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Opening Extract from...

The Frozen Heart

Written by Almudena Grandes

Translated from the Spanish by Frank Wynne

Published by Phoenix

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The Frozen Heart

ALMUDENA GRANDES

Translated from the Spanish by Frank Wynne



PHOENIX

The women weren't wearing tights. Their fat, fleshy knees bulged over the elastic of their socks, peeking out from under the hem of their dresses, which were not really dresses but shapeless, collarless smocks made of some lightweight fabric I could not name. I looked at them, planted like squat trees in the unkempt cemetery, wearing no stockings, no boots, and with no other coat than the coarse woollen jackets they kept closed by folding their arms across their chests.

The men weren't wearing overcoats either, but their jackets – made of a darker shade of the same coarse wool – were buttoned up to hide the fact that they had their hands in their pockets. Like the women, they all looked identical – shirts buttoned to the throat, heavy stubble, hair close cropped. Some wore caps, others were bare headed, but, like the women, they adopted the same stance: legs apart, heads held high, feet planted firmly in the ground like stout trees, ancient and strong, impervious to cold or catastrophe.

My father, like them, had had no time for people who were sensitive to the cold. I remembered that as I stood with the icy wind from the sierras slashing at my face – 'a bit of a breeze', he would have called it. In early March the sun can be deceitful, pretending to be riper, warmer, on one of those late winter mornings when the sky seems like a photograph of itself, the blue so intense it looks as though a child had coloured it in with a crayon – a perfect sky, clear, deep, translucent; in the distance, the mountains' peaks still capped with snow, a few pale clouds ravelling slowly, their unhurried progress completing this perfect illusion of spring. 'A glorious day', my father would have said, but I was cold as the icy wind whipped at my face and the damp seeped through the soles of my boots, my woollen socks, through the delicate barrier

of skin. 'You should have been in Russia, or Poland, now that was cold', my father would say when as kids we grumbled about the cold on mornings like this. 'You should have been in Russia, or Poland, now that was cold'. I remembered his words as I stared at these men, these hardy men who did not feel the cold, men he had once resembled. 'You should have been in Russia, or Poland', and the voice of my mother saying, 'Julio, don't say things like that to the children . . .'

'Are you all right, Álvaro?'

I heard my wife's voice, felt the pressure of her fingers, her hand searching for mine in my coat pocket. Mai turned to me, her eyes wide, her smile uncertain; the expression of someone intelligent enough to know that, in the face of death, there is no possible consolation. The tip of her nose glowed pink and the dark hair that usually tumbled over her shoulders lashed at her face.

'Yes,' I said after a moment. 'Yes, I'm fine.'

I squeezed her fingers and then she left me to my thoughts.

There may be no consolation in the face of death, but it would have pleased my father to be buried on a morning like this, so similar to the mornings when he would bundle us all into the car and drive to Torrelodones for lunch. 'A glorious day, just look at that sky, and the Sierra! You can see all the way to Navacerrada. The air is so fresh it'd bring a dead man back to life . . .' Mamá never enjoyed these trips, though she had spent her summers in Torrelodones as a child and it was where she had met her future husband. I didn't enjoy them either, but we all loved him – his strength, his enthusiasm, his joy – and so we smiled and sang '*ahora que vamos despacio vamos a contar mentiras, ¡tra-la-rá!, vamos a contar mentiras*', all the way to Torrelodones. It's a curious town: from a distance, it looks like a housing estate, but as you draw nearer it seems to be nothing more than a train station and a scatter of buildings. 'You know why it's called Torrelodones?' Of course we knew, it was named after the little fortress that perched like a toy castle on top of the hill, the Torre de los Lodones, yet every time we came he would explain it to us again. 'The fortress is an ancient tower built by the Lodones, they were a tribe, a bit like the Visigoths . . .' My father always claimed he didn't like the town, but he loved taking us there, to show us the hills and the mountains and the meadows where as a boy he had tended sheep with his father; he loved to wander the streets, stopping to chat with every-

one, and afterwards telling us the same stories: 'That's Anselmo – his grandfather was my grandfather's cousin. That woman over there is Amada and the woman with her is Encarnita, they've been friends since they were little girls. That man over there, his name's Paco, he had a vicious temper, but my friends and I used to steal apples from his orchard . . .'

