White

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When the neighborhood children—brown, grubby, and insatiably curious—peered into the casket, they gaped. Inside it was the most beautiful woman they had ever seen. According to popular rumor she was more than a hundred years old, and she was white, all marvelously white: Her lashes and her brows, her hair beneath a coronet of plastic pearls shining dully in contrast to the dead, paper-like skin, her handkerchief and rosary beads in hands clasped over the concave breast of a stiff lace terno. Years had pared away the flesh and fat, leaving her features reposing in the cleanest and sparest of lines. In contrast to her whiteness, and that of the freshly-painted and satin-lined casket, the whitewashed walls of the barangay chapel looked dingier than usual in the daytime. At night the lighted candles softened the tableau; the white casket and the woman inside were eerie but gorgeous. Then, the children cowered behind their mothers' skirts as the grownups repeated time-worn prayers, peppered with Latin and half-sung by the neighborhood *manalabtan*.

At around eight o'clock the manalabtan got off her knees and collected her wages for the day. The mourners dropped their long faces. Gas lanterns were lit for the benefit of the living, and the big wooden cross on the wall receded into the shadows. The women tucked their prayer books away and turned to one another to gossip; the old men gathered to pour the tuba, and the younger ones twisted the caps off Tanduay bottles. The first drops were tossed on the earth to appease the spirits. The children wandered out into the moonlight to play.

It was the first time many of them, young or old, had seen Remedios Caliso up close. She was the stuff of nightmares and of fable, living in a wooden hut in the middle of a small lot overgrown with weeds. Dead center in that square-shaped plot, the dwelling was situated to be as far as possible from the borders that marked where other people's lives began. There was no fence except a half-hearted length of chicken wire attached to worm-eaten

planks, but the grass grew so high on the old woman's land that it discouraged even the most adventurous of the young ones. Mothers hushed crying babies and exacted obedience from wayward brats with the threat: "If you don't do as I say, the old woman will get you! The old woman with the white hair will take you to her house and tie you up like she tied up her own children!" If the mother in question was particularly inventive, she might add, "She will cook you and feed you to her dog," or "She will make soup out of your bones." All the powers of witchcraft were ascribed to the crone, and there was some truth—very little, but some—to them: She did have children, and she did keep them tied up. A boy who had ventured close to the hut in search of a lost ball claimed that he had come face to face with a sad, gaunt creature fastened by a chain to a house post, but that he had been chased away by a dog before he could investigate further. He had been discredited by his playmates because he could not tell them if it had been a male or a female, even as he protested that he had been so scared he never noticed. Level-headed grownups could attest that a sour-faced man who looked to be in his seventies and called himself her son did venture out of the house on a regular basis to do the marketing. Now and then, he was spotted making repairs or making a bonfire out of trash and fallen leaves. The woman herself never went out to speak to the neighbors, accompany her son, or even go to church.

She was so ancient that it was a wonder any one knew her name, that anyone remembered it so as to write it down on a mass card or tomb-stone. And even then it could have taken many forms—Remidios, Remedyos, Kaliso, Kaleso, Calisu—for she had been born in the faraway days before the war, when memory was more powerful than writing, in that idyllic period called Peace Time. For those who live in our less optimistically named era, there is no remembering, or record of remembering beyond that time, which exists in the consciousness like a drawn-out pastoral. Remedios had been born in a Golden Age, when the wealthy were beautiful and kind, when men were brave and strong and the women tender and lovely. Children grew up in the fear of the Lord, and all the land was governed by wise white men and, closer to home, the most gifted of the feudal elite. During Peace Time, the farmers worked hard and the earth was bountiful. The Maranaos lived beside the Lake and fought among themselves, brandishing their picturesque krises. Down in the plains, the young men sang serenades and the girls were chaste; they loved and courted beneath the soft light of the moon.

