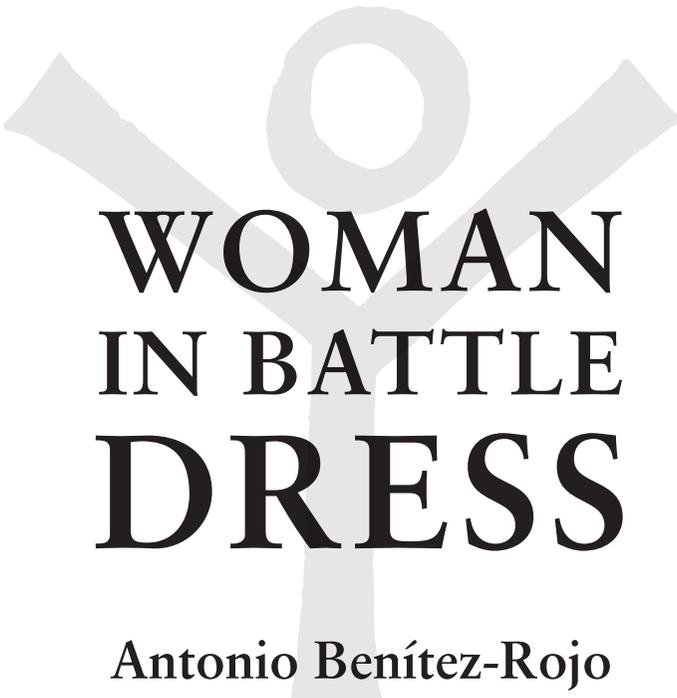


**WOMAN
IN BATTLE
DRESS**

ANTONIO BENÍTEZ-ROJO

Translated by Jessica Powell



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City
Lights



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Woman in Battle Dress

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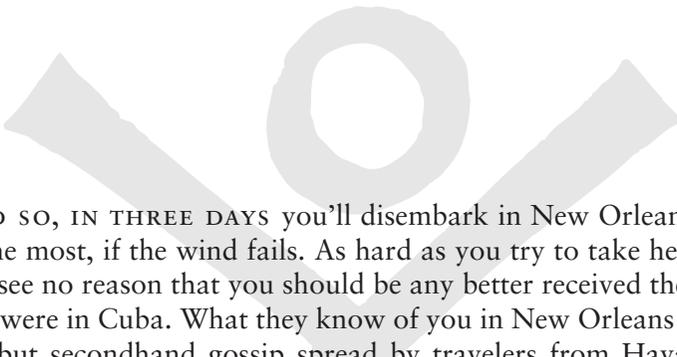
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AND SO, IN THREE DAYS you'll disembark in New Orleans. Four, at the most, if the wind fails. As hard as you try to take heart, you can see no reason that you should be any better received there than you were in Cuba. What they know of you in New Orleans is nothing but secondhand gossip spread by travelers from Havana; rumors repeated by sailors and merchants who, hoping to amaze their listeners, turn every drizzle into a downpour, every chicken's death into a horrifying murder. God only knows what abominations they are telling about you there! If there's one thing you're sure of, it's that the dock will be full of gawkers hurling insults. Some will even spit at you. There'll be the usual hailstorm of eggs and rotten vegetables. There will even be those who'll try to pinch your backside or claw at your face. Master and slave, lawyer, barber, shoemaker and tailor, each and every one of them will heap their own guilt and resentments onto you. The saddest part of all is that there are bound to be some good women among the crowd, women who'll condemn you without even knowing why. Their minds constricted by ignorance and prejudice, they'll see you only as an indecent foreigner, a degenerate; never a friend. How well you know their accusatory cries. They have dogged you from one end of Cuba to the other, from Santiago all the way to Havana. The only difference is that this time they'll humiliate you in English, and even in French, your own mother tongue. What you fear most, what you've begun to obsess over, is that moment when you'll step off the boat—your first steps onto the dock, exposed to all those stares, those hungry eyes fixed upon you, wishing to strip you bare. Today, more than ever before, you understand the cruel shame suffered by so many women who, on their way to the bonfire, the guillotine, the hangman's noose, or the executioner's axe, were paraded through an excited crowd, lathered up by the promise of a spectacle. It's true that,

in your case, there's never been talk of a death sentence, but you've been insulted so repeatedly that the thought of being subjected to public ridicule all over again has come to feel intolerable. Despite all that you saw during the war—the battlefields of Austria, Russia, and Spain, among others, you've never managed to get used to the insensitivity of human beings, especially those in so-called “polite” society. And of course, the satirical bards of New Orleans will have their verses at the ready. Eager to show off their wit, they impatiently await your arrival. Later, they'll publish their rhymed couplets in the newspaper, attaching to them names like Sophocles and Euripides. Poor devils, they don't even know that, had you lived in those classical times, your glories and miseries might have provided the worthy inspiration for some famous dramatic poet. But no, now that you think back on your reading, you realize that you don't fit as a character in a Greek tragedy; Electra, Ariadne, and Clytemnestra have nothing whatsoever to do with you. Only a woman of your times could understand you completely, perhaps a Madame de Staël, Swiss-born like you, with a free spirit to match your own. But the baroness has been dead nine or ten years by now and you can think of no one else who might defend you with her pen—that is to say, to do you justice for posterity's sake. If only you had half the talent of that Mexican nun whose works you read in prison, what immortal verses you would compose, what sage letters you would write! What other woman knows what you know of men, what other woman knows their bodies and souls as well as you! And what's more, who could possibly define a woman's place better than you, you who have proven yourself within the most exclusive of men's worlds? But God did not grant you the gifts of a poet and you will never be the one to elegantly describe the ups and downs of your life. Face it, Henriette; your fate is sealed. You have nothing left to hope for. Even if you manage to go down in history, it will be as a libertine, in the best of cases, an infamous impostor. Judges, scribes, witnesses, registries, briefs, signatures, seals—all of the instruments of jurisprudence have allied themselves against you; they have omitted any favorable depositions and exaggerated those that malign you. They have judged you hastily, with single-minded determination, as though you were an abhorrent social error that must be rectified immediately and never allowed to recur. Your past has been meticulously dissected, disputed, and criticized, you've been

