How good it is to have the soul wrapped in a yellow blouse to protect it from prying eyes!
How good it is,
When one is thrown to the jaws of the scaffold,
To shout: “Drink Van Houten cocoa!”

VLADIMIR MAÏAKOVSKY, The Cloud in Trousers.

DRINK VAN HOUTEN COCOA!

"The only thing I ask of you," Ija repeated at irregular intervals, "is not to put my age in my obituary. I beg you, don't put it!"

Usually, this request was made in the evening (Ija was lying in bed, ready to fall asleep), when my cousins and I sat on the couch next to her to chat in low voices.

Ija had a triumphant health. Life in her was vigorous; her body dedicated the entire day to housework, without a moment's rest.

She was really strong, Ija.

When evening fell, warm and purple, my cousins and I, sometimes joined by our classmates, gathered in that ideal place: Ija's room. Occasionally, our conversations were interrupted by Ija's tired voice reminding us for the umpteenth time not to mention her age in her obituary. All this because Ija's old age, her great old age, filled her with deep shame.

In Ija's room, we became aware of the enormous errors of this life: our mothers lived lives they did not deserve, with husbands they should never have had, just as we always let the boys we liked pass by without notice. This was how the world went, all askew. Ija's little room knew this well, knowing nothing of the mistake of her death, which was so slow in coming, leaving her ashamed and helpless.

In that small room, our secrets could come to light, and we managed to turn them into words without consequences. My mother and aunt also came there to talk about their grievances with their husbands, and then the conversation would shift to some handsome man they had spotted on the street and the multicolored fireworks he had set off in their sky.

For my mother, my aunt, and perhaps for me too, yes, for me too, Ija could no longer hear, see, or understand because of her old age, despite her liveliness, despite being lucid, mischievous, and sometimes even malicious. Despite understanding everything. Ija's eyes were so deeply set in her skull, surrounded by loose skin marked with a thousand tiny wrinkles, that it was impossible to believe they saw. Her old age prevented her from grasping anything, yet we knew Ija absorbed everything without fail.

I, too, had fallen into this trap without thinking too much about it. As soon as I had something weighing on my heart, one of those secrets we make, I would schedule a visit to Ija. At home, it was difficult to discuss delicate topics like men and love games. But at Ija's, we could; she didn't see or hear.

Her room served all purposes—kitchen, living room, and bedroom. We knocked on her door, entered without waiting for permission, settled on the couch, quickly said good evening, and left her alone, sunk in her bed, like a big doll, both present and absent according to our whims. We accompanied our chatter with her homemade treats. The

more sugar went down into our stomachs, the hotter the confessions became. We awoke the secrets of the heart; oh, how handsome was that boy seen today in the street! How he looked at me, how I looked at him, but tell me, how is it that when I close my eyes, I can no longer reconstruct his face in my mind? I push my imagination, but it lets me down halfway. Yet I know he has short chestnut hair, is tanned, tall, and slim.

Our mothers called us, and we answered that we were visiting Ija. And silence fell. They were reassured. At Ija's, there was no danger. With Ija, we had a duty: to visit her often and willingly, out of respect, because Ija was our great-grandmother, and it is very rare in life to know one's great-grandparents. And then, at home, we are supposed to respect old age. So we visited Ija, and this excuse always worked; in fact, it was *the excuse*.

She didn't speak to us. She knew we weren't there to chat with her. Occasionally, her voice would briefly interrupt our babbling, reminding us again to remember that for nothing in the world did she want her age to appear in her obituary. Then she fell silent again. We weren't sure of Ija's age. Her birth date wasn't written anywhere, on any paper. She said she was perhaps born in a certain year. In our country, it was extreme old age, rarely reached. We would say: "Good God, Ija, how strong she is! To live as long as Ija! Ija, as tough as the white raven! Ija, whom death has forgotten!"

Ija, however, begged death every night to come and take her. When I asked her: "Ija, how is it that you want to die so much?" she replied that death would make her forget some things, things I better not ask her about because she didn't want to reveal them. She sighed, adding: "I should have been underground a long time ago!"

Still, I feel we were insensitive to Ija's words. Better: the words Ija spoke did not touch me. At our age (thirteen), old age and the thought of old age seemed distant. Ija's age appeared to us like a mysterious number multiplied by seventeen. Until about fourteen or fifteen, counting was easy, it was quick to get to fourteen, but counting to over eighty was tiring, boring. I understood that Ija felt crushed under the weight of the years.

She tried to draw our attention with a defeated voice, one that didn't even believe in what she was asking for, but asked anyway because she had painfully surrendered to an old age too long: "How can death be so forgetful?" And that was how she ended her monologue.

When the death of young people occurs (like when our neighbor Artan passed away, only twenty-four years old, the night before his wedding), we are breathless in front of the injustices of life, or more precisely, its absurdities.

Ija wants death, but death does not want Ija. Artan does not think about death, it is Thursday, on Friday his fiancée waits for him in her white dress, on Sunday he will go to get her and make her his. To tidy up the house and make it prettier, Artan plans to move the old family portraits and the sunset beach photos, which have been in the same place for too long, to refresh the living room. In this house, a young woman is about to begin her life. He dusts off the drill, aims at a spot on the wall, starts the tool, and at that very moment, his heavy body collapses with a muffled sound. Dead.

The electric shock passed through his body, leaving him lifeless. All of this became part of the scenario of his imminent wedding.

Two days after Artan's death, as I walked down the street with Blerinda, his sister, disfigured by horror, tears, sleepless nights, and pain, she pointed with her small, dirty fingers to an old woman who was passing by:

"Look, just look," Blerinda said, her voice worn out with bitterness, "she—the old woman—she's alive, while my Artan, he's eating the earth."

The old woman didn't understand the crucial role she played in our conversation. She passed by, and we continued to look at her in silence, scrutinizing her misshapen back as

if that hump concealed in it the rest of Artan's life. Without saying anything, I thought of Ija: she was much older than this woman. When Blerinda came to visit me at Ija's, I was sure she would think again: "And here, the old woman lives while Artan eats the earth." She wouldn't dare repeat the phrase, but it would be enough to see her swollen eyes to understand what was screaming in her body.

When she learned of Artan's death, Ija shrank. I could see clearly, she wanted to disappear, the dishonor crushed her. Thus, her face flushed, for a moment magenta. She knew she was guilty of not dying in the allotted time. Silently, she went to the bathroom and leaned over the basin where the dirty laundry was soaking. All hunched over, dressed in black, with her cotton shawl covering her sparse hair, she scrubbed the laundry furiously, pouring as much water as she lifted foam, endlessly washing and rinsing the same pieces.

"Artan, right now, is eating the earth." The phrase whispered to me by Blerinda made me see him dressed as a groom (because he was buried in his wedding outfit, which made his mother's sobs even louder), his stiff black suit, never worn, his immaculate shirt, his polished black shoes, shaved, perfumed with Cologne, sitting in the coffin on a brown seat (the seat must be brown because it is made of earth), and scooping up dust, mud, and roots with his hands before bringing them to his mouth, filling himself with the mixture. He no longer wanted to hear us; the electric shock had made it so that we no longer interested him, he only wanted to eat the earth now.