In this era Remedios grew up strong and vigorous and healthy. An orphan, she lived in the house of a prosperous widowed aunt with a daughter

the same age as Remedios. There was nothing exceptional about her. She was, to all appearances, a perfect specimen of a girl who navigated her position as a poor relation with relative ease. Upon leaving school at the age of twelve, she could read and write, but she could also sew a straight seam and boil a perfect pot of fluffy white rice. Clean and wholesome, she had a gift for keeping everything about her person—including any rooms, closets, or linens under her care—neat and tidy. Her slim, strong hands were forever patting, pushing, or pulling things into place: a stray lock of hair, a book on a shelf, the window curtains. At eighteen years old, burdened with the responsibilities of a glorified yet unpaid housemaid, she earned a small income of her own peddling snacks in a discreet fashion to the neighbors. She made the native cakes called *biko* to sell every afternoon, molding the sweet, sticky rice into neat little disks with the help of a metal jar lid, arranging them on their little banana-leaf wrappings and placing them in faultless, concentric rows in her basket. Her inner landscape was equally tidy, or so it seemed. There was a self-sufficiency about her, an air of having all that she needed.

Even in those fabled days, the rain did not fall but it poured. One afternoon Remedios was walking home without an umbrella, with nothing but a basket on her arm when the sky quickly grew dark; lightning crackled and thunder rolled, sonorous across the heavens. Rain fell in large, fat, warm drops, threatening to soak her as she ran for the shelter of a large mango tree. It was a monster of a tree, with a thick trunk that a man could just barely encompass. It wore its crown low. Remedios felt safe beneath the dense foliage. With her back close to the trunk, she could almost stay dry, as long as the thunderstorm did not last. The air was warm, heavy with moisture; she edged around the circumference of the tree, her feet feeling their way across the large roots. She made a misstep, and nearly fell to her knees. Clawing at the bark for support, Remedios found herself halfway on the other side of the tree and discovered that she was not alone.

Behind the tree stood Carlos De Asis, who also had sought shelter from the rain. Carlos was handsome, and he was rich. At twenty-three, he had the face of an angel. Remedios thought she had never seen anyone, male or female, so utterly beautiful. He looked like the statue of the patron, Senor San Miguel, in the Cathedral: He had curly brown hair worn long, rosy cheeks, an effeminate mouth with Cupid's-bow lips, a short, high-bridged nose. He wore a light summer suit of linen, which at the moment was marked in damp spots by the rain. He only looked at her in surprise. At precisely this moment,

Remedios's lifelong calm deserted her. She gave him a curt, almost uncivil nod, and hurried out of the shelter of the tree and into the rain.

She tramped home, the merciless mud sucking at each step and threatening to pull the slippers off her feet each time she tried to put one in front of the other. The effort made her calves ache. The road seemed long, and it was all the more annoying because she felt she absolutely had to be alone. She had to be alone at once. At the doorstep of her aunt's house, she left the slippers behind and entered barefoot, hurrying to the small, curtained space beside the kitchen that served as her room.

There was a mirror there. Remedios picked it up and peered into it. What did she see? A face dull, and damp, and broad by comparison—the cheekbones were square, and the nose was unremarkable. The mouth was full of white, healthy teeth, but the eyes were native eyes, bright and black and lacking the honeyed light of a *mestiza*'s. A melancholy mood fell upon her, and she thought, "This is what it means to be in love." And the worst part of this melancholy was that it did not allow her to be still. She lay awake that night, and for several nights thereafter, thinking of angels with porcelain skin and marble bodies. At intervals she did consciously allow the angels to become Carlos De Asis, but not for very long because she felt that she might go mad.

And as all this happened very long ago, it was Remedios's misfortune that there were as yet thousands rather than tens of thousands of people in her town. The number of well-born, eligible young men, for instance, could be counted on a girl's fingers and toes. The number of unmarried society belles was correspondingly low, and her cousin Deling was one of them. Deling was only a year older than Remedios—barely twenty—and she was extremely pretty. She was dainty, her skin was light, and her eyebrows were shaped like the wings of a bird in flight. Taking the odds into account, it was only a matter of time before young Mr. De Asis came visiting.

