

**ROSER
CAMINALS**

**THE STREET
OF THE THREE BEDS**

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Roser Caminals.

The Street of the Three Beds.

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PREFACE

The Street of the Three Beds is the first volume of a trilogy. I use the term *trilogy* in the loosest sense of the word, as the only common thread running through the three novels is the setting (Barcelona) and the period, from the 1880's to the 1920's. I wrote the original (*El Carrer dels Tres Llits*, Barcelona; Edicions 62, 2002) in my native Catalan, spoken approximately by ten million people. Catalan is the official language in the country of Andorra, between France and Spain, and Catalonia, the northeastern region of Spain. It has a robust media presence and a literary history harking back to the Middle Age. In 2003, after becoming a best seller, the book was published in Spanish.

Inspired by an urban legend revolving around the disappearance of a young woman in a lingerie store, *The Street of the Three Beds* explores the connections between the underworld, specifically the white slave trade, and the prosperous Barcelona bourgeoisie of the industrial revolution. Its faltering hero, Maurici Aldabò, is the scion of a manufacturing family who, through his affair with an obscure seamstress, finds himself enmeshed in a nightmarish search in a seedy side of town. A major Mediterranean port and the leader of economic development in Spain, turn-of-the-century Barcelona was a study in contrasts and urban vitality: privileged factory owners rubbed elbows with underpaid, exploited workers; a cultural renaissance in literature and architecture—internationally best represented by the buildings of Antoni Gaudí—coexisted with corruption, social unrest, and political violence. It was a hotbed of artists and anarchists. As a native of the city and an early reader of Dickens, I have always been fascinated by the invisible ties that bind together the upper and lower classes, upstanding citizens and underdogs, in a web of interdependence, hypocrisy, and deceit.

The center stage of the novel is the old city, occupied by the extensive medieval part surrounded by a maze of narrow streets, one of which is the Street of the Three Beds. I grew up within a short walking distance from it, in a busy street on the edge of the red light district where family business—ours was a grocery store—

alternated with restaurants, bars, two churches, and boarding houses. A couple of our neighbors ran profitable bordellos in distant areas of town. While most of the people who populated my childhood were petit bourgeois like us, prostitutes were not strangers and nightclubs featuring transvestites and other risqué attractions were a stone's throw away. When I was ten years old we moved to a neighborhood of grid-patterned streets lined with trees and broad sidewalks; but it is the old city, with its potpourri of blind lottery peddlers, sailors from all over the world walking up from the harbor, fishmongers, tourists, door-to-door salesmen, and a variety of shady characters thrown into the mix that finds its way into my fiction. The rich texture of the street life I witnessed throughout my formative years remains a powerful allure to the mature writer.

When I go back to Barcelona—about once a year, usually to promote a book—I stay in the oldest hotel in the city, just a few blocks from the grocery store my family used to own. The neighborhood I once knew intimately and that Maurici Aldabò discovers through his journey is now, fittingly, claimed by immigrants from four different continents. Maurici lived at the close of a century and the dawn of the next, in a city undergoing a transformation. A century later, Barcelona is, once again, transforming itself. New challenges and opportunities lie ahead for the contemporary novelist who, like the wicked, must know no rest.

My warmest thanks to Professor Frederick Fornoff, who proposed this translation and helped to start it, and to my husband, fellow writer William Heath, for his constant and generous support.

Roser Caminals
Frederick, Maryland
November 2010

CHAPTER 1

“Did you know that in Barcelona there are more rats in the sewers than people in the streets?”

“Stop that!” Rita flapped one hand like the wing of a butterfly; in the other, she held the ice cream cone Maurici had just bought her at a stand in the city’s central square. The vanilla scoop was melting from the warmth of the afternoon sun and of Rita’s tongue that, like the tip of a pink, greedy arrow, rhythmically attacked it. The two were in no hurry, drifting along in the tide of strollers.

“I’m serious!” he insisted. “I read it the other day in the paper. The authorities can’t get rid of them. Under the streets, Barcelona’s a vast breeding ground for rats. They multiply at an alarming rate and survive everything. The faster the city grows, the more rats there are.”

He watched in amusement how Rita’s nose wrinkled in disgust at the morbid details.

“Speaking of the newspaper, I haven’t read it yet today.”