reviled as a negative example, too dangerous in a world held in thrall to outmoded ideas from fifty years ago. And so, your truth—all that you have left—will remain buried alongside your bones in some Louisiana cemetery. And it will all begin again three days from now, perhaps four. Imagining yourself humiliated all over again by the throngs, seeing yourself disembark with your head shaved practically bald, wearing the threadbare habit you inherited from a nun, dead of yellow fever, you know that you can't take it anymore. You have reached your limit. In Santiago de Cuba, when they threatened to parade you along the main thoroughfare, dressed in a shift and mounted atop a donkey, you considered killing yourself right there in your cell. What a pity that you didn't go through with it, Henriette. What a pity. And now, when all of your efforts and good deeds have proven worthless, when your entire body aches from so many restless nights, you wonder why you ever asked the ship's captain for a pen and paper. What you write at this very moment may well prove to be your final letter, your final act. Yes, a letter to yourself. And perhaps of farewell.



You take up the pen after reading what you wrote last night. How fickle emotions are! All it took was to be allowed on deck to take in the beautiful morning and to exchange a few pleasantries with Captain Plumet to transform your emotional state, though physically you're still slow and aching. And really, how vain you are, my friend! Did you actually think that those "glories and miseries" that you so boasted of yesterday—with the rhetorical style of a provincial lawyer, no less—would merit the attentions of a famous writer? Were she still alive, Madame de Staël would not have even bothered to listen to your story. You're no Joan of Arc, after all! Only women of high moral principles should become the subject of literature. The perfect heroine should act selflessly, unaware of the personal consequences of her actions. If her behavior is praiseworthy, it is so precisely because it cannot be bought or led off course. These are the women's names that deserve to be etched in stone, certainly not yours. I'll grant that you've never been lacking in presence of mind or in perseverance, but, as painful as it may be to admit, you must recognize that if you have defied the law for many years, you did it

first out of compassion, then led by ambition, and finally, for love. It's not that you've stopped believing that both the courts and the public have judged you maliciously, but you must confess that it was your excessive self-confidence, or better, your vanity, that landed you in prison. This time you gambled and lost, and that's all there is to it.

And now you've begun to wonder what the mayor of Havana has written in your convict's passport. Your future in New Orleans depends, in good measure, upon what it says. Fortunately, he didn't seem ill-disposed toward you last year when he visited the women's hospital. You may also count on support from Bishop Espada, who has proved himself sympathetic. In any case, it's likely that you'll find out what it says tonight, since the cheerful and gallant Captain Plumet—something about him reminds you of your uncle—has invited us to dinner, and it is he who safeguards all of our documents. You speak in the plural because on deck you met two other deportees: a mulatta suspected of witchcraft and a melancholy whore of about your age, both from New Orleans. Although you were unaware of their presence on board the ship, they were certainly aware of yours. The respect they have for you is strange. To judge from their words, you have become rather famous among women of ill-repute. You could even say that they envy your celebrity. Imagine! But now you must overcome the febrile exhaustion that has come over you and try to fix yourself up to look at least passably presentable; your two admirers have outfitted you with clothes, makeup, shoes, even a wig. How many years has it been since you last dressed as an elegant woman?

(Three hours later.) Undeniably, Captain Plumet is the spitting image of your Uncle Charles: the same prominent jaw line, the curved nose, the suntanned face, the sparkling blue eyes, and that desperate, roaring laugh that he adopted in his last days. Perhaps this is why, yesterday, you got up the nerve to ask him for writing materials. In any case, my friend, you have little to be happy about. Your passport reads: "Enriqueta Faber Cavent. Born in Lausanne, Switzerland, 1791. Subject of the French Crown. She has served four years of reclusion and service in the Women's Hospital of Havana. She has committed the following crimes: perjury, falsification of documents, bribery, incitation of violence, illegally practicing medicine, imposture (pretending to be of the masculine sex), rape

of a minor, and grave assaults against the institution of marriage. She has been forbidden to reside in Cuba or in any other territory under the Spanish Crown. She is hereby remanded to the authorities in New Orleans.”

You had it right yesterday: your fate is sealed. And more than sealed, signed by the mayor and approved by both the governor and the captain general. Even so, some hope remains. Plumet showed you a sealed letter in which, according to him, the bishop asks the Mother Superior of the Sisters of Charity in New Orleans to take responsibility for you. Does this mean that you’ll have to live in a convent and go on wearing a nun’s habit? What do they want from you? How long must you wait for your freedom? Plumet had shrugged his shoulders; he knows nothing. He would like to do something to help you, but his hands are tied. Years ago, when he commanded one of Jean Laffite’s ships, he would have hidden you in an empty barrel and that would have been that. But everything’s changed since the war. The port authorities are ever more persnickety and even the slightest irregularity can cost a captain his license. He told you this in a rush, as if hoping to forestall any further conversation on the topic, while urgently ushering you out of his quarters so as to be left alone with Madeleine and Marie, since as far as womanizing goes, well, that’s another thing he has in common with your uncle. In any case, you may at least be grateful for his good intentions and an excellent dinner.



How peculiar that here, in the middle of the ocean, aboard this aging schooner transporting goods as ordinary as leather, tobacco, and mahogany, your old dream about Robert should have returned. There was a time when the dream recurred two or three times every year. Later, as if the names Enrique and Henri had erased Henriette’s past, it returned less and less frequently until finally disappearing from your nights altogether. In any event, the dream came back to you exactly as before. Although now that you think about it, there is one important difference: within the dream you were aware that you were dreaming the same dream you had dreamt before. So much so that, seeing yourself once again in that strange and desolate room, you tried to leave so as not to feel the sadness of Robert’s arrival.