In American fashion Deling and Carlos were allowed to be alone together in the living room, although Remedios's aunt was always within earshot in the adjacent room. It was Remedios who swept the floor, plumped the sofa cushions, and set out the ashtrays and the cups of coffee for the guest's arrival. She came to the sala even before Deling did, and she was the last to leave "the lovebirds" when the visit began. She left with the opening lines of flirtation ringing in her ears. She knew their pet names: Carlos's resemblance to St.

Michael was not lost on Deling, and she called him Patron. He called her the Princess of Light, which was actually a play on Lucifer, who before his Fall and subsequent defeat by the heavenly hosts was so glorious that he was called the "Prince of Light." Deling rather delighted in her impish role. Clearly, the question was not if, but when, the Patron would complete his conquest and make all the heavens rejoice.

On the nights Carlos came to visit, Remedios sat in the kitchen preparing wrapping for the next day's biko. She passed the broad, dark green banana leaves over a candle flame until they toughened and acquired the requisite sheen, then cut them into little squares with a pair of scissors. The repetitive work used to be a soothing end to a busy day, but there seemed to be no soothing her now. She thought of the lovers with their hands intertwined, Carlos's rosy lips on Deling's graceful neck. It was not fair, she thought, that for her there would be only this. Sturdy and serviceable, broad and neat, there would be no handsome archangel for her. Only a lifetime of peddling biko, keeping house, or, God forbid, playing nursemaid to *their* children. Little golden cherubs, boys and girls. How many would there be? Ah! Remedios was not a stranger to the ways of life. She had seen cattle and horses in the fields, field hands and their sweethearts behind bushes, and oh, as a child, her own parents loving each other on the mat adjacent to hers. If Carlos were mine, she thought, I would make with him six, no, eight, ten children, and I would not be satisfied.

She was in such agony that one night she deliberately walked into the sala while Carlos was visiting. The pair guiltily sprang apart, leaving the required space between them "for the Holy Spirit to pass through" that decorum demanded. Deling was surprised, but not unduly concerned.

"Oh Remedios!" she exclaimed, "I did not call for you yet."

"I'm sorry; I thought I heard you calling," Remedios said.

Deling turned to her suitor. "Remedios here is a distant cousin of mine." Carlos nodded, but did not rise or extend his hand. "She makes the most delicious biko," Deling continued.

"Someday she must allow us to taste some," he murmured politely. Of course, he did not even glance at her.

It was not remarkable that he should not have met her eyes, though Remedios felt betrayed. But what did she expect? Should he have said, *I saw her once, under a mango tree, one afternoon when it rained*? There was a chance he did not even remember.

Remedios vowed then that he should remember her. Among the neighbors who bought her wares was an old wise woman, the local *hilot* who dispensed herbal medicine to those who were sick. She brewed teas for women who missed their monthlies, and taught distraught mothers which leaves to plaster on the backs and chests of children with chronic coughs. Remedios liked her; her home was small and impeccably clean. It was a two-storey wooden house with jar-lined shelves and an altar that was always fragrant with flowers and burning incense and candles. For a fee, one could buy from her dry grass and a pinch of incense to burn in a coconut shell to purify a haunted house, or to dispel bad vapors brought about by the occasional *buyag* that one incurred from displeased elementals. The next time Remedios came with her basket, the hilot inquired after her health.

"You do not look well," the old woman said. "You are always so healthy. But now you look like you do not sleep. Fever? Bad dreams?"

"No, *Manang*. Not bad ones."

"There is only one other kind of dream that makes a girl look like you do."

Remedios sat on the floor, Indian-fashion, her basket in her lap. "Can you help me?"

"You girls know all the charms I know, and probably some I do not know. Write his name on a piece of paper and stick it on a white candle, and burn it while you think of him. Light pink candles in church. Take a basin and fill it with water and pink rose petals, and keep it under your bed while you sleep. Then you will dream of him."

"I do not need more dreams! I don't want dreams. I want him for real."

