

SEEING RED

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*To Paul,
keeping watch in the darkness*

I raised my head in horror and saw Lina staring at me with black, glassy, motionless eyes. A smile, between loving and ironic, creased my beloved's lips. I jumped up in desperation and grabbed Lina roughly by the hand.

“What have you done, you wretched woman?”

CLEMENTE PALMA, *Los ojos de Lina* (Lina's Eyes)

burst

It was happening. Right then, happening. They'd been warning me for a long time, and yet. I was paralyzed, my sweaty hands clutching at the air, while the people in the living room went on talking, roaring with laughter—even their whispers were exaggerated, while I. And someone shouted louder than the rest, turn the music down, don't make so much noise or the neighbors'll call the cops at midnight. I focused in on that thundering voice that never seemed to tire of repeating that even on Saturdays the neighbors went to bed early. Those *gringos* weren't night owls like us, party people to the core. Good protestant folks who would indeed protest if we kept them from their sleep. On the other side of the walls, above our bodies and under our feet, too, these *gringos*—so used to greeting dawn with their socks on and shoes already tied—were restless. *Gringos* who sat down in their impeccable underwear and ironed faces to eat their breakfasts of cereal with cold milk. But none of us were worried about those sleepless *gringos*, their heads buried under pillows, their throats stuffed with pills that would bring no relief as long as we kept trampling their rest. If the people in the living room went on trampling, that is, not me. I was still in the bedroom, kneeling, my arm stretched out toward the floor. In that instant, precisely, in that half-light, in that commotion, I found myself thinking about the neighbors' oppressive sleeplessness, imagining them as they turned out the

lights after stuffing earplugs in their ears, how they'd push them in so hard the silicone would burst. I thought I would much rather have been the one with broken earplugs, the one with eardrums pierced by shards. I would rather have been the old woman resolutely placing the mask over her eyelids, only to yank it off again and switch on the light. I wished for that while my still-suspended hand encountered nothing. There was only the alcoholic laughter coming through the walls and spattering me with saliva. Only Manuela's strident voice yelling over the noise for the umpteenth time, Come on, guys, keep it down a little. No, please don't, I said to myself, keep talking, keep shouting, howl, growl if you must. Die laughing. That's what I said to myself, my body seized up though only a few seconds had passed. I'd only just come into the master bedroom, just leaned over to search for my purse and the syringe. I had to give myself an injection at twelve o'clock sharp but now I wouldn't make it, because the pile of precariously balanced coats let my purse slide to the floor, because instead of stopping conscientiously, as I should have, I bent over and reached to pick it up. And then a firecracker went off in my head. But no, it was no fire I was seeing, it was blood spilling out inside my eye. The most shockingly beautiful blood I have ever seen. The most outrageous. The most terrifying. The blood gushed, but only I could see it. With absolute clarity I watched as it thickened, I saw the pressure rise, I watched as I got dizzy, I saw my stomach turn, saw that I was starting to retch, and even so. I didn't straighten up or move an inch, didn't even try to breathe while I watched the show. Because that was the last thing I would see, that night, through that eye: a deep, black blood.

dark blood

There would be no more admonitions impossible to follow. Stop smoking, first of all, and then don't hold your breath, don't cough, do not for any reason pick up heavy packages, boxes, suitcases. Never ever lean over, or dive headfirst into water. The carnal throes of passion were forbidden, because even an ardent kiss could cause my veins to burst. They were brittle, those veins that sprouted from my retina and coiled and snaked through the transparent humor of my eye. To observe the growth of that winding vine of capillaries and conduits, to keep watch day by day over its millimetric expansion. That was the only thing that could be done: keep watch over the sinuous movement of the venous web advancing toward the center of my eye. That was all and it was a lot, the optician declared, just that, that's it, he would repeat, averting his eyes and looking at my clinical history that had grown into a mountain of papers, a thousand-page manuscript stuffed into a manila folder. Knitting his graying eyebrows, Lekz wrote the precise biography of my retinas, their uncertain prognosis. Then he cleared his throat and subjected me to the details of new research protocols. At one point he dropped the phrase transplants in experimental stages. Only I didn't qualify for any experiments: I was either too young, or my veins too thick, or the procedure too risky. We had to wait until the results were published in specialized journals, and for the government to approve new drugs. Time also stretched out like arbitrary veins, and the eye doctor went on talking nonstop, ignoring my impatience. And what if there's a hemorrhage, doctor, I was saying, clenching his protocols between my teeth. But it didn't bear thinking about, he said; better not to think at all, he said,

