Her legs, enormously swollen, weighing who knows how much each, established her in permanent residence of the hamlet. Others might walk six kilometers of dirt track to the stone-chip road where the bus passed. Others, still better off, could trot their horses to La Cruz, dismounting at the foot of the bluff where the macadam began, then walk the foam-soaked animals up to the town. None of this was for Julia. She was a true resident, like the trees, the decaying fence posts, or the oldest hog, who would not leave the pen even when the ruffian Hierra boys pulled open its gate to let the shoats scatter out into gardens and laundry baskets.

During the wind season Julia, with effort, pulled on her trousers: great dark green bags secured by a nylon cord made kinder by an elastic strip at the back. Like her giant turkey, a sort of guard-turkey (Duende the hound was a coward), Julia became restless toward dusk. She patrolled her yard, one heel committing the other to a plunge forward in the sand. Restlessness led her clockwise round by the barbed wire, out to the stagnant water, along its dun-colored froth to the broken wooden “bridge,” fallen in the mangrove and rubbish pond, back past a once-upon-a-time garage, alongside the roofed shelter that would have been a veranda had it a floor, and finally up to slats, wired together, that bordered the so-called road. A symbolic fence. These slats leaned outward at a sixty-degree angle because Duende jumped up to have forelegs on them when barking at passing fowl. Or barking at nothing. Duende, oversized for a dog, once set alongside Julia’s mass reassumed domestic scale. His hind legs were in terrible shape but, on the other hand, they had a shape, unlike Julia’s. Duende could stick at this barking on hind legs for some forty seconds, ruining the fence a little more, then dysplasia claimed back its own; he folded sideways, flailing forepaws, often enough cuffing his muzzle on the
boards. Duende was not an able dog; woman’s best friend perhaps, but not able.

Ever since Hilda Talpeca told Julia about the blue lights of Nicaragua, a new longing exacerbated her daily pains and humiliations. This was not a longing for love and good sex or for relief from skin rash, or for her skipping prepuberty girlhood, when climbing papaya trees was a whim, not a figure of speech. The ache, the desire, grabbed at the horizon, or at some void, needy of something or other, something to do with a meaning, but a meaning different from the meaning of a refrigerator that worked or some trick to cleanse the mangrove waters of petroleum sheen and stink.

These lights, affirmed Hilda Talpeca, did not appear every night but when seen they were blue. Nobody lives on the Nicaragua side, objected Julia, at least that’s what they say. Indeed, indeed—all more significant that there should be lights. Signifying what, asked Julia, loath to become excited by mystery and strangers only to discover that one had talked for twenty minutes about a rabble of drunken groseros, just like here in Jobo. Signifying something strange, insisted Hilda. Julia said nothing to that; Hilda, she knew since years back, thought and talked in fragments, not in complete sentences—a wicked rooster, fishnets torn, indecency, elections, color TV, late bus, more tourists. The owner, victim or witness of whatever it was—rooster, fishnet, bus, indecency—became garbled with the object as if the strain of naming it shattered its place within the rest of life.

Did you ever see the blue lights Hilda? asked Julia.

No, Luis though.

Luis saw them?

No, Luis talked to Hierra.

Hierra saw them?

Luis said so. Luis said that Hierra said that Hierra had seen the lights.

Hilda, Hierra is too drunk to see the moon.

Grandpa.

Oh, Grandpa Hierra! I see.
So Grandpa Hierra was in La Cruz, or what?

Grandpa saw them.

But he never walks farther than the school?

He saw them.

Hilda you’ve been smoking it, thought Julia. The blue lights came on at dusk, now retailed Hilda. Irritation of mind set off Julia’s skin rash; stealthily, smiling falsely, she spread her hippopotamus legs in want of ventilation or at least in hope of less chafing.

Julia inquired for days. She was inured to long quests for information—the patience of the dying tree visited by woodpeckers, of the corrugated iron roof visited by iguanas and yellowed leaves. She asked of the passing postman. She asked at the Pulpería Jobo.

