

THERE WERE SO many plants in the apartment that we called it the jungle.

The building looked like something out of an old futurist movie. Flat lines, overhangs, lots of gray, wide open spaces, huge windows. Our apartment was two stories, and the living-room window went all the way from the bottom of the first floor to the top of the second. Downstairs, the floor tiles were black granite with white veins. Upstairs, white granite with black veins. The staircase had black steel tubes and polished slabs for steps. A naked staircase, full of holes. The upstairs hall overlooked the living room, like a balcony, and had the same tube railing as the stairs. From there you could gaze down at the jungle below, sprawling in all directions.

There were plants on the floor and on tables, on top of the hi-fi and the buffet, between pieces of furniture, on wrought iron stands and in ceramic pots, hanging from the walls and ceiling on the staircase's lowest steps, and in places you couldn't see from the upstairs: the kitchen, the laundry room, the guest bathroom. All kinds of plants. Sun, shade, water. A few, like red anthurium and white egret, had flowers. The rest were green. Ferns both smooth and curly, shrubs with striped leaves, spotted leaves, colorful leaves, palms, bushes, huge trees that grew well in planters, and delicate herbs that fit into my small hand.

Sometimes, walking through the apartment, I had the feeling the plants were reaching out with their finger-leaves, trying to touch me; and that the biggest ones, in a forest behind the three-seater sofa, liked to envelop the people sitting there or brush up against them and cause a fright.

Out on the street, two guayacanes obstructed the view from the balcony and living room. In the rainy season, their leaves fell off and the trees became covered in pink flowers. Birds would hop from the guayacanes onto the balcony. Hummingbirds and tropical kingbirds—the most intrepid—would pop in to nose around. Butterflies would flutter fearlessly from the dining room to the living room. Sometimes, at night, a bat would get in and fly around, low to the ground, looking lost. Mamá and I would scream. Papá would grab a broom and stand, motionless, in the middle of the jungle until the bat flew out the way it had come in.

In the afternoons a cool wind came down from the hills and swept over Cali. It stirred the guayacanes, blew in through the open windows, and rustled the indoor plants too. The racket it made sounded like people at a concert. In the afternoons, mamá watered. Water overflowed pots, filtered down through the dirt, seeped out the holes, and dripped onto the ceramic plates, trickling like a little stream.

I loved running through the jungle, letting the plants caress me, stopping in their midst, closing my eyes and listening to their sounds. The tinkle of water, the whisper of air, the nervous, agitated branches. I loved running up the stairs and looking down from the second floor, as if at the edge of a

cliff, the stairs a fractured ravine. Our jungle, lush and savage, down below.

Mamá was always home. She didn't want to be like my grandmother. She spent her whole life telling me so.

My grandmother slept till midmorning, so my mother had to go to school without seeing her. In the afternoons, my grandmother played lulo with her friends, meaning that four days out of five, when mamá got home from school her mother wasn't there. The one day she was, it was because it was her turn to host the card game. Eight ladies at the dining room table, smoking, laughing, tossing down cards and eating pandebono cheese bread. My grandmother didn't even look at mamá.

One time, at the club, mamá heard a woman ask my grandmother why she hadn't had more children.

"Ay, mija," my grandmother said, "if I could have avoided it, I wouldn't even have had this one."

The two of them burst out laughing. My mother had just gotten out of the pool and was standing there dripping water. It felt, she said, like they'd ripped open her chest and reached in to tear out her heart.

My grandfather got back from work in the evening. He'd hug mamá, tickle her, ask about her day. But apart from that, she grew up in the care of maids, who came and went, one after the other, since my grandmother never liked any of them.

Maids didn't last long at our house.

Yesenia was from the Amazon jungle. She was

nineteen, with straight hair down to her waist and the rough-hewn features of the stone sculptures at San Agustín. We hit it off from the first day.

My school was a few blocks from our apartment building. Yesenia would walk me there in the mornings and be waiting for me when I got out in the afternoons. On the way, she'd tell me about where she was from. The fruits, the animals, the rivers wider than an avenue.

"That," she said, pointing to Cali River, "is not a river; it's a creek."

One afternoon we went straight to her bedroom. A small room off the kitchen, with a bathroom and a tiny window. We sat facing each other on her bed. We'd discovered that she didn't know any songs or hand games, and I was teaching her my favorite one, about dolls from Paris. She was getting it all wrong, and we were laughing our heads off. My mother appeared in the doorway.

"Claudia, come upstairs."

She looked super serious.

"What's wrong?"

"I said: *come*."

"We were just playing."

"Do not make me repeat myself."

I looked at Yesenia. With her eyes, she told me to obey. I stood up and went. Mamá grabbed my schoolbag off the floor. We climbed the stairs, went into my room, and she closed the door.

"Never again do I want to see you getting friendly with her."

"With Yesenia?"

"With any maid."

"But why?"