better to just keep an eye on it and take some notes that would be impossible to decipher later on. But soon he would raise his eyes from his illegible calligraphy to concede that if it happened, if it came to pass, if in fact the event occurred, then we would have to see. Then *you'll* see, I muttered, holed up in my hate: I hope you can catch a glimpse of something then, once I no longer can. And now it had happened. I no longer saw anything but blood in one eye. How long would before the other one broke? This was finally the blind alley, the dark passage where only anonymous, besieged cries could be heard. But no, maybe not, I thought, getting hold of myself, sitting down on the coats in that bedroom of Manuela's, folding my toes inward while my shoes swung like corpses. No, I told myself, because with my eyes already broken I would dance again, jump again, kick doors open with no risk of bleeding out; I could jump off the balcony, bury the blade of an open pair of scissors between my eyebrows. Become the master of the alley, or find the way out. That's what I thought without thinking, fleetingly. I started to ransack the drawers in search of a forgotten pack of cigarettes and a lighter. I was going to burn my fingernails lighting the cigarette, fill myself with tobacco before returning to that doctor's office and saying to him, the smoke now risen to my head, tell me what you see now, doctor, tell me, coldly, urgently, strangled by resentment, as if his gloved hands had wrenched my sick eye out by its roots: tell me now, tell me whatever you want, because now he couldn't tell me anything. It was Saturday night or more like Sunday, and there was no way to get in touch with the doctor. And in any case, what could he say that I didn't already know: liters of rage were clouding my vision?

that face

As I put out the cigarette and straightened up, I saw a thread of blood run across my other eye. A fine thread that immediately started to dissolve. Soon it would be nothing but a dark spot, but it was enough to turn the air around me murky. I opened the door and stopped to look at what remained of the night: just a pasty light coming from what must be the living room, shadows moving to the rhythm of a murderous music. Drums. Rock chords. Discordant voices. There would be appetizers languishing on the table, and potato chips, a dozen beers. The ashtrays must still be only half-full, I thought, without actually seeing them. The party stayed its course and no one had any intention of stopping it. If only the wide-awake *gringos* would start banging on the walls with their broomsticks, I thought. If only the cops would come and make us turn off the music, put away all that old Argentine rock, pick up the trays with stony faces. If only they would make us put our shoes on, toss back the last dregs in the bottles, tell the last tired joke, hurry through the goodbyes and see-you-laters. But the early morning still stretched out ahead of us. Of me. Of Ignacio, who was still indiscernible in the fog. Ignacio would understand the situation without my needing to say get me out of here, take me home. I was sure his panting exhaustion would come to my rescue, his finger poking my cheek. Why so serious?, he said, suddenly beside me. Hearing his voice shattered my composure, dashed it to the floor as he added: Why the long face? And how was I to know what kind of face I had, when I'd misplaced my lips and my mole, when even my earlobes had gotten lost. All I had left were a couple of blind eyes. And I heard myself saying, Ignacio,

chirping Ignacio like a bird, Ignacio, I'm bleeding, this is the blood and it's so dark, so awfully thick. But no. That wasn't what I said, but rather, Ignacio, I think I'm bleeding again, why don't we go. Go? he said (you said it, Ignacio, that's what you said even though now you deny it, and then you fell silent). And I heard him ask if it was a lot of blood, maybe assuming it was like so many other times, just a bloody particle that quickly dissolved in my humors. Not so much, no, I lied, but let's go. Let's go now. But no. Let's wait until the party winds down, till the conversation dies of its own accord. Let's not be the ones to kill it, as if it weren't already dead. We'll leave in a little while, and what's an hour more or half an hour less when there's no longer anything ahead. I could drink another glass of wine and anesthetize myself, another glass of wine and get drunk. (Yes, pour me another glass, I whispered, while you filled it up with blood.) And I drank to the health of my parents, who were snoring miles away from the disaster, to the health of my friends' uproar, to the health of the neighbors who hadn't complained about the noise, the health of the medics who never came to my rescue, to the motherfucking health of health.