But, no matter how you tried, you were scarcely able to move your limbs, and then suddenly, there he was, his frame filling the dark recess of the doorway, awaiting your cry of surprise so that he could shyly enter the room. As always, he is dressed in his exquisite Hussar's uniform—Hungarian *culottes* made of blue cloth, red Dolman with gold fringe, bearskin hat topped with a long feather, tall calfskin boots, and, draped over his left shoulder, the splendidly embroidered fur cloak. His curved saber hangs from his wrist, tied on by a silk cord. His other hand holds the reins of Patriote, his favorite mount, the saddle covered with a leopard skin given to him by Field Marshal Lannes. Suddenly Patriote startles; his eyes bulge with fear. Robert tries to calm him, but the horse struggles to go back outside and Robert lets him go with a gesture of resignation. From the moment you saw him, you realized that he'd grown taller since the last time you had the dream. He also seemed thinner, although perhaps not, perhaps you had merely misjudged after seeing him so tall alongside Patriote, who, for some reason, was the same size as always. Now Robert examines the room's bare walls. His gaze moves slowly over the dimly lit corners, the beams of the ceiling, the grand silver candelabra, filigreed in dust and cobwebs, which stands on the mantelpiece above the empty fireplace. There are no candles in this candelabra. The hazy glow that floats in the room does not come from any visible source of light. Although Robert has seen you—or better, has moved his inexpressive gaze over you—he has not noticed you; to him, you must be like a sort of reflection or a transparent presence. Knowing that now you can walk, you decide to get up from the bed. A sense of infinite compassion impels you toward him. Robert has grown so large that, although you stand on tiptoe, your lips barely brush against the cross of the Legion of Honor that he wears on his chest. “Ah, it's you. Doesn't it seem that spring is awfully late to arrive here in Foix?” Upon hearing his words, you realize that he doesn't yet know that he is dead. You wonder if you should tell him, but decide against it. Whatever his condition, he does not appear to be in pain. Confused by this situation, you manage only to lead him by the hand toward the bed. Curiously, his hand is not cold. You notice that he has recently shaved and that his tremendous mustache has been newly waxed. Robert allows himself to be undressed like a child—you always marvel at seeing him naked. After untying the saber from his wrist and removing his cap,

you take your time unbuttoning his clothing. At last you lay him down across the bed, loosen the braids against both sides of his face, and pull off his shiny black boots and tight-fitting *culottes*. His body is intact. There is not even a trace of his old scars. A faint opalescent glow emanates from his long and conspicuous penis, resting flaccidly against his left thigh. “Ah, it’s you. Doesn’t it seem that spring is awfully late to arrive here in Foix?” End of the dream.

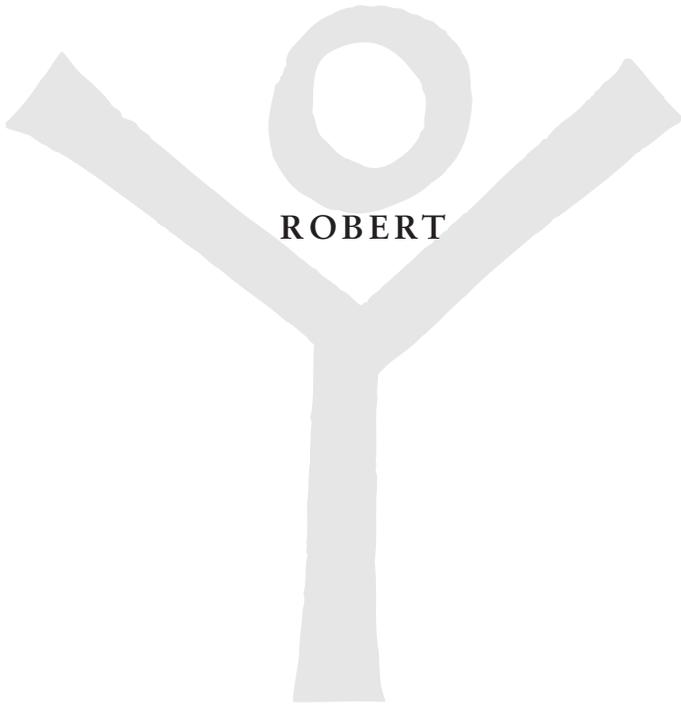
The sun was just rising when you came up on deck. You were dressed as a woman and wearing Madeleine’s wig. This is how you’ll disembark tomorrow in New Orleans. To avoid thinking about Robert and the dream, which always unsettles you, you distract yourself by watching the bustle of the sailors. What a complex thing, a ship! Even Plumet’s small and aging schooner, with its wooden hull, rigging and sails, seems an indecipherable puzzle. You assume that each and every one of the ship’s innumerable parts has a specific name, something like the drugs in a pharmacopeia. That large, deep sail could be called laudanum, and the triangle of sailcloth that they raise at the prow could be eucalyptus, beneficial for respiratory ailments. This is how Madeline found you, immersed in your little game. Marie, the mulatta, was in her berth, suffering from seasickness. Madeline is a dispirited sort. She is also younger than she appears. Hard living has withered her face and set its expression in a deep scowl. She moves like a sleepwalker. Were you to choose one word to describe her it would be this: exhausted. You can imagine her used up breasts, her anus worn to shreds from the arduous work of making a living off her body. As she tells it, both she and Marie traveled to Havana with the Théâtre d’Orleans opera company. Madeline doesn’t sing, but the manager needed an obsequious woman with loose morals and a passing knowledge of Spanish to hand out programs to passersby. Marie doesn’t sing either; she joined the troupe as a hairdresser. Why did they decide to stay in Cuba? For the same reason you did, Henriette: to make money.