They stopped at a kiosk. While he paid, the vendor stared at Rita, who kept caressing the ice cream with her tongue. She looked up now and then to make sure the admiration hadn’t faded from the man’s eyes. Maurici folded the *Diari de Barcelona* and stuck it under his arm as if he owned the city. Rita, shaded by the brim of the straw hat trimmed with flowers and a bow, watched him out of the corner of her eye. Suddenly, she linked her arm with his in an attempt to complete the picture of a permanent union. Noticing that her gesture left Maurici unperturbed, she decided the time was right to speak.

“Remember what I told you the other day?”

A long lick at the cone.

“What did you tell me the other day?”

“Sure you remember. About the visit.”

“What visit?”

“You know what visit! The one that comes every month!”

“Oh, right.”

“Well, no sign of it yet. I’ve been waiting three weeks, and so far, nothing, not a thing.”

The yellow scoop had totally surrendered to the assault of Rita’s tongue. Trading weapons, she was now crunching the flaky cone between her teeth. Maurici seemed as unruffled as ever.

“So? That’s nothing to worry about. As I understand it, that’s not uncommon with women. Like I said, you just have to wait a bit.”

After pushing aside the protective brim of her hat, Rita lifted her face and skewered him:

“Easy for you to say! What’s it to you! But I’m getting nervous. I’ve never been late before. Always on time, like a clock. And on top of that, when I got up the other day I had morning sickness. Soon as I stood up, everything began to spin like a merry-go-round.”

Her agitation was evident in her voice and the sparks in her eyes. She hadn’t meant to get so upset. Her plan had been to stay calm and in control. “You catch more flies with honey than with vinegar,” she’d told herself over and over while plotting her strategy in the dark shabby bedroom of her boarding house. Now her own show of temper annoyed her as much as Maurici’s cool demeanor. Rita might be nearly illiterate, but her instinct never failed her: she knew when she was on target, and when she was wide of the mark. This time she’d been too direct. It would have been wiser to take a more roundabout path, longer but safer. Maurici wasn’t going to melt as easily as the ice-cream. She toned down her voice and went on:

“We should start thinking about the future. Can’t you see that if it turns out as I think it will, waiting will only make things worse?”

“What if you’re wrong, and we rush into it? Imagine how upset my parents would be and the fuss their friends would make if we rushed into such an important decision blindly. What a mess we’d have on our hands! We could never put it behind us. Not to mention your relatives back home.”

“What relatives? I’ve got no family, I already told you. I grew up without a father, and my mother died shortly before I came to Barcelona. I have an uncle in Caracas, but I never hear from him.” Rita moved closer to Maurici to make room for a woman

carrying a basket of laundry. For a moment, their physical proximity drew a circle around them. Nobody outside it seemed to count, and so he took the conversation to a more intimate level.

“Rita, darling, aren’t we happy as it is? We’re young. Why don’t we focus on the present instead of the future? Look at my father. Old before his time from worrying so much. Fifty years old, and his hair’s already white. He’s spent his whole life working, paying bills on Saturdays, and going to mass on Sundays. Do you believe in the hereafter? As far as I’m concerned, if it exists, I couldn’t care less.”

Shocked, Rita waved her hands nervously as he spoke.

“Don’t fool yourself, my dear. We’re in this world to enjoy a good life. And just think, at our age, how much we have ahead of us. C’mon, honey, don’t look so glum, it’s not a catastrophe. Now show me that lovely face . . .”

He took her by the shoulders and bent down to kiss her. But Rita was in no mood for sweet talk. No, sweet talk wouldn’t get him anywhere. Even in the acutest throes of passion she’d never deviated from her path, never lost her bearings. The shrillest cry of pleasure had never smothered the inner whisper, “keep your head.” Maurici’s charm and good looks had certainly made things easier but they hadn’t altered her calculations. She knew exactly who she was and who she could become if she clung to the reins of her life with the necessary skill. From the moment, a year earlier, when she’d come to serve in his house it had been her intention to cross the doorstep of the sewing room and move about freely in the halls and parlors she could now only glimpse. Maurici was interested in the present; why not, his was quite interesting. But hers? To be a seamstress in a wealthy household wasn’t very interesting at all. Otherwise, why had she left her hometown at twenty and worked so hard to eliminate every trace of country twang from her speech? What good was her beauty if it couldn’t open one by one every door of the Aldabó house?