The blue lights appeared in a line, as if descending a hill. They went out when a shrimper cruised the shore in front of them. They went on when a shrimper cruised the shore. They ran parallel to the shore. They were seen atop the two hills on the west end of the peninsula. They were seen only on weekends. They blinked. There were eleven lights. There were four lights. They were pale blue. They were white underneath and blue on top. They were faint. The Rural Guard said that there were no lights. Hierra saw the blue lights twice. Alarcón says he never saw any lights.

Julia’s memory gnawed at the question whether, when they felled all the north ridge trees to clear for the hotel that never was, this opened a clear view across to Nicaragua, the uninhabited hills, dark copses, fingers of gray gravel poking into Bahía Salinas.

And so Julia prepared her sacrifice. The sacrifice of her real shoes. The sacrifice of batteries and a new bulb for the mechanic’s double-length flashlight. The sacrifice, perhaps, of her little reputation for prudence and wisdom. The sacrifice of dignity, should her disgraceful body have to be carried home by sarcastic vagueros after some accident, an accident that hovered near, like Duende’s hindquarters collapsing for good; something probable.

The humpy little mountain between Jobo and the bay was called Jesús Salvador ever since somebody painted JESÚS SALVADOR.
in white letters on the stone face exposed by landslide. That paint job was doubtless Hierra’s, in some religious fit between binges, between one or another unimaginative delinquency or one or another arrest.

Her preparations, like much of what Julia did, crisscrossed mental order with corporeal staggering and chaos. Flashlight, stick, talcum powder, pliers for barbed wire. Nervous excitement exacted its toll; precious energy dribbled away before the struggle to climb Jesús Salvador. She started out two hours before nightfall in the shimmering heat that deforms the shape of things to the eye, turns vultures into dead branches, naked little girls napping on wooden steps into muddy corpses.

The ascent was worse than Julia foresaw. New barbed wire on the west path intimidated her. She sidled painfully east, cut three strands of old rusted wire, as if its decadence mitigated the damage, eased through, then retraced west along the new wire. Yes, the trees were felled. She suffered four bouts of heart palpitation. Once over the crest, Nicaragua lay in view. Her sweat would not dry. Vast patches of mud; everywhere, mud and ground vines. Nowhere to sit down. She patted talcum between her thighs three times. She waited for sundown. She waited after sundown. Darkness took full command. Pain trembled up her overweight legs. She vigilied, scanned all the opposite coast, sometimes holding a hand over one eye, sometimes squinting through both eyes. She did not see any blue lights. She yearned to wait longer but fear of the descent harassed her mind, became stronger. And then, too, the voice of reason—so far it was all without accident, so far nobody knew.

When Jesús Salvador’s southeast slope at last flattened into pasture underfoot, Julia stopped to rest her swollen legs, her ankles cut by grasses, and her sorrow. Now that it was all over, or almost over, her mind busied at the sights she could have seen; tarrying among mosquitoes and grunts from Brahmin cattle to her right she fancied the lights. At least, she thought, I can imagine.

Julia squeezed her eyes shut and indeed imagined. Sorrow gave her patience, and with this help she saw. Over each house, its
tiled veranda, its white walls and comfortable veranda chairs, a blue light. At the door two women smiled, women of fifty, sixty, like her, wide-bodied with age. Over the door a blue light in a blue glass fixture. Now, on a tray, iced tea in tall glasses, like ice cream glasses of the Hotel Rita. Soft curiosity, with smiles and words, then confidential talk. Yes, confidential talk between them, and curiosity as to the deepest thoughts of each; a plate of cookies held out, encouragement to speak. The thoughtful faces of women, of sisters.