A cabin boy, the very same one who tried to enter your cabin last night and whom you dispatched with a slap across the face, interrupted your conversation. “Captain Plumet has invited you both to have breakfast with him,” said the boy, scarcely looking at you. When you made as if to follow him, Madeleine took you by the arm; she had something to discuss with you. Her proposition, delivered

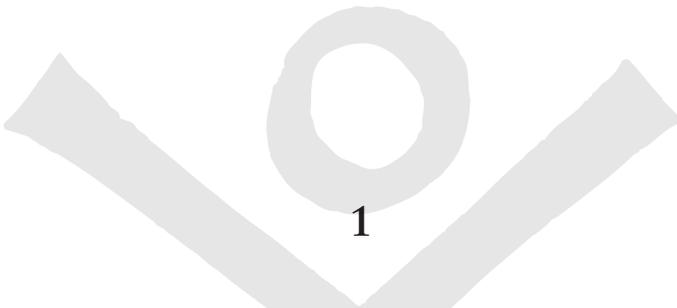
quickly and nervously, rendered you speechless with surprise. You knew, of course, that she despised her line of work and held a very poor opinion of herself, but it had never even crossed your mind that donning the habit of the Sisters of Charity would seem so marvelous to her. Madeline, simply put, wanted to be you, wanted to trade the whorehouse for the convent. "But in order to exchange passports we would need Captain Plumet's help," you told her. "It is already guaranteed," replied Madeline. "I bought it at a very good price last night. Truth be told, it's not a problem for him at all. They put him in charge of transporting three women, and three women will disembark at the dock." "And Marie?" you asked. "She's like a sister to me," Madeline smiled. "She'll shave my head to look just like yours."

And so, my friend, you shall arrive in New Orleans with a new name, Madeline Dampierre, and the good nuns at the convent will receive a false Henriette Faber. Damned if this isn't a true comedy of errors! Well, you wish them both the best of luck. Naturally, Plumet's complicity came at a price, which turned out to be exactly the one you had expected. How simple it is to manipulate certain types of men!

Hours later, your head fuzzy and aching from so much wine, you went up on deck to take in some fresh air. The moon was full. When you leaned out over the gunwale to feel the ocean spray, you saw a line of dolphins following behind the boat. Their polished backs, bathed in moonlight, looked like enormous silver coins rolling edgewise among the waves. Surface. . . . Submerge. . . . Surface. . . . Submerge. What else is life but a continual cycle of abundance and scarcity? One way or another, you'll sort things out when you get to New Orleans. Nothing could be worse than that retreat from Moscow in which nine of every ten who marched alongside you had died. And now you think again of your dream about Robert. Could it be some kind of sign? Oh, my beautiful and distant Hus-sar, what times we had together! How I missed you, how I wept for you! Rest in peace in my dreams. You will always be with me. For better or for worse, I owe to your death much of what I have been, what I am today, and what I forever will be.



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1

THERE WAS ONCE A SWEET and lost time when the days passed so slowly that each one seemed to contain all four of the seasons. Now that old age has abbreviated my sleep and I tend to awake before dawn, when the street looks like a long black cat stretched out beneath my window, it is not unusual for me to attempt to conjure up the contours of one of those days. At times I try to reproduce the landscape of some extraordinary event, imagining it on a grand scale in which I appear inlaid like a blade of grass. At others, I trace the details of a beloved face, a beloved body—lately they’ve been Robert’s—in order to place them, first still, then in motion, within one of the intimate scenes guarded in my memory: the first waltz at a gala ball, a furtive caress in a box seat at the opera, or simply Robert and me, stretched out on one of his precious animal skins, drinking wine by the fire and talking about nothing in particular. I can spend hours bewitched by these tender reveries, until, still wrapped up in my daydream, I hear the Irish servant boy leaving the breakfast tray and the *New York Herald* outside my door. Soon after, Milly, my dedicated secretary and traveling companion, appears, with a steaming cup of tea, a slice of rye bread, and an ounce of light rum, forcing me to leave behind that splendid autumn in Vienna, 1805, full of golden leaves and military triumphs, or the sudden kiss that caused us to slip upon the icy cobblestones of a street in Warsaw, leaving us splayed on the ground next to a spur-stone, laughing like idiots until the cold against our backsides obliged us to rise, only to slip all over again. Today, this very morning, I saw him once more on the staircase of our lodging-house in Berlin, his new leopard skin slung over his shoulder, mounting the stairs with his back hunched

and his head lowered as though bearing the weight of an actual flesh-and-blood animal, all just to make me laugh, to set the jubilant and celebratory tone occasioned by his promotion to captain. Once again I heard him say, between bites of sausage and swallows of schnapps, that after the next battle Lannes would have to give him a tiger skin, and, who knew, maybe a lion's or even an elephant's, and then we'd made love again, taking our time, my tongue traversing the trail of scars that mapped his body, taking in the inexplicable smell of his skin, like moss and fresh bread.

Are these silly vignettes just an old lady's attempt at solace? Perhaps. But it would be so much worse to await the gray light of dawn counting sheep or the days I might yet have left on this earth. What's more, how could I write about my life without first reconstructing it, using the dubious glue of memory to piece together the innumerable fragments of my past, scattered like the pieces of a Chinese vase thrown from a bell tower to the street below? In any case, at my age one no longer worries about seeming ridiculous, especially not here in New York where I have come to seek the clamor and tumult found only in the world's greatest cities. Nowhere else but here, surrounded by masses of immigrants, by energy and hunger, trains, exotic music and violence, could I have rediscovered my youth, a youth spent on the battlefields of Europe. No other city on Earth is so like that which was Napoleon's Grande Armée, army of armies, legion of nations. It was just a few weeks ago that, riding in a coach through squalid neighborhoods and outdoor kitchens, I smelled the stench of injured flesh mingled with the scent of borscht, and it was as though I were right back in the field hospitals in Dvina, Dnieper, Niemen. . . . This city fits me like a ring on a finger. I knew it from the very first day. It's here—where one must live in the moment, run always at a gallop, and both love and hate with a soldier's passion—that I will speak of the horrors wrought by war: blackened rubble, vast, anonymous graves, widows and orphans, cripples and blind men, but also mutilations of the soul. And yet, like certain parts of this roiling city, life on the battlefield has its beautiful side, its own poetry. At times it can be a joyous retreat where the hours stretch out like a clean sheet and one may lie down and rest and dream and sing and laugh, forgetting all about the hiss of shrapnel and the clamor of death. It is this small corner of refuge, a place that belonged to Robert and me, that I wish to speak of now.