stumbling along

And we all left the party together, saying nothing but thanks, see you later, bye; and I guess the group gradually scattered along the way, because I can't see them in my memory. The elevator was full of voices, but when we went outside there were only three or four bodies, and then only one walking next to me. Julián was telling me about his job talk at the university or who knows what,

while I moved deeper into unprecedented darkness. Ignacio would be behind us, talking his Spanish politics with Arcadio, or maybe he'd gone off to hunt for a taxi. At that hour, on that scrawny island wedged in next to Manhattan, it wouldn't be easy to find a cab. We'd have been more likely to come across an abandoned wheelchair with a loose spring. A chair would have helped me, made me less vulnerable to the night's uncertainty. A chair, so much better than a cumbersome cane. And I thought back to that very afternoon when we'd crossed over the river in the tramway along with a dozen people, variously maimed, in their wheelchairs. Roosevelt was an island of wheelchairs where only a few professors and students lived, and no tourists came; it was a poor, protected island that almost no one visited, I thought, thinking next that I should have realized why I'd ended up traveling with all those people beside me, them and me all the same hanging above the waters. On the shore stood Fate and he was raising a question, an admonition. What did you come here looking for? he said, pointing one finger. What did you lose on this island? A chair, I answered, outside of time and circumstance, just a metal chair, with wheels, with pedals and levers and maybe even a button to propel it forward. If only you'd had a little more foresight, you would have your chair, answered my dour inner voice. At least you'd have one for tonight, when you were going to need it. But now the maimed would all be sleeping soundly, with their chairs disabled and parked next to their beds. Mine, my bed, which wasn't mine but rather Ignacio's, was still far away. Everything seemed far from me now, and getting ever farther. Ignacio had disappeared and Julián quickened his pace, spurred on by the beers. I was inevitably

being left behind. I moved in slow motion, sliding over the slippery gravel, plummeting off curbs, stumbling over steps. Julián must have come back when he realized he was talking to himself, I felt him supporting me by the elbow and saying fizzily, “I’d better help you, looks like you’re a bit drunk, too.” He started to laugh at me and I also started shaking in an attack of panic and booming laughter. And in that laughter or those convulsions Julián dragged me forward, interrogating me, did my feet hurt?, were my knees stuck?, because, *joder*, he said Spanishly, why the hell are you going so slow? I kept walking with my eyes fixed on the ground as if that would save me from falling, and with my head sunk miserably between my shoulders I tried to explain what was happening: I left my glasses at home, I can’t see anything. Glasses! And since when do you wear glasses? You’ve kept that nice and hidden! he exclaimed, wasted and dead tired. And warning me that we were walking through a stretch of wet grass, he went on repeating, I can’t believe it! You never wear glasses! Never, it was true. I had never bought a pair of glasses. Until twelve o’clock that night I’d had perfect vision. But by three o’clock Sunday morning, even the most powerful magnifying glass wouldn’t have helped me. Raising his voice and maybe also his finger, like the university professor he would become, Julián brandished his ragged tongue to chastise me. You get what you deserve. And, swallowing or spitting saliva, he announced that the price of my vanity would be to trudge through life, forever stumbling.