"In your bed, for real?" the hilot asked, a naughty glint in her eyes. "You girls know how to do that too."

"But I do not know, Manang."

"Yes you do! Paint your face, brush against him, touch his arm, walk with him in the dark."

"I can't."

"If you can't manage that, girl, then you don't deserve him."

"The man is Carlos De Asis, and he is engaged to my cousin Deling. I need a charm to make him love me—a real one."

"Oh, you aim high. Do you really want him badly? Because, as I keep telling you young people, there is no power on Earth or even heaven to make someone love you."

"But there are charms to bring a man to you, and charms to keep him."

"To bring him and keep him, yes."

"Then give me one of them."

"I have a very simple one. Just take a little of your, you know, womanly juices," said the hilot, gesturing toward the part of her body that Remedios had covered with the basket of cakes. "Then find a way for him to swallow them. Mix them in his food, in his *cerveza* or his Coca-Cola."

Remedios blushed. "But how do I get them?"

The old woman laughed. "Now, if you can't do that, you have no business having a man in your bed at all. And," she added, "if you do this, do not tell anyone about it."

That night Remedios came to know for the first time the difficulty of being truly a woman. That is, of mingling sex with clinical, even scientific intent—a woman must frequently plan and count and measure even as she goes through the bodily rituals of love. She tried to sort the problem out. How was she to collect the juices of her desire, enough of them to fill a small container and even add, like an ingredient, to food? How did they taste and smell? Would the food or drink have to mask their presence—or was their savor the magic of the charm? Could she collect them all at once, or make several tries? Did they need to be fresh, or would they keep? Was the power in the idea and intent of the thing, or in its actual, physical composition? Was she to add them before or after cooking the food? Sugar, for instance, and caramel, were quite different. Raw sugar was sweet, but it was the toasted nature of caramel that made it heavenly. Would the juices then be transfigured by heat, or destroyed?

In the end, practicality determined the method as it so often does. To cook an entire batch of biko with the extra ingredient would be wasteful, as she could not sell the rest and have the entire neighborhood lusting after her in case the charm did work. To cook a single serving was impossible. She would have to add it last, and only to Carlos's portion.

Remedios began her preparations by obtaining a receptacle. A small, clean glass jar was necessary. She had heard somewhere that implements used

in magic had to be cleansed in oil by the light of the moon. Coconut oil was good, preferably if an incantation had been said over it. In any case, coconut oil would not hurt because the food she planned to use was cooked in coconut cream already. She was not a witch, really, so for an incantation she only said Carlos's name over and over as she anointed the jar inside and outside with the oil. Next she took and anointed a small silver spoon and a cloth to position under her hips. Her habit of tidiness suggested it was necessary.

The next step was to create and collect the secretions. To do this, she had to slip at will into the realm of wakeful dream. There were two opportunities in a day to do so: at noon, after the midday meal when it was hot and humid. Remedios found the latter ideal, if only because the heat allowed her to be both aroused and wakeful enough to complete the experiment. She tried several ways to bring herself into the necessary state. At first, like a girl-child, she would squeeze her thighs tightly together to stimulate herself as she summoned beautiful visions: the glorious archangel with a flaming sword in his hand descending upon her, triumphant. The effort tired her out; she sweated and occasionally got cramps in her legs. Very little liquid was produced this way. Then, she tried the opposite: the angel with his limbs bound by strong ropes to the earth as his wings beating the air in futile efforts to escape. In these dreams she herself took a sword to cut him free. But it was only when, in the languorous aftermath of one such attempt, she used her hands upon herself that she met with sufficient success. This time, she found herself in mortal struggle with the angel. Her fingers dug into his white flesh; he fought her off and pinned her to the earth. Then she felt almost as if she could not breathe, and the liquid poured from her. She caught some of it in the palm of one hand, some of it trickling through her fingers, almost as though to elude her. There was nothing else for it then. She rose and went into the kitchen. With her damp hand, she took a handful of sticky brown rice and squeezed it, mingling the salt of her body with the soft grains and the sweet, syrupy oil.