“You can say what you want about your father. I’m sure he doesn’t regret a thing and he’s happy with his life. And as for us being young, you’re twenty-five and I’ve just turned twenty-two. We’re not kids anymore.”

When they were about to cross the street, they stopped to let a rag picker’s cart go by. A basket chair flipped upside down and an

old mattress peeked from under a tattered blanket. He took advantage of the interruption to change the subject.

“Would you like to eat at the Eden this Saturday? I’ll buy you a dress for the occasion. You’ll see, it’s a very nice place.”

Usually he was cautious not to appear in public places with Rita. This policy of extreme discretion had produced good results of late. It wouldn’t do at all for some acquaintance of his parents to see them together. After Rita had finished her day’s work he never waited for her in the neighborhood. Instead, they’d meet in the gardens near the Governor’s Palace, or in the park, or they’d go straight to some discreet little hotel near the hills that enclosed the city. When he walked her to her boarding-house, he never went up. The mystery in which he cloaked their relationship provided a piquancy that satisfied his experienced and somewhat jaded erotic palate. On this occasion, however, it was worth taking a chance if only to steer the conversation away from the subject. Even so, he’d chosen the Eden conscious that his parents’ social circle didn’t go there because it was frequented by women of easy virtue. Rita tried out a faint smile:

“Oh, Maurici, Maurici! I think you’re trying to bribe me!” She punctuated each syllable with a gentle poke of her finger on his chest. “There’s going to be no Eden if we don’t clear up this matter first. It won’t take long. I’ll go to the doctor and we’ll know what’s what. If my suspicions are confirmed, you can start preparing your parents.”

Even though the sun and the early moon were competing for a clear sky, Maurici’s afternoon was rapidly clouding over. He stopped walking and leaned against a building like a boxer against the ropes.

“Don’t get ahead of yourself, dear. I’ve already told you, that can’t be.”

“Oh, really? Why not?”

“Well . . . because we’re too young, and I’m not situated yet, let alone ready to get married and have a kid.” He smacked his leg with the rolled up newspaper, turning nervously as if he were suffocating inside his suit. His gaze, a bit arrogant, sought escape down the street.

“Ah, you’re not *situated*! You’re not ready! Then what good are your studies and your father’s business? And me, what am I

supposed to do in the meantime? Wait till the baby's born and raise it till your future's set? Or till you drop me for the next seamstress that comes along?"

"Don't be that way, honey. Of course I'll help you. There are lots of things we can do. Look, going to a doctor is not a bad idea. You don't want to be tied down with a child right now. You wouldn't be able to support it, it would interfere with your life, it would get between us . . . I'll pay for everything. You don't have to worry about that."

Her face grew more and more tense.

"What are you saying? I can't believe you're talking to me like this. Who do you think I am? How could you think I'd be capable of something like that?" Rita's voice became so loud that passersby turned around to look at her. "To think I considered you a gentleman, a decent man, the son of a good family. I'll tell your father and your mother, everyone will know about this. You're going to find out who you're dealing with!"

Maurici, more cornered than ever, decided to go on the offensive.

"And who do you think is going to believe you? How do I know it's mine? And yourself, how can you be sure? You must think I live on the moon. All those trips back home where you say you have no family? . . . Who's waiting for you? There's bound to be someone. Perhaps that guy you mentioned a few times, what's his name?"

"Mateu. He's crazy about me, but I've never given him the time of day. He'd be thrilled if it was his!"

She regretted ever having mentioned Mateu. How stupid, to try to make her lover jealous.

"C'mon, darling. Don't think you can pull the wool over my eyes. I've been around. You had plenty of practice when we met."

Despite the rage welling up inside her, Rita managed to calm down enough to debate the choice between outraged dignity and tears. On previous occasions, tears had done the trick. So she instructed herself to cry, working herself up till tears flowed from her eyes. The exertion was so great that her peaches and cream complexion darkened like a ripe tomato. Maurici rolled his eyes helplessly.

“Rita, honey, don’t go making a scene here in the middle of the street”

“Don’t touch me! Don’t come near me!”

He let a few seconds go by until the weeping subsided.

“It’s pointless to argue about this till we’re sure . . . Look, let’s drop it for now. You’re upset and worn out. We’ll discuss it later on.”

