

# Boston 1630



noemata 

BOSTON 1630

©Noemara/ Marcela Noemi Ruiz

© Cover image: Noemara/Marcela N Ruiz

Cover design: Noemara/Marcela N Ruiz

1st edition

© Noemara, 2025.

Ruiz, Marcela Noemi

Boston 1630 / Marcela Noemi Ruiz; Illustrated by Marcela Noemi Ruiz. - 1st illustrated ed. - Autonomous City of Buenos Aires: Marcela Noemi Ruiz, 2025.

Digital book, PDF

Digital File: download and online

ISBN 978-631-01-1983-0

1. Existential Novels. I. Ruiz, Marcela Noemi, illus. II. Title. Dewey Decimal Classification A860

Digital File: download and online

Email: noemara2@gmail.com Website: [www.noemara.com](http://www.noemara.com)

All rights reserved for publication in any language.

According to the current Penal Code, no part of this or any other book may be reproduced, recorded on any existing storage system, or transmitted by any means, whether electronic, mechanical, reprographic, magnetic, or any other, without the prior written authorization of Noemara/Marcela N. Ruiz.

Its content is protected by current law, which establishes prison sentences and/or fines for those who intentionally reproduce or plagiarize, in whole or in part, a literary, artistic, or scientific work.

ISBN 978-631-01-1983-0

Legal Deposit: -RE-2026-07136865-APN-DNDA#MJ

Printed in Buenos Aires, Argentina, 2025

# Boston 1630

Noemara

*Dedicated to my mother Kelly,  
who fought to see me shine  
and always believed in me.*

## Foreword

*I write this story as an act of memory and resistance. Because there were girls silenced before they had a voice, young women branded as impure for thinking, for feeling, for wanting something more than obedience. Because there were boys forced to harden themselves, to repress tenderness, to bear burdens they did not choose. Boston, 1630, is just a mirror. An echo of what still persists when faith becomes dogma, when the name of God is used to justify punishment, fear and submission.*

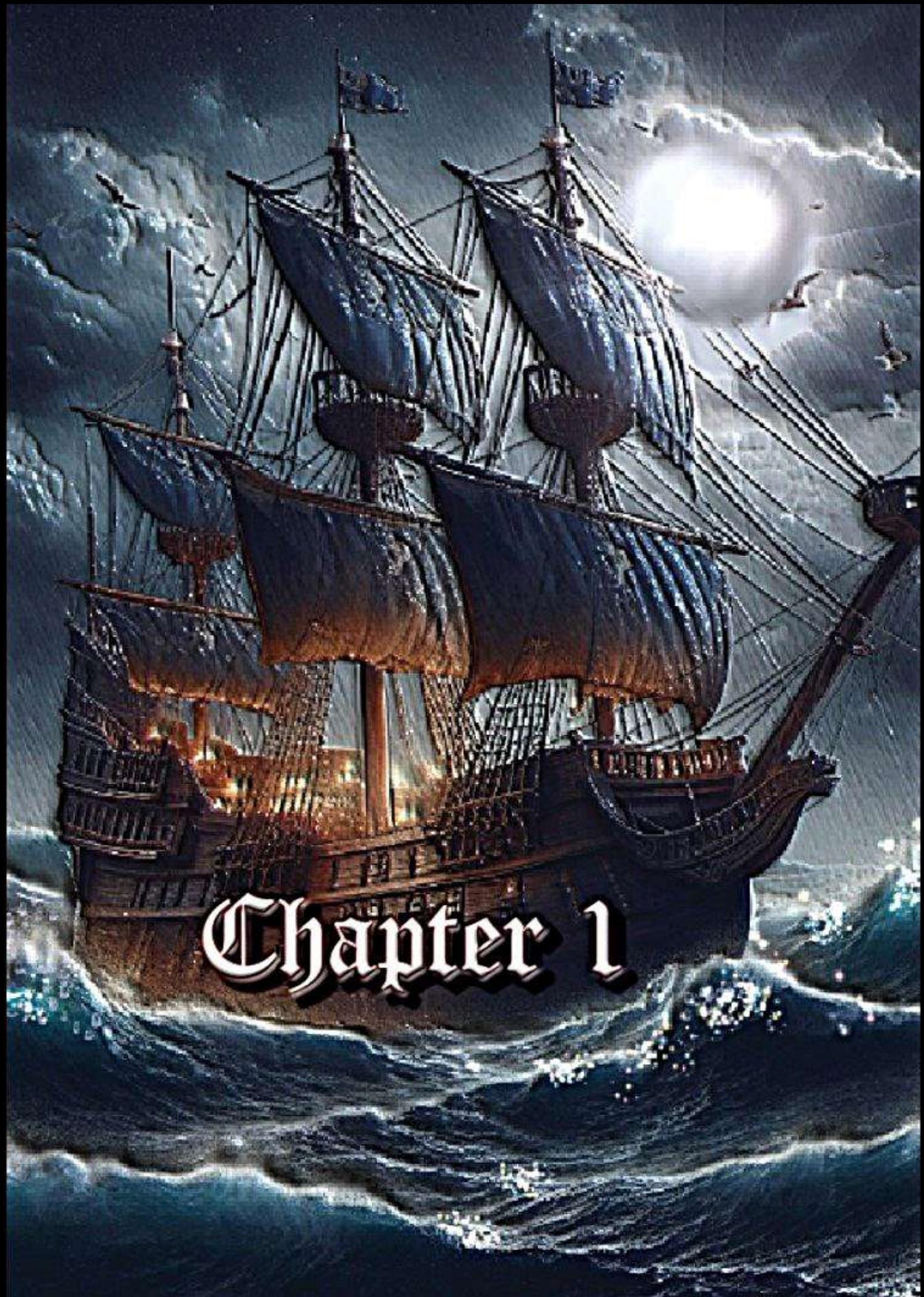
*I am not writing against spirituality, but against its distortion. Against the fanaticism that mutilates conscience, that turns mercy into a threat. This novel is an invitation to look squarely at what has been done in the name of heaven. To ask ourselves what kind of divinity can demand the humiliation of bodies, the extinction of doubt and the sacrifice of freedom.*

*I believe in a religion that embraces. That listens. That does not fear tenderness or rebellion. I believe in a faith that does not exclude, that does not condemn, that does not feed on the suffering of others. And I believe that storytelling is also praying for what can still be transformed.*

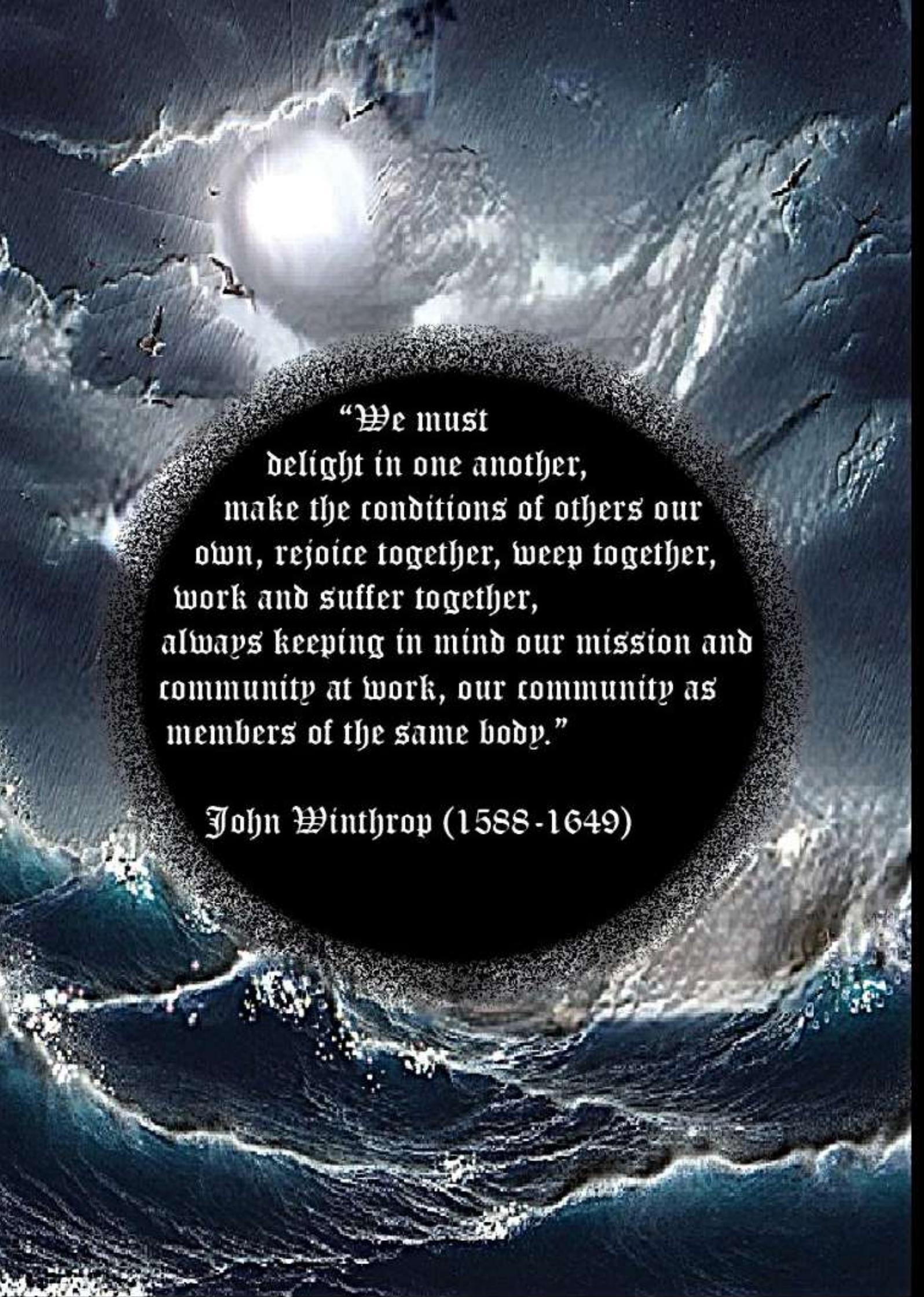
*May this story raise questions. May it make people uncomfortable. May it ignite. Because if God exists, and I believe He does, He must be on the side of those who love without fear.*

Noemara





# Chapter 1



**“We must  
delight in one another,  
make the conditions of others our  
own, rejoice together, weep together,  
work and suffer together,  
always keeping in mind our mission and  
community at work, our community as  
members of the same body.”**

**John Winthrop (1588-1649)**

*I have died three times. The first time was eight hundred years ago, when a fiefdom called Dommoc still existed and the Viking barbarians ravaged it, taking possession of our lands. Times of barbarism, fury and arrogance. A misunderstood love and my death were the outcome of conspiracies, jealousy and blindness. A dark tunnel takes me away from distorted images, in a past that was once present but which I can hardly remember now.*

*The second time was in Boston. More precisely, in Massachusetts Bay, in a small settlement called Salem, founded by Roger Conant in 1626. This life was marked by silence that enveloped cries of incomprehension, helplessness and amazement that I could not make heard. Like scraps of a worn sheet, I piece together my story, while shadows accompany me and I walk towards a distant light, which I hope to reach at the end of my tale. Before I forget it in the minute before my new birth.*

About a year ago, my father had decided to seek a new life in New England. He joined several other men and they enlisted in the search that many wealthy families with ties to important Puritan leaders were conducting. They only accepted men of faith who were skilled in all types of skilled labour. They wanted to ensure a robust colony that could be self-sufficient and facilitate trade. My father was a competent merchant, and we had a small watchmaking business. He was very good at carpentry as a trade. So he offered his services as a carpenter, with the dream of one day regaining his beloved business.

We sold everything, absolutely everything, not even my mother's beloved pots and pans remained. Just a handful of clothes and all my father's tools, which represented our livelihood and our dream for the future. My mother did not object; on the contrary, she saw it as an escape from her ghosts. The death of two children who had been born after me had distanced her from herself, and all that remained was to distance herself from the world she knew. Her lungs had suffered, either from the cold or from sadness, and my father predicted that she would heal in a land with pure air and sunshine.

I remember those days as a whirlwind with no beginning and no end. The scenes are jumbled together and I can't put them in order. People coming and going with our furniture and decorations, clothes in sacks that my mother gave away to poor women who came to collect them, with ragged children clinging to their skirts. My mother's tears, which she hid behind quick, energetic movements, busy with tasks of packing and stacking objects that formed living mountains,

growing and shrinking in size as they disappeared. I don't know how many weeks it took us to empty the house.

I was barely twelve years old, smaller than usual for my age, with large honey-coloured eyes and dark brown hair with big curls. Introverted and fearful in the face of so many changes, I just watched as reality overwhelmed my senses and my limited understanding of the social events of my time.

My world was my home and my parents, and the first of my losses was that world of walls and ceilings that had seen me born. I did not yet know that more painful losses awaited me.

Unlike my mother, my father was exultant, full of life and hope, in contrast to his wife and me, one apathetic and the other immersed in uncertainty.

The day my father closed the door of the house forever, he also closed my past; my mother held my hat tightly and urged me to get into the carriage. I couldn't help but sob loudly, hugging her waist the whole way to the port.

When we arrived, the nauseating air of the port disgusted me. We climbed the ramp onto the ship and were registered: Samuel, Lydia, and Nelly Chute, in the service of Isaac Saltonstall. Meanwhile, my father took care of the paperwork and talked with the other men who shared his same desires. In the bow, I saw the captain in the distance. My mother pointed him out to me, telling me his name was Winthrop and that we were on the flagship Arbella. She said we were lucky because my father had secured a contract as an employee in the port business and another for her as a servant for seven years with an important family called Saltonstall. Servitude, a word I did not understand, but my mother assured me that it would help us save enough money to start our own business again. One of the ships near us had the name Mayflower on it. Astonished, I asked if it was the same one that had brought the first pilgrims to Plymouth, but they told me it wasn't. It was another ship that had been named after the famous one I had heard so many stories about, many of them fantastical.

It was April, I don't remember the day, but the sun was warm and the salty wind blew gently against my face. The sea of men coming and going busily prevented me from seeing the sea in all its grandeur. Only when the sailors began to shout to raise anchor did the captain begin to sing praises and the voices of the Puritans gradually joined in. I managed to see the immense sea opening up before my eyes, the distant horizon bringing a lump to my throat. My mother hugged me and I felt the security of her warmth.

The cool, temperate weather accompanied us, as did boredom after several days. I used to play with other children, running from bow to stern, jumping rope, annoying the sailors with our shouts and laughter. Fed up with our presence, they would give us looks that filled our childish eyes with terror. Some parents invented a game with ropes for us to play, which kept us a little more under control at the request of the captain, who was also a father and was travelling

with his wife and three children, dealing with parental fatigue like the rest of us. The cold of the sea took its toll on some of the more fragile children, and when they fell ill, we were forbidden to roam freely around the ship in order to protect us as much as possible. It was a long journey, with several days of rain and storms on the high seas. My time on the voyage was divided between helping my mother with the chores of subsistence, playing with other children, and falling asleep during Captain Winthrop's long and endless sermons. The men got drunk every night during the first few weeks, and the captain lectured us on how we should save the Indians we would see from the clutches of the devil and ignorance, on the virtue of silence, and on our civil and moral obligations.

Hypocrite! He only lectured us to serve him when he was appointed governor, arriving with the endorsement of a letter from the king that few knew he had in his possession. Only the important and necessary men knew about it, those with whom he met at night to drink and consolidate their slave trade and land appropriation business at the first opportunity they could. All in the name of God and the Holy Bible.

Two weeks had passed since we set sail, and the calmness of the ocean in those days was reflected in my eyes in an apathy that overwhelmed me amid the constant rocking of the ship, which made my stomach churn, and the wind with tiny drops of salt.

I had never been on a boat before, I used to get seasick, and at that moment all I wanted to do was sleep. I didn't know what death was, so I didn't feel that fear of dying, but I did deeply fear feeling that way forever. I used to feel strangely that time was distorted, sometimes believing I heard a murmur of voices coming from the ocean itself, and I understood that the sea could be as relentless as the days spent on the boat without the comforts I knew, with the air heavy with humidity, rancid smells, and the constant creaking of wood marking the passage of time without hours.

My mother, who always had coughing fits, began to run a fever as the days went by, her breathing became heavier, and a hoarse sound in her chest appeared more and more often when she exhaled. Her face lost colour, turning yellow-green, and she lost weight every week, coughing more and more violently, something clinging cruelly to her chest, forcing her to rest for a few days.

I tried to take care of her as best I could, bringing her fresh water, placing damp cloths on her forehead when she started to run a fever. I tucked the blankets around her to protect her from the night-time cold.

Every night, as I watched my mother sleep, I wondered if she would wake up the next day with more strength. I spent hours by her side, telling her stories I made up to entertain her.

Meanwhile, my father, a man of austere character, shaped by Puritan faith and the rigour of his trade as a merchant, was deeply affected by his wife's illness, but his way of coping with the pain was to immerse himself in his duties.

He took on maintenance work on the ship as a carpenter. He believed that showing strength was a divine mandate, a necessary pillar for keeping the family together in times of adversity. Although his face rarely showed emotion, he spent entire nights with my mother, reciting prayers in a low voice. He did not know how to express tenderness with words, but his constant presence was a silent act of love.

During daylight hours, I spent my time gazing at the horizon, distancing myself from my playmates and becoming introverted, withdrawing into myself from that moment on; I was afraid and did not dare to name or explain the reason for that fear. The ocean was infinite, and the sky seemed to merge with it in a stillness that contrasted with the turbulent emotions inside me. I often saw the other passengers: families seeking a promising future, men preoccupied with their own plans, sailors busy with their tasks, and children playing. I tried to find distractions by watching them, but I always returned to the little corner where my mother was resting.

I was reading her some psalms when she stopped me with a gesture.

-Nelly, I'm sorry.

-For what, Mum? There's nothing to be sorry for.

-Yes, there is. I'm afraid I won't be able to see you grow up.

-Don't say that. God doesn't allow us to put a time limit on our lives.

-Oh, Nelly, how I regret getting on this ship. Your father had to sell the business and the house. We should have stayed and let your father leave. He wasted money on our tickets, I won't see the new sky in those lands, and you'll be a burden to your father. Promise me you'll be happy despite everything.

-Yes. I promise. Now rest, I'll bring you some broth.

I thought how practical my mother was until the very last moment. But we were already there. I fervently believed that it was God's decision and not our choice, as our lives had changed. I was not used to thinking for myself without the guidance of faith. I still did not realise that the words of the Bible were reinterpreted to suit human interests, silencing the true message of love and freedom that God offered us, the free will to decide our present and future, to choose between good and evil, right and wrong in the light of true Christian sentiment.

Like my mother, I accepted the prevailing idea at the time that, as a woman, I was useless, insignificant, and incapable of performing heavy domestic chores. A woman had to be submissive and docile in front of the men chosen by God,

avoiding evil thoughts and repressing any act that might seduce a man and lead him to perdition. As females, we were a flawed but necessary creation.

The day my mother died was solemn and grey. My father woke me up. A few metres away from me lay my mother, pale and stiff, her eyes already closed by her husband. The coughing had stopped, but so had the slight movement of her chest as she breathed. I realised I was alone. For the first time, I knew loneliness, even though I was surrounded by others, and I felt a strange weight inside me. At first, I didn't cry; I was too stunned to do so. I just sat next to my mother for hours, feeling the roughness of the wood beneath my feet and listening to the sea, which remained the same as always, indifferent, living the natural time of its own existence so far from our ephemeral humanity.

When night fell, the crew took steps to honour my mother's departure. I watched as her body was carefully wrapped by the older, experienced women travelling with us, while the murmurs on board seemed quieter than usual. Despite the sadness, I felt a duty I could not ignore: I had to continue, as my mother would have wanted, just as I had promised her. At that moment, I stopped being a child; I began to understand that life went on, even in a place as inhospitable as that ship and with an even more uncertain future.

When my mother passed away, my father seemed to break down for a moment, although he quickly imposed a rigid calm upon himself.

My father became an impenetrable wall, and that confused me as much as it comforted me; in a way, it gave me security. In an attempt to protect me from despair, he kept me busy with cleaning tasks on the ship or distracted me with conversations about his plans for when we reached new lands. He didn't know how to calm a child's anguish, but he believed that giving me a purpose was better than letting me sink into grief. On the few nights when he allowed himself to let his guard down, I would find him silently gazing at the ocean, his eyes filled with a sadness he never verbalised. We had been at sea for six weeks when my mother was thrown into the ocean, accompanied by songs and psalms.

Seven and a half weeks had passed since then, and our destination was about to become a reality. The crew's spirits had turned to excitement, the children who had fallen ill had recovered and were cheerful, playing more often, laughing and shouting. The sailors were also in high spirits, either because they were about to reach land or because they were getting rid of so many Protestants who never stopped praying and singing. They were fed up with putting up with the insults and profanity typical of rough men who worked under the sun, weathering storms, living body and soul on the vast sea.

The dawn woke me up with a great commotion. It seemed as if the bunks had disappeared in a sea of people coming and going, storing their belongings, mothers giving orders to excited children, men preparing packages and carrying trunks. I looked for my father and he was also busy with our things. I got up and went over to help him. We had arrived at Massachusetts Bay, from where we

were to depart for a town in the same colony of Massachusetts. Captain John Winthrop was to take office as governor, so many stayed there, while other groups set off for the rest of the colony's coastal towns.

I felt my mother's absence, as if a part of me had remained on that ship, and indeed it had. A little girl had boarded the ship holding her mother's hand, and that day, behind my father's back, a young woman with a pained soul disembarked, indifferently looking around at the intense life of the crowd, equally indifferent to her presence.

We joined three other families in the service of Isaac Saltonstall, all faithful to the Puritan spirit, unlike the pilgrims who had arrived ten years earlier. The men and women of the Arbella were determined to remain under the protection of the Church of England, believing that they could eradicate Catholic customs from within.

I too was convinced, by my parents' upbringing, at that young age, that the Church was too lavish, with its luxurious stained glass windows, organ music during its ceremonies, and the fine robes worn by its ministers. Many Puritans were imprisoned for wanting to change the Church of England. So they decided to leave the country and come to this new land. During that time on the ship, the captain and minister, now Governor Winthrop, told us that in Massachusetts, Puritans should be 'like a city upon a hill.' That meant we should be an example for everyone in the world to follow.

