stops urinating the almond tree and lies down in a strange mystical posture, already defeated by the weather, on the wet leaves that form a natural mattress. His sense of smell has emphasized the sacred condition of the seasons. Now, at last, an elusive cloud provides him with a bit of sunshine that his dermis appreciates.

*

I met an old friend at the market. We had a pleasant, if brief, chat.

*

Mrs. Salome has arrived while I was away. She explains to me, by way of justification, her hardships. I tell her to avoid worries, that I understand the situation and that she should take the week off. She insists on preparing today's lunch as compensation for her future absence. I do not make myself beg. While the mistress is cooking I lock myself in my room and reach for a bottle of wine from the place of my secrets. I start drinking with long sips.

*

The bottle is half full and I leave it on the nightstand without any care. The swallowed wine causes me a slight sensation of dizziness that I intend to expel with a cup of coffee. I implore a bath of cold water, but Mrs. Salome tells me that the food is ready. I swallow the soup with a burning sensation. The heat calms the emptiness of my stomach, the strange discomfort of bitterness caused by the drink. I get up from the table looking at the boy who is eating and go to my bedroom with an intense desire to sleep.

*

I half-open my eyes and the first image I see is that of the world. My drunkenness is not fit to scrutinize the disgusting delights of your garden. I imagine the naked body of the boy with true lust and then return to sleep. When I wake up I notice an unusual position on the right side of the painted board. I guess someone has checked the painting. Mrs. Salome is forbidden to enter the bedroom and has always been respectful, therefore my only suspicion lies in the boy's curiosity. I'm not angry, but I don't like the intrusion either. Then, I feel the pastiness that has stained my breeches during sleep.

*

Fewer people came to church today than yesterday. Nevertheless, my sermons were longer.

*

The last book of the Bible announces a hell full of fire and brimstone as a condemnation for those who betray the Lord's standards. A hell of stench, of smelly vapors, would be an unbearable torment, even for any soul alien to the weaknesses of the body. I defecate slowly and with a little pain. My sphincter expels a gas that is released in the form of a high-pitched scream. It stinks, but I breathe it in, imagining a tormented mephitic hell saturated with fetid effluvium, and, sitting here, the stench juxtaposed to the imagination incites me to nausea. I barely open the door and allow a little fresh air to circulate, shaking off the miasmas of excrement, the foul air that has contaminated my organism.

*

Tomás sniffs my leg, he has surely noticed the smell of soap on my body after the bath. He starts making nasty grunts. He pulls the fabric of my sleeping suit and tears it, flooding it with his drool. Bad dog. Now I watch him walk away, satisfied with the mischief. I take off my robe and find myself naked in front of the mirror. I can't resist directing a caress to my testicle area. An electric

current shakes me. My penis swells into a dark crimson. As I react, I walk away from the mirror in horror. I take another wardrobe and urge myself to forget my desires.

*

The Sanhedrin of the senses welcomes the proposal to betray the soul.

*

I strip him of his shirt with a serenity I don't believe in. But it's my hands that strip his torso. I lay him down with his ass rising up to my face which I push away immediately, instantly blushing. I stroke his back which is sure to be burning with the coolness of the menthol. His lungs can already feel it, I am sure of it, because my hands refresh to the rhythm of the massages. I contemplate for the last time his perfect ass as a dominant young man. I turn him over with his face towards me. I hit the menthol on his pectorals and I take the opportunity to feel his shy nipples that emerge without audacity. The strong smell of eucalyptus penetrates me.

*

This morning, they both sleep with the rumination of the rain lashing the street. Neither Father Misael has had the dream of the knife, nor young Manuel the vision of the beast. Maybe they've gone away so they don't come back. We are on the threshold of a new day. In the center of the city, the rain washes away all the stench from the street of the billiards. The downpour cleans the old tree in the backyard. During the rains, some naive people claim that God is the one crying for all the sins of mankind. The most accurate image would not be symbolized by the divine tears that fall upon the world, but by the sizzling of Thomas's urine that soaks into us, similar to this one, which now comes off the bark of the old almond tree. Be it in one form or another, after all it is from the body of the immaterial God that the liquid that bathes us comes.

