

Isabelle Allende, from *Stories of Eva Luna*

You untied your sash, kicked off your sandals, tossed your full skirt into the corner—it was cotton, if I remember—and loosened the clasp that held your hair in a ponytail. You were shivering, and laughing. We were too close to see one another, each absorbed in our urgent rite, enveloped in our shared warmth and scent. You opened to me, my hands on your twisting waist, your hands impatient. You pressed against me, you explored me, you scaled me, you fastened me with your invincible legs, you said a thousand times, come, your lips on mine. In the final instant we glimpsed absolute solitude, each lost in a blazing chasm, but soon we returned from the far side of that fire to find ourselves embraced amid a riot of pillows beneath white mosquito netting. I brushed your hair back to look into your eyes. Sometimes you sat beside me, your legs pulled up to your chin and your silk shawl over one shoulder in the silence of the night that had barely begun. That is how I remember you, in stillness.

You think in words; for you, language is an inexhaustible thread you weave as if life were created as you tell it. I think in the frozen images of a photograph. Not an image on a plate, but one traced by a fine pen, a small and perfect memory with the soft volumes and warm colors of a Renaissance painting, like an intention captured on grainy paper or cloth. It is a prophetic moment; it is our entire existence, all we have lived and have yet to live, all times in one time, without beginning or end. From an indefinite distance I am looking at that picture, which includes me. I am spectator and protagonist. I am in shadow, veiled by the fog of a translucent curtain. I know I am myself, but I am also this person observing from outside. I know what the man on the rumpled bed is feeling, in a room with dark beams arching toward a cathedral ceiling, a scene that resembles a fragment from some ancient ceremony. I am there with you but also here, alone, in a different frame of consciousness. In the painting, the couple is resting after making love; their skin gleams moistly. The man's eyes are closed; one hand is on his chest and the other on her thigh, in intimate complicity. That vision is recurrent and immutable; nothing changes: always the same peaceful smile on the man's face, always the woman's languor, the same folds in the sheets, the same dark corners of the room, always the lamplight strikes her breasts and cheekbones at the same angle, and always the silk shawl and the dark hair fall with the same delicacy.

Every time I think of you, that is how I see you, how I see us, frozen for all time on that canvas, immune to the fading of memory. I spend immeasurable moments imagining myself in that scene, until I feel I am entering the space of the photograph and am no longer the man who observes but the man lying beside the woman. Then the quiet symmetry of the picture is broken and I hear voices very close to my ear.

"Tell me a story," I say to you.

"What about?"

"Tell me a story you have never told anyone before. Make it up for me."