We climbed into the carriages that were waiting for us. The journey was short, and we arrived at the town of Salem, led at that time by John Endecott. The town was booming, with houses and warehouses already in place. Each family was responsible for building their own home and business. We were allocated plots of land measuring fifty feet deep and eight feet wide for each member. My father's share was reduced due to my mother's death. I remembered her lamenting the financial loss that her death would cause, and I felt sorry for my father. He never mentioned the financial losses that might arise from the death of his wife; he continued to thank God for all that he had given him in life. Meanwhile, we lived in a tent. My father finished the house in three months. It had a slatted roof, a dirt floor, a designated area for the fireplace and fire, two rooms, and our own garden, where we began to grow herbs and vegetables. That was the place I loved most. We had also been given another plot of land on the outskirts to grow corn or wheat, which needed more space to grow.

I felt that God was giving me a chance to be happy amid the tragedy and sadness.

The winter days were not so long or cold, and the summers surprised me with their warmth and rain. The months passed as we built a new life. I learned to cook and dry cod, tend the garden and do the housework, while my father, who had signed a servitude contract with Mr Saltonstall, became a cooper. He made barrels to store cargo, food, and fresh water for long voyages. Saltonstall, having

retired from the slave trade run by Winthrop and other Puritans, devoted himself to the manufacture of masts and barrels. He became a pillar of the community.

Two years had passed since we had disembarked. My father was tired of working long hours at the port, and the damp, cold weather, although not as harsh as in England, was taking its toll on his lungs. He refused to remarry, even though the clergyman insistentlly urged him to take a wife; it was beginning to look bad that he did not have one and was not contributing more children to the community. Living alone with his daughter was also generating suspicion in the minds of repressed women, who twistedly lived by watching the lives of others.

The afternoon was drawing to a close when I served soup into my father's bowl. He was sweating and pale, and barely touched the chicken I had roasted that afternoon. He went to bed, but I had a bad feeling about it. Before sunrise, I heard my father's voice talking in his sleep. When I approached him and touched his forehead, I realised how feverish he was. I put compresses on his forehead and gave him small sips of warm water to drink. His chest was tight, and he made a hoarse sound when he exhaled. I went to a neighbour's house to ask for help. He also worked with my father, so I asked him to let my father's employer know that he was ill and to find a doctor in the suburbs who could come and see him. My father, always forward-thinking, kept enough money aside to deal with these issues; my mother had wisely taught him about household economics. It was not good to live spending everything you earned, considering that if you did not work, you did not get paid. His wages were only enough for that, and although my father tried hard to save up to start his own business again, he had not yet succeeded.

When the doctor arrived, he prescribed a diet of fruit and vegetables, as he did not believe it was scurvy but rather a typical case of pneumonia. However, three weeks passed and my father continued to cough, had pain in his chest, looked weak, lost weight and continued to have a fever and night sweats.

When the doctor saw him again, he took me aside.

-Nelly, I'm sorry to say that you must prepare yourself for the worst.

-What are you talking about, Doctor?

-Your father has the white plague.

The room spun around me, I felt like I was going to faint, and the doctor's arms held me until he left me abandoned in a chair. That's how I felt from that moment on, abandoned to my fate.

I- think it's best to inform your father so he can make the necessary preparations. We must keep our distance from the sick person, as this disease is highly contagious. You will be quarantined, so I must notify the minister. Be careful, cover your nose and mouth with a handkerchief. I thought this curse had remained in England, but I see that we have not completely escaped its clutches.

He left me there, motionless. I watched as he returned to my father's room and spoke to him from the doorway, not daring to go any further, close to the sick man. My father only replied with a thank you. I will take care of my daughter.

With a wave of his hat, the doctor left, and a long time passed—I don't know if it was hours—until I got up and went to fetch water to give my father to drink. With calculated intent, I took no care for myself, approached him, kissed his forehead, and said something silly. I wanted to suffer the same fate as him. Why live?

My world had a new crack through which pain seeped in. In those two years, I had managed to build walls of routines and tasks. I had embraced my pain between the seams, my beloved garden, the cauldron, and the chores. I didn't need people around me. There were days when my father and I barely exchanged a word, each of us lost in our own thoughts.

The weeks on the ship made me want to run away from people. Now, in the village, I could only bear a couple of greetings and smiles during sermons or when going to a store for groceries or supplies. The memory of the hustle and bustle on the ship, seeing the same faces in a small space, the silenced annoyance, the melancholy in the air. My mother's death and the looks of pity or the distancing of the other children from a sad orphan with her gaze lost on the horizon were memories I couldn't forget. The shame I felt for myself and my father in the face of misfortune was what remained of the journey to the new world.

Once again, uncertainty and loneliness loomed like a shadow that consumed everything in its path. Once again, he did not know what to do, what to think, or what to feel.

A few days later, after barely eating anything for lunch, my father called me over to him. I was approaching him when he raised his hand, stopping me a few metres away.

-Nelly, don't come so close. Bring a chair, we need to talk.

I went to fetch the chair and sat down at a distance, as he had asked. My legs were shaking. I knew he was going to tell me something important, but my heart didn't want to hear it. My mind had to make an enormous effort to focus on the moment I was experiencing. The doctor had come one last time a few days ago and barely spoke to me. I thought that might have something to do with this need to talk about my father.

-Daughter, we must be realistic and accept God's decision. I don't have much time left, and I don't want you to get sick because of me, so I demand that you take extreme care of your health. As for your future, I won't deny that I am extremely concerned, despite trusting in God's plans. I am human and cannot

help but worry and feel worldly attachment. The doctor has been very useful as a messenger, although useless in his healing task.

He said it with a wry smile, true to form, maintaining his usual consistency and friendly seriousness. This was also a trait of mine, one I had inherited from him and which would unfortunately become more apparent in the future. Unfortunately for me, these were unacceptable qualities in a woman at that time.

-Nelly, all you have left is this house and what little savings remain. Keep the money and keep it for yourself. As for the house, I have placed it under the administration of Mr Isaac Saltonstall. He will kindly take care of you until he finds a young man for you to marry. Until that time comes, he will rent out the house and the land to cover the costs of keeping you with his family. When you get married, he will return the land and the house to you. Until you are old enough to do so, you will work as a teacher for his two young daughters. Thanks to your mother, you read, do arithmetic and write perfectly, and you can also teach them a little history, but be prudent, teach only the facts and keep my opinions and your own to yourself. I believe fervently in God, but I also believe that man manages to be God's most stupid and blind creation, despite the Almighty's most loving attempts at perfection. It doesn't always work out the first time- laughed heartily.

There was my father, a side of him that no one but my mother and I knew. His doubts, veiled criticisms, a rethinking of historical times. He rarely expressed his contradictory thoughts between his faith and his reason; these were not times for the lukewarm, everything was filtered through a black-and-white lens. Puritans in general were quite intolerant of dissent and questioning. Even though they themselves constantly questioned the Church of England and the King himself. They were convinced that they were a model of Christian charity and true civil liberty, unlike the natural and savage liberty of the American Indians. 'Do as I say, not as I do' was a Puritan motto. From victims of the Anglicans to perpetrators of the Pequots. The twists and turns of life in the theatre of the universe.

-In two days, you must have your things ready because you are moving to the Saltonstall house.

-But who will take care of you? You cannot stay alone.

-Do not worry, the doctor has already arranged everything necessary. God is in my heart.

Desolation overwhelmed me, my soul was empty, lost, everything had been decided without me being able to do anything or even think of what to say. I wondered if this was what life was all about, existing simply because others allowed me to exist like a small tree in an endless forest. Still, silent, without the freedom to see another sky or glimpse a horizon.

Over the next few days, I packed my few belongings: clothes, a portrait of my parents, my Bible, and my slate, on which I had so often scribbled letters and numbers. Now it would serve to teach other girls what I had learned.

It was a cool, sunny morning when a tall, thin, grey-haired man appeared. His gaze and countenance were void of emotion. Removing his hat, he greeted me and introduced himself as Mr Saltonstall. A chill ran down my spine. I greeted him with a bow and, with tears rolling down my cheeks, made my way to the room where my father lay. I approached him with pain and immense love.

-Father, they've come for me. I don't want to go. I don't want you to abandon me.

-Calm down, Nelly. The important thing is that God doesn't abandon you. He never will. Don't abandon him.

-Maybe God will have mercy and heal you. I pray for it every day in every sermon. I swear I do, but it seems He doesn't hear me.

-He hears you, but the paths He traces are the ones that must be. Have faith. I love you, daughter.

It was the first time in my life that he had told me he loved me. I had always felt that the pain of my brother's death left no room for me in his heart. My soul was torn apart; I was never the same after my mother's passing, but saying goodbye to my father was so hard that I felt my heart no longer beat with the same human warmth, as if it had died right there and turned to stone. It was the last time I saw him and the last words I heard him say.

I never knew what arrangements the doctor, Mr Saltonstall and my father made for his care until his death. All I know is that on that day I got into the carriage with that cold and distant man. He was very tall, with blond hair and tanned skin, burly, with a strikingly prominent jaw. The journey took only a few minutes, arriving at a two-storey house with details that denoted the family's wealth, very different from the one my father had been able to build with his own hands and a little help from other members of the community.

At the door stood a woman as thin as Saltonstall; you could even say they looked so much alike that it caught my attention, but with more angular features and ice-blue eyes. Later I would learn that she was his second cousin, the daughter of a first cousin of her husband's father. At her side were two girls of about seven or eight and four young women between the ages of sixteen and twenty, two of them and the youngest about the same age as her sisters. Behind them was a much older woman, and from her clothes, I guessed she was a servant in the house. That's what they called those who worked for these prominent members of the community. It was servile work with low pay and excessive mistreatment disguised as puritanical perfection.

The woman came forward to greet me as I managed to get out of the carriage with my humble bag.

-Welcome, Nelly. I'm Elizabeth Saltonstall. And these are my children.-She gestured for them to come closer. Meanwhile, her husband drove the carriage to the stable behind the house.

-Children, meet Nelly. Nelly, these are Eleanor and Alice, Henry and George, and the older ones, John and James. We're glad you're here. Unfortunately, your mother was unable to complete her work with us. I am sorry for your loss, but since your parents had signed a contract, you will take your mother's place. You will be the girls' teacher. It is better for them to be educated at home, unlike the boys, who can attend school. It is important for everyone to know how to read and write so that they can read the Holy Bible without intermediaries.

She took me by the arm and gently nudged me towards the house, with the children and young people following behind us, while Mrs Saltonstall told me about the usual household schedules and chores and her desire for me to teach her daughters to read for themselves, so that they could interpret the words of God.

Mrs Saltonstall gave me the same impression as her husband, although she was more talkative and sociable. There was something in her tone of voice that suggested she felt superior to others, especially me. Her cold stare and the nervous gestures of her hands, wringing them together as if she wanted to get through the unpleasant task of talking to someone who was not on her level as quickly as possible, even more so, someone as inferior as a young orphan girl without aristocratic origins. That was my impression, and surely that memory is coloured by my own low self-esteem. It is likely that my appearance revealed my orphaned status at that time.

The girls were six and seven years old, their hair barely peeking out from under their bonnets. Both had their father's brown eyes and watched me intently. They had very sweet smiles and imagined that I would open the gates of heaven for them, or something like that, by teaching them to read. How innocent! I would only teach them what the cage that would hold them captive for the rest of their lives was made of.

The two youngest children, younger than their brothers but older than the girls, were nine and ten years old, Henry and George respectively, as their mother informed me. Henry was smiling, restless and notoriously innocent, unlike his brother, who was quieter, more serious and perceptive in his gaze. They were the only two children who had their mother's eye colour, were tall for their age and equally slim as their parents.

I watched them as I walked through the house with her mother, who was describing the rooms to me on the way to my room next to Anne's, the maid and cook.

John and James were sixteen and eighteen years old, respectively. They had disappeared as soon as we entered the house on our way to the barn to meet

their father. I suppose they didn't care much about my presence, since it didn't change their lives in any way. I was a silly girl in their eyes. Both were athletic and slender, with brown hair and eyes, good-looking, but neither stood out particularly from other young people.

Mrs Saltonstall closed the door behind me. The small room contained a table, a chair and a cot. There were no windows, only a small vent that provided barely any natural light. The blanket covering the bed was clean but worn from use. I thought about my blanket, the one I had left at home. I should have brought it with me, I thought. Everything was spotlessly clean. Anne brought me a plate of hearty food and a slice of bread, along with a jug of water to wash myself and a little beer. It was customary for us to drink beer in the absence of uncontaminated water. I didn't have a candle to see by when evening fell, and I didn't dare leave the room to look for Anne, much less someone from the family. I felt like I was in a mousetrap, and like a frightened mouse, I stayed in a corner until I fell asleep after eating.

The dim light bathed the small room when I opened my eyes. I was cold to the bone. I sat up and realised it was dawn. I washed my face in the small basin, pouring water from the jug into it. I looked for a change of clothes. I was fixing my hair when a soft knock on the door alerted me that someone was coming to get me. It was the kind old Anne. I followed her to the kitchen and began to help her with breakfast. I started cooking the oatmeal while she baked bread. Silence enveloped us cosily as the sun began to rise.

-Nelly, the lady asked me to bring her breakfast to her room. This is unusual, as she likes everyone to have breakfast together to give thanks to God for the food, but she wants to let you know what life will be like in the house and how you should educate the girls. Before you go, have your breakfast, but do it quickly so you don't take longer than necessary.

-All right -I said. I didn't dare ask any questions, but uncertainty gnawed at me inside. I was alert to every moment I spent there. I didn't really know who these people were. I had never lived with so many people around me, accustomed as I was to the solitude of living with my father. I was terrified. I drank the tea and ate a few slices of bread, the knot in my stomach only allowing room for a few bites.

When everything was ready, I loaded the tray with food and went to see the lady. I climbed the dark stairs to the last room at the end of the corridor. Opening the door somewhat clumsily due to the weight of the tray in my hands, I found her sitting alone by the window at a small table. She was dressed austerely, her hair tucked under a white cap, wearing an ochre-coloured dress buttoned tightly up to her neck. She was drumming her fingers on the rustic wood of the table. She looked up when I entered, and her eyes were like two daggers piercing my pupils. She didn't blink and looked me up and down with a certain disdain. Taking her eyes off me, she pointed her index finger at me to put down the tray and sit

in a chair a few metres away from the table, far enough away to make me feel like I was about to be interrogated and lectured. My forehead was sweating and my legs were shaking. I was grateful that she didn't force me to stand, because I was afraid I wouldn't be able to support my own weight.

-¿Have you always had those curls?

I was surprised by the question. I could clearly sense that she did not like them. None of her daughters had curls; in fact, you could hardly see their hair under their white bonnets.

-Yes, Mrs.

-It's not a Christian taste at all. You'd better cut them off. I'll tell Anne to get rid of them.

-¿Why?-I asked, tears welling up in my eyes.

-Because in this house you will live under the strict gaze of God. We women are nothing more than vicious beings who must cleanse ourselves of the clutches of the devil that Eve left us in. Her wickedness is a sin that we must banish in order to be worthy in the eyes of the Most High. ¿Do you not believe that?

-Yes, Mrs.

-You must help Anne in everything, until she sees in you the purest form of Christianity. You must eat in the kitchen with the servants. Taking you into my home is an act of kindness on the part of my husband and an obligation I have taken on as a Christian duty. You are an orphan whom we must keep on the path of God.

As if some dignity within me had rebelled, my voice seemed to take on a life of its own, and I could not stop it.

-My father is not dead, Mrs.

It was a phrase that did not go unnoticed by that woman. I kept my gaze intense and steady, locked in a duel with her cold stare, which scrutinised me, betraying disappointment and mistrust. It was a silent duel, the beginning of a battle in which I would be at a clear disadvantage.

- We shall see what divine plans the Lord has in store for your father and you. You must pray day and night for his soul. I will pray for yours.

More than a desire for protection, it sounded like a threat to me. This woman spoke her words as if they were divine decrees. Her blind faith and my naturally critical reasoning clashed, with her insisting on saving and protecting my Christianity and me with the seed of freedom in my soul.

As if every thought that crossed my mind was reflected in the sparkle of my eyes, my body also began to free itself from fear, defying it with my mere presence. I maintained my composed posture, my back straight and my

shoulders relaxed, my hands clasped together resting on my lap. As she listed the tasks I had to perform under Anne's supervision, how I should teach the girls, the Bible reading schedules, laundry days, and the usual routines for the entire community that I already knew well.

I nodded slowly, just to make it clear that I was listening. While she ate her breakfast without even looking at me, she began firing off endless questions like darts: who had raised me, to make sure it had been my mother, whether I knew my prayers, whether I read the Bible every day, everything she could think of that would reassure her that I was a good Christian.

She let me go, and just like the tray, now empty of food, my mind was also empty of ideas. My whole being was filled with feelings I couldn't understand; everything in me was confusion and exhaustion.

A few days had passed since that disastrous meeting with Mrs. Saltonstall. She hadn't spoken to me since then, passing by me as if I were just another piece of furniture, not even giving me a dismissive glance. I had become a ghost in that house. I only had contact with the people who used to work there. I hardly ever saw Mr. Saltonstall in the evening, nor his older children, unless I was helping to serve dinner. The younger children went to school in the morning and afternoon, so I rarely saw them, except when they came into the kitchen to ask for cookies. Incredibly, I didn't realize that those had been the best times in that house. Being invisible was much better than becoming her favorite target.

She had sent me, through the cook Anne, the primers to teach her young daughters, as well as the only book she would use as they learned to read, write, and count. They were flat, racket-shaped boards with the alphabet printed on one side and a sentence on the other. And the book called the New England Primer contained rhymes that taught the alphabet and spelling, as well as many sentences, poems, and questions about the Bible that gave answers to be burned into the children's minds. The Lady, as I will call her from now on, had given the order that once a week they had to recite a different poem from memory and perfectly. She herself would give the test, and anyone who could not complete the task would be severely punished.

The girls sat at the kitchen table, looking at me expectantly. I began to draw the first letters for them and they copied them onto their slates. Alice was more advanced than Eleanor; both had received their first lessons from their mother. According to the rumors I had heard, the lady used to get annoyed when one of them made a mistake, and she was so irritable that she imposed absurd punishments on both of them equally. It didn't matter who made the mistake; they both suffered the same fate.

Eleanor was reciting: "The A for Adam that everyone will learn. The Bible begins with B, the same one I recited yesterday. The C for house and kitchen, the one

for the horse that walks so beautifully. God begins with D, the same one who sees everything. The E for elephant, look at that big trunk. The F makes me as happy as a worm," she fell silent, staring at me. I realized she couldn't remember the next line, so I helped her by mentioning the next letter she should say. Her eyes filled with tears, and I began to smell something unpleasant around us. Alice began to sob, and I heard what sounded like a faint trickle of water falling near us. I got up from my chair and instantly saw the liquid falling from her small body onto the chair where she had been sitting. She was urinating. Eleanor was pale, and silent tears were sliding down her cheeks. I was so shocked that I didn't know what to do or say. I composed myself and, without getting upset because I was truly sad for them, I sensed the fear and shame they were feeling at that moment.

I took Alice by the hand and helped her down from the chair. -Don't worry, Alice, there's no need to be afraid. Everything's fine.

-¿Are you going to punish us? My hands hurt when Mother hits us with the cane.

-No, of course not. You're learning, and it's normal to fail at first. It's just a matter of practice.

Alice stopped crying, and I was about to take her to clean up and change her clothes when I called Eleanor so we could all go together. She shook her head, still as pale as she had been minutes before.

-¿What's wrong, Eleanor?- She wasn't looking at me; she kept her eyes fixed on the floor. Alice explained to me in a very low voice, almost inaudible.

-She's pooped herself.

I couldn't believe it, one of the girls was wetting herself and the other had defecated. What was happening?

"You can relax too, it's no big deal what happened. I won't say anything to your mother, don't worry. This will stay between us. ¿Okay?- They nodded and we all went quietly to the bathroom, where they cleaned themselves up. I went to find some clean clothes, and after they both changed, I ended the day's lesson. I prepared a small lunch of cookies and warm milk, and we chatted casually about the things that interested them as children. At the same time, I was asking myself many questions. What kind of parents did these girls have to terrify them like this? Certainly, they frightened me a little too. And not just their parents.

These girls had been raised under the yoke of fear and strict Puritan morality. The notion of sin weighed heavily on their every thought, and their nights were marked by fear of divine punishment. Alice was the more withdrawn, observant one, constantly looking for signs of what might condemn her in front of her mother. Eleanor, on the other hand, felt the pressure with barely contained anxiety; when she heard sermons about eternal punishment, her hands trembled and her gaze fixed on the floor. They watched each other closely, trying not to

make mistakes, convinced that any transgression could mean the ruin of their souls and their family.

I didn't dare ask anyone about what had happened. I waited to see how common this situation was. I didn't want to incur the lady's wrath. She would probably accuse me of harassing the girls, or anything else could happen. At that point, I felt that the responsibility would fall on my shoulders for whatever reason. I prayed that it was something unusual and that it wouldn't happen again. I was afraid for the girls, but above all for myself. I cowardly took refuge in silence.

It was a cold but sunny morning, and the whole community gathered at the church, built a year before my arrival. It was simple but spacious, constructed like most of the houses, with large wooden planks. The minister was at the entrance greeting each parishioner when Mr. Saltonstall arrived. Both men became tense despite their friendly smiles; their looks said much more than their words.

-Minister, welcome to you and your young wife.

-Thank you very much, Mr. Saltonstall. I'm glad to see you this morning.

-I understand you have had certain differences with Captain Winthrop.

-I am glad to hear that you are not involved in the slave trade with the captain, as far as I know.

-That is correct. It is a difficult and arduous trade. I am more inclined toward barrel making and supplying wood to ships.

-I'm glad, a dignified job like our beloved Jesus the carpenter. Welcome to God's humble abode." The minister subtly made clear his position, which had already been the reason for his expulsion from Plymouth. He ended the presentation so as not to continue a conversation that would lead to politics. He continued greeting those who arrived while all of us family members and attendees took our seats.

Songs and praises began the minister's sermon. It was the day that a light of understanding was fixed in my memory, giving rise to my critical spirit.