How is it possible that I can no longer name the waltz that we, strangers just a moment earlier, danced together, beginning to know one another through the measured glide of our feet and the gentle pressure of our gloved fingers? How could I have forgotten the melody that accompanied my growing fascination with that Hussar lieutenant with the face of a Mameluke who, with no more introduction than a brief nod, had taken me by the arm, led me away from the sofa of timid debutants where Uncle Charles had left me, and planted me, rigid and blushing, among the other couples waiting for the music to begin? At this very moment, as I write by the frozen glass of my windowpane, I try yet again to tease the notes of that waltz from my memory. But, as always, I see myself dancing with Robert encased in the most pitiful silence, twirling like a music box ballerina to the one-two-three, one-two-three rhythm, surrounded by dizzying tulles and epaulets, the great ballroom of the Boulogne Prefecture decorated in full military pomp, with tri-color wall hangings, bronze eagles, regimental flags, drums, crossed swords, the vibrant green of the laurel crowns anticipating the glories of the new campaign. And me, fourteen years old, suddenly enraptured, melting at his strange elegance, at that mix of lofty arrogance and animal grace that I had seen only in engravings of classical marble statues.

I can, however, remember the music of *Fidelio*, the voices ascending upward toward the opera boxes while Robert, standing behind my seat, sank his fingers into my coiffure and caressed the nape of my neck. (And it's not that I remember the music because the libretto of that particular opera in some way influenced my decision to pass as a man. The time when, imitating the brave Leonore, I would dress as a young man, was still a long way off. In that Viennese autumn, the rue de Vaugirard, medical school, and the name Enrique Fuenmayor were still far in the future. Back then I was simply Henriette, a girl drunk with love, who gave herself over to be sipped slowly, like a glass of Tokay wine, her sweetness savored until the very last drop had been licked from the rim. If I remember entire passages of that prophetic opera it must be for the same reason that I remember that desolate Russian tune, as monotonous as the steppes, that the Uhlan sergeant with bandaged eyes had hummed while Nadezhda's hand, tucked inside my cloak, made my nipples swell in a frigid Smolensk hospital. But why I am thinking of Nadezhda here?) Leaving aside the matter of the irretrievable waltz,

I have certainly not forgotten the events leading up to that night; events that had to occur in their proper order, like the stages of a long journey, so that I could arrive at last in Robert's arms.

First was the interminable luncheon at which Doctor Larrey had set out to enlist Uncle Charles and some of his colleagues into service with the Imperial Guard. Seated across from Aunt Margot—as out of town guests, and relatives of Uncle Charles', we had been invited to join the table—I watched with alarm as she devoured, with the dexterity of a sword-swallower, a steaming bowl of bouillabaisse, half a capon, an enormous plate of stewed wild boar, a salad and a raspberry tart. At five o'clock in the evening, while I was trying to decide which of my soirée gowns to wear, Uncle Charles appeared at my room at the guesthouse, his arms held open in a gesture of helplessness, to inform me that we would not be attending the ball after all because Aunt Margot was ill. Uncle Charles seemed quite concerned, which was unusual for him.

"It's probably just indigestion, but she is complaining of a sharp pain high in her stomach, and I've decided to bleed her. She's a bit warm and looks rather flushed to me."

"I could help," I offered, alarmed. But Uncle Charles flatly refused, taking it for granted that the sight of so much blood would upset me. He would make do with Françoise or one of the servants from the guesthouse, someone who could hold the basin for him. He told me there was no cause for alarm since the Cavents almost always died of heart maladies. He was merely taking precautions. He would keep me informed.

A short while later, when my tears had begun to dry—tears shed, in all sincerity, for Aunt Margot, but also from the disappointment of missing what was to be my first gala ball—Uncle Charles returned, quite content.

"My sister is feeling much better. She refused to let me bleed her. The indigestion has taken its proper course and the pain has vanished. I'm certain it was only gas. I did warn her. She shouldn't eat so much. One of these days she's going to give us a real scare." Françoise, Aunt Margot's maidservant, poked her red head through the half-opened door.

"Henriette, your Aunt wishes to see you. And you as well, Doctor Cavent."

Much to my surprise, Aunt Margot was out of bed, holding a

candle up to peer at her tongue in the mirror of the armoire. Upon seeing us enter, she straightened her ample dressing gown and turned around.

“My tongue doesn’t look nearly as bad as you said,” she said to Uncle Charles. “Doctors always exaggerate. Just imagine, he wanted to bleed me!”

“You should be in bed.”

“I feel perfectly fine. Nothing hurts anymore. And anyway, I’ve moved my bowels again. You may see for yourself, if you wish,” she said, waving her arm vaguely in the direction of the folding screen that obscured one corner of the room. “Well, Henriette, don’t just stand there like a statue. It’s getting late, my dear. Don’t you think it’s high time you got dressed for the ball? If you arrive too late there’ll be no one left to ask you to dance. As it is, you’re quite tall for your age, which intimidates the young officers. And you, Uncle Charles, you should be quite finished inspecting the fruits of my intestines. Follow Henriette out, and go change your uniform. You’ve got a sauce stain on your sleeve. Or is it shit?” she said, laughing. “You should take a cue from Doctor Larrey, who is always dressed to the nines.”

“So . . . you’re really feeling all better?” I asked her, taking the candle so that Françoise could help her into bed.

“We should stay, Margot,” said Uncle Charles. “We’ll have dinner together here in your room. That way at least I can be sure that you only have a bit of broth.”

“Don’t be a hypocrite, Charles. You’re dying to capture some pretty little heart before marching off to war with that Emperor of yours. I’ve already told you, I feel perfectly fine. And anyway, I have Françoise, who fusses over me as though I were made of whipped cream. She’s reading me my favorite novel. Oh, what a rascal, that Valmont! Ah, those were the days!” she sighed. “Enough! To the dance! It’s getting late.”