At the slightest sound Paco would rush out of his house waving his rifle, though he never actually shot at the boys who were stealing his cherries, his figs. Anselmo was much older than my father; by rights he should have been long dead, yet here he was at my father's funeral, and beside him Encarnita. Beneath the wizened mask of old age, I could still see the plump, friendly faces that had smiled into my childish eyes. It had been years – more than twenty years – since that last 'glorious Sunday morning' when my father had taken us to Torrelodones for lunch. I hadn't been back since and the sight of all these people moved me. Time had been cruel to some of them, gentler to others, but they had all washed up on the shore of an old age that was very different to my father's. At some other time, some other place, some other funeral, I probably wouldn't have recognised them in the dark mass of huddled bodies, but that morning I stared at each of them in turn, at their powerful bodies, their solid legs, their natural, almost haughty, formality, their shoulders aged but not bowed, their dark, tawny skin, weathered by the mountain sun which burns but does not tan. Their cheeks were etched with long wrinkles, deep as scars. No delicate web of crow's feet round their eyes, but deep, hard lines, as though time had carved their faces with a chisel thicker than the fine blade it had used on my father.

Julio Carrión González might have been born in a little house in Torrelodones, but he died in a hospital in Madrid, his skin ashen, his eldest daughter – an intensive care doctor – in attendance, and with every tube and monitor and machine available. Long ago, before I was conceived, his life had taken a different path from the lives of the men and women he had known as a boy, the people who had outlived him, who had come to his funeral as if from another time, another world, from a country that no longer existed. Life had changed in Torrelodones too. I knew that if they had time, if they knew someone with a phone, a car, these people would also die surrounded by tubes and monitors and machines. I knew that the fact that they still left the house without an overcoat, a

purse or tights said little about their bank balance, which had been steadily growing over the years thanks to the influx of people from Madrid prepared to pay any price for a plot of land barely big enough to graze a dozen sheep on. I knew all this, yet looking across the grave at their weather-beaten faces, the stocky frames, the threadbare corduroy trousers, the cigarette butts clenched defiantly between the lips of some, what I saw was the abject poverty of the past. In the fat, bare knees of these women with nothing to keep out the cold but a coarse woollen jacket, I saw a harsher, crueller Spain.

We stood on the opposite side of the grave. His family, the well-dressed product of his prosperity, his widow, his children, his grandchildren, some of his colleagues, the widows of former colleagues, a few friends from the city I lived in, from the world I knew and understood. There weren't many of us. Mamá had asked us not to tell people. 'I mean, Torrelodones, it's hardly Madrid,' she said, 'people might not want to come all that way . . .' We realised that she wanted only those closest to her at the funeral, and we had respected her wishes. I hadn't told my sisters-in-law, nor my mother's brothers, I hadn't even told Fernando Cisneros, my best friend since university. There weren't many of us, but we weren't expecting anyone else.

I hate funerals, everyone in the family knows that. I hate the gravediggers, their offhand manner, the predictable, hypocritical expression of condolence they put on when their eyes accidentally meet those of the bereaved. I hate the sound of the shovels, the grating of the coffin against the sides of the grave, the quiet whisper of the ropes; I hate the ritual of throwing handfuls of earth and single roses on to the coffin and the insincere, portentous homily. I hate the whole macabre ceremony, which inevitably turns out to be so brief, so banal, so unimaginably *bearable*. That's why I was standing with Mai off to one side, almost out of earshot of the droning voice of Father Aizpuru, the priest Mamá had invited from Madrid. The man who, she claimed, had kept her children on the straight and narrow, the priest my older brothers still treated with the same infantile reverence he had cultivated when he refereed football matches in the schoolyard. I'd never liked him. In my last year in primary school, he was my tutor, and he used to make us exercise in the playground stripped to the waist on the coldest days of winter.

'Are you men or are you girls?' Another image of Spain. He would stand there, his cassock buttoned up while I shivered like a freshly sheared lamb in the fine cold drizzle of sleet. 'What are you – men or girls?' I never joined in the enthusiastic chorus shouting 'Men!' because there was only one thought running through my head: 'You bastard, Aizpuru, you fucking bastard'. Naive as I was, I tried to get my own back at the age of sixteen, as I sat stony faced through Friday mass, refusing to pray, to sing, to kneel, 'fuck you, Aizpuru, it's your fault that I lost my faith'. Until finally he phoned my mother, called her into school after class and had a long chat with her. He told her to keep an eye on me. 'Álvarito isn't like his brothers,' he said, 'he's sensitive, headstrong, he's weaker. Oh, he's a good lad, a first-rate student, responsible and clever too – maybe too clever for a boy his age. That's what worries me. Boys like that develop unhealthy friendships, that's why I think it might be best for you to keep an eye on him, keep him busy.' That night my mother sat on the edge of my bed, ran her fingers through my hair, and without looking at me, said: 'Álvaro, *hijo*, you do like girls, don't you?' 'Of course, Mamá, I like girls a lot.' She heaved a sigh, kissed me and left the room. She never asked me about my sexual orientation again and never said a word to my father. I graduated top of my class, with the same refrain still ringing in my head, 'you fucking bastard, Aizpuru, you fucking bastard', never suspecting that years later I would realise that he was right, not me.