-*"Dear brothers and sisters:*

*This life is a brief moment; eternity follows. A blissful or terrible eternity depends on the improvement or deterioration of this brief moment; yet (and I tremble to think it) how vile is this priceless jewel, and how many vain inventions and senseless pastimes have the children of men everywhere in the world devised to pass the time and the time in this brief moment of life, until, like a pleasant river, they have flowed into the dead sea of eternal lamentation! The greatest crime in the world is not developing one's potential. When you do what you do best, you not only help yourself, but the world.*

*It has been the foolish custom of all barbarous nations to paint and adorn their faces and bodies (as has been, to our shame and sorrow, the case with some of our ancestors in this nation). ¿How much, then, do we owe to our most holy Creator for so much knowledge of himself revealed in such civility and piety? And how should we also yearn and strive for America to share in our Mercy? All people, men and women, Christians and Indians, regardless of their status, heritage, or beliefs, are entitled to the same rights as we are.*

*And in our small lives, is it not comforting to have friends and neighbors visit? A poor visit and empty presence, and yet, in truth, it is very solemn, unless it is a case of infectious disease, and then everyone abandons them and flees, for I*

*have often seen a poor house abandoned in the middle of a wild forest, everyone fleeing, the living unable to bury the dead, so terrible is the apprehension of an infectious disease, that not only people, but houses and the whole city take flight. So let us ask ourselves: are we the ones who flee, or are we the ones who, at the cost of risk, help and protect all of us who make up this community?*

*Let us think about it. I share with you some verses that the Holy Spirit whispered to me in the light of early prayer:*

*They see the wonders of God that are called*

*Across terrible seas to pass,*

*With winds that tear and seas that roar,*

*And calm as smooth as glass.*

*I have been on the ships of Europe often*

*In the hand of the King of terrors;*

*When all have cried, now, now we sink,*

*Yet God brought it safely to land.*

*Alone among the Indians in canoes,*

*Returning some time ago, I have been*

*Half an inch from death, deep in the ocean,*

*God's wonders I have seen.*

The sermon continued and discomfort in the church was felt among some groups, including Mr. Saltonstall. The reality was that Williams was attacking the greed of wealthy people like them. The criticism of the Church of England, coupled with the proclamation that everyone had rights, was a bitter pill to swallow for certain prominent figures in society. The minister's days were numbered, and the animosity generated by his kindness toward the Indians was no minor factor. Minister Williams believed that no king had the right to arbitrarily take the lands of the Native Americans. For him, the English colonists should pay the Native Americans for every piece of land they wanted to use. To make matters worse, Minister Williams had befriended a group of Native Americans who feared a future war that could decimate them. He had already been expelled from Plymouth, and in Salem he was beginning to make some people uncomfortable.

I was fascinated. This man was voicing aloud the ideas of my parents, thoughts that my parents kept almost secret, fearing reprisals such as expulsion from the community and the loss of their land. Freedom of conscience, understanding that we were all children of God and deserved comfort, mercy, and companionship.

These were extremely libertarian ideas for the time, which threatened the interests of economic and social powers. From that day on, I gladly attended every sermon. The air of freedom, even within the prevailing dogmatism, was a breath of relief from so many strict rules that repressed my life.

I thought of my poor father, suffering alone, and cried for the rest of the ceremony. News of his condition was scarce and discouraging. I wanted to go see him, but they forbade me, either out of fear that I would contract the disease and endanger the family that had taken me in, or out of simple indifference to my pain.

When the ceremony ended, we began to leave the church, with the Saltonstall family walking behind us along with the rest of the people who worked for the family. I watched as James, the eldest son, walked into the surrounding undergrowth toward the family home, taking a rough and slightly longer path. Eleanor followed a few meters behind. I found it strange.

Why would they separate from the group? I didn't mention it or ask any questions, but it caught my attention. James was a handsome young man, tall and slender but not lanky. Physical labor had made him athletic. He was closest to his father and carried all of his father's expectations on his shoulders. He was very similar in character to his father. He had a presence that terrified me; in my opinion, he was the most fearsome of them all. I remembered that, unlike his brother John, he did not play with hurtful words, but with silence.

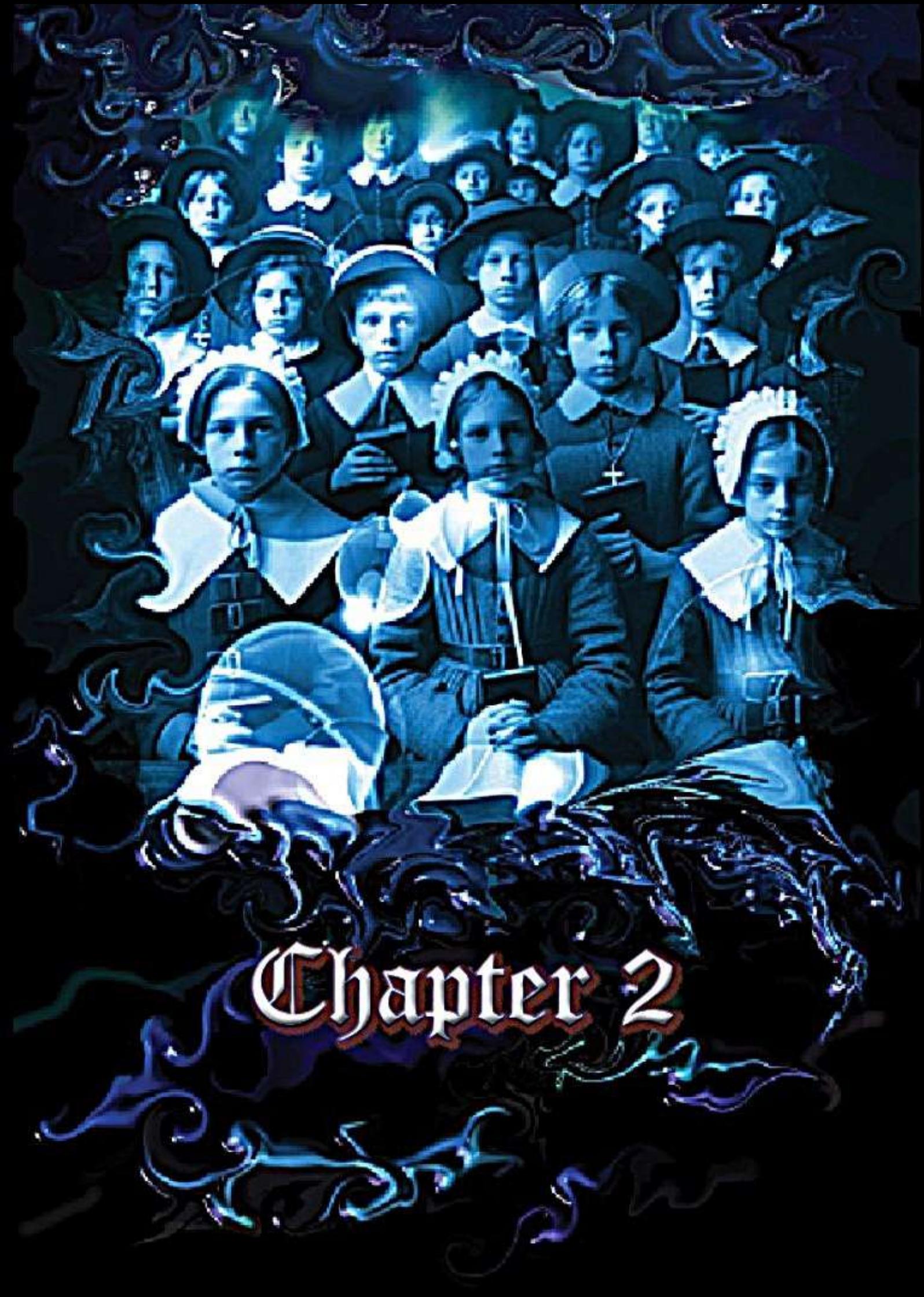
When I left an imperfect crease in my folded clothes, he would walk past me without saying anything, but his presence weighed heavily like a sentence. During moments of prayer, if I looked away, he would stare at me, waiting for me to lower my gaze back to the right path. His judgment was not immediate, but I knew that one day, when his patience ran out, his correction would come inevitably and brutally. His sadism was not openly expressed, but repressed under a cloak of religious fervor. He had internalized Puritan severity in a dangerous way: for him, punishment was necessary, and like his mother, he was convinced that suffering atoned for sin. His gaze was cold, calculating; when he watched, there was no tenderness, only judgment.

He did not seek pleasure in the pain of others impulsively, but rather under the belief that it was his duty to impose discipline, purify, and correct. In his mind, violence was justified by faith. His hands were always rigid, as if he were ready to dispense justice at any moment. He did not shout or get upset, but his dry tone was more threatening than any physical punishment. All the employees feared him, as did his brothers. Perhaps that is why I found it so strange that Eleanor followed him, as if there were a loving affection between them, something I had never seen before. Was it possible that in James' cold heart there was a glimmer of brotherly love and compassion? A weakness for his tender sister, capable of being affectionate?

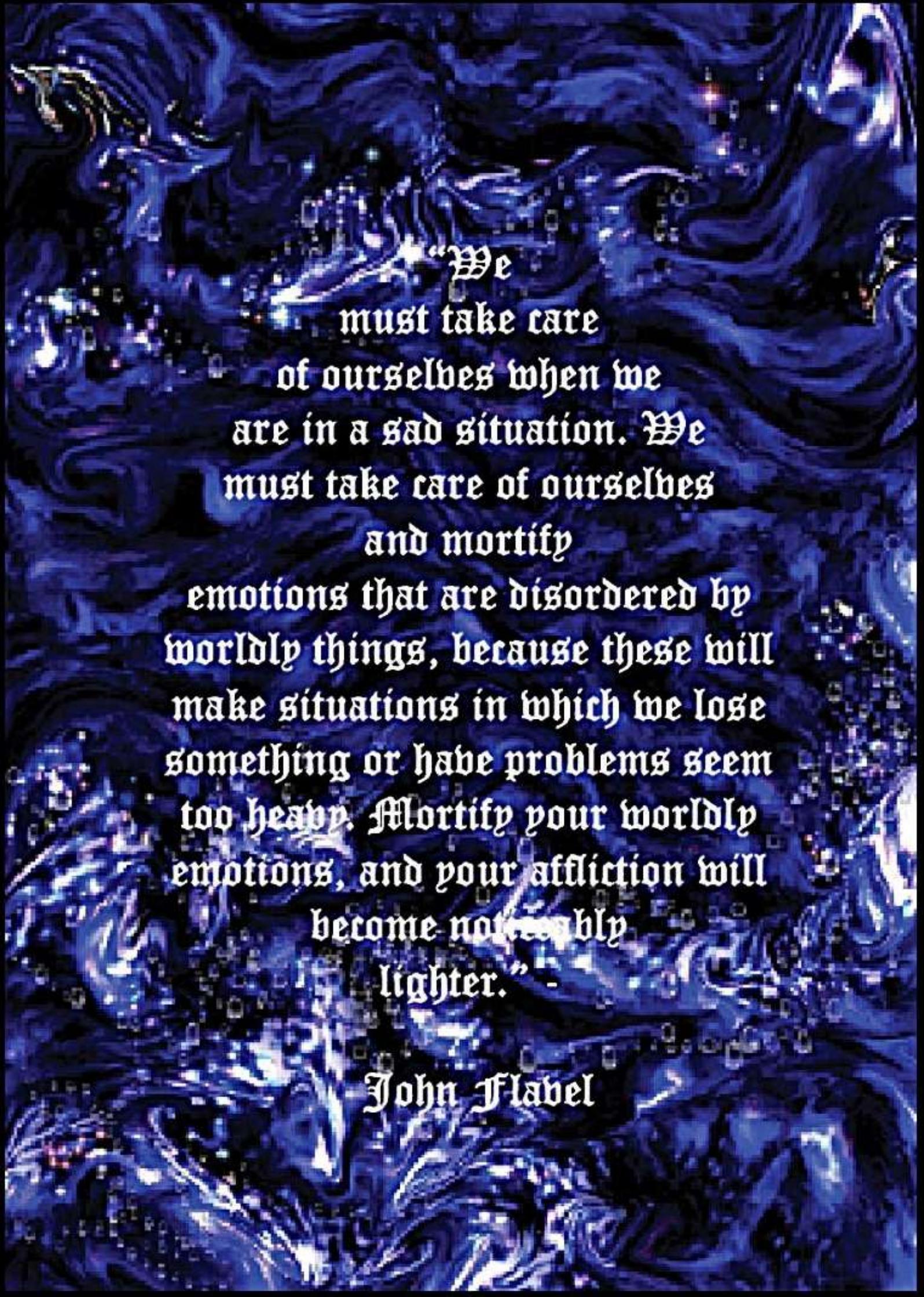
When I got home, I prepared the workbooks to give the girls their lesson for the day after lunch. I would take the opportunity to ask the girls a few more questions about my concerns, but knowing how shy and fearful they usually were, I probably wouldn't get anywhere.

The afternoon dragged on slowly and wearily for the girls and me. The lessons became monotonous, and I was in too low a mood to inspire them with enthusiasm. The conversation revolved solely around memorizing and reciting paragraphs. Spelling words and drawing them was the most entertaining part, but not enough to dispel the listlessness we all felt. The cold numbed us despite the fire in the fireplace, and the exhaustion I felt from paying attention in class made me give up on striking up a deep conversation to find out more than what I could see at first glance. I left it for another, more opportune moment. They were just unfounded concerns; surely my apprehension toward James and his family made me distrustful and suspicious.





# Chapter 2



“We  
must take care  
of ourselves when we  
are in a sad situation. We  
must take care of ourselves  
and mortify  
emotions that are disordered by  
worldly things, because these will  
make situations in which we lose  
something or have problems seem  
too heavy. Mortify your worldly  
emotions, and your affliction will  
become noticeably  
lighter.”

John Flavel

*The light is still far away, I am moving toward it but slowly; as if I were flying only with my eyes, I cannot feel my feet but I can see them, as well as my hands. How strange death is! It is like a vivid and sensitive present, I have not forgotten even the smallest detail of my life but something inside me tells me that it will not be for long. As I move forward, I cannot help but recount what my life was like.*

Back then, from dawn onwards, I felt the weight of surveillance. Mrs. Stonstall, rigid and fanatical, began the day with endless prayers, expecting us all to recite them with the same devotion. Every pause, every hesitation, was a fault. "God sees your weakness," she would say coldly. Instead of keeping my eyes down in submission, I kept them fixed, not with open defiance, but with an intensity that made it clear that I was listening, but not absorbing every word as absolute truth. Sometimes, whenever she recited a sermon on obedience, I would glance toward the window, just for a few seconds, a minimal gesture that hinted that my mind was wandering elsewhere. But one day John pointed it out to me: "Mother, Nelly looks out the window whenever we're praying. It seems like her soul is restless." He had been observing my little transgressions with interest, without my noticing, but he didn't accuse me right away. He preferred to wait, gathering subtle evidence, and then expose it at the most opportune moment. He enjoyed it like a game. It was the beginning of the end.

The Lady would not allow any deviation in my behavior. She approached me with her typical meticulous attention and judgmental gaze, as if observing an invisible crack in my face.

"It is clear that we have not yet molded you correctly. Sin makes you clumsy and distracted. Perhaps you should pray for discernment and humility."

John's accusatory words were enough to keep me kneeling for hours, praying for redemption I didn't feel I needed. Hours later, with numb legs and sore knees, I went to the kitchen to help with lunch.

The aroma of baked bread mingled with the cold air coming in through the window. I was sitting on the wooden bench, with a heavy cookbook by Gervase Markham resting on my lap, carefully turning the pages. I wanted to learn how to cook turkey, but I was intrigued to find the recipe for roasting venison. I was so engrossed in it that I didn't hear the footsteps until it was too late.

-¿What is this?" she said to me in a harsh voice, her eyes filled with fury, startled. I quickly closed the book. I didn't understand why she was scolding me. How bad was what I was doing?

-A cookbook, Mrs.

He snatched the book from me abruptly and, as if barking instead of speaking, began yelling at me that I was wasting my time loafing around. I was paralyzed, tense, trying to regain some calm within myself.

-¿A cookbook? And why do you need to read this? The only thing a girl like you needs is obedience and prayer. Don't waste your time on worldly vanities!

-I was learning more about how to prepare food for the house. I want to do my job well.-Humility did not come naturally to me, but it was better to try.

-Do your homework well? Women don't need knowledge, they need devotion! This book, with its worn pages and worthless words, won't teach you what really matters. Do you really think that knowing more about spices and recipes will make you a virtuous woman?

He watched me sternly as my hands ran over the aged spine of the book. I kept my eyes on the floor, not wanting him to see the hatred growing inside me, but my voice sounded firm.

-I didn't mean to neglect my duties, lady. I just thought that learning more would make me more useful in the kitchen.

-The devil whispers sweet words, always disguising pride with justifications. The kitchen is a duty, not a place for vain curiosity. The Scriptures are your only guide. Do you really think the food you serve is more important than the salvation of your soul?

His voice was as tense as his fingers on the edge of his apron as he narrowed his eyes.

-No... I didn't mean to.

She slowly approached me, and I thought she was going to hit me, but she brought her face so close to mine that I could smell her sweat.

-Intent is irrelevant. God's will is clear: every woman must submit, listen, and not question. The next time I see you occupying your mind with anything other than the Word of God, you will know what true punishment is.

The woman snatched the book from me and slammed it on the table before walking away. I took a deep breath, feeling the burning sensation in my chest. I didn't cry, I let the indignation, resentment, and desire for revenge flow through me. I just closed my eyes for a moment, remaining silent, surprised by the emotions that overwhelmed me and that I had been unaware of until that moment. Inside me, something began to resist. Something was breaking.

Every day, there was a lesson. Mrs. Saltonstall's authority was unquestionable, but over time, a sense of failure began to creep into her regarding my indoctrination. I did not complete the submission, and although I followed the rules, my lack of enthusiasm became a source of frustration for her. She became more obsessive, intensifying punishments, imposing more prayers and religious

readings, or even seeking my "purification" by having me kneel for hours with my hands in prayer. At some point, she wondered, is it God's will that Nelly remain impure, or had she failed as a spiritual guide?

When I spoke to the girls in class and we read some psalms, I warned them about the dangers of sin, but I did so using ambiguous words, without the tone of condemnation that adults would expect. Instead of inspiring fear, I softened my voice, allowing them to understand that perhaps not everything was as terrifying as they had been taught.

The girls began to feel uncomfortable with my attitude, which was so different from their mother's, but little by little they developed a dangerous curiosity. They began to notice that I was not being punished by divine forces, as they had been led to believe. They observed my resistance to harassment and wondered if everything they had been taught was really true. Alice began to copy small aspects of my behavior, while Eleanor struggled between loyalty to her mother and the fear of discovering that her faith was more fragile than she thought. They were already nine and eight years old, and their age-appropriate view of life was opening up to subtle questions, questions that at that time should have been suppressed by what they kept quiet and limited themselves to observing and surviving under the invisible eye of a relentless God.

As my character became bolder, my responses were measured; I did not challenge directly, but when long prayers of repentance were imposed on me, I murmured just enough to comply, but without the fervor they expected of me. When asked if I had felt the weight of God in my heart, I replied with a "Yes, of course," too neutral to be convincing.

During moments of obligatory prayer, I would move my fingers, making small strokes on the fabric of my skirt, as if I were writing something in secret. It was like a ritual of my own, a gesture of silent rebellion while pretending to obey.

She washed the clothes meticulously, but deliberately left an imperfect crease that, although insignificant, represented a crack in the suffocating perfection imposed. The work was never enough. If the clothes were not neatly folded, the Lady would take my hands firmly, examining my fingers as if clumsiness were a sin. "The devil dwells in laziness," she would murmur.

If they offered me a book of sermons to read, I would open it, but my gaze would wander to the design of the letters on the pages rather than the words themselves. Meanwhile, the younger boys would watch me, avoiding doing so directly, their eyes betraying fear; to them, I was a bad omen. They felt the tension, but did not fully understand it. In their eyes, I represented a figure on the borderline of sin, someone who could attract divine wrath. They watched me from afar, avoiding unnecessary contact. I used to whisper my prayers instead of reciting them with conviction, and they watched me with uneasy complicity, as if that could bring punishment upon the whole house. Over time, they developed a mixture of fear and fascination for me.

John, on the other hand, his mother's favorite son, once saw me stumble over a tray, but he didn't shout or alert anyone. He approached slowly, leaning slightly. "Sin makes you clumsy," he said calmly, "perhaps I should tell Mother that you need to pray more," or on other occasions, "If you don't want to fall into disgrace, you should show more devotion, sister." Always with a smile that suggested he knew more than he was saying.

He looked at me with contempt, but his interest in manipulating me grew. In a way, I was a stepping stone for him to compete with his older brother James, who was closer to their father and would inherit control of the family after him. Envy was disguised as competition and meritocracy.

Somehow he sensed that I was stronger than I appeared, and testing me as much as he could, instead of accusing me openly, he tried to confuse me, making me believe that there were things inside me that were truly impure. He tried in vain to sow doubts in my mind, wanting to persuade me that my resistance was a sin disguised as pride. He even tried to gain my trust with acts of false closeness, intending to betray me at the opportune moment. Vile by nature, John had learned to navigate his mother's religious expectations with cunning. In public, he was obedient, devout, even exemplary, but in the shadows he was manipulative. He had discovered that guilt was a useful tool; he knew how to twist it to get what he wanted, accusing his younger siblings of imaginary sins to see them kneel in pleas for forgiveness. He reveled in the weakness of others, finding pleasure in the anguish that dogma imposed. He knew how to speak to gain the trust of his elders, but his gaze betrayed his enjoyment in the moments when he managed to impose his dominance over those he considered inferior.

It was a gray afternoon, and the lady was looking at the furniture with a frown, running her fingers over the mark on the wood. Her expression was stern, full of judgment. Her sons, John and James, came into the room to take a break and drink some beers. The lady's attitude alerted them to her tension. I remained at the back of the dining room cleaning the floor as usual, aware of the storm that was brewing without yet knowing the reason.

-Who did this?- she asked coldly, with a hint of annoyance, without taking her eyes off the piece of furniture, and with one hand on her hip, the lady waited for an answer.

-What's wrong?- James stepped forward to look at the furniture.

-It has a scratch that has chipped it. -It was a piece of furniture that her husband had had made at the shipyard by some of his employees. It was used to store antique tableware that was never used, but they kept it as if it were a relic of a family nobility that they did not actually possess.

-Mother, neither James nor I would touch this piece of furniture without permission. Who else has been here?-John said, looking at me sideways.

-Nelly has spent a lot of time here cleaning alone, hasn't she? What was she doing with her hands when no one was looking?

The direct accusation forced me to respond, tense, but trying to remain calm.

-I haven't touched the furniture. I didn't even go near it.