And so the night had begun. While Uncle Charles went to the hospital to put on his dress uniform, I kissed Aunt Margot goodbye and went to my room to get dressed. In a flurry, I threw open the armoire door and pulled out the first gown that I saw. I did my hair the best I could, powdered my nose, dashed on a few drops of perfume, covered my shoulders with a shawl, put my fan in my purse and went downstairs to wait for Uncle Charles. I had no inkling

that, with the same ease with which a child paints a square, a door, two windows and a smoking chimney, my life was about to open up into a new space, into that place of refuge that I would share with Robert.

By the second waltz I had already sunk irremediably into those Levantine eyes. I was astonished that he stayed by my side, that he hadn't returned me to the green silk sofa where he'd found me. Drenched in sweat, we took turns fanning ourselves, waiting for the military band to start up again and give us an excuse to draw our bodies near once more. Two or three times I glanced about for Uncle Charles, but, grateful for his promotion to Surgeon General, he had reserved his full attention for Doctor Larrey. I was soon holding my second glass of champagne. Then, Robert grazed my lips with the back of his hand and I lost count. Three? Four? Then he said the name of a certain Madame Polidor, recently arrived from Saint-Domingue, and I found myself looking at a fascinating woman with a languid smile and bronzed shoulders. I noted that she spoke familiarly with Robert and it occurred to me that perhaps she had once been his lover, although she was quite a bit older than him. After complaining of the heat and asking us if we weren't tired of dancing, she invited us to her house to listen to gypsy music.

"I came with my Uncle, Doctor Cavent. We should be leaving soon," I said quickly, determined not to shirk my duties as a niece.

But everything happened in such an effortless way that, a short while later, while the musicians played an old-fashioned minuet and Robert was leading me to a chair, it was Uncle Charles himself who, arm in arm with Madame Polidor, said that it was only ten o'clock and we should accept the invitation and enjoy some gypsy songs and violin music, of which he was quite fond.

"In that case, it would be best if Robert went with you," she said, looking at me with amusement. "My house is not easy to find at night. I am so pleased that you'll come. I've invited only a small group," she added, and, raising her hand to her temple, she turned toward my uncle. "Please forgive my rudeness, Doctor Cavent. The atrocities I witnessed in Saint-Domingue have left me with no manners whatsoever. Allow me to introduce Lieutenant Robert Renaud, a good friend to whom I owe a great deal. Among other things, he has helped me organize my modest salon."

"Charles-Henri Cavent, Surgeon General with the Imperial

Guard, at your service,” said my uncle. “Do you serve with Field Marshall Lannes, by any chance?”

“Yes, in the 9th Hussar regiment, stationed at Etaples. I am in Boulogne as an official adjunct to the General Staff.”

“Ah, I do believe I’ve heard tell of you,” said Uncle Charles, winking one of his sparkling blue eyes. “Yes. Very good, very good. We’ll give a sound drubbing to the Austrian. We’ll take Vienna, you’ll see. I’d be delighted if you’d accompany us this evening.”

Suddenly I knew that I was set on a new course. All the old things were already behind me: the little town of Foix with its three towers, Aunt Margot’s château on the banks of the Ariège, the works of La Fontaine and Madame de La Fayette, games with the gardener’s daughters, village festivals, embroidery, picnics in the forest glade where I would talk to the fairies, happy trips with Aunt Margot to Toulouse and Carcassonne, studying the classics, piano and geography, taking riding lessons. . . . Upon climbing into the coach, dizzy from the wine, I had the distinct impression that all of that was becoming a distant memory, turning rapidly into the remote past as if a magic wind had transported me to the other side of the earth. Now, all that was left to do was follow the adventure wherever it might lead me.



Madame Polidor’s house was outside the rampart wall, adjacent to a road lined with artillery batteries and field tents that curved along the coast. I don’t know why I had imagined that it would be a castle. It turned out to be a partially ruined tower, no longer of any military use (as Uncle Charles observed), surrounded by piles of rubble. Since the coaches could not make it to the door, it was necessary to walk in the dark among bivouacking soldiers and enormous cannons pointed out to sea. My disenchantment only grew upon seeing the guests’ lack of decorum; some were singing, while others laughed and shouted to one another in greeting. I felt like a fish out of water. I asked myself what I, so timid and quiet, was doing there among such freewheeling sorts. Robert walked in silence. He held me by the arm in an impersonal way, as though still testing his will to seduce me. Suddenly, an insistent, feminine voice called out to him. It came from someone who had been walking

behind us. I held my breath. I feared he would leave my side. But he didn't even turn around and, taking advantage of the fact that Uncle Charles had moved a few steps ahead of us, I showed my gratitude for his gesture by resting my head, briefly, on his shoulder. The poor impression I'd formed of the place disappeared the moment I entered the tower. Now, at this very minute, lost in nostalgia as I recall the exotic look of Madame Polidor's sitting-room, I suspect that it is the very same room that, years ago, used to appear over and over in my dreams: the bare stone walls, the huge silver candelabra on the mantelpiece, the thick beams supporting the ceiling and, of course, Robert. The only difference was that, in my recurrent dream, there was an enormous bed (a memory, perhaps, from my childhood in Lausanne, when my parents were still alive?) and possibly a mirror. In any case, in my dream there hadn't been the Egyptian rug or the heaps of red and black pillows that, piled up here and there, served as chairs, and even as divans for the guests; or the small tables, scarcely a hand's length high, upon which accumulated bottles of wine, glasses and, here and there, a candlestick; or the white silk wall hangings, painted with strange hieroglyphs that contrasted with the worn and blackened stone walls; or the massive trunk upon which rested a Spanish guitar and church censer, burning an aromatic resin. Above all, in my dream, there was no Claudette, the girl with honey-colored skin, dressed as a Turk, who, as soon as we entered, whispered her name and began collecting the furs, shakos, and twenty-franc pieces—the obligatory donation for the gypsies—that the gentlemen held out to her. (I have just remembered that in my dream I was always wearing her Moorish slippers.) Then we arranged ourselves in easy groups of two and three around the tables. There were, perhaps, a dozen of us, fifteen at the most, including Madame Polidor and the enchanting Claudette.