tomorrow

(There I am. There I go. Looking out again through the taxi window, staring, trying to grab hold of some bit of the horizon from the highway, the hollowed silhouette of the two pulverized towers, the line of the mutilated sky beside the fragile glow of the star-splashed river, the History Channel neon dazzling above the water. I see it all without seeing it; I see it from the memory of having seen it or through your eyes, Ignacio. The taxi's headlights sliced through a light nocturnal fog of paper and charred metal that refused to dissipate, that adhered to the glass as condensation. Our driver shoved his way in, cutting off other cars, but he also let others pass him, speeding and honking their horns. You two were dozing and maybe you even fell asleep, rocked by the sharp acceleration and violent braking. I settled my forehead against the window and closed my eyes until your voice shook me, Ignacio, a voice so new in my life I sometimes take a second to recognize it, a voice that also changed tone when you shifted into another language. Your voice was giving instructions in English to the taxi driver: get off at the next exit, cross over to the west, toward the Washington Bridge still ablaze on the horizon. We hadn't planned on crossing that iron bridge, we weren't heading for the suburb on the other side where I had once lived and had no intention of returning. I was throwing myself into the present, the only thing I had as we dropped Julián off on the corner where his building was and continued on toward yours, which was now ours. And as soon as we were alone, you took my face in your hands and turned it so I'd look at you. So you could look at me. Your eyes saw nothing extraordinary, they didn't see what lay behind my pupils.

Was it a lot? Much more than ever before, I told you somberly, but maybe tomorrow. Tomorrow you'll be better. But tomorrow was already today: it only had to grow light, the failing streetlights had only to be eclipsed by the sun. Turban-crowned, the driver stopped abruptly and we slid forward. Don't move, you said, and then I heard the door slam, and you must have circled around to open the door for me, to give me your hand, warn me to duck my head. From far away, anyone would have thought we were emerging from another era, not a car. We got out of the time machine arm in arm and went up the stairs the same way, toward the elevator and the five floors up. We went arm in arm down the hall until the jangling of keys in the lock. The apartment's stale air received us. The heat rose from every corner, from the floor now carpetless, from the utterly bare walls, the countless boxes that seemed full of smoldering embers instead of books. We'd spent days packing for our imminent move. I went straight down the hallway to the bedroom and you followed behind: watch out, I'm leaving a glass of water for you here. And we threw ourselves onto the bed and in spite of the humidity we embraced and, oily from sweat, we slept. And the next morning you raised the blinds and sat down beside me, waiting for me to wake up from either my sleep or my life. But I'd been wide awake for hours, not daring to open my eyes. Lucina? I raised an eyelid and then the other and to my astonishment there was light, a bit of light, enough light: the bloody shadow hadn't disappeared from my right eye, but the one in the left had sunk to the bottom. I was only half blind. And so I accepted your coffee and raised it to my lips without hesitation, and I even smiled, because, in spite of everything. And you

were there, and it was as if you were one-eyed, too, you couldn't understand what had happened. You couldn't calculate the gravity. You couldn't bring yourself to ask all the questions. You balled them up and stuffed them, like now, in your pockets.)

a beat-up truck

Only a few days until the eye doctor comes back from his conference and sees the terminal state of my retinas. Maybe Friday. It's only Tuesday. Three days during which we have to resolve the rest of our lives. Tomorrow we will stop being tenants, and we'll settle into an apartment Ignacio will spend the next thirty years paying for. We were moving only a few blocks east, where the neighborhood descends stairs and elevators to meet synagogues and tall hats, sidelocks, synthetic wigs, long black robes, where old orthodox and archaic young Jews share the corner with the Dominican clamor. We were going to live at that hinge: our window to the south, the door framing the north. We talked about nothing but the move and its details, we held ourselves strictly to the concrete, to moving ourselves immediately toward the future. Toward the moment when we pushed the thick wooden door and turned the doorknob. When we breathed in the smell of fresh paint and turpentine, varnish, and sawdust still hanging in the air. We would verify that every repair had been duly made in that apartment whose previous owners had gradually destroyed it. It was imperative to still have an eye, one eye at least to be sure that everything was ok, a sharp eye to make up for a blind one. Because the only seeing eye that I still had was no longer sighted