'Álvaro, *hijo*, I know you didn't want to wear a suit and tie today, but please, I'm begging you, at least be pleasant to Father Aizpuru . . .' This was the one thing my mother had asked of me that morning, so I'd made sure I was the first to shake his hand so that my somewhat frosty greeting would be forgotten in the exaggerated fuss my brothers Rafa and Julio would make of him, hugging the fat old man, who ruffled their hair, kissed them on both cheeks, all of them blubbering and crying. The Marist brotherhood of brotherly love, 'I have two mothers, one here on earth, the other in heaven'. A clever piece of bullshit. I said as much to Mai and received a swift kick for my pains. Clearly, my mother here on earth had had a word with my wife.

Father Aizpuru was right, I wasn't like my brothers, but I was a good lad, always. I'd never been a problem child, never caused trouble the way they had. In the innumerate, unscientific world

I'd grown up in, my better-than-average flair for mental arithmetic had bestowed on me a mythical intelligence that even I did not believe I possessed. Yes, I'm a theoretical physicist, and that's a job title that causes a few raised eyebrows when people first hear it. Until they discover what it means in reality – a professor's salary and no prospect of becoming what they would consider to be rich and important. That's when they realise the truth – that I'm just a normal guy. At least I was until that morning when my one phobia – my morbid aversion to funerals – propelled my mind from the profound, universal grief of the survivor into a curious state of heightened awareness. It probably had something to do with the pill Angélica had given me at breakfast. 'You haven't cried, Álvaro,' she said. 'Here, take this, it'll help.' She was right, I hadn't cried – I rarely cry, almost never. I didn't ask my sister what the pill was – and maybe my detachment was simply down to me refusing to deal with my grief – but as I stood there feeling strangely alert I turned my gaze from the fat, fleshy knees of the women from Torrelodones to the faces of my own family.

There they stood, and suddenly it was as though I didn't know them. Father Aizpuru was still blethering on, my mother was staring out towards the horizon, the sea-blue eyes of a young woman set in an old woman's face, her skin so translucent, so fine, it seemed as though it might split from all the wrinkling, folding and fanning out. My mother's character was not in her wrinkles, however, but in her eyes, which seemed so gentle yet could be so harsh, their shrewdness masked by the innocence of their colour; when she laughed they were beautiful but when she was angry, they flared with a purer, bluer light. My mother was still a handsome woman, but when she was young Angélica Otero Fernández had been a beauty, a fantasy – blonde, pale, exotic. 'Your family must be from somewhere in Soria,' my father used to say to her. 'You have Iberian blood in you, they have blond hair and pale eyes . . .' 'Julio,' my mother would say, 'you know perfectly well that my father is from Lugo in Galicia, and my mother is from Madrid.' 'That may be, but somewhere in the distant past. Either that or your father had Celtic blood,' he insisted, unable to think of any other reason for the superiority of my mother's genes, which had produced a string of pale, blond, blue-eyed children; a string broken only once, when I was born.

'Gypsy', my brothers used to call me, and my father would hug

me and tell them to shut up. 'Don't pay them any attention, Álvaro, you take after me, see?' In time, that fact became increasingly obvious. Father Aizpuru had been right, I wasn't like my brothers, I didn't even look like them. I glanced over at Rafa, the eldest, forty-seven – six years older than me – still blond, although he was now almost bald. He stood next to my mother, stiff and serious, conscious of the solemnity of the occasion. Rafa was a tall man, with broad shoulders in proportion to his height and a pot belly that stuck out from his skinny frame. Julio was three years younger but looked almost like his twin, though age had been kinder to him. Between them came Angélica – now Dr Carrión – who had extraordinary green eyes and who envied me my dark complexion, since she had pale, delicate skin that burned easily. The mysteries of the Otero/Fernández bloodlines had produced better results in the female of the species than the male. My brothers were not particularly handsome, but both my sisters were beautiful and Clara, the youngest, was stunning. She too was blonde, but her eyes were the colour of honey. Then there was me. In the street, at school, in the park, I looked completely unremarkable, but at home I was totally out of place, as though I were from another planet. Four years after Julio was born and five years before Clara, along I came, with my black hair, dark eyes and dark skin, narrow shoulders, hairy legs, big hands, and a flat stomach – the lost Carrión, shorter than my brothers, barely as tall as my sisters, different.