THURSDAY

Burning and gelidity

Fiat voluntas tua, sicut in caelo, et in terra

I am shaken by a burning discharge whose genesis is the occiput, and it exudes partly through my spine. My tendons wake up and force me to stretch the length of my body in the pleasant pain that consumes itself orgasmically in my underpants. I feel how my penis descends slowly, knocked down by the convulsive pleasure of pollution while in my soul a void is gestated that I cannot stand. The cold slips from the open window and swings in the curtain with a languid and consecutive wail. I watch the velvet shudder against the wall, impacting against the window glass, against the frame made of spruce. I feel the breeze slip and sneak in between my armpits, shaking my skin in a gust that ruffles my whole body. I sigh. I separate myself from the interior, maculated by the semen. I get up and pray for the weakness of my flesh.

*

The warmth of the coffee encourages me to leave it. I prefer to take light sips of the peach juice. The boy tells me a somewhat profane story, but I don't dare rebuke him. I just look at him and give him a cold smile. Today he did not accompany me to mass either and I missed it so much, especially when Bishop Pio imposed the blessing. I look at him and I am enraptured by his features, by his carefree look, by the boisterous hair of the morning. I get up from the table in a hurry, trying to dodge my eyes that are turned to him again and again.

*

I've gone down with a chill. Today I will not leave the house or attend to the parishioners who are preparing for Good Friday. I've left certain minor commitments in charge, following the doctor's recommendation. The boy prepares an infusion for me, which I ingest along with the medicine. As he turns around, I can feel the movement of his buttocks in a provocative sway. I surrender to sleep.

*

When I wake up, I see the boy's face. He has kept me company all this time the fever has lasted. He informs me that he has prepared lunch and comforts my body with a hot soup that he insists on spooning into my mouth. Then comes a hard time. I rebuke him for having examined the painting without consent and he answers that he wanted to know what was in it. It is not a question of forbidding him to know, but I think that he should first consult an authorized voice to confirm whether or not he is qualified to know. He replied that he felt he was qualified and implored me to guide him through the painting. After a struggle of pleas and refusals, I give in to the request and allow him to open it. He expands a face of wonder. It is beautiful, he says, but at the same time horrendous. It's our soul, I tell him, or I just think about it. The residual shock of the fever stuns me. For the moment I only want to get away from the boy, to shout at him to leave my room and

disappear forever, that God has revealed to me that he is an emissary of the devil. I am overcome by the desire to excommunicate him from my life. I understand that I will do the opposite, because I stand up to him and place a hand on his shoulder and hold it in an intention-laden embrace. What you are witnessing is a paradise, a hell, and this here, I tell you in a magnanimous voice pointing out the central part, is the world. For now it will be enough to see it, we will have time to study it part by part. My body does not resist the impulse and I kiss him on the cheek while I descend my hand into the cleft of his back. His reaction is not one of rejection. Unexpectedly he asks for my blessing.

*

I sent the boy to the market for supplies. I feel the absence and try to fight the desire with a prayer, but being on my knees, the words get stuck in the throat. This time I cannot pray. I get up, take a warm shower, and prepare to receive him as best I can.

*

The boy finally arrives, but unfortunately accompanied by Miss Rachel, a helpful woman at the disposal of the Church, young despite her almost forty years, unmarried despite her beauty. Behind her, an entourage of ladies who have joined forces to pay me a visit and offer me fruits, bought precisely, I imagine, from the beautiful old maid. Tomás greets them with angry barks. I receive them with apparent gratitude, I give them, with the authority they give me, a couple of admonitions, I impose one or two tasks on them in preparation for tomorrow's procession, and I delicately dismiss them on the pretext of my rest. I close the door behind them, with its moldy iron edge and rusty hinges, and I embark on the search for the boy throughout the house.

*

I invite you once again to my room. We are having a conversation about certain theological aspects that he discusses with some knowledge. I instruct him as I lay my open hand on his fleshy, appetizing thigh. I urge him to begin a prayer together. I stand behind him and we raise the usual shared prayer. I perceive the warmth of his body that soothes the cold of the environment and at the same time refreshes the warmth of my entrails.