Overhead across the veranda a breeze would swing the chain from which blue lights suspended in glass fixtures; blue light touched them all. No envy would soil their talk, for hospitality and truth smooth the aggressions of time, and make of time a welcome, and in so doing resist death and shame. She, Julia, would speak. She would be heard.

Was the dirt track to her right? She swept the flashlight beam about; a yellow eye glared back. An enemy? A cow! How evil a cow’s eye yet no one sees it so. Was she in the Alarcón’s pasture? It could only be that. She started to the right, forcing a confident pace. Thus it befell her: hidden by grasses, a narrow ditch; in its pit, water. Julia crashed down, terror sickening her heart. A terrible blow against her side. She lay still, fearful. She lay thus for minutes, trying to ignore water soaking in, trying not to panic, despite that her whole treacherous weight was sinking, pushing open the muck. She felt stabs from twigs and stones. Water filled both shoes—not cool water, but blood-warm and greasy; with it, unknown things, dead or quick.

A time later, an uncertain time, Julia clambered and groaned up onto the dark field, knees cut, one ear scratched, her hair muddied on the right side. She wiped the flashlight on her fuzzy trouser bags, themselves all sloppy. It still worked; she peered along its beam, here, then there. Tiny twin light, a flash, greenish-white, moving fast, then blackness. Were there bats then, would she see their teeth? Pebbles hurt her sole; the right shoe was packed with mud. Swaying, cautious of foot, she lumbered ahead. Here was wire. There was a post. She shined the light to the right. Two orange lights replied, disappeared, glowered again. What thing, and did it move? What is around us that we never see? What behind us?
After the sixth fence post the dirt track appeared in the beams, a ghosty-white stream. There gaunted the peaked roof of the Pentecostal church. Coming toward her now, people—three, no four. A white shirt. One was Señora Espinosa; Julia recognized her wheezy “...and I said to them.” When they neared, Julia, with no premeditation, shined the mechanic’s flashlight beam directly at a face, flicked off the beam, flicked it back on. It was not the same as the animal eye; a human eye was dull. The faces veered aside. “Hey who is that?” cried a man. “Julia,” replied Julia, and hobbled on.

Not so bright, she thought. The eyes are not bright. Two more people. Julia flashed into their faces. Hardly any light came back. “Cut it out Julia,” cried Cristina. I know each one, Julia’s thoughts now pant- ed, I know their real minds and their words in the dark, but they, they know only my shape. But not how tired, me, not who I am or was.

The ambulance will come from La Cruz. She pictured the white uniform of the provincial nurse, the shame of her enormous weight in the stretcher, the grunts and expelled breath, the toil of putting her aboard for her last ride in a car.

Another figure neared, shoes rasping on the road. She shined her light again. It was Alarcón. He flinched. No light returned; it was as if he had no eyes. “Julia?” asked Alarcón, “Julia? What’s with you? Why the light?”

“I’m lost?” Julia said, in a loud voice. “What are you talking about,” contested Alarcón, “you’re fifty meters from your house. Stop it. Don’t shine that stupid light in my face.” “I’m lost,” affirmed Julia. Alarcón pointed to the slats in front of Julia’s house; one could make them out by the pink bulb above the Pulpería Jobo to the left. “Hola, Duende, Duende,” called Alarcón. Duende’s square messy head appeared between the slats. “There you are,” declared Alarcón, like a policeman or a mayor, “there you are. There’s your dog.” Julia moved her legs just a few more times, lifting, placing down, resting, lifting, placing down.

Duende heaved forepaws up onto the slats, barked, slid to one side, tottered, and righted himself. He stuck it out a few seconds, then crashed down. “Down goes Duende,” witnessed Julia, aloud or not, she never knew. Now she was at her shack where she had lived all
this time. Now she was in through the slat gate. She shined the beam for Duende who sat askew on his patch of dry ground halfway to the screen door. “Duende?” pleaded Julia, trying to see his eyes in the white beams. “Duende,” thought or said Julia, “lost.” Then “I.”