when I moved: my coming and going roiled the blood pooled in my retina, agitated it like a feather duster; the push broom of my movement churned it up. But there was no time for stillness, and I threw myself compulsively into packing. Ignacio went out in search of more empty boxes, while I stowed our clothes in suitcases, stuffed our shoes and boots into enormous plastic bags, put the plates between the sheets and our only blanket, the salad bowls between towels. All by touch. I wrapped mugs and cups in newspaper until finally it was Wednesday and a beat-up truck appeared on the corner. It was noon, three guys were at the door. They wore faces pressed for time and they carried with them six hands full of fingers. A tall and thin black man gave orders to another one, too young and very short, who was teamed up with the biggest of them all: a muscular and perhaps somewhat retarded white guy. (You told me about him, terrified, when you returned from the first floor.) He needed direction, the muscular guy, because he regularly pounded the hallway walls, the doorways, the molding, windowpanes, doorjambs, the roof of the diminutive elevator in which he almost didn't fit. On the second trip down, the old elevator started to falter; it died on the mezzanine floor, and that guy, the muscular one, was the only one who could lift the mattress on his shoulders. And the bed frame. And the heavy work table and then nine shelves. More books than we would ever read. And also the ones I'd published under a pen name and the manuscript of an inconclusive novel that maybe now I'd never finish, I thought, swallowing my anguish without pausing to chew it. Too much paper and so little furniture. We didn't have much, but even so it was a lot for one man. So what should have taken

us a couple of hours ended up taking four or maybe five. And when everything was finally in the truck, the elevator unfroze and I could go down with the shopping cart carrying the things we'd hidden from the men. The old TV, the radio, two laptops; some half-drunk bottles of liquor and the glasses we'd use to celebrate that very night. You take it over, I don't trust these guys to be careful. Can you? Of course I can, I half-lied. I can do it perfectly well. They got into the truck to drive down the few blocks separating one building from the other, taking turns pushing because the battery was failing, and then I forgot about them. I lifted my nose to follow the smell of wet cement from some neighbor who must be watering. I felt my way to turn left, and I headed off very slowly in search of the subway station.

shopping cart move

The route I knew no longer coincided with my steps. I couldn't distinguish streetlights from trees in that murky tide, I couldn't be sure they were cars I distinguished next to the possible park on the corner. I moved along like a disoriented bat, following intuitions. I followed behind the people who passed me. If they stopped I stopped too; if they crossed a street, I caught up to them with my cart squealing metallically. I rode the elevator down to the oppressive subway station and skirted the turnstiles to make for the long corridor, until I found the exit leading to our new neighborhood. No one seemed to be ahead of me, or behind me. No rigorous rabbis to ask for directions or old ladies with backs bent over their walkers. No old person with flailing cane I could

assault with my uncertainty. I slipped through the heavy station doors, and I stopped to train my ear to a bicycle crossing puddles, the slow turning of a car parking in reverse, the sporadic horns honking, the avenue's green lights. The street wasn't a place, it was a crowd of sounds all elbowing and shoving. And there was the whisper of a rotten gutter. Garbage bags piled up in the street, chafing against the breeze. A clamor of birds being electrocuted on the wires. Children shouting and chasing each other. Enough, I told myself, because it was vital that I find the sidewalk's edge. The bottles clanked loudly against each other as I bumped down, and they hit each other again as the cart bounced in potholes and grated against the curb. I raised the front wheels and then the back and I set off again on my bumpy ride. I put my neurons and their bristly dendrites to work on the math of the steps that should take me from one corner to the other. Eighty to the first and turn right. Eighty, left. Right, eighty-nine. And I was almost there. I felt the warm air churning my hair and cooling my face. I must have been close to the entrance to the building when I heard a voice's hey, its sharp and energetic, what's up. I stopped. Who could this woman be, in that neighborhood, on that street, at dusk? Who, when I was a new arrival to that intersection? I raised my face with the hint of a meticulous smile of hate, insulting through my teeth all those musicians with perfect hearing, the leathery telephone operators, the blind from birth who are trained to recognize voices. I cursed that woman but also myself for smiling at her with my whole body, with my stupid lips pronouncing a hi there all soaked in saliva. There I was, alone before that voice that assaulted and penetrated my person. The voice kept coming

closer, throwing words and some kind of perfume while she, the voice, but especially the sharp shoes, their heels drumming against the cement, said something that the wail of an ambulance kept me from understanding. And then the footsteps moved away. And the perfume began to dissipate. And the woman went on talking with someone submerged far away, inside her phone.