"Because, my girl, she's the maid."

"Why does that matter?"

"Because you get attached to them and then they leave."

"Yesenia doesn't know anybody in Cali. She can stay with us forever."

"Ay, Claudia, don't be so naive."

A few days later, Yesenia left without saying good-bye while I was at school.

My mother said she'd gotten a call from her hometown of Leticia, and had to return to her family. I suspected it was untrue, but mamá stuck to her story.

Next came Lucila, an older woman from the Cauca region who paid no attention to me and was the maid who stayed with us the longest.

Mamá did her housewife things in the mornings, when I was at school. The shopping, the errands, the bills. At lunchtime she picked my father up from the supermarket and they had lunch together at the apartment. Then in the afternoons he drove back to work, and she stayed home to wait for me.

When I got home from school, I'd find her in bed with a magazine. She liked *¡Hola!*, *Vanidades*, and *Cosmopolitan*. There, she read about the lives of famous women. The articles came accompanied by large color photos of houses, yachts, and parties. I ate lunch and she turned pages. I did homework and she turned pages. At four o'clock, the only tv station began its daily programming, and as I watched *Sesame Street* she turned pages.

Mamá once told me that shortly before graduating

from high school she'd waited for my grandfather to come home from work, to tell him that she wanted to go to university. They were in my grandparents' bedroom. He took off his guayabera, let it drop to the floor, and stood there in his undershirt. Big and hairy, with his taut round belly. A bear. Then he stared at her with strange-looking eyes she didn't recognize.

"Law," my mother dared to add.

My grandfather's neck veins bulged, and in his gruffest voice he told her that what decent señoritas did was get married: *university, law, his foot!* His furious voice booming as if through a megaphone. I could practically hear it as my mother, just a girl, cowered and backed away.

Less than a month later he had a heart attack and died.

In the study, we had a wall where family portraits hung.

The one of my maternal grandparents was a black-and-white photo in a silver frame. It had been taken at the club's New Year's party, the last one my maternal grandparents had spent together. Streamers fell all around, people wore paper hats and held party blowers. My grandparents were just emerging from an embrace. Laughing. Him: a giant in a tux, bifocals, drink in hand. You couldn't see his hair, but I knew, from other photos and from my mother, that it sprouted out from everywhere. His shirtsleeves, his back, his nose, even his ears. My grandmother was in an elegant, open-back dress, with a cigarette holder between her fingers and a bouffant hairdo.

She was long and skinny, an upright worm. Beside him she looked diminutive.

Beauty and the Beast, I always thought, though my mother would defend her father, saying he was no beast, he was a teddy bear and only got mad that one time.

My grandfather worked his whole life in the sales department of an electrical appliance factory. He had big clients, earned a good salary, and made commissions on every sale. After he died there were no more commissions, and the pension my grandmother received was a fraction of his salary.

My grandmother and mother were forced to sell the car, the club membership, and the house in San Fernando. They moved to a rental apartment in town, fired the live-in maids and hired one who went home at the end of the day. They stopped going to the beauty parlor and learned to do their own nails and hair. My grandmother's was a short beehive, which she teased with a comb, using half a can of hairspray until it was piled up high. She forwent her lulo games, since hosting eight women every time it was her turn to entertain was too costly, and took up canasta, which was played with only four.

Mamá, fresh out of high school, began volunteering at San Juan de Dios Hospital, an activity grandfather would have approved of.

San Juan de Dios was a charity hospital. I never saw the inside but pictured it as filthy and dismal, with bloodstained walls and moribund patients groaning in the hallways. One day when I said so out loud, my mother laughed. Actually, she said, it was

airy and luminous, with white walls and interior courtyards. A 1700s building, well taken care of by the nuns who ran it.

That was where she met my father.

My paternal grandparents' portrait was oval, in a bronze openwork frame. They lived before my other grandparents' time, in an age my child's mind pictured to be as dark as the colors of the portrait.

This one was an oil painting of their wedding day, copied from a studio photograph, with a brown background and opaque details. The bride was the only luminous thing in it. A girl of sixteen. She was sitting on a wooden chair. Her wedding dress covered her from neck to shoes. She wore a mantilla and a demure smile, and held a rosary in her hands. It looked like she was getting confirmed, like the groom was really her father. He stood, one hand on her shoulder, like an old wooden post. A brittle man, bald, in a gray suit and thick glasses.

My grandmother, that girl, was not yet even twenty when she died giving birth to my father. They lived on my grandfather's coffee farm. Grandfather moved to Cali. Devastated by the loss, I assumed. A forlorn man in no state to take care of anyone. The newborn and his sister, my tía Amelia, who was two, stayed on the farm and were cared for by a sister of the deceased.

Tía Amelia and my father were raised on that farm. When the time came, their aunt enrolled them at the local school, where the children of peasants and workers went. In second grade, when their shoes got too small, the aunt hacked off the tips