*

The body beats me. I lie down with the taste of fruit still evident on my palate. I rehearse a prayer that melts in the attempt. My head is not here, but in the figure of the boy. I stagger to his door. I half-open it and discover the body asleep in the pleasure of the nap in a fetal posture with the beautiful bottom pointing at me, inciting me to caress it, to give it the final bite. My terrified body boils with fever or something else. In a fit of lucidity, I return to my bed.

*

I woke up with the slimy sensation of sweat adhering to my skin. I watch the glimmer of the evening sun refracting on the mirror and flooding the room with its radiance, invading every corner. I understand the need to wash myself, a heat wave invades the bedroom and my crotch is doughy. The fever has passed. I beg for some fresh water.

*

I have sent written instructions to the faithful for the Good Friday procession. The boy was my companion while I wrote the letter which he later delivered, encouraged by the promise to show him a part of the painting. I could not suppress my interest in his movements; my gaze fell on him all the time. He even made me divert my pen to a couple of features.

*

The disc's case has as its cover the image of a road furrowed by autumn leaves that gets lost in a suggestive horizon. The yellowish passage ditches a forest of absolute tranquility. No bird hurts the tranquility. No animal ventures to desecrate the serenity of the small universe of leaves and earth. All are about to emerge to inaugurate, in a spirited way, an infernal paradise. I insert the disc in the player which forces it to spin quickly. That device transforms into a tiny infinite whirlwind that spins at thousands of revolutions per minute. The music invades the room, very slowly, as if struggling to wake up from a lethargy imposed by restrictive forces, inhaling tranquility, absorbing silence, holding on to the space that it will later occupy with its imperial tonality. But it will be the cold. The bass marks the rhythm, it continues in a continuous way, it flows with a crescendo that shades the shy interventions of the violins: they are the steps of the walker to whom some tribulation urges, they are the cracks of the ice about to crack. Now the lightning flashes, set on fire by the solo violin, the storm of the orchestra roars and shakes the space and vibrates at the feet of the wretch. The race originates with the impulse of the bass that throbs insistently and marks the fast tracks. The masterful imposition of the main violinist invades, strikes with its gusts of icy wind, and the intense cold forces the shivering and imposes the gnashing of teeth.

*

You see this area here, and it shows me the top right side of the open painting. The whole painting symbolizes the sufferings of the sinner. But this part here, in particular, is the cliché image, the usual one, that we make of hell. Sulphur falling in continuous rain, mountains destroyed and bathed in darkness, and people in unspeakable torment.

In this area, he indicates the central part with his index finger drawing an ellipse, the ice marks a strong contrast with the sulphurous fire, because within the conception of hell as a place of eternal torment, a space of ice is one of the most horrifying places. Look here how it cracks and the poor man is left at the mercy of the cold water.

In this part, points out the bottom, is what in art is called musical hell, due to the use of musical instruments as symbols of torture. Very common in certain mystical painters. You see this bagpipe, here is the lute, here is the harp. And here a flute, you can see it.

I wonder if this is really hell. Through the window I can feel the night coming on.

Well, he tells me, the desperation and martyrdom, surely are well represented by the author, and here on this board, by the imitator, who is, I like to call him that, a performer.

I ask him how he sees hell through what the holy scripture dictates. He does not answer. He seems to be immersed in a reflection that escapes the moment and my doubts. He's really wondering what hell is like.

The holy book shows hell as a place of perpetual incandescence where souls will be thrown into the lakes of sulphur. This is how the painter in the upper part of this work captures it. In fact,

the prophet invariably mentions it, noting certain premises such as the fire that never goes out, the wailing and gnashing of teeth, the eternal punishment.

He speaks without looking at me, as if in conversation with himself.