no light bulbs

Ignacio pounced on me as I entered. They just left, he exclaimed. It's full of boxes, but come see how the repairs turned out. He dragged me by the hand like a child while I tried not to crash into the walls of the narrow hallway. In a minute he had taken me to see the refinished floor of the living room, the newly painted bedroom, the splendors of the kitchen, the shadowy bathroom that we'd leave for another day when we had more money. The apartment felt colossal, and to judge by Ignacio's eyes (to judge by the memory of your eyes, which are also mine) it still felt uninhabited. We had almost nothing and nearly all of it was his, and we'd decided to bring only what was indispensable. Everything else was so worn out, so collected from streets and subways, so abandoned on curbs or stolen from lives that came before ours. Leave the past where it had perished instead of lugging it with us to that newly remodeled apartment. There's nowhere to sit, cautioned Ignacio as if excusing himself, but we'll get some beach chairs and put them in the living room. I answered that yes, of course, whatever you want, while thinking what do you mean? We'll buy a sofa and a recliner and a pair of chairs and splendid

lamps. But first we'll paint again to cover all the sickly white on the walls. We'll have to get to work soon, I thought, tomorrow if possible. There were only two days left before the eye doctor's dreaded news, but we showered happily without a curtain, washing our hair with whatever was at hand. And we put on the same clothes, sweaty but now dry, and we sat on the newly sanded and varnished floor. Look what they did, said Ignacio. It's too dark, I said. True, he replied, grabbing my hand and guiding one of my fingers to slide along the rough groove, full of splinters, that went across the room. They dragged the bookshelf here, he continued dryly; all the way to here, sorrowfully; the whole length of the room, with something like resigned rage. I saw him coming but I couldn't stop him, he went on, and I imagined the muscular man's strong but soft arms, covered by a barely-there, transparent down, his punished-dog eyes, the stupefied muteness of the man who had ruined our floor. But what could a little scratch in the wood matter to us? We'd lay a rug over it. Then we'd lay each other on top of that scratch and the Persian rug I'd pick out once I had eyes again. And once we finished getting laid, exhausted but radiant and satisfied, we'd start all over again. We'd screw like animals on every scratch the house had, in every hole in the wall, like insects. I thought of the scrapes and homemade defects that we'd leave on the house, that we'd collect gradually, maybe. I was worry-free as I stretched out on the floor with my eyes shut tight. Ignacio uncorked a bottle in the kitchen and complained, his voice becoming abstract, where'd you put the glasses, where'd you put the napkins, opening and closing crates and rummaging in boxes. I got lost in the crackle of newspaper between his fingers,

in the cork that shot against the wall, and the champagne fizz. Because that was the only certainty: inaugurating our life with glasses washed by shadow, letting ourselves be stunned by the silence. It was night already and we didn't have electricity, there wasn't a single bare lightbulb swinging from the sockets. Not even a candle. Ignacio had no clue where the lighter was. He searched through clothes and felt his way over the floor, looking for it but not finding it. And we also toasted to that, because in the darkness of the empty house we were the same: a couple of blind lovers.

house of hard knocks

Thwacks against half-closed doors, all of their edges blunt. A nose mashed against a shelf. Scratched fingers, broken nails, twisted ankles almost sprained. Ignacio took note of every mishap and tried to clear the boxes still only half-emptied, he moved the open bags from the hallway and cleared away orphan shoes, but then I got tangled up in rugs, I knocked over posters leaning against walls, I toppled trash cans. I was buried in open boxes with table legs between my fingers. The house was alive, it wielded its door-knobs and sharpened its fixtures while I still clung to corners that were no longer where they belonged. It changed shape, the house, the rooms castled, the furniture swapped places to confuse me. With one eye blind with blood and the other clouded over at my every movement, I was lost, a blindfolded chicken, dizzy and witless. But I dried some sheepish tears and counted my steps again, memorizing: five long steps to the living room and eight short ones back to the bedroom, kitchen to the left, ten to the bathroom,