The lady took charge of the impending confrontation, turning to me with sharp eyes.

-Are you denying your guilt?

-I have nothing to deny, lady. It wasn't me.- I took a deep breath, trying not to hesitate.

John stepped forward, feigning concern. There he was, manipulating me, making me believe he was helping me.

-Maybe you don't remember. Young women are careless... sometimes they do things without realizing it. Or they lie.-There was the duplicity of his character, plunging the dagger he loved to wield. Barely smiling, enjoying the scene. What dangerous words... they almost seemed like a defense in my favor, but it was only a disguised accusation.

James just kept quiet, without saying a word, he was merely a witness waiting for the outcome. He imposed his presence without resorting to verbal violence, only to give his verdict in the end.

There he went again, using religion to justify oppression. He crossed his arms, his judgment already made.

-Denial is the hallmark of sin. If you didn't do it, why is everyone pointing at you?

The injustice filled me with resentment, I felt a mixture of hatred and fear, and between those two feelings, the desire to escape from there. I held back the urge to clench my fists, and my voice, sustained with a dignity that sounded like an act of arrogance and pride to the ears of my accusers, responded, dizzy with all the feelings that overwhelmed me.

-Because it's easy to point fingers at me. Because I'm not like you, I'm not your daughter.-My gaze was a clear reflection of my contained anger.

-God forbid I should have a daughter like you.

She turned on her heel, looking at me, and delivered that verdict that needed no proof, no explanation, not even a hint of doubt in her words.

-I don't need proof. God sees what the flesh tries to hide. There is no innocence in a tongue that justifies itself instead of asking for forgiveness.

I remained silent, I didn't respond. Correction would come later; I knew the battle was impossible to win with words. I just breathed, holding on to my own invisible resistance. And the house, with its stale air, closed in on me. She ordered me to clean the entire entrance to the house and pray one hundred Our Fathers. Anne, the cook, would be the witness to make sure that not one of them was missing from the set number.

The days became endless, enduring silent contempt and habitual hostility, while I turned my sadness and loneliness into my deepest secret. I cloaked them in indifference, becoming more reserved and cautious, anticipating storms, living in a state of alertness and seeking peace in the silence of the moments when I managed to be alone. I forced myself not to remember my parents, nor to recall the past that had been happy there in my memories.

I just prayed for my father, begging for a miracle that would improve his health. The hope of returning home to him helped me endure my reality in that house. I focused on the here and now in order to survive such orphanhood. Not even Anne, with whom I shared the housework, showed me any affection. She was distant, but at least she didn't mistreat me, which was more than enough for me. She herself was fearful of God and the Saltonstalls and was very careful not to cross paths with the older children. She was indifferent to the younger ones and did not seek to please them, knowing that as they grew up, like their brothers, they would impose themselves on her and put her in her place in that house. Perhaps it was something I should learn from her example: not to seek affection there, to be a useful shadow so as not to be a target for the family.

The afternoon was drawing to a close and the table was set with austere precision. The English porcelain plates were full, but the air was thick, charged with an invisible authority emanating from the owners of the house. I moved silently, serving the food with careful hands, but before I could finish, the lady frowned, without looking at me, and said in a sharp, cold voice:

-That skirt.

Confused because I didn't know who she was talking to, I looked at her and our eyes met; the arrow was aimed at me.

- Lady?

Her eyes scanned the messy folds of my skirt with displeasure, her tone dry, barely containing her contempt.

-Don't you have any respect for your work? The clothes you wear are a reflection of your inner self. Is this the image of a virtuous young woman?

James, still eating and looking only at his plate, intervened.

-Mother, a woman who doesn't take care of herself can't take care of what is assigned to her either.

I swallowed hard, trying not to show how affected I was.

-The skirt got wrinkled while I was serving in the kitchen. It wasn't intentional.'}

She narrowed her eyes, not planning to let me off so easily.

-Everything has a cause. A neglected soul reflects its disorder in material things. Or do you think neatness is a choice and not a commandment?

Mr Saltonstall, without looking up from his plate, but speaking in an indifferent and listless voice, expressed his opinion as a pillar of prejudice without raising his voice, reinforcing the oppression.

-Discipline is reflected in all aspects of life. A woman who does not maintain her appearance does not maintain her place either.

The young children became tense, silently concentrating on their food without even glancing at the humiliating scene. The girls cowered in their seats, one avoiding moving too much for fear of attracting attention, and the other not understanding what was happening, clasping her hands in her lap as if to protect herself from a punishment she might share without knowing why. There was always a reason; their mother always found merit for sin, no matter how small. They had already overcome their incontinence. Alice had matured in character, while Eleanor had become more fearful and introverted. John focused on his food, remaining oblivious to what was happening.

James, always displaying severity and masculinity, with a slight gesture like a cruel judge who detects something rotten, echoed his father.

-Perhaps the skirt isn't the only thing wrinkled about her. It's her character that's really twisted.

Respiré hondo, mis manos temblaron levemente, estaba harta de ellos. Pero simulando todo lo que pude una humildad que no sentía, debí responder lo mejor pude sorteando mi odio.

-It was never my intention to disrespect the house.

The Lady, with that unyielding religious authority, declared:

-Intention does not excuse sin. Leave. Your presence at the family table makes me uncomfortable.

I lowered my gaze, accustomed to defeat, holding back my anger, surviving the moment, and went to the kitchen. My silence was becoming my weapon of resistance. Dinner was over, and the distant prayers of the family, each in their own room, finally brought the day to a close.

The morning dawned in all its splendor, and the warm midday sun made me think how beautiful life was in its simplicity. It was a feeling of contemplation that did not last long.

I was in the kitchen helping Anne with a chicken. She had already plucked, tied, and washed it, while I stuffed its belly with parsley and spread lard on it. We laughed as we discussed a prank the children had played the day before. At that moment, the lady entered, her face serious and staring at me with a strange gleam of victory, giving me the impression that she was not going to say anything good. She stopped in the middle of the room, scanning the kitchen and, as if measuring the air, she said theatrically:

-Nelly, our beloved Creator has called your father.

The shock prevented me from hearing Anne's muffled cries or the words the lady continued to utter. I was trying to comprehend the meaning of those first words.

The next few hours were a blur between my mind and reality. I automatically changed into a black shirt and skirt and waited for them to call me to begin the funeral procession. My guardian would take care of preparing everything necessary for the funeral. I walked like a ghost behind the pine coffin with a simple cross on the lid that contained the body that had belonged to my father.

The windy, gray day was an accomplice to my grief. The walk to the central burial site on Charter Street seemed endless. The path was lined with a few houses belonging to some of the townspeople. Sailor Pickman, a rough and quiet man, stood in front of his humble home and took off his hat as a sign of respect. I thanked him for that in my heart. I felt that this distant man, a stranger in my life, was the most honest of the entire procession. Others, such as Daniels and Davenport, also locals, made the same gesture in front of their houses, standing on the doorsteps of their homes with their families. They had been my father's co-workers at the lumber mill owned by Isaac Saltonstall, my benefactor.

That particular street on the way to the cemetery was populated by a few sailors who were building their houses with leftover wood from the ships they repaired. Everything was poor and gloomy.

Until then, I had felt the loneliness of not having my mother, but now I also felt the absence of my father. The feeling of being orphaned was immense, and the coldness and abandonment sank into my bones, knowing that no one in this world would care for me as they did. At fifteen years old, life had dealt me a cruel blow.

As the minister delivered his final words and blessings to my father, Mr. Saltonstall's gaze was fixed on me, as if scrutinizing my thoughts. The discomfort this caused me brought me back to the reality around me. When the ceremony ended, the men in charge of filling the grave with earth went about their task, while the mourners dispersed. I stood watching as the earth swallowed the

coffin, when I felt a tug on my arm that made me turn awkwardly. It was Mrs. Saltonstall, who told me without any empathy that we should get on with our lives and routines, urging me to return to the house. That was how she was, cold and distant, exercising her power in the house with a cruelty that only those who wield it believe to be divine justice. There was no compassion or loving gestures; to her, I was just a potential soulless vessel filled with demons and sinful desires, pure filth.

There were days when I couldn't tell morning from night, the sounds and words around me seemed distant, nothing moved me at all, I didn't even notice the abuse or daily humiliations. Nothing mattered to me. My mind just wandered through a timeless void, my body gliding through the world, responding automatically to everything, from getting up, getting dressed, or doing chores. When I taught the girls, I repeated the lessons without paying attention to their answers, and if they asked me something, my apathy responded with just the bare minimum.

At night, sleep invaded me with constant nightmares, fragments of images of memories with my parents intermingled with the terror I experienced with the Saltonstalls. I began to fall asleep praying to God to have mercy on me, if he had abandoned me to my fate, to be merciful and end my life. I wanted so badly to die that I believed God was punishing me by keeping me alive.

¿ What was the point of living? There was no future for me. If only I had been born a man, I would have had some chance of being free. I could work, learn a trade, escape from this house, from these false and hypocritical people. Maybe even travel, go to another town or perhaps return to England. I didn't care about religion; it didn't matter to me whether I was Puritan or Anglican or even Catholic. My faith had waned, disbelieving in this suffocating Puritanism that only determined that because I was a woman, I was worthless. God did not see me or hear me, he only blamed me for my original sin. Why did I have to pay for the sin of Adam and Eve? Why should I atone for the sin of being born, if I did not ask to be born? They forced me to exist without wanting to, to live to suffer. For what purpose? Not even the minister's sermons gave me peace or answers. All I heard were obligations, exhortations to be saints, children of God who showed a purity with which we were not born. They promised me a heaven I didn't ask for and threatened me with a hell worse than this life. My despair was as immense as my ignorance.

I had no appetite, just constant tiredness and sleepiness. Sometimes I would fall asleep for a few moments while teaching the girls and helping them with their homework. When I opened my eyes, I didn't know how long I had been asleep, but when I saw that they were still doing their work, I realized it had only been a few moments. I looked pale, spending my days barely eating a few bites and leaving my plate unfinished at lunch or dinner. I felt weak, and inside I wondered when I would finally die.

One morning, after serving breakfast to the family, I was sitting with Anne having our tea and scones when the sudden opening of the door broke the silence between us.

-Who do you think you are to decide how to live your life? You're skin and bones, you look like a ghost haunting the house.' Anne brings a plate of porridge. This devilish little woman is going to feed herself, even if she has to beat her like a beast.

Anne quickly got up to fetch the food, while I just stared at the lady, wondering if she was genuinely concerned or if she only cared about keeping me alive for some reason.

She came over to me in two strides, and before I could stop her, she took my jaw in her hands and made me open my mouth. Anne, still surprised by what was happening, brought her the bowl of oatmeal. The lady took the spoon in one hand and began to feed me.

She moved my jaw, pushing the food into my mouth and making me swallow. I took her hand, which was holding my face, and pushed it away abruptly.

A slap crossed my face and I felt the burning sensation on my cheek. When I turned my gaze away from the blow, I saw the kitchen knife on the counter and stared at it, wanting to grab it. The hatred inside me made me see that I could do it and stab this damn woman. But just thinking about it, having the vivid image of stabbing the knife into her body, made my whole being tremble, as if lightning had struck me and made me shake with electricity in every tiny part of my body.

I gave up, frightened by my own feelings, by what was happening to my body at that moment. All the hatred of that woman was as if it invaded me and became flesh in me. Somehow I distanced myself from my body with my mind and let her do it.

I swallowed each spoonful as the food overflowed from the corners of my lips and some of it fell on my clothes. Satisfied, the lady dropped the spoon on the table and, without taking her eyes off me, said

-You're going to eat whether you like it or not. I don't care if it's cow shit or food, you're not going to die until I say so.

He looked at Anne and ordered her:

-Take care of it, it will be your responsibility to make sure he eats.

She left, and just as she had entered, the door slammed shut with a loud bang. My chest was heaving up and down, and I thought my heart was going to explode. Anne went to fetch a cloth and gave it to me without saying a word. She cleaned the table with another cloth and refilled the bowl with porridge.

She said to me in a low but firm voice: 'Now eat up, or you'll just make this woman end up beating you to death.'

But as she said it, her gaze showed that she was blaming me for the situation, as if it were all my fault, and I didn't know what I had done wrong. I didn't understand why; what I had done to deserve all this.

My anguish turned into resentment. Revenge did not appeal to me because it would not change my reality. I was angry at the world around me, at the people around me, those who despised me on the one hand and, on the other, the people in town who were happy, or at least seemed to be. I envied families; they had what I had lost and would surely never have. The shadows cast by my pain enveloped me in those days.

They were dark months, full of doubts, letting each day pass as if I were serving a sentence in a prison with invisible bars.

Mr. Santonstall had taken me to my house to collect some belongings that I wished to keep. As the administrator of my estate and my guardian, I could not object. I took some mementos, including clothes belonging to my mother and me, a small oil portrait of my mother and me that my father had commissioned during our stay in Holland on our way to America, and an etching depicting our family in a rural landscape. These were invisible threads that kept me connected to them, true treasures for my soul. I had to leave my father's few pieces of furniture and tools behind; they would be sold to increase my dowry, and the humble house my father had built would be rented out until Mr. Saltonstall saw fit. The money would be enough to cover the expenses my upkeep entailed for his family. As a young woman, I could not decide or manage the money, much less since my father had signed over guardianship of me to my benefactor.

No one offered me comfort, neither Anne nor anyone else in the village came to give me a little warmth or even a hint of pity. I was a ghost that no one saw. The contempt I received on a daily basis shaped my character, and I began to despise everyone myself, giving every person I came across a look of disdain. People began to see me as arrogant and started to whisper about how bad I looked, but I had the tolerance that grief gives you, and when the minister heard the gossip, he saved my image by saying that I was a young woman who was overcoming the pain of losing my parents. Without my knowing it, some sense of reason and humanity protected me at that time. The man of faith suggested to some girls my age that they approach me, urging them to bring me back and accompany me on the good Christian path.

So, when the sermon was over, they allowed me to stay for a while in the company of a small group of girls, watched from a distance by some women as they chatted about recipes and sewing. At first, I was terribly annoyed to be with them. They talked nonstop about things that didn't interest me at all. I found them dull, unfunny, banal, and even a little stupid. How wrong I was. If anyone was stupid, it was me.

I believed that only my miserable world existed, that everyone else lived peaceful and happy lives, that joy was for others, those who accepted norms and rules with gratitude because they made their lives orderly and secure. I was so immersed in my shadows that I did not see the pain or sadness of others.

Every Sunday, the Sabbath was observed, beginning on Saturday afternoon and ending at sunset on Sunday; worldly activities were forbidden, it was a day for prayer and reflection in community, so we would gather together while families had lunch and socialized. Rather than observing the day with solemnity and rigor, many took it as an excuse to engage in public relations, business, or simply gossip.

Meanwhile, I struggled with my own emotional confinement. The young women didn't pay much attention to my poor conversation and my silences. My contempt for finding myself in that situation, which I didn't need to be in, gradually disappeared without me realizing it. I listened to them, but my attention to their stories grew as they recounted their lives and feelings. They weren't so different from me; we suffered the same thing in different ways.

We were all between thirteen and fifteen years old. Two of them were fatherless orphans. I remember their names, their faces are etched in my memory. Mary and Sarah. One of them had sadness etched in her eyes. We never knew exactly why, whether it was the loss of her father or her mother who enveloped her in strange daily lies about insignificant things, confusing her at every turn. The other had a rebellious and defiant spirit even more noticeable than mine.

They were thirteen and fourteen years old, respectively. I was already fifteen, and life had thrown the strongest storms at me. My sixteenth birthday was approaching, and I didn't see anything on the horizon that would make things better.

Another of the young women, Elizabeth, was fifteen, just like me. She was a happy, cheerful, and innocent girl. Her parents had no intention of marrying her off, as she was the youngest of four daughters. They were saving her to care for them in their old age.

Then there was Clarice, the daughter of one of the most prominent men in society. She was thin and somewhat awkward. She was always eating cakes or sweets. Being the daughter of a wealthy and influential family in the community, she felt she was above the rest of us. Devout to the extreme, she never stopped criticizing anyone if she thought they had strayed from Christian rules. It was clear that she felt she was God's most devout daughter and was convinced that her place in heaven was assured. She was exasperating, certainly, but for some reason I saw her as so sincere and so demanding of herself in her devotion that I couldn't dislike her. I don't think it was admiration. I was filled with surprise and even a little envy at the security and peace of mind that her rigid ideas gave her. Deep down, she naively believed everything without questioning anything in her faith, and despite her arrogance, I felt that she had a good heart.

It was a day like any other, one of them, the exasperating Clarice, was excited to tell us some news.

-Have you heard about the terrible thing that happened?' She said it as if she liked the fact that she was announcing, or perhaps the excitement of having something to talk about and being the one to say it, something that happened to her a lot.

-No, tell us-we urged her to begin the story.

-A certain Alexander and a Thomas Robert from Plymouth were banished, they say, for filthy, rude behaviour between them.

-What do you mean by filthy, rude?'-asked Sarah, the defiant young woman, always ready to throw an ironic word or a bold attitude at the most "devout" of us.

-What men and women do between themselves.

-Kissing? Mary wanted to know.

-That and much more.

-They planted their seed in each other, and witnesses say that John Alexander had already tried it with other boys.

-That's disgusting.

Another commented in a low voice-Like the daughter of Mendame, a merchant on the high street, who was convicted of fornication with an Indian named Tinsin. She was sentenced to be whipped by the tail of a cart through the streets of the city and to wear an AD badge, which, if she was found without it, would be branded on her forehead. I don't know how they didn't sentence them all to death.

-Yes, and this Alexander was sentenced to severe flogging, then they burned his shoulder with a hot iron and then he was banished; the other one, Tomás Robert, was sentenced to severe flogging but they didn't exile him, I think because of his family, but he was forbidden to own land within the colony.

-And worst of all, he's coming to live here.

-Are you sure?

-Yes, I heard my father say it; he was telling my mother in the kitchen.

-What's wrong with that, really?-I said, letting my thoughts run free.

They all stared at me, wide-eyed, as if Satan were speaking through my mouth. One of them turned pale, another silenced me with her gaze. Clearly, it had not been an appropriate thing to say.

My romantic dreams amounted to a poor understanding of encounters with men, evasive glances, an internal heat that enveloped my body, cold sweat, and above

all, gazing into the distance with a desire for I don't know what, but the presence of another, even if far away, eased my unease. I didn't know when I had felt it, or for whom. I didn't remember. But I was certain that I knew the feeling.

-Sorry, I was just asking- I said to prevent the conversation from turning to me.

-God created man and woman, and anything that does not follow God's command is a terrible sin- added kind Mary, who was giving me the shocking news.

-But if love exists as God teaches us, what does it matter if you are a man or a woman?

-The relationship between a man and a woman is only for the purpose of starting a family, having children, and being good Christians.

-And what will you do when you get here?

-I don't know, I don't think they'll let him build or give him land, his parents deny him as their son.

-I suppose he'll have a miserable life - Elizabeth felt sorry for him.

-Will anyone talk to him? - Sad eyes, as I called him, felt sorry for the unknown young man.

-The minister will take care of him to guide him in the teachings of God.

-I think a new minister is coming.

'What?' I asked, surprised.

-Yes, the men of the village disagree with many of this minister's ideas, especially regarding the Indians-replied the gangly Clarice.

They continued to discuss the subject, revelling in their criticism of the sinners and filthy men who inhabited this wild land.

I was left thinking about the minister, feeling a wave of sadness that the only man after my father from whom I had received a little compassion and respect was no longer in the church.

I felt the weight of loneliness again. It was becoming real.

They also commented on the brother of one of them who had had to pay a fine of twelve pence for smoking secretly in the barn. It was forbidden to smoke anywhere—the outhouse, the road, the barn, the street—and for smoking anywhere more than a mile from home, and if they caught someone a second time, the fine increased to two shillings.

I used to watch Mr. Stanford when he smoked his pipe. He did it alone at his desk, and I always wanted to try it. What was it like to smoke? It had a special smell, like walnut wood. It was strange, but I liked to smell it. I would walk by or stand outside near his office window to smell it.

I kept it a secret. Although I liked the girls, it was better to be wary. There was always some snitch who liked to incriminate someone.

-What if... he does it with a sheep?

We all turned our gaze to the girl with sad eyes.

-What do you mean? Did you see someone doing that?

-No... No. I just asked out of curiosity- She hesitated to answer, but I was sure she had seen someone in particular.

-Be careful where your curiosity takes you,-said the lanky, devout girl, calling everyone to order as usual.

The conversation ended abruptly when the elders called us because the cars were starting to leave and people were returning to their homes.

Some time later, Alexander arrived, the subject of our gossip. I was surprised by how handsome he was, a young man of about seventeen, a little older than me, with gentle manners and an intelligent, sharp gaze. Silent, he did not talk to anyone or seek to do so, and he settled into the minister's house. A few days later, the minister left for his new post, subtly expelled by internal politics with words of gratitude but false friendship, and the new minister they had so desired arrived. He was a rigid man with abundant gray hair and extremely radical views.

However, I was struck by how willing he was to become the young man's tutor. We all thought he would whip him every day, but against all odds, he was extremely kind to him. He used to say that with good and holy words, everyone would return to the path of the Lord. As the months went by, no one remembered why the young man had arrived. He remained discreet and did not interact much with the community. The relationship between the minister and him, in my opinion, had certain ups and downs. But no one said anything, no one hinted at anything. It was enough for the community that the minister was exaggerated in his sermons, harsh in his judgments, and a tireless defender of dogma. Young Alexander was more than just a sinner; he was now a devotee of the benefits of being close to the minister.

Some time later, rumors began to spread, which the minister quickly silenced. It was said that Robert, Alexander's lover, who had not been banished, had hanged himself from a tree. The horrified Plymouth community had drilled holes in the tree.

They said that his soul remained there, gazing at the horizon. Surely even today he is still standing there, gazing at a changing horizon, streets, buildings, constructions, other buildings, demolitions, a road, a park, a house. He watches time pass without time, blaming himself, unable to leave this world in search of peace.

The community followed the daily routine, sweeping unpleasant matters under the rug, hoping to eventually get rid of the trash. Meanwhile, life went on. In the port in those days, there was great excitement because more horses and, boldly, the first oxen were arriving on several ships that had moored in the bay. The men were agitated and anxious, forgetting for a while the details of the events that usually occurred.

My life also had a respite. I was no longer the center of the Lady's frustration. She was worried, or rather busy, examining young women as possible future wives for her older sons. She was calculating the benefits and costs of these unions. Her husband informed her of the best families to join, always thinking about what was best for his business.

