

her bedroom, biting back her secret tears, Amaranta put her fingers in her ears so as not to hear the voice of the suitor as he gave Úrsula the latest war news, and in spite of the fact that she was dying to see him, she had the strength not to go out and meet him.

At that time Colonel Aureliano Buendía took the time to send a detailed account to Macondo every two weeks. But only once, almost eight months after he had left, did he write to Úrsula. A special messenger brought a sealed envelope to the house with a sheet of paper inside bearing the colonel's delicate hand: *Take good care of Papa because he is going to die.* Úrsula became alarmed. "If Aureliano says so it's because Aureliano knows," she said. And she had them help her take José Arcadio Buendía to his bedroom. Not only was he as heavy as ever, but during his prolonged stay under the chestnut tree he had developed the faculty of being able to increase his weight at will, to such a degree that seven men were unable to lift him and they had to drag him to the bed. A smell of tender mushrooms, of wood-flower fungus, of old and concentrated outdoors impregnated the air of the bedroom as it was breathed by the colossal old man weatherbeaten by the sun and the rain. The next morning he was not in his bed. In spite of his undiminished strength, José Arcadio Buendía was in no condition to resist. It was all the same to him. If he went back to the chestnut tree it was not because he wanted to but because of a habit of his body. Úrsula took care of him, fed him, brought him news of Aureliano. But actually, the only person with whom he was able to have contact for a long time was Prudencio Aguilar. Almost pulverized at that time by the decrepitude of death, Prudencio Aguilar would come twice a day to chat with him. They talked about fighting cocks. They promised each other to set up a breeding farm for magnificent birds, not so much to enjoy their victories, which they would not need then, as to have something to do on the tedious Sundays of death. It was Prudencio Aguilar who cleaned him, fed him, and brought him splendid news of an unknown person called Aureliano who was a colonel in the war. When he was alone, José Arcadio Buendía consoled himself with the dream of the infinite rooms. He dreamed that he was getting out

of bed, opening the door and going into an identical room with the same bed with a wrought-iron head, the same wicker chair, and the same small picture of the Virgin of Help on the back wall. From that room he would go into another that was just the same, the door of which would open into another that was just the same, the door of which would open into another one just the same, and then into another exactly alike, and so on to infinity. He liked to go from room to room. As in a gallery of parallel mirrors, until Prudencio Aguilar would touch him on the shoulder. Then he would go back from room to room, walking in reverse, going back over his trail, and he would find Prudencio Aguilar in the room of reality. But one night, two weeks after they took him to his bed, Prudencio Aguilar touched his shoulder in an intermediate room and he stayed there forever, thinking that it was the real room. On the following morning Úrsula was bringing him his breakfast when she saw a man coming along the hall. He was short and stocky, with a black suit on and a hat that was also black, enormous, pulled down to his taciturn eyes. "Good Lord," Úrsula thought, "I could have sworn it was Melquíades." It was Cataure, Visitación's brother, who had left the house fleeing from the insomnia plague and of whom there had never been any news. Visitación asked him why he had come back, and he answered her in their solemn language:

"I have come for the exequies of the king."

Then they went into José Arcadio Buendía's room, shook him as hard as they could, shouted in his ear, put a mirror in front of his nostrils, but they could not awaken him. A short time later, when the carpenter was taking measurements for the coffin, through the window they saw a light rain of tiny yellow flowers falling. They fell on the town all through the night in a silent storm, and they covered the roofs and blocked the doors and smothered the animals who slept outdoors. So many flowers fell from the sky that in the morning the streets were carpeted with a compact cushion and they had to clear them away with shovels and rakes so that the funeral procession could pass by.

As I lay there in my white hotel bed feeling lonely and weak, I thought of Buddy Willard lying even lonelier and weaker than I was up in that sanatorium in the Adirondacks, and I felt like a heel of the worst sort. In his letters Buddy kept telling me how he was reading poems by a poet who was also a doctor and how he'd found out about some famous dead Russian short story writer who had been a doctor too, so maybe doctors and writers could get along fine after all.

Now this was a very different tune from what Buddy Willard had been singing all the two years we were getting to know each other. I remember the day he smiled at me and said, 'Do you know what a poem is, Esther?'

'No, what?' I said.

'A piece of dust.' And he looked so proud of having thought of this that I just stared at his blond hair and his blue eyes and his white teeth – he had very long, strong white teeth – and said 'I guess so.'

It was only in the middle of New York a whole year later that I finally thought of an answer to that remark.

I spent a lot of time having imaginary conversations with Buddy Willard. He was a couple of years older than I was and very scientific, so he could always prove things. When I was with him I had to work to keep my head above water.

These conversations I had in my mind usually repeated the beginnings of conversations I'd really had with Buddy, only they finished with me answering him back quite sharply, instead of just sitting around and saying 'I guess so'.

Now, lying on my back in bed, I imagined Buddy saying, 'Do you know what a poem is, Esther?'

'No, what?' I would say.

'A piece of dust.'

Then just as he was smiling and starting to look proud, I would say, 'So are the cadavers you cut up. So are the people you think you're curing. They're dust as dust as dust. I reckon a good poem lasts a whole lot longer than a hundred of those people put together.'

And of course Buddy wouldn't have any answer to that, because what I said was true. People were made of nothing so much as dust, and I couldn't see that doctoring all that dust was a bit better than writing poems people would remember and repeat to themselves when they were unhappy or sick and couldn't sleep.

My trouble was I took everything Buddy Willard told me as the honest-to-God truth. I remember the first night he kissed me. It was after the Yale Junior Prom.

It was strange, the way Buddy had invited me to that Prom.

He popped into my house out of the blue one Christmas vacation, wearing a thick white turtleneck sweater and looking so handsome I could hardly stop staring and said, 'I might drop over to see you at college some day, all right?'

I was flabbergasted. I only saw Buddy at church on Sundays when we were both home from college, and then at a distance, and I couldn't figure what had put it into his head to run over and see me – he had run the two miles between our houses for cross-country practice, he said.

Of course, our mothers were good friends. They had gone to school together and then both married their professors and settled down in the same town, but Buddy was always off on a scholarship at prep school in the fall or earning money by fighting blister rust in Montana in the summer, so our