to the left. The windows must be somewhere and I bumped right into Ignacio. You're dangerous, he told me, angry, trying not to yell at me; stop wandering around, we'll end up breaking all our bones. I know he stood there looking at me because I felt his eyes on mine, like snails coating me in their slime. Lina, he sighed, immersed in a sudden sadness or shyness. Lina, now even softer, holding my chin, his slimy eyes everywhere: you're blind, you're blind and dangerous. Yes, I replied, slowly. Yes, but I'm only an apprentice blind woman and I have very little ambition in the trade, and yes, almost blind and dangerous. But I'm not going to just sit in a chair and wait for it to pass. Ignacio would have preferred me to sit and meditate, but there's nothing to think about now, I told him, snatching his cigarette by touch and taking a forbidden drag. I've already thought everything thinkable, I said, taking an even deeper drag. Thinking, I repeated, moving the butt out of reach when Ignacio tried to take it from my fingers—I accidentally hit the light bulb—I've been thinking since the first time I went, against my will, into an eye doctor's waiting room. Since then I've done nothing but think about the future, and how I'll never see it. Think about that twisted and recalcitrant doctor saying I was carrying a time bomb inside me, ticking faster and faster. He reported all the medical details to my mother, I went on, as if I wasn't sitting right there next to her and getting splashed by all the sticky, acidic saliva he was spouting. The doctor never looked at me, but the thick lenses of his eyeglasses are burned into my memory, and the clogged corneas criss-crossed with thin lines, those miserable, miniature eyes that from the doctor's very depths had foreseen this moment. Then I remembered, now without

telling Ignacio, the way the doctor adjusted his black frames atop his nose while he murmured that maybe—but only maybe because no one can be sure—that maybe in a few years the diseased organ could be replaced with another, compatible one. And I remembered having thought about what it would be like to see through foreign eyes. The doctor's myopic eyes, I said aloud, raising my voice, his eyes made me more afraid than the future of my own, because they are eyes that have followed me and are still coming after me; even in dreams, Ignacio, those rabbit eyes. I don't have anything left to think about, I repeated. Think about it yourself, if you want. Really think about it, I insisted, raising my black eyes toward Ignacio and feeling I was losing my balance. I said it like a challenge, like an accusation, like a reproach, because it wasn't the first time I'd said this to him. I'd begun to say it six months before, starting with the dinner we gave Ignacio after his talk, the dinner I'd attended as a doctoral student, and where I'd sat down across from him to tell him I wrote, too. How I'd started in journalism but then they kicked me out for falsifying the objective truth of the facts, and I moved on to fiction, one hundred percent pure, I'd told him, caressing his leg with my calf. And to prove it I put my latest novel on the table, explaining that I'd condensed my name. So are you or aren't you Lina Meruane? Sometimes I am, I said, when my eyes let me; lately, I'm less and less her and I go back to Lucina. The extra syllable bled sometimes. Ignacio's face took on a puzzled expression and he chose not to believe my insinuation that I suffered from a defect that could leave me blind. Blind, I said, without dramatics, without losing my smile while we had a long drink while the distance between us got ever shorter. He should

really think about it before he paid my bill and invited me into the taxi, I told him, before he touched me, gave me that wet kiss on the ear and then on the lips, before my sighs that were used but felt new, before my absolute silence, before he ever brought me a pancake breakfast in bed, or strummed that languid, cloying bolero on an old guitar, before he ever asked me to stay. To stay. First, yes, think about it. Think about it hard, I told him, looking at him fiercely, hoping he wouldn't think for too long, obliging him to at least pretend to think. Ignacio, I thought, now without insisting; Ignacio, open your eyes, you still have time.