Seated between Uncle Charles and Robert, who began politely filling our glasses, I discovered that I had been mistaken in my impression that the guests were people of low standing. Sprawled comfortably upon the cushions were five women, all of them covered in jewels and dressed in that summer's latest fashion, styles inspired by the Empress herself. The rest of the guests were officers, mostly Hussars. Their uniforms, with their great furs, were the only ones I knew how to identify. Madame Polidor reclined in

Romanesque fashion, supporting herself on one elbow, her head resting in the palm of her hand. I decided that her irresistible beauty resided in the shape of her lips, voluptuously full, and ever so slightly down-turned at the corners, suggesting just a hint of weariness. (Oh, Maryse, my dear Maryse! Though it's true that, back then, you were still Madame Polidor to me, in remembering you now, in detailing your mouth, I find it difficult to relegate you to a minor character in the scene, nothing more than an extra in this comic opera that I'm composing, and yet, this is how it must be until your moment arrives and you step onto center stage. We shall proceed then, for the time being, with the name Madame Polidor.) Next to her was a man with a gray mustache and a patrician air about him who, upon entering the tower, had exchanged greetings with my uncle. "Colonel Marnot, a friend from the Egyptian campaign. Were he not serving with the Guard he'd be a General by now," Uncle Charles had whispered to me. And suddenly, from above and to my right came the sound of violins and tambourines.

I had seen gypsies in Toulouse, but those had been Spanish gypsies who had crossed the Pyrenees with the Saltimbanques from Aragon and Catalonia. These, now making their way downstairs, were dressed completely differently, especially the men, who wore long hair, wide shirts, leather doublets and colorful scarves tied around their necks. Since I hadn't noticed a staircase behind the wall hangings, their sudden arrival surprised me so much that, for a while, I didn't even notice the music they were playing. "I'll wager they're Transylvanian airs," said my uncle, revealing himself somewhat a connoisseur of those plaintive ballads, a bit too slow for my taste, that melded with the dusky light of the room, evoking a remote and inconsolable sadness.

"Are you familiar with the history of the gypsies, monsieur?" I asked Robert brightly.

"Not with their history, no. But I do know about their lives. Much of what we understand today about horses, their dispositions, quirks, illnesses, good and bad crossbreedings, we learned from them," he said in a didactic tone, smiling.

"I assume, then, that there are gypsies among the Hussars," I said, naively.

"Heaven forbid! Gypsies are thieves. Although one must admit that they are also good musicians and coppersmiths."

“The Hussars are elite troops,” Uncle Charles put in, raising his glass to Robert and offering a toast to his health.

While I was formulating an apology, Uncle Charles looked at his watch, stood up a tad unsteadily, and told me it was time to go. “’Tis a pity, but it’s past midnight already,” he added, shrugging his shoulders in his customary gesture of resignation. And destiny is a tricky thing, for had Madame Polidor not appeared at that very moment and insisted that we stay because the best of the music was yet to come, my relationship with Robert would never had been more than a mere flirtation, at most, one of those fleeting war-time romances fueled by letters filled with plagiarized verses and covered with little drawings of hearts and bordered in flowers, tepid epistolary idylls whose tender words of endearment, burdened by repetition, culminate only in boredom. It did not take much to convince Uncle Charles, who sank back into the cushions, accompanied, this time, by Madame Polidor. “We’ll leave in fifteen minutes. All right with you?” he whispered, turning toward me. And what was I to say? I responded with silence.

Meanwhile, Robert, who had stopped wooing me ever since we left the dance, decided to renew his advance, and I, terrified and unsure what to do, felt his left hand slip between the cushion and my dress. I was about to push him away, but my resolve faltered: the waltzes, the champagne, his eyes, his imperiousness, and yes, his well-rehearsed lines: “Henriette, what does it feel like to be a perfect being, to have everything: beauty, grace, youth, wit? Tell me, what does it feel like to fly above it all, up there with the angels?” Such words, though they seem completely ridiculous to me today, transported me to the heavens that night.

Our hostess had not lied when she’d said that the musical evening had not yet reached its finest moment. Firmly anchored in place by Robert’s hand, which had felt its way to my clothed privates, I joined the others in applauding the raucous gypsy woman who, accompanied by an allegro moment of a tune in a major key, had descended the stairs in a flurry of twirling skirts and bare feet. My eyes hooded with pleasure—no hand other than my own had ever touched me in that way—I allowed myself to be swept away by the woman’s deep, husky voice, to be transported by her hands on her hips and her brazen expression that, a mere hour earlier, would have caused me to blush. As I followed her unabashed movements

with my eyes, my gaze met with Colonel Marnot's. His eyes appeared to burn with indignation, with a deep reproach. Though Robert had allowed his fur to slide down his arm, half-hiding it from view, I knew that the Colonel had discovered our secret game, and my pleasure disappeared instantaneously. Blushing and trembling with shame, I stood up so abruptly that the woman interrupted her song. Everything seemed to be spinning: the wall hangings, my shadow, the gypsies; it all wheeled about me, as though I were dancing a frenetic waltz. I closed my eyes. I felt my legs go weak and I let myself go.

I was scarcely aware that it was Robert who carried me back to the coach. When I came to, we were entering the city again, and Uncle Charles was waving a bottle of ammonia from his medicine kit under my nose.

"You must have had too much to drink," he affirmed, after taking my pulse. "Don't worry, I won't say a word to your Aunt. As far as I'm concerned, you only drank one glass of wine."

When we arrived at the guesthouse, we saw immediately that something was wrong: Françoise met us with a long wail and ran toward us, her head in her hands. It seemed that Aunt Margot was having chest pain and could scarcely speak. She had sent Françoise for a priest.

We ran to her room. Uncle Charles bled her immediately, assisted by Pierre, the postilion. While the basin filled with blood, I knelt next to her bed and took her hand. I could see that she was suffocating and I tried to cool her with my fan. But nothing seemed to help. Her strong constitution allowed her to hold out until Françoise returned with the priest. As soon as she had received the Last Rights she fell into a sweat-soaked trance. At dawn, her irregular breathing ceased completely.