She dried her tears with a lace handkerchief. Maurici had temporarily calmed down and, if she got him worked up again, the ground she’d gained might be lost. Victory wouldn’t come in a single battle; if she wanted to win the war, she had to do it one fight at a time and accept that she couldn’t win them all. She looked up to his face, he started to smile, and they set out down the street together. At the corner, she said coolly:

“I have to go into La Perla d’Orient for a second. If you want, you can wait for me. If you’re in a hurry, go on.”

“What do you need?”

“Some petticoats and a strip of embroidery your mother asked me to pick up.”

Maurici watched her disappear into the store. He leaned against a street lamp and opened the newspaper, but despite his effort to concentrate, the print danced before his eyes.

“His Majesty Alfonso XIII has inaugurated a new section of railroad that will run from León to Oviedo. Obviously, Rita’s trying to hook me with this pregnancy nonsense. So unoriginal, it’s enough to make anyone laugh. The oldest trick, making a man believe there’s a baby on the way, and then...no baby. By the time you find out, you’re already caught. Veterans of the war in Cuba meet in the Cafè de la Lluna to sing songs from Havana. More than one poor sap has swallowed hook, line, and sinker in situations like this. You’d have to be a fool to fall for that, but me, I’ve been around the block a few times. Who does she think she’s dealing with? Some amateur? She’s sharp, I’ll give her that, but I wasn’t born yesterday. Worker stabbed in the shipyards. Better to ignore her and forget about it. If it weren’t for this shadow of a doubt . . . what if she really . . .? This morning Manuel Domínguez was stabbed . . . No matter how unlikely, better be cautious. I won’t do a thing till I have proof, that’s for sure. And even if she’s in trouble, no one can make me believe it’s mine. . . . seven times in the thorax and

abdomen by an unknown assailant. The time of death has been established between two and three a.m. The body was found . . . Absolutely not. With all the precautions I've taken, it's impossible. For God's sake, I'm a big boy, I know exactly what I'm doing. . . . by the night watchman Salustiano Sotomayor when he was making his regular rounds. No, absolutely not, pregnancy is unthinkable. What time is it getting to be? Seven fifteen. She'll be coming out any minute. Let's see if she's still sulking. What's the most expedient thing to do? Bring it up again from a new angle or wait for a better opportunity? What should I say to calm her down and still leave myself room to maneuver? Although there are no witnesses to the murder, because at that time of night the neighborhood was almost completely deserted . . ."

He couldn't stop turning it over in his mind. If there was really something to what she was saying, the most convenient solution might be to offer her a tidy sum to cover her expenses and those of the newborn for a reasonable period of time. Where to get that money, that was another matter entirely. He'd have to ask his father, and for that he'd need to come up with a good excuse. He could find Rita a new situation. If only she'd settle for that and not make a fuss.

" . . . Two friends of the victim, who worked in the Montlleó factory, had spent the best part of the night with him in the Sanlúcar tavern on Santa Madrona . . . Twenty minutes. She's been in there twenty minutes. That's another one of her defects that drives me up the wall. I always have to wait, she's never on time. Why should I have to wait for anyone, much less a goddamn seamstress . . . She'd be singing another song if I'd stood her up a few times. Then she wouldn't take on airs or be so demanding. But I have to confess, I'm hooked on her. She's a habit that'll be hard to break. A damn shame, just when things were going so well. . . testified that Manuel Domínguez was inebriated and that he had spoken with some of the regular customers, including one named Paco. . . What the hell's she doing all this time in La Perla d'Orient? Chatting like a magpie with the salesgirl, I bet. She does it on purpose, just to annoy me. This girl's trouble. . . with whom he'd started a violent argument, each of them insulting and threatening the other. And if she won't settle for the money and babbles about the whole thing, which I doubt, I can always deny it. Her word against mine, guess which of