For centuries, fire and ice, that is to say, heat and cold, have been considered the most atrocious tortures in the place of perpetual punishment. A great poet of antiquity describes a part of hell with the usual rain of flames, and another segment, that of the traitors, formed entirely of ice. The devil, as regent of this space of perdition, is embedded from the waist into the icy surface. He cries with his six eyes and flaps his six angry wings.

I imagine a hell of a lot of ice. Hades would be a paradise in comparison. An endless torture in perennial numbness. But what my body can now tolerate is the heat. An intense heat that continues as Father Misael's teaching advances and that oppresses me with the air charged by his close presence, so close. I admit his words as a sign of his spiritual wisdom. I do not intend to bother him any more with the frivolity of my questioning. I ask for his blessing and he gives it to me with greater strength, for he chisels a sacred kiss on my mouth.

*

We've decided to have bread, I'll have some wine and he'll have a glass of juice. At the table we talked about topics of special interest to him. I look into his eyes and as I explain to him certain conceptions about feeling the holy spirit I feel the back of his hand. Then I direct mine to his face. The impact of the blush brushes my face. I caress his cheeks and kiss him again, this time deeply.

*

Feel the abhorrent kiss that will mark the path of treachery and hell.

*

I'm in his room and he points to a beige pajama top. He indicates to me that I am fit to serve a representative of God in the world, who from now on will be his spiritual assistant. He explains to me that the cassock is the only sacred garment that human beings possess. My new tasks consist of undressing him and putting him in his sleeping suit. It is a simple occupation for me and I gladly agree to serve the father, a purified son of God.

*

His hands slide slowly down my thighs. They feel warm, healing, so disturbing and peaceful. I contain a groan. I vibrate when I notice her breathing in the area of my unclothed breaststroke, in the trepidation of my hairs which are agitated attracted by the wave of magnetism of his skin furrowing my skin by the touch of his chaste fingers. Now it is my breast that is satisfied, that rejoices in a delight that does not belong to this world. My skin is bristling. I am dominated by his touch. Taken over by the touch of his immaculate dermis. The folds of my shirt shake as they are slowly unbuttoned. I squeal without contemplation, but he doesn't stop. It seems that he has begun a torture from which he knows he is the executioner and does not want to see his victim escape. I see this segment of my existence as a vital moment. I embrace it and hold it for a time that I dare not establish. It is I who initiate the separation. You saw me with unsuspected agility. A hot flash inflames my body. Formal, he kneels in front of me and begs my blessing. I give him a kiss in his thick hair. I glimpse that my soul will not rest easy until it satisfies my body. My body will not be satisfied until it starts what my

soul denies. I can't stand it anymore, and here lying down, I surrender to the sweet torment of solitary pleasure. Then it is the emptiness. I pray all morning for my salvation.

*

The father accepts the defeat of his soul, has resigned himself and gives himself to the will of God. He prostrates himself on the fresh tile floor and prays, falling on his face. My Father, if it is possible, do not make me drink this cup. But let it be done, not as I will, but as you will. Comforted by having avoided his spiritual responsibility, Father Misael tries to rest, but it is impossible for him to sleep. He looks out of the window and finally feels the breeze hitting his face and soothing the long heat.

The young man has entered the depths of sleep, and with him the calamity of the nightmare that does not leave him. This time he tries, despite the fragility of his make, to escape the gasps of the cyclopean beast that is just a step away from reaching him with its drooling fangs. He knows the inevitable end to his story. His sweat will be drops of blood falling to the ground. A blast of heat impregnated into the air circulates uselessly over the boy's chilled body.

We all know that God, being spirit, and the most supreme of all, does not feel. At least not like this wretched man, at least not like this poor young man suffering from a hell that has been inaugurated and is not even executed. It is time to sleep, Father, rest, for tomorrow the world will bring new airs. God does not understand your tortures.

Father Misael's shoulders receive a colossal weight. Exhausted, he lies down on the bed and closes his eyes. The nightmare of the knife and the ears will emerge again from the dark corner of guilt.

FRIDAY

Sweet and bitter

Panem nostrum quotidianum da nobis hodie...