On the day of my father's funeral, I hadn't yet realised how painful that difference would turn out to be. Father Aizpuru went on murmuring and the wind went on blowing. 'You should have been in Russia, or Poland . . .' my father would have said, because it was cold, I felt cold, in spite of my scarf, my gloves, my boots, I felt cold even though I had my hands in my pockets and my coat buttoned up, even though I wasn't blond and fair skinned, even though I wasn't like my brothers. They felt the cold too, but they hid it well, they stood to attention, hands clasped over their coats, exactly as my father must have stood at the last funeral he attended. He would have worn that same expression – so different from the patient resignation I saw in the eyes of Anselmo and Encarnita, who were in no hurry, who no longer expected to be surprised, bowed only by time, drawing strength from their terrible weariness so that they could look reluctantly on the lives of others. This,

I thought, was what my father had lost when his life diverged from theirs. He had been luckier than they had because although money does not make for a happy life, curiosity does; because although city life is dangerous, it is never boring; because if power can corrupt, it can also be wielded with restraint. My father had had a great deal of power and a great deal of money in his life and had died without ever being reduced to the vegetable, the mineral state of these men, these women he had known as a child, and who, at the moment of his final farewell, had come to claim him as one of them.

He was not one of them. He had not been one of them for a long time. That was why I was so moved to see them, huddled together on the far side of the grave, not daring to mingle with us, Julito Carrión's widow and his children. If I had not stared at them, had not accepted the quiet challenge of their bare knees, the coarse woollen jackets, perhaps I might not have noticed what happened next. But I was still staring at them, wondering whether they had noticed that I didn't look like my brothers, when Father Aizpuru stopped talking, and, turning to look at me, spoke the terrible words: 'If the family would like to come forward.'

Until that moment, I had not been aware of the silence; then I heard the sound of a car in the distance and was relieved as its dull roar masked the dirty clang of the shovels digging into the earth, the harsh grating that seemed to rebuke me, the cowardly son, Father Aizpuru's unruly pupil. 'If the family would like to come forward,' he had said, but I didn't move. Mai glanced at me, squeezed my hand. I shook my head and she went over to join the others. Next come the ropes, I thought, the wheezing and panting of the gravediggers, the brutal indignity of the coffin banging against the walls of the grave, but I heard none of this as the profane, reassuring sound of the engine drew closer, then suddenly stopped just as the shovels finished their work.

There were not many of us, but we weren't expecting anyone else. And yet someone had turned up now, at precisely the wrong moment.

'What will you have, Mamá?'

'Nothing, *hijo*.'

'Mamá, you have to eat something . . .'

'Not now, Julio.'

'Well, I'll have the *fabada*, and then after that . . .'

'Clara!'

'What? I'm pregnant. I'm eating for two.'

'Let her have whatever she wants. Everyone has to grieve in their own way.'

'Really? In that case I'll have the eel.'

'Don't even think about it!'

'But Papá, Aunt Angélica said . . .'

'I don't care what Aunt Angélica said, you're not having eel and that's final.'

'Has everyone decided what they're having?'

'Yes. The boys will have lamb chops' – my nephews snorted but didn't dare to argue – 'I'll take care of the main courses. Mamá, at least have some soup.'

'I don't want soup, Rafa.'

'Have a starter, then.'

'No, Rafa.'

'Tell her, Angélica . . .'

'Can I say something?'

'What is it, Julia?'

'Well, you said the boys had to have lamb chops, but I'm a girl and I want garlic chicken.'

'OK, all those who want chicken put up their hands . . .'

My sister-in-law, Isabel, assuming her husband's rights as the firstborn, took over and, ignoring the waiter, started to count hands; everyone fell silent as if someone had pressed 'Pause' on a film we had seen a thousand times: the Carrión Otero Family Meal, twelve adults – only eleven now – and eleven children, soon to be twelve.