When she served two saucers of biko to the lovers in the sala that night, she pressed a small indentation in this portion intended for Carlos to help her tell it apart from the other. Deling giggled when she received her rice cake.

"Thank you. You're sure these are still good, Remedios? They're not leftovers? We can't feed the Patron something that's been riding around in your basket all afternoon," she said.

"Oh no," Remedios said. "I set these aside earlier and covered them with banana leaves. They're fresh still."

The biko was moist and tempting, gleaming with coconut oil and brown sugar. It was very dark and very sweet. Remedios had not stinted as she made it. She watched with her heart beating fast as Carlos took a bite, and then another, nodding with approval. Would he suddenly turn to her with eyes of love? Perhaps he would turn suddenly brusque toward Deling and cut the visit short. But nothing happened. It became awkward when she stayed a few seconds too long watching the pair eat. She retreated to the kitchen.

As a matter of fact, nothing happened for a very long time. Carlos and Deling were engaged, then married. A photograph was taken of them on their wedding day that survived the vicissitudes of the war and martial law eras, remaining in a place of honor on the walls of the handsome home that Carlos eventually inherited from his parents. It was a lovely, though typical image: their faces were serious as befitted the momentous occasion and the strain of staying still through the rather lengthy film exposure that the cameras of the time required. The bride was as pretty as the flowers she wore in her hair, and the groom's patrician features and bearing were evident.

During the betrothal and the festivities that followed, Remedios was only thankful that no one knew what she had done, or tried to do. She wondered whether the secrecy to which those who cast spells are enjoined is meant to ensure the efficacy of the magic, or merely to prevent them from looking like fools.

But after all, there was some power to the old hilot's charm. The couple returned from their honeymoon and took over Deling's girlhood home; her mother was only too glad to have her son-in-law play the role of "the man of the house." When Deling, who was a modern girl, fell pregnant, she had a medical doctor, not a hilot or a midwife, to consult. And while all the old wives knew that a healthy woman could safely continue with her conjugal relations, the doctor deemed it necessary to prescribe abstinence. So Deling fanned herself restlessly in the hot afternoons and slept fitfully at night, while Carlos was left to his own devices to look for a way to soothe his nerves.

One night, he went to the kitchen where Remedios still slept in the little room behind a drawn curtain. The sound of someone stirring in the kitchen woke her; she pulled the curtain back and saw the man outside. She wore nothing but a chemise and a *tapis*, and Carlos went to her.

She was surprised at how indolent the man was once in her bed. The bamboo *lantay* creaked when they sat on it together, so Remedios quickly spread a blanket on the floor and pulled him down on top of her. His skin seemed to glow in the faint light from the window. She felt like a thief in the night, poised to steal the ivory head and hands of a revered idol. The thrill that rose in her blood, however, was tempered by the man's stillness. Was he waiting, she wondered, to be worshipped? It was awkward, to be lying beneath him yet feeling as though it was she who had to act. She remained unmoving. He passed his hand tentatively over her shoulders and her breasts, then stopped. At this point, Remedios screwed up her courage, gently pushing him off and changing places so that she was on top.

From above, his beauty was even more of a marvel to her. His body was pale and lovely in the shadows, and it was a miracle that it should be joined, fine as it was, to her dark and fleshy form. Her thighs were cumbersome things as they straddled him, but they were powerful, with a power that came from the heart that thudded in her breast. She was strong enough to steel herself, then to impale herself upon him. Carlos sighed, his absorption and his pleasure sealed within him. Later, when he left her aching and warm, she felt that perhaps, that was her deserved lot.

Remedios's child was born, then, half a year after Deling's. No one had any idea who the father was, and Remedios calmly refused to divulge her secret. It was a quiet little girl with large eyes and pasty skin. It hardly ever cried. Remedios called her "Segunda" without explaining who or what it was the second to, and nursed it herself. This was no mean feat. Segunda was a stupid baby who did not know how to take her own nourishment. The mother's breasts were painful and full, leaking milk and staining her blouses. Yet the little one would not latch properly. She either clamped down hard and drew blood or nuzzled ineffectually at the tips of her large brown nipples without relieving Remedios's pain. There were many sleepless, lonely nights for her that she bore like a Spartan, living one day after another because there was no other alternative.