John only cared that she was pretty and submissive, an ornament that wouldn't bother him and would fulfill his obligations to his parents as God intended.

James, on the other hand, wasn't interested in the matter at all; he would accept whatever his mother decided without question.

"Unless there is a union of hearts and a bond of affection, it is not marriage in fact, but in appearance and name, and they will live in a house like two poisons in a stomach, and one will always be sick of the other." The minister repeated this in every sermon during those days when he was aware of and acted as a mediator between families seeking to marry off their children. Those negotiations were a matter of politics and transactions, where the minister, in the name of God, sought divine grace from the donations of the families he could best accommodate. The lady, busy with such an important issue for the future of her family, gave many of us in the house a break.

More than caring about the wives she chose for marriage, or values such as submission, love, respect, support, building a home, and raising children, a life guided by religious and moral principles, what she was really looking for was a civil contract that would voluntarily submit to her authority with social responsibility and good public relations that would increase the family's wealth and her husband's status.

It was Sunday at noon as we gathered again with the young women after church when the lanky, devout young woman approached us with a knowing look.

-Tell me, Nelly, what do you know about James?

-What do you mean?

-What is he like? What does he like? He seems so serious and handsome, from what I can see.

-Why are you suddenly interested in him?

-I'm sixteen now, and Mrs. Saltonstall has been talking to my mother. Soon her husband will speak to my father about a possible marriage with James.

-And do you like the idea?

-Of course, I love the idea. What do you think?

-Not much-I paused, unsure whether to tell her the truth about my feelings towards him. I detested him, but the young woman was so enthusiastic about the idea that I feared my words would dampen her spirits. 'I can't tell you much, I don't have much contact with him. I interact more with the girls because I teach them language and history.

-And what are my future sisters-in-law like?

-They're girls, unbearably childish.

-Oh! Why do you say that? I love children; in fact, I want to have lots of them.

-Don't you think about getting married one day?

-To be honest, I've never thought about it. I like teaching. Maybe I could go to the city and be a teacher.

-There you could marry a teacher, it would be wonderful. An ideal couple.

Mientras conversábamos yo pensaba que realmente a los ojos de la señora podría resultar un excelente matrimonio. La joven era extremadamente devota y anhelaba formar una familia. Pensé que tal vez tendría una amiga si así fuera; pero lo descarté al instante, podía imaginármela como la futura Señora Saltonstall tan rígida e implacable como la señora.

-Don't tell the others what we talked about; nothing is certain yet. Pray for me, so that it comes true-With a smile on her lips, I could only smile back. We joined the rest of the young women who were talking about patterns for making new clothes.

When I returned home, my conversation with the young woman had not gone unnoticed by the lady of the house. She called me to her husband's desk and, without beating around the bush, began to question me.

-I saw you talking to Clarice -The lanky young devotee was clearly the object of his desires.

-Yes, the former minister suggested we meet after each sermon to discuss the scriptures and the feminine duties we must perform.

-I can imagine. What did you talk about today?

-We talked about some new patterns for a skirt.

-I would prefer that you no longer meet with the young women, particularly Clarice. She is likely to be part of our family in the future, and you will realise that you are not on the same level of grace as she is.

Her words hurt me. Faced with the prohibition of hanging out with girls my age, I realized how important they were in my life. But it was true that if Jane married Clarice, I would not have a friend in the house, but a new enemy. With that young woman's personality, she would do everything possible to be part of the family, and my place in it would be at the bottom of the most used pot in the kitchen.

-I understand, lady.

-There's no need to mention this to the minister; it wasn't his decision, but that of the previous minister. You are at an age where you need to stay at home so that you don't go astray. Your defiant nature causes enough problems already. It is very difficult for me to make you pleasing in the eyes of God. Now go, I have a lot to do.

I withdrew and as I turned away, I couldn't help but let a few tears roll down my cheeks. There was no way to find peace in front of this woman. What little air I had, she made sure disappeared, suffocating me in her clutches.

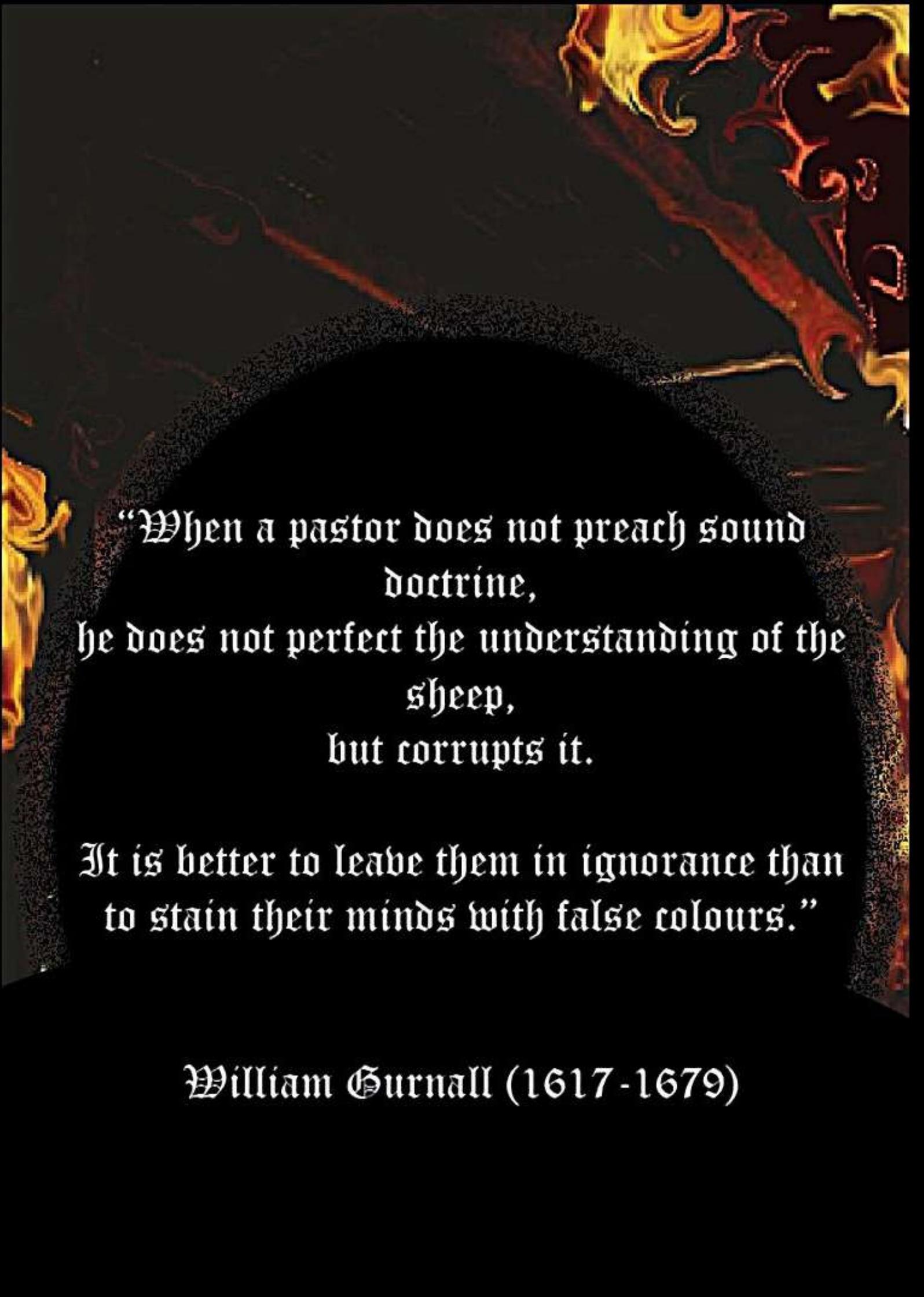
The Lady only had pity for her four sons, her daughters a nuisance that she had to mold in a Christian way so that they could marry profitably one day. Her hopes for divine salvation were her four offspring; only in them would her devout life be reflected. Now her priority was the eldest, John and James. She made decisions about their futures, including their actions and thoughts, where they would live, when they would marry, and with the women she would choose. Her puritanism hid greed and perverse manipulation.

Attentive to every glance, every word, every attitude, she moved each member of the family like pawns on a chessboard.

Her home was her world, her husband remaining aloof, having his own world of alliances, betrayals, and hypocrisy among the community leaders.

# Chapter 3





“When a pastor does not preach sound  
doctrine,  
he does not perfect the understanding of the  
sheep,  
but corrupts it.

It is better to leave them in ignorance than  
to stain their minds with false colours.”

William Gurnall (1617-1679)

*I begin to experience a certain nostalgia to the touch; I am not absent, but my presence does not weigh heavily. There are different versions of me around me, as if they were being rewritten eternally without being destroyed. I remain anchored in my emotional experiences, deeply contemplating my grief, vibrating in an atmosphere of healing. My memory is present, recoding itself.*

The days turned into months, and just as I had coped with my mother's death by working on the ship, life on land gave me more to do. Between teaching the girls and doing housework, time clumsily stitched up the wounds in my soul.

The nights were the worst. While the others slept, I stared at the wooden ceiling, feeling the echo of every word I had heard during the day. The pressure suffocated me, and I cried, silencing my own moans. My will faltered, but my essence remained intact. I had nowhere to run, no real refuge except my thoughts, which refused to give up completely.

It was a sunny day. I was going to get eggs from the chicken coop when I saw James. His hair was messy and his face was red and sweaty. He was rolling up his linen shirt sleeves and adjusting his suspenders with an annoyed gesture, as if he had gotten dirty doing some chore and was trying to clean himself up as he walked briskly. He looked at me menacingly. I thought I would be the target of his fury for some strange reason. He passed so close to me that I almost fell, thinking he would run me over. He barked at me:

-Move, you useless woman!

I said nothing and continued on my way to the barn to look for the chickens. Somewhat angry at the gratuitous aggression but not showing it, I swallowed hard.

Since my father had died, my orphanhood gave rise to these gestures and attitudes to a greater or lesser degree in the members of the family towards me, each time in an increasingly contemptuous and hostile manner. Even the girls, copying the atmosphere that was created around me, were more insolent in their responses or when I corrected them in class; their looks became defiant. I endured it almost unconsciously, locked in my own mind, so detached from what was happening that I didn't care. Perhaps I was beginning to believe that my existence was a nuisance to the world.

I entered the barn, heading for the chickens with my basket in hand, and saw a shadow behind my left shoulder. When I turned around, I saw Eleanor curled up among the bales of straw, crying and trembling. With her hands clasped in front of her face, she was whispering a prayer, her words almost inaudible.

I saw her disheveled, her bonnet askew, as was her dress.

-What's wrong, Eleanor? Why are you here?

She looked up and stared at me with wide eyes, perhaps surprised to see me there. She looked down and answered me fearfully.

-I came to pray. I wanted to be alone.

-On my way here, I ran into James. Did you see him?

It took her a few minutes to answer.

-Yes, he was cleaning the barn when I arrived.-He looked angry.

-Did something happen?'

As she got up from among the bales of straw, she didn't look at me.

-Nothing, I just want to be alone.

Without giving me time to say anything else, she turned and ran off toward the house.

Everything seemed strange to me, her attitude and James's. I was sure something had happened; a pain in my stomach made me feel the situation was making me uncomfortable, and I didn't know why.

I went to find the chickens and collected the eggs in the basket, still thinking of James's hot, sweaty face. The situation with Eleanor, her tears, and that sudden change in mood, sadness and emptiness, with the anxiety of leaving in my presence.

When I returned home, I went to the kitchen to help Anne with lunch. It was in the afternoon when I rejoined the girl and her sister for the day's lesson.

I turned my attention to Eleanor. Alice was enthusiastically reciting one of the psalms I had given them both as homework. Meanwhile, I watched her sister. She had been withdrawn for days, always excessively sleepy during classes. I remembered that she ate hastily at dinner and breakfast, which led her mother to continually scold her, warning her that gluttony was a serious sin in the eyes of God.

When Alice finished reciting the psalms, I instructed them to draw some pictures of their parents, siblings, or whoever they wanted.

I thought I'd give you a little distraction from memorizing so many psalms for your daily homework.

Alice, as always enthusiastic, concentrated on the task. Eleanor, in front of the board, was blank. She began to bite her nails, and I told her not to. Reluctantly, she stopped and began to draw. It was then that I noticed the hand she was drawing with; her wrist was red, like a bruise. I took both of her wrists and noticed that the other hand wasn't as red, so I questioned her. I wanted to know

the reason, not so much out of fear of being blamed for hurting her, but out of genuine concern for her.

-How did you do this?

Her sister stopped what she was doing to look at the girl's hands. Eleanor abruptly pulled her hands away from mine and looked at me with genuine hatred.

-Playing.

-Playing what? –looking at both girls. Alice looked at the floor, her body stiff and silent.

-With ropes, I had to hold both sides very tightly because the rope was heavy.

-Is that true, Alice?

Her sister nodded.

-Then I trust that your brothers Henry and George haven't been bothering you.

-No, they said in unison.

To change the subject, I looked at the drawings they had made. Eleanor had drawn a face without eyes and a somewhat blurred body. It caught my attention, and I asked her:

-Why didn't you make eyes for him?

-I don't know.

-Who is it?

-It's me.

-If you don't make eyes, you won't be able to see.

-I don't want to see.

I was very young, but all that time watching the girls grow up and teaching them, this was something unusual. Eleanor didn't want to see something. I understood that there were things she didn't want to see. I didn't want to see many things either, let alone suffer them.

-What is it you don't want to see?

-It's none of your business. You're not my mother. You're an orphan who lives off our charity. You're nobody to ask me for explanations.

The conversation was impossible to continue; she didn't trust me. Somehow she felt that I might judge or punish her. I decided to drop the subject. When class ended, the girls left to have their snack, and I remained thoughtful, thinking that these girls had grown up and would soon become more enemies in this house. But what saddened me most was that, having been so innocent, they would become cruel, arrogant young women, worthy of this family.

It was at dinner when I saw James again, cold and arrogant as always, listening to his father recounting the latest events in the city. I was serving them soup, and after serving the younger children, I had John and James left. When I served the latter, he bumped his shoulder against my arm and spilled some soup from the ladle.

As if something in him had been held back, he looked at me with contempt, openly accusing me of being useless.

-Mother, how long are we going to put up with this sinner? The longer you wait, the stronger the sin becomes and the deeper its roots grow.

-I apologise, Mr James- I said, trying to restrain my instinct to shout at him that it was his fault, or perhaps his intention, to make me spill the soup.

The lady did not miss the opportunity to mould my character:

-Nelly, clumsiness speaks of your lack of responsibility in your tasks. You had better focus on reading. Holy. The best food is the word of God, so today you shall have nothing but water for dinner to cleanse yourself, your soul, and feed yourself with the Holy Scriptures.

James did not need manipulation; he imposed punishment directly himself or through his mother. He gave me a satisfied look; he had been the architect of the correction, his mother merely the executor.

Somehow, he warned me that he had enough power to humiliate and punish me at will, even for something silly or an unintentional mistake.

Sin was not tolerated; wherever it appeared, it threatened punishment from which there was no return, and his gaze made that very clear to me.

I didn't need to go to my room without dinner, allowing myself an act of rebellion and still fearing, deep down inside, that God would judge me badly. I didn't read the Bible as my punishment. It was a test of endurance. I needed to keep finding ways to hold on to my identity, resisting in silence, in the small spaces of freedom that only I could recognize.

In the morning, the noise of my stomach woke me up. The sun had not yet risen when I was already in the kitchen with the excuse of helping with breakfast. I just wanted to satisfy the hunger I had been carrying since the day before.

Since it was Sunday, there was a lot to prepare for noon. Anne appeared a little later, still sleepy. It was a busy morning, coming and going, fetching flour from the pantry and eggs from the chicken coop. The morning was cold, but having eaten a double portion of breakfast to satisfy her hunger from the night before, she was in much better spirits.

Everything went on as it did every Sunday. The minister's vehement and effusive sermon, threatening eternal punishment, made time pass slowly and eternally every time I went to church. I missed the previous minister, who exhorted us to

compassion, solidarity, and to think of others as our equals. Those sermons had left their mark on my soul because they added to the mark left by my parents. Now, however, it was torture to listen to the shouting accompanied by the gestures and gesticulations of this man who in no way seemed to me to be a shepherd of God.

When I finished, I joined the girls. I remembered what the lady had told me: to avoid meeting up with them because I wasn't their class. I turned a deaf ear; I wasn't going to give up so easily those hours when my loneliness was eased, having learned to laugh at the simple, joyful things I shared with these other young women. Behind the church, we sat on some steps while the older women stayed at the tables, chatting after the meal. Mrs. Saltonstall was busy with her public relations, and her husband was discussing business with the other men. They didn't take my existence into account, which gave me a break.

Henry and George ran around with other children competing in their games, while the older boys stood shyly watching other girls.

The group of girls I was with weren't the most popular or the prettiest, so some of us were comfortable and others felt embarrassed. At that time, Clarice was starting to distance herself. Her future engagement meant that her mind was preoccupied with other concerns. She would stay with us for a while and then, using any excuse, she would go and join the older women because she already felt different. She was preparing to be a young married woman, busy with her home, her husband, and bringing children into the world.

The four of us were laughing about Clarice, who was absent, and her dreams of getting married. One of us imagined her obese with four children constantly challenging them and chasing them with a Bible, another mimicked the scene we had all imagined together, ridiculing it.

When suddenly we heard screams. Total chaos. The men ran, a few grabbed their weapons, the women ran looking for their children, while the minister and a group of ten or fifteen men headed into the fields toward the stream that flowed into the small lake in the village.

The four of us stood silently, waiting expectantly, as we saw Clarice approaching, looking somewhat distraught. Her voice was broken and agitated as she brought us up to speed on what was happening.

-They say they found a child at the mouth of the stream.

-So what?- we asked.

-They say he's dead.

We were stunned, we didn't know what to say. Anne approached us; we hadn't seen her during the entire religious ceremony, she usually stood at the back with the other workers.

-Nelly, we have to go home, it's urgent. There's been a tragedy.

-What are you talking about, Anne?

-The Lady sent me to find the girls, Alicia and Eleanor, but I couldn't find the latter. We spent a while calling her everywhere, thinking she had gone home. John and James went to look for her but couldn't find her there.

The five of us looked at her, not understanding what the boy's death had to do with Eleanor's disappearance. We sensed there was a connection, and I felt very afraid.

-What does this have to do with the child they just found?

-It's not a child-Anne said, sobbing-...It's Eleanor.

We all stifled a cry. Two of them took my hands and looked at me, waiting for my reaction.

I was blank, I couldn't understand what she had told us. How was it possible? Why did Eleanor go to the stream? Why was she alone? What happened? When did she leave without anyone noticing?

Anne wanted to take me home, but I refused. I ran off, leaving them all behind, but Anne ran after me, not to stop me but to accompany me. She also wanted to go to the creek rather than obey the lady's order to go home.

I don't know how long it took me to get there, I just ran and started to slow down when I saw the group of men pulling a bundle out of the water. I approached a few meters away and saw the body of little Eleanor, her clothes wet and dripping, her face pale and her eyes open. The pain in my chest was as if my heart were being squeezed, as if a knife were piercing it.

Mr. Saltonstall was holding her in his arms, John and James were behind him, astonished like the rest of the men. There was nothing to be done, no one could come up with an explanation. The only women there were Anne and me. No one called our attention or reprimanded us for being there; everyone was truly very distressed.

Those of us who were like a procession slowly made our way to Saltonstall's house. When the Lord and his sons entered the house with the girl, we all stayed outside. The minister, as the authority figure, organized the men: some were to search the surrounding area for any suspects, while others were to fetch the doctor to verify the girl's death. Meanwhile, from inside the house, we could hear the lady's screams and inconsolable crying.

Anne pushed me into the kitchen, but we entered through the back door so as not to disturb the family or participate in the pain they were experiencing. We poured ourselves some water and sat silently at the table, waiting uncertainly for the next events to unfold.

I don't know how many hours I sat there remembering Eleanor's last moments. At some point, Anne started making soup for the family and for us, while I was lost in my memories. Thinking about how strange the girl had been those days, her silences, absent in her thoughts. And guilt began to take root in me. Why didn't I insist more, asking her what was wrong? What was she thinking at that moment? Because I couldn't believe it was an accident, as they were saying. The minister and the justice official couldn't find anyone around, and the hypotheses arose more from gossip than from real evidence.

Eleanor didn't usually play in the stream; she wasn't interested in playing in nature or seeking out solitary moments or places like this one where she had been found, let alone risking drowning. She was extremely obedient, more out of fear than conviction, but I was sure there was something else. Although I remembered the day I found her alone in the barn. Could that change in her character be possible?

When I served dinner, a simple soup given the circumstances, only the rest of the children and their older siblings were present. Everyone was silent and saddened, but James's thoughtful yet stern face caught my attention. I had never seen him nervous before, but this time I could subtly observe his nerves in the movements of his hands and how he insistently adjusted the strand of hair on his face. Surely I was the only one who could notice this slight change in his feelings, because everyone else was absorbed in their own thoughts.

At that moment, it struck me like a bolt of lightning, the image of that day rushing back to me, his shirt poorly buttoned, one of his suspenders hanging from his pants, his flushed appearance and reddened face. Then, finding Eleanor frightened and equally disheveled, her skirt covered in hay, her hair tousled. There was a strange connection between one event and the other. I felt a bitter taste and my stomach churned, a strange physical sensation in my body, but I couldn't understand why these images were coming to me, why my mind and body were disjointed in different emotions.

When I returned to the kitchen, I left the utensils on the table and sat down to continue remembering details that I hadn't considered until that moment.

Another image came to me, when we were leaving the church and I saw James walking away, followed a few meters behind by Eleanor, taking a different path than the one we were all taking toward the house.

When they rang the bell from the dining room to let me know they had finished dinner and I should come and clear the table, I came back to reality and headed over there. The younger children weren't there. John went to the library, and James stood by the table, drumming his fingers on the tablecloth. When he felt me come in, he looked up and stared at me in a strangely threatening way, and fear ran through my body, but I pretended nothing was wrong. I had gotten used to hiding my fear and terror, because when they saw my weakness, the words

and punishments could double, so I stood firm, shrugged my shoulders, and got on with the task at hand.

I stopped looking at him, but I could feel his gaze fixed on the back of my neck. Somehow, silently, without words, there was a tangible threat in the atmosphere. After a few minutes, he turned on his heels and headed for the stairs leading to the bedrooms.