'Mamá, who was that girl who showed up at the end?'

There was a long silence.

'What girl?' My mother threw the question back at me.

'What are you having, Álvaro? I haven't got you down here.'

'Be quiet a minute, Isabel.' Mamá's blue eyes sparkled with curiosity. 'What girl, Álvaro?'

'There was a girl, about Clara's age, tall, dark, with long straight hair . . . She turned up right at the end in a car, but she stayed by the cemetery gate. She was wearing trousers, huge sunglasses and a raincoat. You didn't see her?'

No one else had seen her. She had crept slowly into the cemetery,

stepping carefully so that her high-heeled boots wouldn't sink into the mud, yet she wasn't looking at the ground or the sky, she was looking straight ahead, or rather, she was allowing herself to be looked at. She walked across the recently mown grass as though walking down a red carpet; there was something in her bearing, in the way she moved, shoulders relaxed, arms gently swinging as she walked, utterly different from the involuntary, inevitable, almost theatrical stiffness common to mourners at a funeral, even if they did not really know the deceased. I couldn't see her eyes, but I could see her mouth; her lips were slightly parted, serene, almost smiling, though she did not actually smile. She drew level with me and stopped, far from the fur coats and the coarse wool jackets. Perhaps she knew I was her only witness, the only one who had noticed her, the only one who would later remember having seen her, perhaps not.

'I thought maybe she worked with you?' I turned to my brother Rafa, my brother Julio. 'Maybe she was once Papá's secretary or – I don't know – maybe she worked for the estate agents.'

'If she had, she would have come over and said something.' Rafa looked from me to Julio, who nodded. 'I certainly didn't mention the funeral to anyone at the office.'

'Neither did I.'

'Well . . . I don't know. But I did see her. Maybe she knew Dad better than she knew us, perhaps she was a nurse at the hospital, someone who looked after him? Or she didn't feel comfortable coming over to talk to us . . .'

But these were things I had thought of afterwards to try to justify her departure, which had been as sudden and inexplicable as her arrival. At first, I stupidly thought that she had made a mistake, she hadn't known there was a funeral and had some other reason for being in that small, remote cemetery on that cold Thursday morning in March. It wasn't just her attitude, the studied casualness of a woman with no particular place to go, a woman who simply wants to be seen. There was something worryingly incongruous about her presence at my father's funeral. Those present fell into two diametrically opposed groups: the people my father had known as a child, and those he had known as an adult. This woman was young, well dressed, wrapped up warmly, yet in spite of her expensive boots, her hair was loose and she was wearing no make-up. If she had been related to Anselmo or Encarnita – or

to any of the people of Torrelodones – she would have gone over and said something to them. But she didn't. Instead, she had opened her handbag, taken out a packet of cigarettes and a lighter, lit one, taken off her sunglasses and stared at me.

'I don't know what to say . . .' My sister Angélica was slower to react. 'I work at UCI, I know all the nurses there and she doesn't sound like anyone I know . . . Besides, even if she was too embarrassed to talk to Mamá, she would have said hello to me.'

'Well, all I know is that I saw her,' I said again, looking around the table. 'Maybe she's somebody's neighbour, or she went to school with one of us, she could have been at school with Clara . . .'

'Maybe she's a local,' said Rafa as Clara shook her head.

'I thought that too, but she didn't look like she was from Torrelodones.'

'That doesn't mean a thing, Álvaro,' my mother said. 'Maybe if she were my age, but nowadays young people all look the same whether they're from small towns or the city. It's impossible to tell them apart.'

The woman had looked at me as though she knew me, or was trying to work out who I was, and it occurred to me then that this was why she had come – not to be seen, but to see us. I had looked into her large dark eyes, and she had held my gaze, patiently, resolutely, as though she had been waiting a long time to see us again, or simply to acknowledge us, to acknowledge me. I had smoked so much over the past two days that I had woken up that morning determined never to smoke again, but there was still a packet in my coat pocket, and watching her slowly smoke her cigarette, I was forced to break my resolution. By the time I had lit my cigarette, she had finished hers, and when I looked back, she was no longer looking at me, but staring straight ahead, at my mother, who was sobbing gently as Rafa took a handful of earth and threw it on to the coffin, at Clara, who, in one last, heartbreaking gesture, threw flowers into the grave, at my little nephews in their suits and ties, awkward in these roles, these clothes, knowing that grown-ups were watching. At that moment I realised that this woman knew exactly where she was and I felt a shudder of anxiety, of fear – not of danger but of the unknown. Then my mother collapsed. My brother Julio caught her and everyone clustered round, and I realised that it was over: the shovels, the prayers, the ropes. By the time I, too, finally stepped forward and took my

place next to my family, my father had begun his journey towards oblivion.