price is right

There beneath the hair, inside his skull, in all those brains, Ignacio resolves that we should go out. Go out immediately, at a run if possible. We've spent the whole morning stuck inside waiting for the secretary's call, him wandering around the house, me very still, immersed in a nineteenth century novel that an unknown reader whispers to me from the walkman. Ignacio shakes me. I press pause, stop. The secretary just informed him that I can't have an appointment until Monday. What happened to Friday? No one canceled, no one is going to miss their appointment today, Ignacio says Yuku told him. Desperate and inconsolable, Ignacio announces that if we don't go out we will die of suffocation. We should go out and do something: look for furniture at second hand stores, for example. I wouldn't be able to choose anything by myself, you have to come, he insists, and I accept because never have I had more free time. Never as much as I do now, in the Manhattan

streets full of deadly potholes and manholes with ladders that lead down to hell. The light hits my face but I can't touch it, I can't use it, and I walk through the city like I'm on a tight rope, leaning against Ignacio who walks at a different pace, syncopating his unmistakable steps with other, unfamiliar ones, sharp-heeled and rushed, that wound the pavement. We rummage among furniture made of smooth and wild wood that evoked exotic birds and mandrills, lichens, African songs; and there is also the scent of candied peanuts and caramel apples, of pretzels, bagels just out of the oven, grazing our noses. Nothing Ignacio sees convinces him, and I, who can't see enough and who follow his description of the world with only my fingertips, am afraid I'll fall over at any moment, struck down by heat and displeasure. Then we go into a new furniture store and we rest by trying out some armchairs under dry, conditioned air. Can I help you? says a voice equally cold and dry but more inclement, and I know Ignacio feels duty-bound to give explanations, improvising a British accent that comes out respectably well. He talks about how our house is bare, how we only have, for now, a mattress on the floor and a dozen unopened boxes and suitcases. And a couple of rugs, and a scratch on the floor, I correct him through clenched teeth, no talent for posturing. I suspect Ignacio is looking around, that on the inside he is furnishing the postcard from nowhere: coffee table, sofa, recliners, and chairs that would have to survive us like the children we'll never have. While he describes what our house will be like, I organize all that furniture we can't afford in an imaginary budget. And the light now is so tenuous. When the saleswoman turns around Ignacio decides in the blink of an eye that the purchase can

wait for a better moment. And he drags me out to the scorching street and I still hear him saying, breathless, more light, we have to have enough light, that's the most important thing, right? And yes, yes, sure, light, bulbs and lamps and screens, all that, I answer, breathless myself, already up to my neck with him in a store full of lamps. Lamps that are old but mended, like the store's owners: a sixty-something couple with long-lived lamps their own hands have refurbished. The younger man goes up the stairs to bring a lamp down. Are we only going to buy one? They're not cheap, answers Ignacio, and what do we want another one for? So we have enough light, I say. So we don't have a one-eyed living room, I add. Always two, just in case. We argue. The older one straightens his neck and decides for Ignacio that yes, it's always better to have two. *Lo está diciendo porque tiene un ojo en blanco*, Ignacio grumbles defensively in Spanish. A white eye? What happened to your eye? I ask, turning to the old man. I feel Ignacio squeezing my hand while he apologizes for me, explaining that I'm asking because I have a problem with my sight, too. A problem, I repeat, I'm practically blind. Ignacio lets go of my hand then and puts his own away in his pocket, along with his metro card. I wait. I had a stroke, the salesman says, a stroke right here in my eye, he adds. There was no way to revive it, he says. An eye isn't a heart. It's not even half a heart. It's much less, I add, that's why we have two. The old man stands there reflecting, but not about what I'd just said. His dead eye never really bothered him much, he explains sadly, though without really explaining himself. He clears his throat and says that his people were dying back then. In the eighties, I say, asking but really affirming, because suddenly I know what he's

going to tell me. I know that he is, in his way, a survivor. That many people like him were filled with ganglia, with inexplicable ulcers, and that some went crazy or blind before sinking into stigma. That stigma had brushed against me and left a splinter behind: someone, maybe a decade ago, had told me that their AIDS diagnosis had been the closest thing he knew to having diabetes. That someone had identified with me, and then that someone had started to die in the eyes. The last time I saw him, he was blind. Only he and I are left, said the voice of the old man next to me, succinct as a summary trial. He was a judge of just causes, talking to himself. Only he and I, he repeats. I'd like to know where the other old man is; I'd like to be able to turn around, look toward the back of the store, where the old finger is surely pointing and expecting my eyes to follow. Losing this eye was the price I paid, he says without regret: the small price of staying alive.