At two years old Segunda still would not speak. Her body was strong enough, but she had a vacant gaze. Remedios waited in vain to hear herself called "Mama," and be rewarded for her pains, but that day never came. Instead, one day the child threw the household into an uproar by biting Deling's boy—a cherub as predicted, and everyone's darling—hard enough to draw blood. Remedios's aunt was horrified. Carlos then suggested kindly that

mother and child could be housed in a hut on one of his father's properties on the other side of town. There, the fierce, odd little Segunda would be kept out of the way while Remedios could play the role of caretaker and even supplement her income by keeping a garden or continuing to peddle her rice cakes as she wished.

It was an equitable arrangement. In the course of five years Deling became pregnant two more times, and so did Remedios in her exile. The one-to-one correspondence might have been remarkable to anyone who bothered to count the weeks and the months. Presumably Deling and her mother did. Perhaps they even spoke about it to each other. But it was hardly a reason to lose composure, not when Deling was still so lovely, Carlos still so rich, and their children the picture of happiness and well-being. From Deling's perspective, perhaps, the panorama of life was so wide that it could scarcely be marred by the ripples of her husband's unproven indiscretions.

It was rather different for Remedios, whose daughter Segunda did not improve with age. The girl never learned to talk. At first she was only angry and sullen, but with time it became apparent that she was an idiot. Remedios was caught in a period that unbearably lengthened the travails of early motherhood. All her children, it turned out, were idiots. Her days were spent washing and feeding for her helpless brood. Fortunately only Segunda was difficult and sullen; the other two, still girls, were more tractable. They were stupid but gentle, laughing and babbling to themselves, willing to be left on the bed or on the floor while she did her chores. For safety, she tied them up or penned them in a wooden crib while she sold vegetables and biko in the neighborhood. She took the moody Segunda with her, and the sour little child managed to arouse pity for her mother so that the neighbors kindly patronized Remedios's wares and allowed her to make a simple living. Remedios attributed the relatively sweet temper of her two other children to the manner in which they had been conceived. Having become more accepting of Carlos's laziness, she had learned to appease her desires by unquestioningly taking the lead when he came to her. She kissed his red lips and cheeks, his hands and his feet, submitting to the now oddly humiliating role of climbing on top of him and doing all the hard work to bring them both to fulfillment.

Yet, all idylls must come to an end, even the one that their town—nay, the entire country—enjoyed with its white masters. One day in May 1942, the most ordinary of days, Carlos came to her. It was quite early in the morning, at the time when the dew on the grass was all but dry. The sun

had crept into the windows of her hut, and the air was warm. The sleepy vapors of the night were beginning to grow stale. Remedios led Carlos to the inner room where her children were sleeping in a row on a single mat on the floor, their legs tangled in the blankets. In this state it was almost impossible to tell that they were different from other children. Their bodies were well-formed. The two oldest had lost the plumpness of babyhood, and stretched out as they were, it was possible to see how long their limbs had become. Anyone would have thought them almost beautiful in their sleep. With the petty, unreasonable passions of the waking hours erased temporarily from their faces, it was possible to appreciate the way the shadows of their lashes fell upon their cheeks and the perfection of their small, half-open mouths, exquisite as the mouths of all children who have yet to lose their baby teeth. Carlos sat wearily down on the bed, his eyes on the sleepers.

"And these ones also, even these I will have to take care of," he sighed.

"I am taking good care of them," said Remedios, wondering at this sudden mood. Man-like, he had not bothered himself too much about her children. When they were born he was never there. When he saw them a few weeks later, he would be too afraid to pick them up lest he hurt them, and by the time they were older and less fragile he was afraid that they would make a mess on his clothes.