Everyone was in their rooms. Night had fallen with a silence as heavy as a blanket. Lying in my bed, I entered a sea of nightmares, images of my parents, Eleanor appearing to me reciting her homework, dark landscapes, murmurs I didn't understand, disjointed images, incoherent situations. It was a night of terror, and when I woke up in the morning, I was so tired and exhausted as if I hadn't slept, and in fact, I hadn't rested at all.

The mourning for Eleanor had begun. I didn't know then that I would never again see any color other than the black of the mourning clothes.

At noon, Mr. Saltonstal met with the minister, the bailiff, and the doctor who determined the cause of death. There was a blow to her skull that resembled one that could have been caused by a falling stone. Drowning, surely after losing consciousness, was the result of her struggling in the water. Thus, the death of his daughter was resolved without further ado. It was determined that Eleanor had died accidentally, surely as a prank she had wandered away from her family to play by the stream and most likely slipped and was knocked unconscious, fainting in the water where she unfortunately drowned.

I was the only one who wasn't satisfied with that explanation, but I was nobody to argue with the conclusion they had reached. I was left with doubts and questions, with Eleanor's sad and lost gaze in her final moments. It occurred to me to ask myself, where was James that morning in the church? I remembered, as clearly as if I were reliving it, that he had been talking to Clarice under the watchful gaze of the women and men around them.

James had clearly not been with Eleanor that morning; the girl had not followed him anywhere nor had she been anywhere near him. It was confirmed that no children or adults had left the church grounds at lunchtime. Some girls claimed that Eleanor had wandered away from the group playing with ropes, heading toward some trees about ten meters away from where they were. They had seen her sitting under one of the trees, but then they couldn't remember her anymore; they had become engrossed in their games and laughter and had stopped paying attention to her.

When Mr. Saltonstall told us employees and maids what had happened, not because he owed us an explanation, but to avoid gossip among the staff, I got the feeling after hearing it that although the girl may have suffered an accident, something in her wanted to disappear, forget, and leave it behind.

The Lady and some women, including Anne, took care of washing the body and dressing it to place it in the coffin.

The procession to the cemetery would take place hours later, before sunset.

It was not a day for a funeral. The clouds moved slowly, the sun casting its last rays on the small coffin. The afternoon should have been gray, rainy, sad, mirroring the mood among those present. But compassionately, a clearing of light appeared. The children Henry, George, and Alice looked like small, rigid statues, silent, with their eyes downcast, standing next to their mother.

I had never seen the lady in such a state before, distraught, her eyes sunken from tears, yet her gaze was piercing, with a grimace of repressed hatred and anger. At her side, her husband stood serious, with an unshakeable coldness in the face of the spectacle.

John and James stood behind them, their hands clasped together, listening silently to the minister.

His face was pale, it was clear he hadn't slept, and if he had, he hadn't slept well. Why did he feel guilty? I didn't know, but my intuition was knocking at my mind, generating doubts, strange feelings that only left me with contempt and anger towards him and his whole family.

They had suffocated the girl with the demanding rules of the house, with the indifference of her father, the every man for himself attitude of each brother, and an uncompromising mother. But where did that leave me? A victim who survived the oppressive atmosphere day by day. If I couldn't save myself, how could I have saved her?

While the minister said the prayers, I remembered my father's funeral, which, unlike this one, had been attended by everyone who knew the family, which was almost the entire town.

My mother's death and how her body was embraced by the sea. Their deaths came to me and the three deaths weighed heavily on my soul. I couldn't stop my tears; they rolled down my face silently.

I don't know how long I had been lost in my thoughts when Alice tugged at my arm. I turned to look at her; she had such a sad and sweet little face. I put my hand on her shoulder; the funeral was over, I hadn't realized. I took her by the hand and walked behind the rest of the family and friends on the way back to the house.

That's when I saw Daniels and Davenport, my father's co-workers at the Saltonstall shipyard. I greeted them with a nod, and they responded in kind, but they were walking quickly toward me. I didn't feel like talking to anyone, let alone these two men I barely knew, but I couldn't be rude when they had been so kind when my father passed away.

They were humble, devout men. Hard workers who, because of their labor, were quiet and rough. Fathers who would give generations to Salem's future.

I slowed down and told Alice to hurry up and catch up with Anne, who was a few meters away from us. I didn't take my eyes off her until I was sure she had taken the woman's hand; the fear of losing another child terrified me.

I greeted the men kindly and took the opportunity to thank them for attending my father's funeral, which had been such a difficult time for me.

They looked at each other, and Daniels nudged Davenport's elbow slightly, urging him to speak. The man, somewhat nervous, cleared his throat and said to me with an anxious look:

-Señorita Nelly, Disculpe nuestra intromisión, no queremos incomodarla pero nos sentimos en la obligación, por el recuerdo de su padre que fue un muy buen hombre, en hacerle este comentario.

-What do you want to tell me?

-We wanted to let you know that the house and land acquired by your father are up for sale. We believe you are not aware of this, but if so, please excuse our boldness.

I didn't understand what they were saying. For sale? My father had let Lord Saltonstall lease it to cover the costs of guardianship, with the intention of returning the property to me later.

-The truth is that I wasn't aware of it. My father made it clear in writing what should be done with it: never put it up for sale. Mr. Santolstall never mentioned it to me.

-We imagined as much, which is why we wanted to warn you. But please don't mention Mr. Saltonstall to us. We don't want to lose our jobs; our families depend on us.

-Don't worry, I won't mention you. I promise, in memory of my parents. But I am immensely grateful to you for telling me this. God bless you.

-Likewise, Miss Nelly. We are sorry for the loss of Eleanor. She was your teacher, and we can imagine how fond you were of her. May God rest her soul. We bid you farewell and may our Lord Jesus Christ protect you.

-Thank you, likewise.

The anguish and sadness I felt gave way to a rush of anger and frustration at these men's words. I had not the slightest affection for Mr. Saltonstall. As a prominent member of our puritanical community, his facade was impeccable—a respected man, severe in his devotion, an example to the town.

But behind his image of righteousness, he had other motivations. While during the day he recited speeches about humility and virtue, at night at his desk he

joyfully counted his profits in secret. His greed led him to forge agreements with merchants that bordered on illegality, justifying everything with phrases such as "the Lord blesses cunning men." His faith was not spiritual, it was functional, using religion as a tool of control. He was the authority, but his wife was the iron fist. He did not pay much attention to his young children. Beyond ensuring that they absorbed the fear necessary to be obedient, he focused all his attention on James, because he felt that he had formed a reflection of himself. A son who understood the power and necessity of discipline; he considered him a useful instrument within the family. With John, on the other hand, he saw someone with potential, but he was irritated by his son's lack of rigor. He felt that he was not completely molded, he still perceived a certain autonomy and freedom of thought, so he used to be sarcastic, a way of challenging him.

His wife was indispensable to him, the pillar of the family who carried out the plans he had designed and executed to perfection.

After saying goodbye to Daniels and Davenport, I retraced my steps on the way home. I would have liked to confront Mr. Saltonstall right then and there, but it was neither the day nor the moment. We had just buried his daughter, and I couldn't ask for explanations on such a painful day. Even though he wasn't a loving father, he was grieving the loss, and humanly speaking, because of his affection for Eleanor, I had to honor her death and remain silent for the time being.

It was better to wait until I calmed down and let a few days pass. I would use that time to stay alert and make sure that what I had been told was true. Deep down, I hoped it wasn't true, not because I was afraid of thinking badly of the Lord, because I already had no respect for his image, but because of the fact that I would lose what my father had left me. To some it might seem like nothing, but to me it was everything. It was all I had, something my father had worked hard for, leaving behind our whole life in England.

How I wish my parents hadn't made that decision: to get on that ship in search of a better future! How I regretted that my parents hadn't been content with the life we had! But what I regretted most was my present situation.

A few days later, with the excuse of having to go buy some yarn at the village bazaar, I made my way to my old house. The Saltonstalls were still in mourning, and the lady of the house and the other members of the family did not pay much attention to what we servants were doing. Despite the pain we shared for the little girl, for all of us who worked in the house, it was a respite from the oppression and harassment we always received, especially from the lady of the house.

When I arrived at my house, I noticed that the grass was overgrown, one of the windows was broken, and it didn't look like anyone was living there. Mr. Saltonstall had told me that he was going to rent it out, but it was clear that no one had lived there since my father died.

I opened the door and entered the small dining room. Everything was intact but covered in dust. The fireplace showed no signs of having been used, and the furniture was in exactly the same place I remembered.

I found it strange. Why hadn't he rented it out? It wasn't difficult to do, as new settlers were constantly arriving in Salem. But this situation allowed me to ask my guardian what his plans were, without exposing the men who had warned me that something was wrong.

Grief inevitably overwhelmed me and I wept bitterly, but mistrust also grew within me. My future was in the hands of the Saltonstalls, and my mind had long been devising ways to escape the cage they had put me in. It wasn't easy being a woman, let alone a young woman. Men were the architects of our destiny; we didn't have many options. Our fathers, brothers, or guardians had the power to decide what place we would occupy in society.

I spent a long time rummaging through the trunks and small objects I hadn't taken with me. I took the opportunity to keep a small statuette, a crucifix that belonged to my mother, some handkerchiefs she had embroidered, and my father's glasses, which were still next to his bed.

I closed the door of the house, feeling sorry for the garden that had already died and the flowers that were no longer growing.

I quickly went to the bazaar and bought some threads without paying attention to the quality or price because they were just an excuse and I had to return with them in my basket.

I had to make good use of that day, so I headed to the shipyard. I knew Mr. Saltonstall was at home, so he wouldn't know I was there unless someone told him, but I would do my best to go unnoticed. I hoped to find Daniels or Davenport to find out a little more. Hopefully, I said to myself, they'll have something else to tell me.

I saw Davenport arranging some barrels. There was no one around him; he was alone, and I was grateful for that. I approached quickly to be as brief as possible, avoiding being seen by anyone. The shipyard was almost empty. The family's mourning had given the workers the day off, and only a couple of men had stayed behind as guards in case of any unforeseen events.

I approached him, and he was surprised to see me. We greeted each other politely, and without further ado, I began to ask him questions in a low voice.

-The thing is, my father left some assets in custody, which were supposed to be for me. What do you think Mr Saltonstall's intentions are?

The man crossed his arms, his expression tense.

-Yes. Your father's last wish was not for you to remain in that man's care, but he had no choice. Now Saltonstall claims that those assets do not exist, and his

intention was always to keep them for himself. That is why he is going to try to marry you.

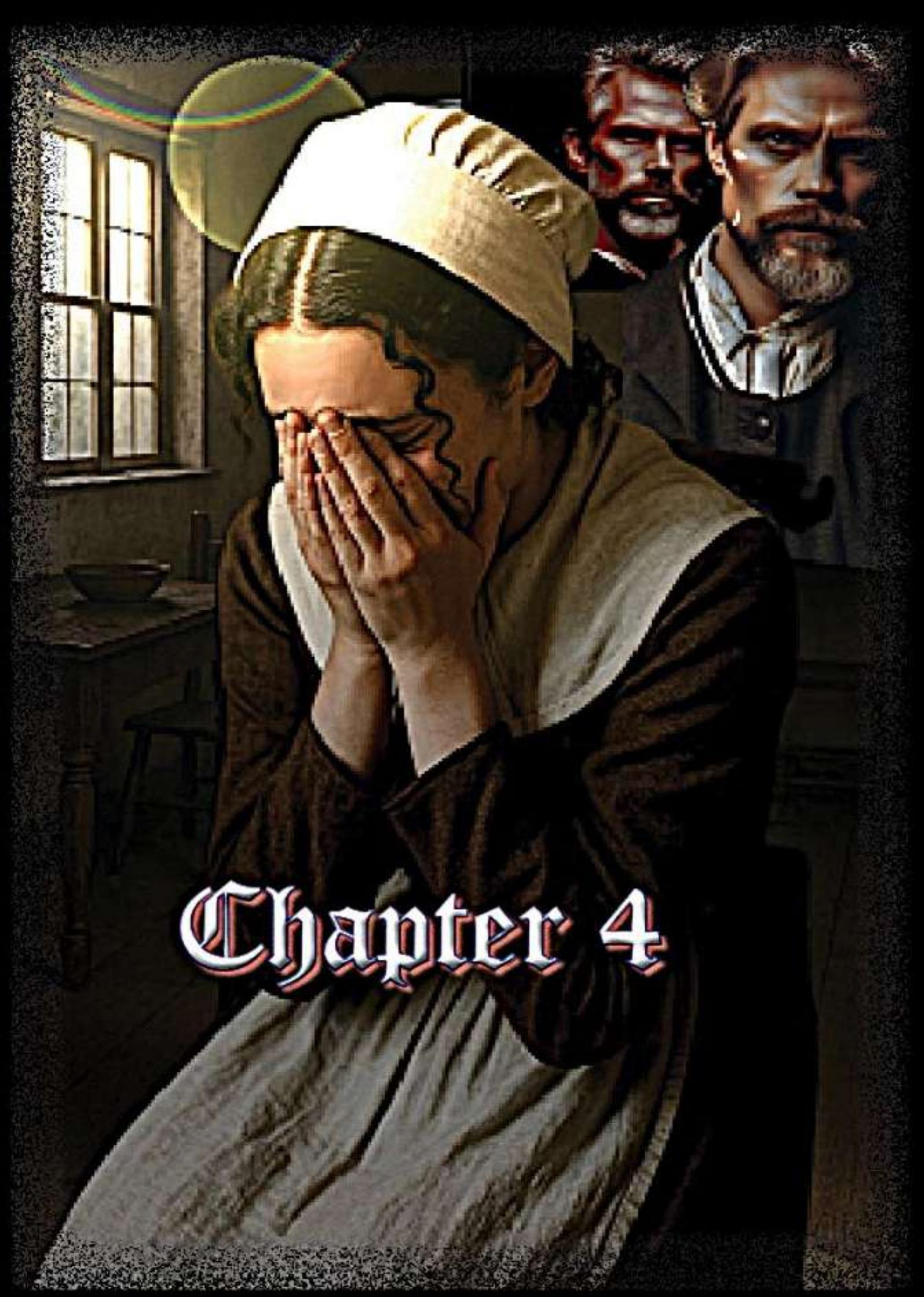
-So it wasn't my well-being. He just wanted a way to get rid of me while keeping what belonged to me. The man nodded gravely.

-That man is not a good guardian. He is an opportunist. He has handled everything to his own advantage. And be careful. If he can't marry you off, he will find another way to get you out of his way. He is not just an ambitious man. He is a man with power.

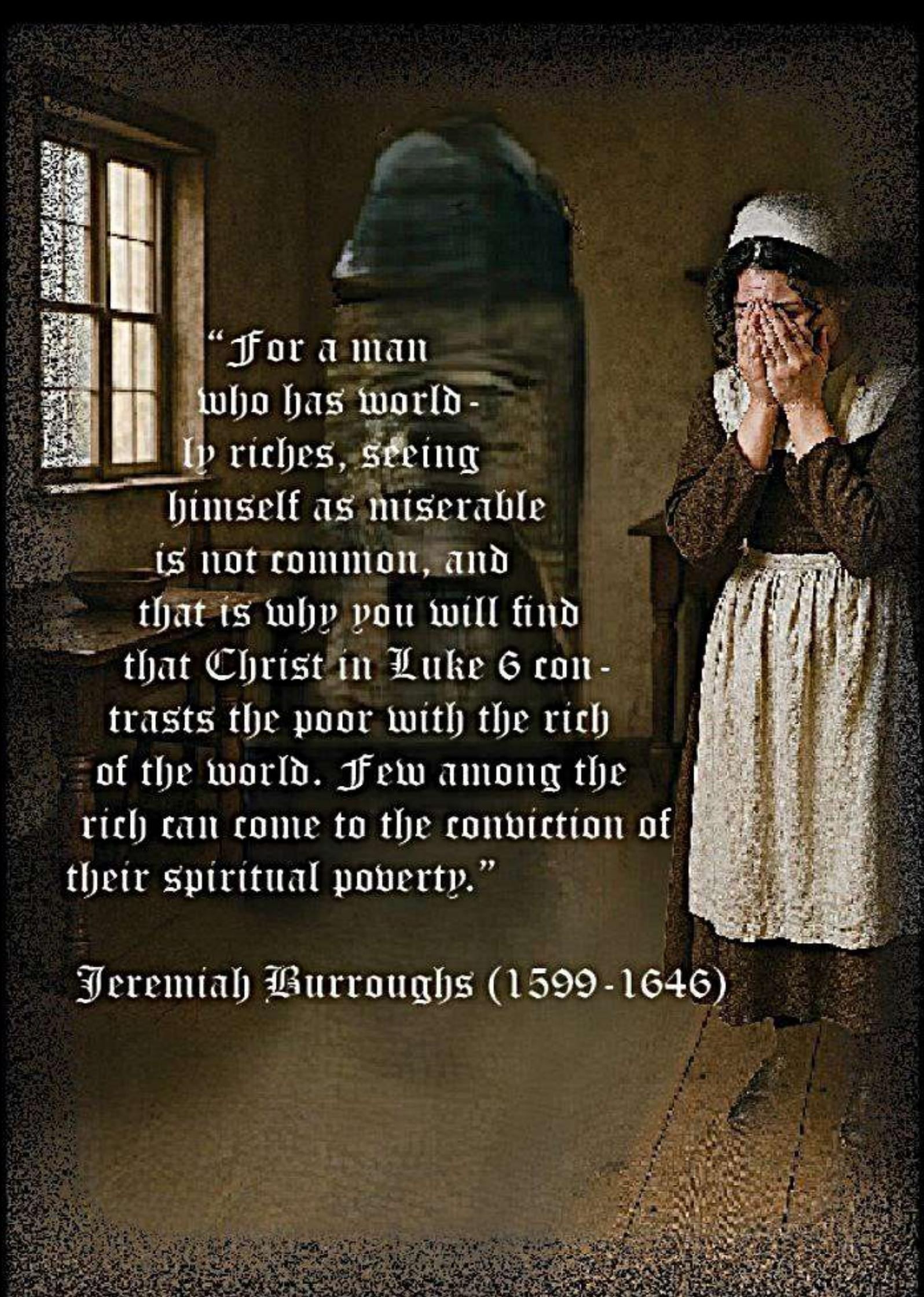
The man looked at me with some concern. My pulse was racing. I took a deep breath and, with a slight smile, thanked him for his good intentions. He asked me to keep this conversation a secret. I assured him that I would not expose him or his partner. I assured him that my parents in heaven were also grateful to them. We said goodbye quickly, and I ran back home to make up for the time I had lost searching for answers.

When I arrived at the Saltonstall house, I went to my little room and put away the souvenirs I had brought back. I went back to my chores so as not to attract attention while I thought about the ideal moment to confront Mr. Saltonstall.





# Chapter 4



“For a man who has worldly riches, seeing himself as miserable is not common, and that is why you will find that Christ in Luke 6 contrasts the poor with the rich of the world. Few among the rich can come to the conviction of their spiritual poverty.”

Jeremiah Burroughs (1599-1646)

*I inhabit internal dimensions while acting in the visible story, I don't know if they are memories or presences. I move through an atmospheric state that branches off into shared atmospheres, I observe what I didn't see, I hear what I didn't hear. I walk among them without being seen. I understand what I didn't understand.*

A few days later, one afternoon after lunch, the Lord was at his desk with some papers from his business. I knocked on the door and asked permission to enter. He looked up from his documents, indifferent, until he saw a kind of determination in my eyes. Raising an eyebrow, I said:

-I wanted to ask you if my father's property is leased. The property was to remain in his custody until I came of age or married.

-Your father trusted my judgement, Nelly. And in these times, a young woman alone cannot maintain a house without guidance.

-It is my intention to continue working as a teacher in the future. They have built a new school in the big city, and perhaps I could sell my father's house and move there.- It was an idea that had been forming in my imagination, a hope that had arisen on nights when I was looking for a way to escape my present situation.

-As far as I know, Governor Winthrop does not accept women at the new school.

-But there are opportunities as an external teacher for young children. I do not intend to stay here when I could be free.

-Be careful what you say. You speak as if you were a slave in this house. I remind you that you are under my care. Scripture teaches obedience, especially to those who watch over your soul.

-And also over my lands?

He looked at me as if he were seeing me for the first time. There was something about me that unsettled him. It wasn't fear, but rather an unexpected discomfort. For the first time, the shadow of his control was beginning to crack.

-It is not appropriate for a young lady to question her guardian. Your father gave me authority. And you, even without a husband, cannot exercise it. Your tone is dangerous. It could make one think that you are not in your right mind. And that, Nelly, has consequences.

-Legal or spiritual consequences? Because if it's the former, I have witnesses. And if it's the latter, I fear more for your soul than for mine.

The courage that anger brings was unknown to me until that day. I was beside myself. I didn't measure my words or my gestures. My body was not my own; it was all anger, pain, and frustration taking over my being and my mind.

-You don't know what you're saying. You're young. Impulsive. You need guidance. I'm going to talk to my wife. With Eleanor's passing, she hasn't been able to keep things running smoothly at home. And here we are... an ungrateful girl confronting me and questioning her elders' decisions.

-What I need is justice. And what you need is to remember that custody is not ownership. Nor is guardianship control.

-Who do you think you are?! Your father trusted me with everything. Don't force me to make decisions that will harm you.

-Do not force me to remind you that faith is no excuse for theft. Nor guardianship for abuse.

-You are playing with fire, girl.

-No. I am lighting the lamp that you extinguished.

What was the point of speaking if words crashed against walls that were not made to hear us? I had spoken my truth. I had spoken it with the voice my father had taught me to think for myself, questioning, analyzing the facts and the intentions of men. And yet, Mr. Saltonstall—that man who cloaked himself in verses like someone cloaks themselves in someone else's skin—had responded with threats wrapped in doctrine. There was no justice for me. Not there. Not then. The laws that surrounded me did not see a woman. They saw property in transit. A body that had to be handed over. A house that had to be emptied. My name was not enough. My reason was not enough. I was a daughter, but not an heir. I was a voice, but without authority. And he knew it. They all knew it when they signed the papers. Custody. What a false word. He did not guard my well-being. He guarded his ambition. And me, what did I guard? The memory of my parents. The dignity they had not yet taken from me. But with each passing day, I felt them closing in on me. As if the air itself obeyed their laws. As if the faith they taught me were just another chain. Where was God in all this? In the threat? In the silence? Or perhaps in that rage that kept me awake at night. I didn't want to be a martyr. I wanted to be free. And if I couldn't be free in that house, I would be a storm raging over their heads.