us they'd believe. Who's going to take the word of a nobody named Rita against the word of an Aldabò? With my father's influence, they'll shut her up and put her in her place. Daddy would never let a snake like her ruin the life of his son, his only son. He dreams of marrying me off to a Carulla or an Andreu, or that snotty Marsini bitch. Besides, I'm in no rush. I've no desire to get married just yet. Not until I'm at least thirty. Marriage is too long as it is, so why make it eternal? *Manuel Domínguez, according to one of his companions, Olegario Riera, threatened to break a bottle over the head of his adversary, the abovementioned Paco.* At any rate, no matter how this turns out, I'm in for a good scolding. Daddy's not going to like hearing about my escapades with a servant. He's so damn strict! I'll have to put up with the same shit he put me through the last time, when he caught me with that maid. Only this will worse, because that one wasn't pregnant. But Daddy raised hell when he had to buy her off, even though to him that was small change, less than a day's profit. It didn't help for Mother to say I was only having fun, that if a man doesn't sow his wild oats while he's single, he'll sow them after he's married . . . It was like preaching in the desert. I'm sure he's never sowed any wild oats, so that stuff will make no impression on him. *Following this, the man known as Paco fled from the tavern in the direction of the docks chased by Manuel Domínguez.* The bells of Santa Anna just rang a quarter to eight. Closing time. If she doesn't come out soon, I'll split. I've been cooling my heels here more than half an hour. The joke's gone on long enough. *The police are seeking information about the prime suspect, Francisco Cardona, alias Paco, who apparently has disappeared.*"

Maurici checked his pocket watch. Twelve minutes to eight and Rita still hadn't come out. . . And Rita never did.

Agitated and oblivious to what he'd read, he threw the newspaper on the ground. Despite his decision not to wait for her, he peered impatiently through the glass door. Inside the store there were no customers, just a woman collecting pieces of cloth behind the counter and a man sitting at the back. He shoved the door open and went in.

"Good evening. I'm waiting for a young lady who came in a while ago."

“What young lady? We’ve had quite a few customers this afternoon.”

The saleswoman—in fact, she seemed to be the owner—was a handsome middle-aged matron. As she spoke to Maurici she concentrated on gathering rolls of cloth scattered on the glass counter, which also served as a showcase. Inside were delicate camisoles with satin bows and corsets with metal ribs that looked like ancient instruments of torture.

“A blonde girl, good looking. Fairly tall, wearing a hat with flowers and a blue-striped dress.”

“No one dressed like that has come in.”

Maurici smiled.

“You’re mistaken. She was with me and I saw her come in.”

“No, sir. I’m telling you, you’re the one who’s mistaken.”

“Perhaps someone else waited on her.”

“We’re the only ones here, Jaumet and I. There’s no one else in the store.”

Maurici couldn’t help noticing how smoothly the woman’s fingers handled the material. Without knowing why, this irritated him.

“Are you sure she isn’t in the dressing room?”

Without looking up, the sphinx replied:

“Look for yourself.”

Somewhat hesitantly and without conviction, Maurici walked through the store, long and narrow like a tunnel, until he reached the back where Jaumet was seated on a low chair. As he approached him he could see that the man, despite being well past forty, had the vacant look of those who live permanently in the age of innocence. Maurici muttered “good evening” and the man responded with a nod and a broad smile. Behind him hung the curtain of the dressing room. Maurici opened it and stood looking at a booth less than six feet square with a bench and a full figure mirror. The clothes rack, nailed to the wall, was empty.

The interior of the store was painted a cream color that had darkened with time. Two crystal chandeliers hung down from the high ceiling. The wall behind the counter was lined with small drawers of the same color, with porcelain knobs and tiny labels. Maurici stupidly ran his gaze over them, as if Rita might pop out of one. Even at the risk of being rudely dismissed, he ventured:

“Isn’t there another door?”

Without changing her expression or raising her eyes from the counter, the woman replied:

“As you can see, there’s just the front door.”

“She came in to buy . . .,” he tried to remember, “a strip of embroidery and something else . . . And, by the way, this isn’t the first time she’s been here. You must know her.”

“No, sir. I haven’t sold any embroidery strip to anyone this afternoon.”

Reluctant to leave, Maurici touched his hand against the rim of his hat and slowly headed for the door.

“Good evening,” said the woman tiredly and still gathering up rolls of cloth.

The situation was too absurd to be real. For just a moment he stopped to look at the passersby and thought that, knowing where Rita was hiding, they were laughing at him with the smugness of people who share a secret. Someone was pulling his leg. He had the feeling that he was floating, immersed in a world as elastic and dense as the world of dreams. “Let’s take this step by step,” he said to himself, clinging to reason as if it were an anchor. “No matter how strange things seem, sooner or later there’s always an explanation. Rita can’t have just up and vanished. That’s physically impossible. She has to be somewhere. I saw her go in there; I’m sure of that. But I didn’t see her leave, which doesn’t mean she didn’t leave. While I was looking at the paper and preoccupied with my own worries, she might have sneaked out. That’s unlikely because I did keep an eye out for her, but not impossible. Besides, she had her reasons to pull a stunt like that. She was angry and sore at me, and so she decided to give me the slip. What a nerve! She’s got even more gall than I thought. What doesn’t jibe is that the owner denies having seen her. Why? That I don’t swallow for a second. That woman knows more than she’s telling. Why wouldn’t she simply say that Rita came in and then left? What possible reason could she have to lie to me?”