"But did you know, Remedios, that war is coming to us? The Americans have left. We will wake up one day to find the Japanese on our doorsteps."

Remedios had heard talk of war, but it had seemed unreal to her, so preoccupied was she with getting through the days that were so full of the work she had to do. War was guns and marching men, and it had nothing to do with her tomato plants and the vines of squash and okra, with the pail full of soiled diapers soaking in soapy water that she had to scrub and rinse and hang out to dry before the midday meal.

"Well, perhaps not on your doorstep," Carlos continued, "but maybe on mine. I am afraid. I am afraid of what happens in war to men like me. There are so many who depend on me. I have a wife and children, a big house, and enough money to attract attention. Remedios, what should I do?"

"Do what I do. You see how I have lived all these years. Be quiet, keep your head down, and don't make any trouble."

"I, make trouble! I have never made any trouble for anyone. But now the trouble will come to me."

Remedios looked at him and saw him as he was then: in the bright daylight his face was so young and so anxious. The forearms, on which some light brown hair curled, were so slight. Her own were more muscular and sturdy. His thin-skinned hands had never wielded a weapon. Why, the strong soap she used with her laundry would probably make them scratch and bleed. Suddenly she was thankful for the distance that had always separated them.

"Listen, Carlos. Years ago I fell in love with you. But you had eyes only for Deling. I watched the two of you together—all the time—and I realized if I did not want things to be done to me, I had to do something myself. I went to the hilot and asked her to for a charm, and I used it on you."

"Remedios!" he exclaimed. "Those things are not real."

"Aren't they? But you came to me. Don't worry though. Now that I have told you about it, it is not a secret anymore. It is broken."

"Is it really broken now?" Carlos asked sadly. "Don't you want to try and see?"

They came together again, but now it was he who was the supplicant, clinging to her flesh, moving slowly and deliberately. Remedios lay in bed obligingly enough, still generous with the offer of her body but not with her will. Her mind wandered beyond the hot room filled with the exhalations of five human beings, beyond the confines of the cottage and to the mansion where he would return: that mansion that seemed in contrast so dim and vast and cool. And beyond its walls, beyond the narrow streets of the town, there were forests and fields and the infinite sky.

For Remedios, it was the last time she would ever be with a man. Another child was born, a boy this time, but Carlos never saw it. After he left her, he had entrusted his family to relatives in the Japanese-occupied city and gone into the mountains with the guerillas. Maybe his hands had grown hard and callused there, maybe steel had finally entered his soul. Remedios did not know. She heard that he had been killed during an air raid. When the Japanese planes droned overhead, the people in the countryside left the open fields and hid themselves in makeshift underground shelters or in the forests. Carlos and three other men had found themselves in a clearing, and had hidden under a big acacia tree. A bomb had dropped squarely on the tree. When it exploded, he and his companions had been blown sky-high. Body parts had rained down on the ground. Later, the legs, arms, trunks, and severed heads had been hastily buried in a common grave.

The boy was the only one of Remedios's children who turned out to be fully human. He grew up strong, like his mother, with a dogged sense of duty, yet always half-resentful that his mother never told him a true word about his father. Sometimes she told him that the man had drowned in a bowl of soup; occasionally, she said that one day he had just forgotten to breathe. There were times when the boy thought she was as crazy as her idiot daughters. It was with his help that Remedios lived out the many years of her life in the madhouse of her own making. She stayed brown and sturdy through her middle years, seeming ageless until she suddenly began to shrivel and turn arthritic in her sixtieth year. And yet she lived on, and time worked its magic: the thick flesh was pared from her cheeks, the unrelenting blackness of her eyes turned light and bluish as cataracts filmed them over. Unable to walk properly, she stayed indoors until her skin lightened from lack of the sun and collapsed into a thousand little wrinkles, and the color in her hair washed out from its roots. In the end she was purified, cleansed of the offending earth tones that colored her human clay, taking on the whiteness of a graven image fashioned of ivory, wax, and pearl.