Lights

JUST HALF AN HOUR AGO, while Milly and I were turning the plants toward the light and picking dead leaves from their stems, the memory of Aunt Margot felt so vivid that I was compelled to sit down and write about her, and also about my family.

I must begin by saying that I have almost no memory of my parents. Whenever I try to evoke them, their faces appear blurry and incomplete, like fragments of worn daguerreotypes that someone's left under my pillow. Mama sitting before a mirror, her back to me, combing her long, copper-colored hair, or a faint smile in her blue eyes as she let me take a sip from her cup of hot chocolate. My father's vigorous hand, pointing out my first rainbow, or tying, too tightly, the laces on my little white booties. Neither do I remember Lausanne, nor the house in which I was born. Sometimes, in the deepest recesses of my memory and at the end of a long hallway, I think I can see a dog; at others, hanging from an invisible wall, as though floating in the nothingness, a bird in a cage and a cuckoo clock, that, come to think of it, could have been the same thing; perhaps a full-length mirror and a big bed with two giant white pillows, and yes, also my tiny chamber pot. All told, nothing too terribly precious.

My years in Foix passed happily among my Aunt's conservative ideas and the clandestine revolutionary rumors spread by the servants at the château. Despite my Aunt's best efforts to educate me in accordance with her values—instruction in piano, voice, dance, sewing, Italian and Spanish, flower arrangement, and etiquette were entrusted to a long-nosed woman named Madame Montiel; grammar, Latin, Greek, mathematics, logic, geography, and didactic

lectures were dutifully imparted by abbé Lachouque; riding lessons and fencing were the province of the good Captain Laguerre—my contact with the gardener’s clever daughters, with whom I carried out make-believe decapitations next to a dead tree that we called The Guillotine, Pierre’s Jacobean diatribes that he delivered, undaunted by my curiosity, to the other servants in the kitchen while my Aunt napped, and my intense conversations with Françoise, a secret admirer of Rousseau and of the *Philosophes*, had marked me with a vague sense of anti-monarchical patriotism that, though I never dared to express it, had grown within me as spontaneously and disorderly as a flowering vine, ideals that I continue to hold to this day with the same lack of political discipline. In any case, my childhood and adolescence belong to Aunt Margot, as does the sum total of my filial love. In truth, I couldn’t have asked for a better mother. And if, at the time of her death, I did not share some of her convictions, I nevertheless owe to her example my only three virtues: perseverance, physical stamina, and the capacity to make decisions in difficult moments. Of all of my belongings, the one I value most is a tiny portrait of her that I wear, to this day, on a chain around my neck. It has been no easy task to keep it all these years. On three separate occasions I have lost the gold chains that it hung upon: the first was in 1812, during the terrible retreat from Moscow to the Niemen; then in Spain, when I fell prisoner in the Battle of Vitoria; and finally, in jail in Santiago de Cuba, when I was stripped of everything of value I’d had with me. I have just opened the stubborn little door of the locket to say hello to Aunt Margot, an Aunt Margot at age nineteen, a newlywed, surprisingly thin, but already wearing her customarily resolute expression, a portrait painted by one of those miniaturists who found fame in the Court of Versailles.

The Cavents, enterprising people from the Languedoc, had sought refuge in Geneva, fleeing religious persecution. There they had prospered as manufacturers of knives and scissors. My maternal grandfather, Antoine-Marie Cavent, had embraced the Roman Catholic faith—a creed loathed in the city—in order to marry the heiress to a great textile empire. From this union were born, in consecutive years, my mother, baptized Suzanne, Aunt Louise, Aunt Margot, and Uncle Charles. Widowed and suffering from an ailing heart, my grandfather ended up bankrupt due to competition from British manufacturers. All that remained of his considerable fortune

was the house in which he lived. Since the profitable marriages he had expected for his daughters were no longer possible, he married them off the best he could, to men of various professions: Paul Faber, my father, the owner of a modest printing press in Lausanne; Guillaume Curchet, of Geneva, an employee of a bank owned by the Necker brothers, proved worthy of Aunt Margot, and a certain Brunet, a lawyer in Lausanne, obtained a “yes” from Aunt Louise, the eldest and most beautiful of the three sisters. Each of these marriages was born purely of love, since none of my grandfather’s daughters had any dowry to offer other than a solid conservative education. As for Uncle Charles, my grandfather dissuaded him from following his true inclination toward a military career, convincing him, instead, to go to Paris to study medicine.

With his daughters’ domestic situations arranged, my grandfather sold his house, complete with all of the furniture inside it. The following day he went to see his son-in-law, Curchet, in his office at the bank, and deposited all of the money in an account to be managed by Curchet himself. From that sum, Uncle Charles was to receive a modest allowance for thirty-six months, provided that he continue with his medical studies; the remainder would go toward a dowry for the first marriageable granddaughter, or, in the case that there were no granddaughters, it would be given to the first grandson when he came of age. After making these farsighted provisions, he went to the best hotel in Geneva, ordered a Pantagruelian dinner, and died that same night, in his sleep, from his second heart attack.

A few weeks later, Curchet and Aunt Margot’s social life took an unexpected turn. Upon being named Finance Minister in France, Jacques Necker asked his brother Louis to send him two or three trusted employees from his bank in Geneva, requesting Curchet in particular, as he was his wife’s cousin. From one day to the next, the young couple found themselves living in a house in Paris. Owing to Curchet’s loyalty and intelligence, very soon they were living a life of ease. From then on, Curchet’s destiny would advance in tandem with Necker’s, whose turbulent career in politics and finance is well known. In any case, following his protector’s second term as Finance Minister, whose unpopular dismissal sparked the storming of the Bastille, Curchet withdrew from public life and consolidated all of the wealth he had amassed through his lucrative speculations. He intended to return to Geneva, but Aunt Margot,