FIRST STATION

The mouth opens in a yawn that erupts into an inaudible scream. The loaded and thick tongue forces him to swallow dry with the natural bitterness of the morning. He remembers the fall of the previous night. It is not the first time that he emulates the ancient practice of Onan, but it can be said that he had turned from sin and redeemed himself through a vast path of atonement and weary days of penance. The most elementary desires have taken the form of an agitated chorus that within his body demands satisfactions that his soul is not willing to consent to. And this fact dictates the condemnation. He feels his body dirty, he registers his soul maculated, he hates his crotch. His hands have been stained by the secretion and he contemplates superimposed in a light wake the rigid layer that gives him away. He gets out of bed and washes his hands with abundant soap. He intones a prayer.

*

SECOND STATION

Forgive me, beloved Father, if my sins are great, greater is your goodness. Accept my prayer. Don't take me away from you. I truly try to bear this burden on my shoulders, Father, which oppresses me. Give me your help to keep on standing, do not let my steps falter, do not let my soul faint in sin. Be my protector. Be my guide. Help me, Lord, to stand firm on your word.

*

THIRD STATION

It is good, indeed, to feel the respect they command for the authority of a representative of God on earth. These ladies have successfully made up for my absence in the preparations and here I witness a complete representation of the Way of the Cross translated by the clumsy movements of the boys. How slender they are. Especially mine, transmuted into the wounded, half-naked man hooked to the wood. An impulse invites me to look at the comfortable extension of his pale legs, the provocative stretching of his feet, the bulge that originates in his tights and that articulates in my mind an undignified image that I shake with a renewed prayer. I feel the awakening of a portion of me. I cry out to the heavens to bring down that betrayal of my body.

*

FOURTH STATION

How to elude, beloved Father, the promptings of the devil. How. Give me strength. I turn to your word, to your sacred word, and I take comfort.

After short invocations, I am surprised to find inside the sacred book a picture of the Virgin. I observe the lines that draw her profile, the look emanating towards the sky, the magnificence with which the little one rests on her shoulder, unaware of the destiny that awaits him. The boy calls to me. I leave the Bible almost on the edge of the desk. I put it in my shirt pocket and go outside. The food has an excess of salt that I don't reproach the boy for. The cheese, on the other hand, is crushed on my palate and it reduces the feeling of salt. The sweet bitterness of the wine compensates for the shock of these extremes.

*

FIFTH STATION

I am attentive to the attitude of the boy whose lip has developed a mimicry that allows me to sense his purpose in speaking.

Father, I've thought about what we talked about yesterday and I don't want to be in hell. I want to comply with the measures imposed by God.

I look at it with surprise. His words are a support to bear this burden that torments me, to wall up once and for all the heavy shutter of desire that is shown to me as an easy, fatuous, tempting and harmful subterfuge and to put an end, at last, to my intentions.

You will fulfill them, rumble my words in the dining room, while a headache begins to invade me. The bell, exasperating, bursts into his calls.

*

SIXTH STATION

The boy has directed his steps towards the door. For my part, I lay on the couch with the annoying feeling of thousands of needles piercing my skull. I observe Mrs. Salome's anatomy as she approaches to attend to my discomfort surrounded by Thomas' annoying greeting. By her gestures, I sense that I am sweating since she is venting me with a handkerchief. She explains something to the boy who is going to the kitchen. I feel my head exploding. Then I taste the fresh roll of sweetened water. It's been an imbalance in my blood pressure. They both insist on calling the doctor, but I absolutely refuse. Mrs. Salome comes to me once more and with her dry handkerchief of my face the sweat that I have distilled in the trance.

*

SEVENTH STATION

My head is spinning. The throbbing pain is gone, but there's a sense of weariness left. I'm not interested in the lady's presence. As she clears the table, I think of the boy. My desire to feel his skin is intensified in the emulsion of my blood pooling in my pelvic area. I notice Mrs. Salome's uncomfortable walk with me. I enter the bathroom. With my pants touching the floor, I stroke my limb. I stimulate myself for a few seconds and then rebel against the pleasure. I make an effort for my soul to impose itself on my senses. I achieve this and the erection, little by little, decreases.

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