'I saw her.' My nephew Guille, Rafa's youngest son, stopped playing with his mobile phone and looked up at me. 'She was wearing a checked jacket and those trousers people wear for horse riding. They were tucked into boots that came up to her knees?'

'Yes, that's her. I'm glad you saw her too . . .' I smiled at him and he smiled back, a fourteen-year-old pleased to be the centre of attention. 'Did you see her leave?'

'No. She was right at the back. I thought she'd come up to us afterwards, but I didn't see her again. I only noticed her because . . . well, she was pretty, wasn't she?'

'It's strange . . .' My brother Rafa looked from his son to my mother and then to me.

'Could she be related to us, Mamá?' I persisted. 'A distant cousin or something . . .'

'No,' my mother snapped, then paused for a moment before saying, 'Please, *hijo*, I think I'd recognise my own relatives. I may be old, but I'm not completely gaga.'

'Yes, but . . .' I didn't dare continue, because I saw something in those eyes I did not expect. 'It doesn't matter . . .'

'Álvaro, are you on something?' my sister Angélica interrupted in that slyly solicitous tone everyone in the family recognised from births, hospital visits and convalescences. 'The pill I gave you this morning wouldn't make you act like this . . .'

I had been waiting to see the woman up close, to look into her eyes and see their colour, find out who she was, why she was there, why she studied us so closely – but all the fur coats and woollen jackets had converged, hugging friends and strangers, kissing smooth cheeks, and the woman did not appear. Then my mother, looking more shattered than she had even in her husband's final hours, asked whether one of us would help her back to the car. Julio and I had each slipped an arm around her, felt the astonishing weightlessness of her body, and manoeuvred her out of the cemetery. 'Forty-nine years,' she murmured, 'forty-nine years we lived together, forty-nine years we slept in the same bed, and now . . .' 'Now you have Clara's baby on the way, Mamá, you get to watch your grandchildren grow up,' Julio babbled, 'you have five children and twelve grandchildren, and we all love you and need you. We need you so we can go on loving Papá, so that Papá carries on

living, you know that . . .' My mother walked slowly, Julio trying to console her with sweet, slow words. From time to time I kissed her, pressing my lips to her face as I glanced around to find the mysterious woman, although I suspected she was already gone. I was certain that this woman had known exactly what she was doing, turning up at the last minute when the mourners had their backs to the cemetery gates, when the family was gathered around the priest, leaving her free to watch the funeral from a distance, shielded by the last paroxysm of grief, only to disappear as those unaffected by the death came forward to offer their condolences. She had anticipated all this, but she could not have reckoned on me, my one phobia, the morbid aversion to funerals that had frustrated her clever plan. I had seen her – just me, and a fourteen-year-old boy – and I might have forgotten all about her were it not for the fact that, as I left the cemetery, I became convinced that her appearance at the funeral had not been a mistake, an accident, or any of the names we give to such chance events. She had come, and she had looked at us as though she knew us, and when I had looked at her, I had seen something familiar in her profile, a vague, fleeting impression I could not put my finger on, in the same way that I could not say what it was that had made my mother's eyes flare a deeper, purer blue when I had asked my innocent question.

'Why didn't you say something at the time, Álvaro?'

'Say something about what?' Miguelito was struggling in my arms like an animal as I tried to strap him into the child seat in the car. By the time I had managed to buckle him in, he was fast asleep.

'About the girl . . .' Mai started the car.

I slipped into the passenger seat. My sister Angélica, in her usual hysterical way, had insisted that I wasn't fit to drive. Besides, I didn't feel like it.

'You could have told me at the time, or when we went to pick up Miguelito, or on the way to the restaurant.'

'I suppose so . . .' I couldn't think of anything else to say. 'It just didn't occur to me.'

We stopped at a traffic light and Mai smiled and stroked my hair. Then she leaned over and kissed me, and this warm, calm and affectionate gesture rescued me from the cold and the worry of the morning, bringing me back to somewhere familiar, to the little patch of garden that was my life.

'It was strange, though . . .' she said after a moment, as we turned on to the motorway.

'Yes. I mean no.' Death is strange, I thought. 'I don't know.'