He merged with the bustle of the street, stepping aside to avoid a gypsy woman selling flowers.

“But then, again, I may be a stranger in La Perla d’Orient, but perhaps Rita isn’t. I’ve heard my mother send her there once or twice. What if Rita . . . What if she asked the owner to play dumb if

I came in asking for her? But why wouldn't she tell me she'd left ten minutes ago? What would have been wrong with that? If what Rita wanted was to leave me standing there, she'd already done that. Perhaps she wanted to make sure I didn't follow her to her boarding-house. But, how does she know I won't go there looking for her now? She must have realized if it got late I'd go on home, she heard me say I planned to be back for dinner. It all sounds too complicated but she's capable of that and more . . . She wants to keep stringing me along, I know her. Does she expect me to go to the boarding-house and apologize? That'll be the day!"

Even so, an anxiety that resisted reason kept gnawing at him. "What if something's happened to her? But, what could have happened to her in broad daylight in front of so many people? Nonsense! The fight with Rita and her dirty trick have ruined my afternoon. I don't know why I'm still brooding about it. Do I have some sort of obligation to her? What sort of obligation? She's just a dressmaker, "dressmaker" my foot, all she is is a mere seamstress, a hick from the sticks trying to sell me a bill of goods. She made her play, and it didn't work. Hey, she knew what she was getting into!"

Suddenly he found comfort in a thought that hadn't occurred to him before. "Truth is, she's given me the perfect excuse to break it off. Let's wait and see if she shows up at the house next week. I bet she's gone for good! And if she comes back, let her come back. That's when I'll put her in her place. Hello, goodbye, see you later. And if she has the gall to go to my father making demands, I'll beat her at her own game. When it comes down to it, it's better this way. Still, it's sad to end on a sour note. I was planning to take her out to dinner, show her a good time, and give her a little something as a parting gift. Too bad, it's her loss."

He raised his head, and when he looked at the sky he saw that the moon, keeping its immemorial appointment, had replaced the sun. As for the earth under his feet, the trolley tracks were still in place and the pigeons, like every evening, fluttered up to their nests and made cooing sounds. It was perfectly clear. The incident with Rita had not altered the cosmic order in the slightest; by the same token, why should it alter the rhythm of his life?

That evening he barely tasted his dinner.

CHAPTER 2

When he turned twenty-six, his parents did everything within their power to mark his birthday on the calendar of eternity. To that effect, Lídia Aldabò hired extra help to serve delicacies concocted by the elite chefs of Barcelona. The guests streamed in to the murmur of rustling silk. Shiny leather boots stepped on the wine-colored carpet, between collections of fans and Limoges porcelain that lined the walls of the hallway. The display was illuminated by multicolored stained glass windows that opened onto a large skylight. When the sun poured through, the glass panes glittered like gigantic jewels of every hue in the rainbow. Soon circles of people formed in the parlor that featured mahogany furniture, a grand piano that belonged to Lídia since she was a young girl, and a Japanese screen, a wedding gift from an errant uncle. Maurici's grandmother and other elderly relatives sank in the plush, Oriental style sofas. The coup de grace struck when the sliding doors paneled with mirrors were finally opened. Beyond them, an endless table offered an anthology of temptations to the palate. The piece de resistance was a marinated, boneless salmon some three feet in length, surrounded by lemon wedges and lying on a bed of lettuce in a silver platter. Nearby a pyramid of oysters rose above canapés of caviar, ham, and anchovies, as well as an assortment of cold meats trimmed with gelatin. The Aldabòs dreaded empty spaces, so between platter and platter they'd squeezed dishes of cheese, olives, and other hors d'oeuvres. This was the buffet, the light refreshments Lídia had announced to family and friends. And now they were ready to sample them along with wines from the region but mostly from France, which Lídia favored and her husband tolerated.