Mr. Saltonstall punched the desk, jumped up from his chair, and in two strides lunged at me. Unable to dodge him, he slapped me so hard that my head rang with a whistle that filled all my senses. I fell to the floor, and even in my dazed state, I could hear him shouting psalms at me.

He grabbed me by the arm and dragged me away from his desk, threatening that the punishment I deserved would soon befall me.

I stared at the door as I recovered from the blow I had received. John was a few feet away; I didn't know how long he had been there, but surely long enough.

John looked at me with contempt. He realized that I was stronger than I appeared, so instead of accusing me openly, he tried to confuse me.

-I think you've taken advantage of my father's kindness -she said with a mischievous smile, as if she were enjoying the scene she had witnessed.

I thought he would give me a speech to make me believe that there were things inside me that were truly impure. Trying to sow doubts in my mind, persuading me that my resistance was a sin disguised as pride. Even trying to gain my trust in a false act of closeness, with the intention of betraying me at the first opportunity, to enjoy the moment of my downfall in front of his mother. But he just said to me:

-You will regret your pride, and your anger will lead you to hell.

-I am already in hell.

-The feeling of sin alone is not enough. But you have already taken action. He turned around and walked away, chuckling to himself.

I went to my room to clean myself up and compose myself, my body still shaking and feeling dizzy. Closing the door to my room, I lay down on the bed and fell asleep, exhausted even from myself. On the floor of my gloomy room lay two books that I had to read as punishment given by the Lady: *Acts and Monuments of the Martyrs by John Foxe* and *Exposition on the Ten Commandments by John Dod*.

I should have rewritten those books myself, with the truths that life was showing me.

Mrs. Saltonstall wrung her hands nervously in the comfortable armchair by the desk while her husband explained the altercation he had had with me. Her anger toward me grew, and her frustration increased as she thought about how to subdue me so that I would stop being a problem.

The woman no longer cried over the pain of losing her daughter. All that remained was resentment and shame in front of the town for what had happened. She liked to be admired as a devoted and exemplary mother, and in her mind she imagined people accusing her of being an unscrupulous and irresponsible mother. Her pride was the most wounded, burying her maternal instinct deep in her grief.

Her husband was accusing her of not having been strict enough with me, of not shaping my character sufficiently, and the consequences were plain to see.

-You can't imagine the way she looked at me and how she demanded explanations from me, that ungrateful bitch - He paced irritably from one side of the room to the other.

-She's arrogant and indomitable. I should give her a good spanking to bring those haughty shoulders of hers down from their high horse.

-Now the important thing is to decide what we're going to do -he looked at her worriedly.

-Let's calm down. Getting her out of this house is the most important thing -he said in his typical blunt tone.

-I'm not going to give her her father's property; we've done a lot for her.

-Of course, that's obvious.

-By law, I am her guardian and I can dispose of her and the assets her father left her.

-But she has threatened you that she wants to go to the city, it's a scandal.

-She wants me to give her back the property. I had almost sold it," he exclaimed, raising his voice.

-She's just a young girl, we can't be intimidated by her threats. But we don't need any more scandals; Eleanor's death is enough.

-We could marry her to John,' he asked, anxious to find a quick way out of the conflict.

-You're mad. I would never allow it, to unite that indolent orphan with our son. To ruin his future like that for a hovel and some poor land. Never -The woman's tense voice as she spoke the words was a line he knew he must not cross. He was the authority in the house, but it was his wife who skilfully pulled the invisible strings of the household.

-You have a point. It's better for John to have a good marriage like the one we arranged for James.

-Let's marry her off. By law, we can sell the property along with her marriage. Let me find a good match. There must be someone out there. He won't be a prominent man, but as long as he pays for the property and takes this nuisance off our hands, we're done.

-That sounds good to me. I'll leave it in your hands -He felt relieved to see his wife taking responsibility and making the final decision; he hated having to deal with domestic issues. He only saw the costs and benefits, evaluating his family's earnings and prosperity. The subtle world of relationships and affections were topics he considered to be the domain of women, and that allowed them both to have their own worlds and rule over them without interfering in each other's worlds.

I received no punishment, not even a word about what had happened, from the Lady. It was as if the encounter had been my imagination. Only indifference in response to what I had experienced.

Weeks passed in which I lost myself in my duties as a servant. Classes with Alice were still suspended since what had happened to her sister. John was preparing to leave for Plymouth to continue his studies, and James was a shadow I hardly saw. His engagement was pending for much later. I imagined Clarice's disappointment, eager to begin her fairy-tale dreams.

I was washing a pile of clothes when Anne told me I had to go to Mr. Saltonstall's office. My legs trembled a little with fear, but I straightened up, tidied myself a little, and headed off to the next battle.

To my surprise, only Mrs. Saltonstall was there, sitting by the window at a small tea table. Without looking at me, she poured herself a cup of tea while I stood waiting.

-I have been aware of your complaints. You should be ashamed of the scandal you caused my devoted husband. She looked at me as if she were ready to roll her enemy's head. But with complete composure, she continued with what I assumed would be a long speech about God and our obligations as children of the Supreme Being.

-Misfortune has befallen this household, and you have been nothing but a nuisance, showing not the slightest compassion for our pain. And I am not interested in hearing anything that might come out of your insidious mouth. Because you do not speak, you spit venom; you are a young woman devoid of education and morals. It is evident in your unattractive features, your frail body, and the haughty gaze with which God shows how unworthy you are of holy virtues.

I maintained my rigid attitude with no intention of answering her, no matter what she said. I was more afraid of her than of myself. I was alert to her movements, on the defensive in case she did the same thing as her husband, dragging me by my hair and hitting me. If she did, in my mind I imagined giving her back all the pain I had felt in my body. Scenes played out in my imagination, where I hit her, kicked her body on the floor, or dragged her by her hair. I tried to calm myself in the silence of my own mind. I paid attention again when she said:

-I give up. I cannot straighten the crooked tree that you are. I have negotiated for you to marry a good and devout man. He is a widower and needs a woman to carry on what he and his saintly wife built. He has a strong character, something that a wayward young woman like you needs, to keep you from falling into the abyss of hell. He will be able to save your soul and keep you on the right path.

I made a move to speak, but he stopped me in my tracks.

-I will not discuss money with you. That is a matter for men; they know better than you or I what is right. The hovel and those poor lands for which you are so greedy will be your dowry. Your husband will know how to put them to good use. And be thankful that a man wants to marry you. I have nothing more to say to scum like you, nor do I wish to.

I was confused, unable to move. Mrs. Saltonstall placed the cup on the small table and, without looking at me, headed for the door and disappeared down the hallway.

I don't know how much time passed. Running away was a desperate option, but that's how I felt. But where would I go? How would I survive, without money or family? I had no one to turn to. I returned silently to the laundry room, rolled up my sleeves, and continued washing for the rest of the day.

A few days later, before dinner, I was ordered to stop helping in the kitchen. I had to wash up and dress neatly. I was to go to the desk at eight o'clock sharp because I would be introduced to my future husband.

I cried silently. I didn't know how to escape from this nightmare.

I managed to pull myself together and face the situation. I approached the desk. As if they were a jury about to condemn me, Mr. Saltonstall stood with all the bearing of someone who knows he is in a position of power and looked me up and down, evaluating my appearance. His wife served tea without paying any attention to me. A man of about fifty, corpulent with sun-parched skin and incipient baldness, He looked at me intently without saying a word until Mr. Saltonstall, in a voice that tried to be natural and conciliatory, addressed him:

- Samuel, as we have discussed, the young lady needs guidance. A home. A husband who will guide her properly. - Turning to me - Nelly, may I introduce Samuel Whitmore, a highly respectable man in our community. Sadly, he suffered the loss of his wife earlier this year and needs a faithful and devoted wife to help him raise his four children. I hope you will do your very best.

The man nodded slowly, but his eyes were fixed on me. -It is a woman's duty. To find purpose in marriage. In obedience...

The lady reinforced his words. -She has been raised with order, though she still needs refinement. Youth brings with it certain challenges, but under the right guidance, a woman can find her place.

Whitmore exhaled, almost as if measuring each word. -How old are you, Nelly?

-Sixteen, sir.

The lady interrupted me with the answer -Almost seventeen, Samuel.

The man tilted his head slightly and gave both spouses a sharp look. "I believe that in our previous conversation, one of you told me that he was twenty years old, and even that seemed very young to me.

Mr. Saltonstall, wanting to save the awkwardness of the complaint, flatly denied that they could have been mistaken, that in reality they did not talk at length about age, but rather about the unfortunate situations in which they found themselves: a woman orphaned and alone in the world and a man grieving the death of his wife, left with four young children.

Whitmore was a calm man, but rigid in his ideas and pragmatic. Accustomed to running his farm, he was a man of few words, but severe both in his words and in his attitude toward life. Saltonstall's comment, rather than lowering his price to achieve his goal, further alienated the suitor. For my part, the last thing I wanted was to please that man and ruin my life by marrying someone so old and unpleasant.

Whitmore asked me directly -And what do you consider to be your duty, young lady?

I knew that any honest answer would be used against me, but I was already in the spotlight. The shame of being exposed like a lamb before its butcher and the helplessness of that situation, which exposed me as a victim of abuse of power, hurt my pride. I felt like trash piled up in a corner, waiting to be cleaned up. All I felt was misery and a desire to die to end everything that was hurting me.

- I am not seeking to question what is right, sir, only to fulfil my duty as a Christian.

- And what do you consider to be your duty?

- To serve the household. To learn. To be useful. To seek a future in the city and become a teacher.

- To learn... To teach. It is a dangerous concept if not properly guided. A woman should know enough to fulfil what is expected of her, but no more. You have been educated in this house, under clear rules. Do you consider yourself obedient?

- I do what is expected of me, sir.

-You say that too firmly. Like someone who doesn't need to be guided -She said this with narrowed eyes.

Alarmed by my answers, the Lady decided to take control of the conversation.

-Humility is a virtue in a woman. There is no need for concerns that exceed your role. Nelly is still learning. She is young and needs the hand of a husband to show her the way.

The man paused for a moment before answering, as if something in the conversation had caused him unease that he couldn't quite put his finger on.

-And yet... There's something about her that doesn't sit right. It's not a lack of obedience. It's not open insubordination... But there's an edge to her. A look that doesn't waver when it should. On the other hand, she is still a child. My eldest son is almost her age; it is obvious that she is old enough to be my daughter. Don't you think such a marriage is absurd?

Mr Saltonstall tensed up, fearing he would lose the opportunity to resolve his problem.

-Are you withdrawing your proposal, Mr Whitmore?

- To tell the truth and to be fair, it was your proposal, sir, I simply took it into consideration. The young woman can fulfil her duties, but not under my roof. I do not want a wife who must be tamed like a restless beast, much less a young woman of such a tender age. I do not need another daughter, but a woman who can bear the weight of a family. Do you remember the minister's words a few Sundays ago? They stuck in my mind: 'Unless there is a union of hearts and a bond of affection, it is not marriage in fact, but in appearance and name, and they will live in a house like two poisons in a stomach, and one will always be sick of the other.' What kind of union can I expect with a young woman who has her own dreams, dreams of being a teacher and living in the city? What does that have to do with an old man like me, a farmer with four children to raise? I am not one to give advice, but I believe you should have expectations for this young woman that include the desires she holds in her heart. God lays out paths for each of us according to our abilities.

Relief flooded my soul. Whitmore had truly seen me and understood that this situation had been brought about by spouses with very personal interests. He didn't need more property or land, just a wife to accompany him in his widowhood. He had agreed to buy the property that belonged to me, but only because it was part of the package. He had been deceived about my age and was not willing to get caught up in Saltonstall's traps.

He straightened his back, as if making a final decision, and rose from his seat. He ended the meeting and coldly said goodbye to the couple, who were stunned by his rudeness. I remained standing, tense, watching my nightmare unravel. As he passed by me, leaving the room, Samuel Whitmore said to me in a kindly voice, with a certain warmth:

-I'm sorry for the loss of your parents. Trust in God.

The room filled with tense silence after Whitmore left. The woman pressed her lips together, her hands clenched on the table. Her husband, sitting with his eyes fixed on the fire burning in the wood stove, let his indignation seep into every word. Their reaction to Samuel Whitmore's departure was not just anger, but a frustration deeply rooted in their ambition and need for control. He looked at me with clear contempt.

-What have you done? -she asked in a dry, sly voice.

-I haven't done anything, sir.

The lady stood up with restrained coldness, ready to confront me.

-Nothing. Nothing... and yet Samuel has seen enough to reject you. Why, Nelly? What is it about you that makes prudent men take a step back?

-I don't know, ma'am. From what I understood, it was my age that bothered him.

-You don't know! Of course you know. The way you behave, the way you hold yourself when you should bow... That damn presence of yours that never quite fits in.

-He felt it. He saw it. He saw what's inside you, that thing that never quite fits in. Something impure, asserted the husband.

I clenched my fingers in my lap, but my face tried to remain calm. They refused to accept that my age was the real reason their plans had been thwarted. The blame would fall on me without mercy.

-I have done nothing beyond what was expected of me.

Mr Saltonstall slammed his fist on the table.

-Exactly! And yet, you were enough to make him decide to leave!

The lady added her contribution in a venomous whisper.

-If an honourable man does not want you, who will? What fate awaits you, if there is no place for you as either a wife or a daughter in this house?

Saltonstall regained his composure, but with his sharp voice, he continued to accuse me.

-Samuel was the only worthy choice. Now, the problems he had to bear are still here. You are still here. And every day you spend under this roof without purpose will be a burden.

I remained silent. I didn't respond. I knew that every word I uttered would only fuel the fury of those who had never truly loved me. The air in the room was thick, heavy with judgment and broken expectations. But within my own silence, I felt a spark of victory. Because, without having done anything, without having openly defied them, my mere existence had been enough to disrupt the plans of those who believed their destiny was assured.

The woman was beside herself. "Don't look at me like that, girl! Your eyes are not God's! Since you arrived, the milk has curdled, the lambs are born dead, and James has had impure dreams. Impure dreams! And my poor Eleanor. Where were you when she fell into the water?"

All lies, ramblings he made up on the spot to boost his own spirits, emboldened by superstitions he maliciously attributed to me.

Mr. Santolstall banged on the table and added even more false accusations:

-Witchcraft! That's what it is! There's no other explanation. You come with your silences, your strange drawings, your night-time walks. Your dirty soul is revealed in the smallest gestures!

The screams of both men alerted the household, and John and James dismissed the few servants who were still awake at that hour. Alarmed, they entered the study and closed the door behind them.

-What happened? Didn't Whitmore come? -they asked, trying to understand what was going on there.

-That damn witch scared him away! -declared the mother. With contemptuous tones, the children did not hesitate to support their parents.

-Tomorrow we will speak with the pastor. Let justice be done. Let him examine her. Let her be burned if necessary. James, who loved punishment, joined his brother.

-She must be exposed. The minister will know what to do. Let her be purged. In the afternoon, I found her reading a book without verses. Without verses! What kind of Christian does not carry the Word in her heart? She is not like us!

I managed to defend myself. -I haven't done any harm. I haven't conjured anything. I just... I just think. Is it a sin to think? Is it a sin to wish for the soul to be free?

-She spoke of freedom. She said the soul should fly.' Fly! What does that mean? That's not Christian, that's perverse! -John was revelling in his own anger, unleashing the resentment that always lived inside him. The Lady began to scream, distraught.

-Free! Free! That word is from the devil. The soul submits, Nelly. It submits or it rots.

Mr. Santolstall approached with a stern look. -You have brought darkness to this house. You are not a child of God. You are a test. A temptation. And as such, you must be purged.

With my voice breaking, I spat out a spark of fire. -If justice is burning what they don't understand... then let everything burn - But know this: my soul does not belong to you. Not to you, nor to anyone else. My soul is mine. And even if you silence me, even if you condemn me... it will continue to be mine alone. And who examines you? Who measures cruelty disguised as faith?

Mrs. Santolstall's eyes blazed, as if something demonic had awakened -Silence, witch! Do not desecrate this house with your unholy words! - She lunged at me

with unbridled fury. It wasn't just anger, it was fear, the echo of generations who had learned to strike before listening.

She pushed me hard into the corner where there was a solid wooden chest, engraved with religious symbols. I stumbled, falling backwards, and my head hit the carved edge of the chest, right where there was an inverted cross worn away by time. The blow was sharp. The silence that followed was louder than the screams.

Sir. Santolstall said in a grave voice, but without approaching -May the Lord judge what has been done.

My hair lay scattered on the floor like a dark halo. A trickle of blood ran down my temple, but my face was serene. It was as if, at that moment, I had crossed an invisible threshold. I stopped hearing them and my vision darkened.

-Is she dead? -John whispered, trembling. James replied in a broken voice, still stiff.

-No... she's breathing. But she's not waking up.

The mother looked at him with a desperate expression.

-It was the demon inside her. It forced me. I... I didn't want to... It was the demon. I felt it. When she looked at me... it wasn't her. It was something else,' the woman apologised, and her husband, as if speaking to God rather than to those present, added, 'May God's will be done. If she is to wake up, may she wake up purified.

The room was almost dark. Motionless, my body still warm. The fire had gone out. The air smelled of wax, damp wood, guilt.

The Lord Santolstall stood solemnly looking at the body at his feet, having already made a drastic decision.

-We cannot wait until dawn. We cannot let her wake up. If the minister sees her like this... if word gets out... this house will be marked. Judgement will fall upon us. We have suffered enough misfortune already.

James was hesitating.

-What if she's not dead? What if she's just asleep?

-Then let her sleep in consecrated ground. If the Lord wishes her to wake up, let her do so under His judgement. Not ours.

James stood in a corner, whispering: -This isn't right. This isn't justice. This is fear...

His father interrupted him, his voice firm: -It's duty, James! It's protection! It's obedience!

He turned to John. -You and I will dig. Behind the barn. Where the earth has not yet been desecrated.

The unspoiled earth was that which had not been touched by sin, death, or impure acts. Burying someone there was an attempt to hide the transgression in a "clean" place. It was a hypocritical gesture: the greatest injustice was committed before God, but they sought to do so in a "holy" place to avoid divine punishment. But the untainted earth would become the womb of an awakening that would soon envelop them.

The Lady. Santolstall knelt beside my body, touching my hair with a mixture of tenderness and revulsion—May the Lord receive her. Or condemn her. But may she not return.

The room was in darkness. My body lay motionless, still warm. The fire was dying out. The air smelled of wax, damp wood, guilt.

James and John waited behind the barn for night to fall and for everyone in the house to be asleep. Anne had stayed in Alice's room sleeping, and the workers had already gone home. The moonless sky was perfect for hiding my still-living body. The air was thick, as if the earth itself were holding its breath.

When they felt safe, they dragged the heavy trunk from inside the house, with my body inside and the belongings they had found in a hurry and with nervousness in my room. Still alive, unconscious, wrapped in a rough blanket, the shroud in which I awaited my fate. There was no delicacy, there was urgency. There would be no mourning, there would be oblivion.

The pit was deep. The disturbed earth gave off an ancient dampness. The trunk was lowered with effort. The thud against the bottom echoed like a final echo. The earth began to cover the trunk. There were no prayers. Not even a cross. Only earth, stone, and oblivion. Each silent shovel full was a denial. Each gesture was an affirmation of the order that allowed no cracks. When the pit was full, they placed a large stone on top. There was no mark. Not even a sign. Only the weight of what was buried.

In the distance, I heard sharp noises like blows, a buzzing sound, like the earth makes when it moves, but it was like rain. It mingled with the silence as if the world were made of mud and heartbeats, my heartbeats. In the shadows of my mind, hands touched me, held me, wanted to catch me. I knew I had opened my eyes, but it was as if I hadn't. I couldn't see anything. My elbows bumped against something hard, as did the soles of my feet. Little by little, I felt the weight of my body and the weight of the damp, cold air. It was the weight of the wood pressing down on me. I couldn't stretch my legs. My body was bent, I was trapped. I realized that I was imprisoned by wooden walls, my

fingertips running over the cracks and splinters. A blanket embraced me, rough like a silent rope that tied up my whole being.

I was breathing, but the air was heavy, my lungs felt confined, as if the earth had already begun to claim me. My hands searched for a crack, an opening, something to release the air that was escaping me. Every breath was a battle.

I discovered with amazement that a trunk contained me like a tangle of anguish and anxiety that I had become. I tried to lift the lid. I hit it, scratching it as my nails broke. The wood did not yield like my desperation. My throat moistened and I began to scream:

-No... no... no... Get me out of here -My voice echoed inside. There was no echo. Only confinement.

The weight of oblivion. Anxiety turned into an animal. It bit my chest. It squeezed my throat. My heart beat as if it wanted to break my ribs.

I scratched harder. The blood from my fingers mixed with the wooden boards. I screamed hopelessly: -I'm alive! I'm alive! -But no one listened. Only the earth. Only the trunk. Only silence. The air grew thicker. Every second was a loss. Every thought, a fracture. I hit. I cried. I writhed. But the trunk wouldn't open. The earth was silent. Faith would not save me.

The darkness was no longer an absence; it was a suffocation that took hold of me completely. It was matter. It was touch. I couldn't see or hear, and my breathing was ragged. The air had become thin, like a thread that broke with every attempt to inhale. I felt sleepy and closed my eyes.

My body trembled, not from cold, but from the proximity of something that had no name.

My broken nails no longer scratched. My hands stopped pounding. They just rested, as if waiting for a signal.

And then, I felt it, in that instant, I understood everything. Nothing made sense. There would be no judgment. There would be no punishment. There would be no salvation. Only transition.

Death did not come as a shadow. It came as dissolution. As surrender. As the moment when I ceased to be form and became echo.

My last thought was not a thought. It was an image. A feather suspended in the air. A black crow that did not fly, but waited.

And then, nothing.