Maurici made a late entrance, judging it in bad taste to show up on time at a party given in his honor. In truth, he was never in a hurry. His figure, slim as a sword, his chiseled jaw and cheekbones, and a lock of black hair that would not be tamed by grease, stood out more vividly in slow motion. Even the smile didn't break out at once; rather, the lips opened gradually like curtains to let in the light. His lanky, languid frame retained traces of adolescence that

would likely be slow to disappear. On the subject of his personal charms there was unanimity among the women at the party: he was *a treat, a sweet boy, a delicious froufrou*. Pirula Camprodón, who wrote poetry, held *soirées* with literary pretensions at her home, and whose teeth stuck out like those of a rabbit, had proclaimed him *a dream of verticality*.

With the indolence he cultivated as the key to his allure, he sauntered amidst human and inanimate obstacles, seeking the company of those who might bore but not inconvenience him, like grandma or his cousins Flora and Albert. But before he could reach them he felt on his back, on the innermost spot of his waist between his coat and his shirt, a steely hand like the hook of a pirate. As if his flesh had actually been pierced, his body arched in reaction. No need to turn around to identify it. It was the unmistakable grip of Mrs. Ramalleres. Previous to the affair with Rita, Mrs Ramalleres had caught him by surprise in a weak moment and had made him lose his head. He was ashamed of the incident and had tried to forget it. At the time, a fling with a woman almost twice his age had seemed quite chic, but that geriatric prodigy turned out to be insatiable. Not even his twenty-five year-old vigor sufficed to neutralize the lady's predatory instincts. He turned around as calmly as one turns to face an inevitable disaster.

"Mrs. Ramalleres! How are you?"

The precaution not to call her by her first name was useless. She came up closer, breathing in his ear:

"Where have you been hiding, you beast?"

Maurici, eyeing her claw search again for cover under his coat, cut the conversation short:

"Excuse me! I'm being summoned from the parlor..."

Before he could reach grandma it was also necessary to avoid Mrs. Roura, although for different reasons. She was a stout woman with a habit, since he was a boy, of pinching his cheek with the strength of a vise and the ferocity of a cannibal. In spite of these annoyances, Maurici paid tribute to convention because it gave meaning to his life. He'd rather endure Mrs. Ramalleres' assaults, his grandmother's deafness that forced him to shout, or the soporific data his father's accountant mercilessly fired at him, than engage in conversation with a friend or read in a quiet corner. He swam happily and effortlessly in those waters and couldn't imagine a

future that wasn't a repetition of similar rituals. Stepping like a dancer—one forward, one backward—he made his way through the jungle of industrial vegetation in which the textile barons of Barcelona and Sabadell stood as the tallest trees. Kisses, hugs, handshakes, and jocular pats descended on him like puffs of incense.

Lídia Aldabò was dressed in black and wore the emerald set her husband had given her on their silver anniversary. Her eyes rather than her lips commanded the servants immediately to refill whatever was empty. Her husband had donned his customary dark colors and expression of intense concentration. With his head down, he listened to the explanations of another manufacturer whose name Maurici didn't recall. The three children present hid under the table and now and then tugged at the tablecloth, threatening to bring the entire arrangement crashing down. Right before dessert, Pirula Camprodón recited a homemade, entirely forgettable ode. The sight of the cake, with its twenty-six golden flames, stirred a collective *ahh!* of anticipated delight. Like every year, somebody prompted Maurici to make a silent wish, only he didn't know what to wish for. Nothing was lacking in his life. It seemed perfect as it was. A fleeting thought of Rita insinuated itself into his otherwise complete satisfaction. It had been a week since the incident at La Perla d'Orient and Rita hadn't come back. He hadn't asked his parents, who might have found his interest in the absence of a seamstress strange. Knowing at least where she'd gone would help bring the matter to a close. Wouldn't it be something if an uppity seamstress cast a pall on his day? Facing the cake as if it were a flaming altar, this might be the moment to wish that Rita would go away forever, without a trace. He wished, then, that history undo itself so that he could redo it to his own liking. It wasn't too much to ask. Without another thought, he blew out the candles. A minute later the cake melted in the mouths of guests while champagne flowed from an apparently inexhaustible source.

As expected, he sat at the piano and by request played Mozart's *Turkish March*, a few passages of Spanish operetta, and two traditional Catalan songs that were performed by Flora, who had a pleasant enough voice. The grand finale was a piece by Brahms played in a duet with his mother that received a warm