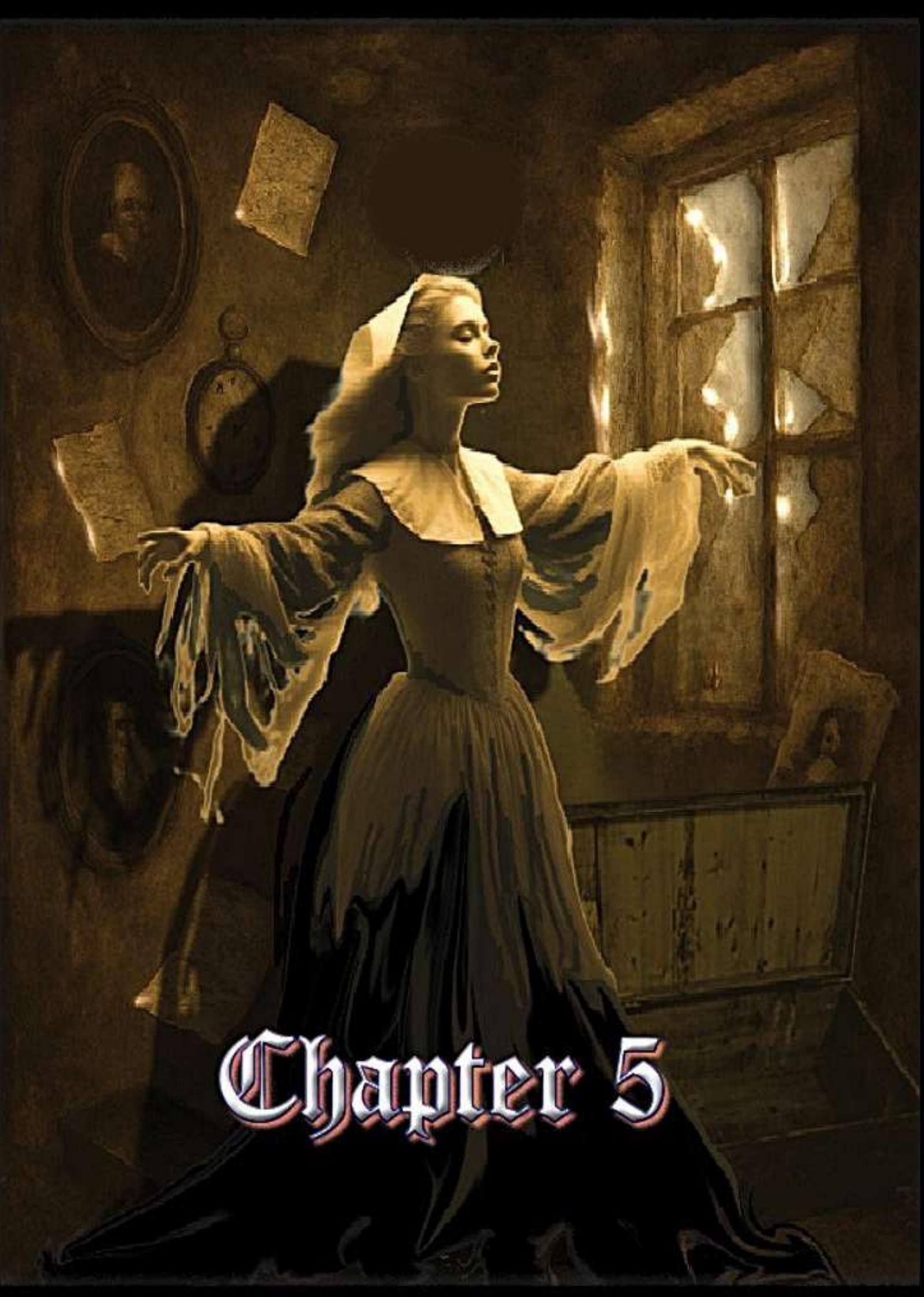
In absolute darkness, no one came for me, not my parents, not an angel, no one. I felt weightless, like I was in water, a bright light, I felt like I was in a tunnel. Huge hands touched me, there were small lights that blinded me, beautiful gray shadows, I wanted to speak but didn't know how, I had forgotten something, I had no control over myself. I was in a dream, my consciousness

lost, I didn't know where I was, or even who I was. Something or someone formless embraced me and I felt peace, calm. And in the security of that perhaps love, I felt the infinity of being without a body, only my soul. I no longer remembered the pain and injustice, I had nothing to forgive because I felt no resentment. I just let myself be in the here and now, I had nothing but a feeling of relief, without the weight on my muscles, without a body, I only saw the light around me.

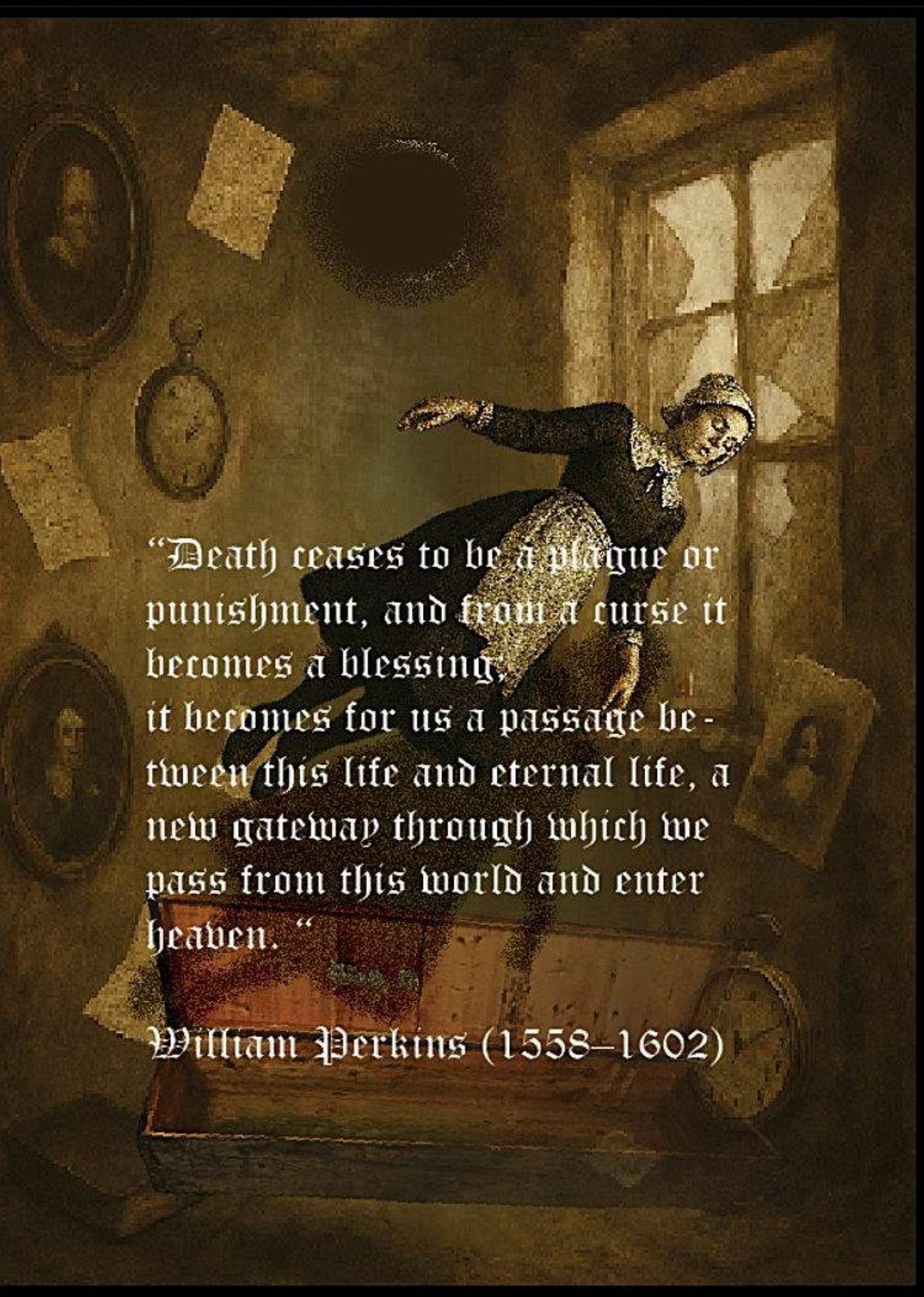
No record remained of my death, nor of my passage through these distant lands. No one asked about me, there were no tears for a servant, a witch, or a young woman without life.

No one mourned me, as they did so many others who came after me.





# Chapter 5

A woman in a black dress and white lace collar is floating in a room. The room has several framed portraits on the wall, some of which are partially obscured by a large, dark, circular shadow. A window with a grid pattern is visible in the background. The overall atmosphere is somber and historical.

“Death ceases to be a plague or punishment, and from a curse it becomes a blessing; it becomes for us a passage between this life and eternal life, a new gateway through which we pass from this world and enter heaven.”

William Perkins (1558–1602)

*I am a resonant core floating without desire for incarnation. The mist begins to thicken and subtle strands of dense light emerge from my center. Tactile vapor, fragment of emotional biology, I vibrate and I am light. The past is an echo weaving bonds like invisible arteries. I did not go, I transformed.*

The midday sun streamed through the window into Mrs. Saltonstall's room. Alice jumped onto her mother's bed, trying to wake her up. The woman opened her eyes as if waking from a nightmare, her vision clouded by a headache. She saw her daughter's face illuminated by the sun's rays. Confusion flooded her mind. Images from the night before appeared to her like a nightmare.

-What are you doing here? What time is it?

-It's late, Mum. I can't find Anne. Dad and James are looking for her.

The woman found this strange and didn't dare ask about Nelly. She got up and dressed quickly, while Alice sat silently watching her from the edge of the bed. Her younger brothers George and Henry were having breakfast in the dining room.

When she had finished getting ready, she took the girl by the hand and went to the dining room to find her husband or one of her older children to confirm what was real and what was not.

Her husband came out to meet her and confirmed that he couldn't find the maid. They had gone into her room and none of her belongings were there. It was clear that she had run away. They didn't know how much she knew about the events of the previous night. They didn't mention a single detail of what had happened; it was better to forget and not bring up with words what was better left buried.

Fearing that she might be a witness to what they had done, her children had set off in different directions in search of the woman.

Anne had fled because, while the tragedy was unfolding, she had left the children's room and, hidden on the stairs, had heard what she should not and did not want to hear. When she returned to the room, Alice George and Henry were still fast asleep. From the window, she watched as the young men dragged a trunk. She knew that something serious had happened and that the victim was Nelly. Unable to sleep all night, before sunrise, she looked for the young woman in her room and, not finding her, went to the desk and saw that the trunk that was always there was gone. In the middle of the night, she went behind the barn, which could be seen from the children's room, and there she saw a large stone that had never been there before. Her soul trembled because she knew that Nelly's young body was lying under that stone.

The whole family was involved; they weren't going to allow any witnesses after committing such a mortal sin. One more body next to Nelly's would make no

difference to them. She feared for her life, and her fear was so great that she could only think of fleeing. She returned to her room, gathered her few belongings, and even though she knew she had not completed seven years of service as a maid and that by law she was entitled to some money upon termination of her contract, she preferred to lose it and value her life more. One of her sisters had settled in New France, which the indigenous peoples there called Kanata. She had some money saved up, so without thinking twice, she decided on her destination. Although the journey was dangerous and extremely long, no one would think to look for her there. She had never spoken of her sister; the Saltonstalls only knew about her work in England and had never bothered to find out more about her life, so they were unaware of her sister in those lands. She would go to the port and take the first ship leaving Salem, and from there she would pray to God to arrive safe and sound.

John and James returned the next day after searching town after town for the maid. Fear gripped them all. Only months later, having heard nothing about the maid's whereabouts, did they calm down. If Anne had wanted to report them, she would have done so shortly after Nelly's disappearance, so they assumed she would be afraid and they would never hear from her again.

They all decided to pick up their lives where they had left off, forgetting about the large rock on the mound of earth behind the barn. Nelly's belongings had been burned, but the lady always found something that belonged to the young woman. Sometimes it was a ribbon, other times a cameo belonging to Nelly's mother, or some small object in a hallway, on the stairs, or in a room. She calmed her imagination by thinking that it had been carelessly dropped or forgotten in the drawer of her dresser or wherever they had found the object.

Alice asked about Nelly and Anne in the days that followed, but her mother, showing annoyance at each question, replied that they had gone to work in the city, that she should not ask about them anymore, that they were not part of her family. The prohibition was a lock that sealed the girl's concerns.

The lady resumed preparations for James's engagement and subsequent marriage, obsessing over every detail; everything had to be majestic. She wanted to give the community something to talk about with the grand celebration she was planning, so that few would ask about Nelly's whereabouts. Only Samuel Whitmore had some doubts about it. Every time he saw them at church, he watched the couple, searching for an answer to his unease and unexplained anxiety that had remained with him since that night when he gave up on marrying a girl who was barely a child. Nelly had not been seen since that day. He was only told that she had left with the maid for the big city. He couldn't quite believe that the Saltonstalls had allowed that young woman to fulfill her dreams. According to the few comments he had heard, the young woman's land had been sold to her guardian in exchange for money to support her travel and studies. They had been so adamant about marrying her off that he was struck by the turn of events.

But she already had enough worries without getting involved in other people's lives. So it remained an isolated incident that would soon fade from her memory. Daniels and Davenport, the men who had kindly warned the young woman about her guardian's scam, were happy to hear that she had managed to leave in search of a better future.

Clarice was happy to marry her Prince Charming and felt blessed by God. In her new status, she distanced herself from the young women with whom she had shared her childhood, as she put it. She could not even imagine the future that awaited her. The fates of those young women would not be any better. One would remain single until old age, never knowing what it was to love and be loved. Another would endure a marriage full of abuse and alcohol, unwanted children brought into the world amid marital violence. Another would run away with a young man who would drag her from brothel to brothel. It was not easy to be a weak woman where God was a patriarchal and absolute figure.

Years later, Mrs. Saltonstall suffered from recurring nightmares: a table covered with empty plates that filled with dirt every time she tried to serve food, the sound of a girl's laughter behind the walls. In dreamlike moments, the trunk appeared to her in her dreams in different rooms, even though it was buried. She dreamed of her own face reflected in the water, but with Nelly's eyes.

Insomnia took over her nights, and her days were filled with shadows passing around her. She complained to her husband about unusual events, such as when the fire in the fireplace went out for no reason, and when she relit it, she saw human figures in the flames. The clocks stopped at the same time every night, 3:16, which in her devout mind was a number that did not correspond to any verse she knew. The Bibles opened by themselves to blank pages, and when she closed them, her fingertips were stained with dirt. Her husband stopped paying attention to his wife's imagination because he couldn't accept that everything she said could be true. He saw his wife deteriorating physically and mentally. She neglected her hygiene, or she had days of exaggerated joy and others when she seemed like a church minister, preaching and punishing everyone she saw sinning everywhere. Little by little, her mind began to wander. Always nervous, she spent her time cleaning because she saw dirt on every piece of furniture, in every corner. She harassed the servants to continuously clean every room, every visible or hidden space. Madness possessed her like a demon, silently, day by day.

Her husband's business was going from bad to worse. He had been swindled and lost more than half his money. He was no longer the important man in town, but a merchant on the road to bankruptcy. The merchants he had always dealt with agreed that God was punishing him for some reason. This made them avoid doing business with him. Absorbed in the papers and books of his barrel trade, he suddenly felt a presence behind him. Many times he looked up because he was sure someone was standing in the doorway. But there was never anyone there.

The back of the barn, where the rock sealed an unjust and vile death, was avoided by the family members. It was as if that small plot of land did not exist. It was the secret silenced in the dark waters of guilt.

James, her eldest son and the hope for continuity, had become taciturn and hostile. He despised his wife, underestimating any skill she displayed. He showed no gesture of love or even attraction toward his wife. Clarice endured everything, hoping that her devotion would make her husband grow to love her. He barely touched her. She wanted to have children, but her husband's sexual impotence made that dream impossible. She was a wife in name only. Day by day, she learned from her mother-in-law the manners and ways of a lady of the house. Her cheerful and outgoing character was lost in the bitterness and frustration of adulthood. James was not interested in business or his wife; neither had been his choice, but rather an imposition he had accepted without question. James dreamed constantly of Eleanor. In his dreams, she followed him across the field, pale and wet-haired, her face emotionless. The nightmare repeated itself amid violent images, struggling with the futile attempts of the girl to free herself from his body on top of her. He would wake up sweaty, his heart beating as if it were a sound box echoing sharp blows in his chest. He would spend hours alone in the barn, enjoying his own body without wanting a woman by his side. The hidden desires he had repressed after Eleanor's death had distanced him from life. One early morning, he took a rope with him and chose a tree with a branch strong enough to support his heavy body. He wrapped the rope around his neck. He did not try to pray or ask God for forgiveness. He only remembered Eleanor's face and let go of his anguish and his infamous desire. Workers found him lifeless, without tears or regret in his soul.

It was a hard blow for Saltonstall; his son, his copy, his legacy had succumbed to his demons. Neither he nor his wife could have imagined the hell their own son had created. Without discussing it, they both assumed that the devilish Nelly was to blame for his death. They had never assumed that the young woman's death had been a homicide; they justified expelling a demon from their home in the name of faith. They believed that James had not been able to bear the guilt of silence, nor had he had the courage to know that he had been absolved of all responsibility for having been the hand of God on earth. The young man took his secrets and demons with him.

They still had the rest of the children and a widow to support.

Meanwhile, the now eldest son, due to James' death, was the future promise.

John, with his huge ego, believed himself to be superior to everyone else. Having always been James' shadow, he enjoyed a certain amount of leniency because his brother was always the target of their father's demands and expectations. His mother spoiled him and expected him to be a professional and a successful man. His parents had divided the responsibility for their older children. James was a copy of his father, and he was supposed to be an improved copy of his

mother. But John had his own ambitions. He didn't like to work or study. He wanted an easy life, living off his father's business income, far away from his family so he could avoid their devout strictness and enjoy women and money. So, after convincing his mother, he left for the city to achieve the success that his mother wanted more than anyone else for her son. Instead, he devoted himself to drinking and gambling. He had barely begun his studies when he dropped out without telling his mother. Every penny his family sent him was lost to alcohol and poker. His licentious lifestyle led him to make untrustworthy friends who did not hesitate to corner him in an alley to demand payment of his gambling debts. His manipulative and clever words did not convince such men. Five fatal stab wounds took the malice from his eyes and the contemptuous look with which he regarded others.

The death of his children shattered the Saltonstalls' fragile stability. The family man saw his world collapse, and the iron fist that had once been his wife was now nothing more than a pair of fingers dragging themselves through life. He decided to save the rest of the children, with a mother immersed in madness, and he, overcome with resentment but without a hint of guilt, sent his children to England with one of his sisters, sending them with a large sum of money for their upkeep and education. He was sure he would never see them again, better that way, he told himself. George and Henry reminded him painfully of James and John, as for Alice, a daughter was nothing more than a problem to be solved, and he no longer had the time or desire to take on yet another nuisance.

In some ways, Alice reminded her of that young woman who had been a nightmare, ruining her family, wearing down its foundations, destroying its expectations of success.

Clarice returned to her parents' house; as a widow, she had to observe a couple of years of mourning. She was bitter about the memory of her husband and about life itself, seeing her dreams shattered. She would watch the lives of other young women more fortunate than her pass her by. Cynicism won the battle and she took up the banner of blind and inflexible faith. She accused and judged as much as she could. Years later, she would marry a minister as severe and unyielding as she was. In her own way, she had the life that had once been denied her.

Only two soulless beings remained in the big house, living as fictional human beings. Haunted by their own demons in their souls. Old age took no pity on them, eating away at them until death, tired of watching them, decided to take them away, but not before torturing them with anticipatory dreams.

The shadows of the dead accompany or simply suffocate the air of the living. They seek redemption and accuse, demanding forgiveness from their

tormentors. Anchored on the threshold between life and death, they cling to the last moment they breathed and embrace painful memories, trying to mend the wounds of the soul.

They chase the light of the souls who feel them even though they cannot see them. There is no peace in an abrupt departure without the victim's desire.

At night, Nelly and Eleanor meet on the staircase landing. They don't need to talk; they already know what fear has hidden from them. They just wait to see life slip away from the living who inhabit the house. They are ethereal, without pain but with a deep sorrow at having left without knowing love, affection, or the comfort of an embrace.

So many possible destinies they could have lived if the God of that family had not been so cruel. They wait, in a moment that is neither past nor future, for the God they love, the one who forgives all, who is warm and understanding, and who will restore their faith by illuminating their souls once again.

They will see the times when the souls of innocents whose bodies were burned in the blindness of fanaticism will join in waiting for the just judgment of true faith.



# Index

Chapter	Page
1 We must weep together, work together, and suffer together	7
2 We must take care of each other when we are in a sad situation	30
3 When a pastor does not preach sound doctrine	51
4 For a man who has worldly riches	67
5 Death ceases to be a plague or punishment	84
Dedication	4
Prologue	5

Ruiz, Marcela Noemi

Boston 1630 / Marcela Noemi Ruiz; Illustrated by Marcela Noemi Ruiz. - 1st illustrated edition. - Autonomous City of Buenos Aires: Marcela Noemi Ruiz, 2025.

Digital book. PDF

Digital file: downloaded online

ISBN 978-631-01-1983-0

I. Existential Novels. I. Ruiz, Marcela Noemi, 1974- II. Title.

Dewey Decimal Classification A860

KE426-07136865-APN-DNDA#MI

Any form of reproduction, distribution, public communication, or transformation of this work, as well as its total or partial reproduction by any means or procedure, including photocopying and scanning, accessing, and the distribution of copies through sale, rental, or public access, may only be carried out with the author's authorization. Commercialization is prohibited. All rights reserved. Intellectual Property Law 11723. Buenos Aires, Argentina

This work © 2 de M is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 4.0. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

EDITED IN BUENOS AIRES, ARGENTINA 2025  
by Marcela Ruiz

#### Esta obra es:

Contenido digital y electrónico de un libro publicado anteriormente.

Se ha realizado una revisión de la obra para garantizar la calidad del contenido.

#### Bajo los siguientes términos:

1. **Propósito:** esta obra tiene fines educativos, culturales o de información y no debe ser utilizada para fines comerciales. Se permite la impresión personal para uso privado.
2. **Reproducción:** no se permite la reproducción total o parcial de esta obra sin el consentimiento expreso del autor o titular de los derechos.
3. **Distribución:** no se permite la distribución o transformación de esta obra sin el consentimiento expreso del autor o titular de los derechos.

Se permite la impresión personal para uso privado de esta obra para fines educativos, culturales o de información.

#### Atención:

Este libro electrónico es compatible con dispositivos de lectura de libros electrónicos y puede ser utilizado en dispositivos de lectura de libros electrónicos.

Se permite la impresión personal para uso privado de esta obra para fines educativos, culturales o de información.

ISBN 978-631-01-1983-0



9 786310 119830

