

STOP! Read these pages first....

Sometimes, there just isn't a word in English that holds all the same nuances of meaning as the Spanish "equivalent". For that reason, some words in this book have been left in Spanish. Others have been left just because they give a sense of place, a gentle reminder that this isn't a vineyard in, say, Kent. Yet others are there because I think the Spanish word has been chosen for a reason and I didn't want to interfere with the author's intentions. I won't patronise you by listing all the words here — I'm sure you're perfectly capable of using Google if you don't already know the Spanish terms for family members, for example — but here are some I felt were worth defining:

Campesino - The dictionary will tell you this means "peasant", "farmhand", "farm worker". It means all these things, but really it just refers to anyone who lives in the countryside and is poor.

Campo - This can mean countryside, or fields, or land. Often, here, it is used to refer to the outside area surrounding the hacienda.

Conquistador - The conquistadors were the Spaniards who invaded South America, conquering the indigenous peoples to profit from the lands' natural riches.

Guacho - An illegitimate child born of a sexual "relationship" (consensual or otherwise) between a conquistador or his descendants and an indigenous woman.

Hacienda - The closest English equivalents would be "ranch" or "farmstead".

Hijo/a - Son/daughter. The plural is always "hijos", "sons", unless all the children are female.

India - An indigenous woman (in this instance, probably Mapuche).

Nana - Similar to the English "nanny", a nana — always a woman, often of indigenous descent — lives in a household and looks after the children, as well as cooking and cleaning. Many upper-class Chilean children have a stronger bond with their nana than with their mother, and a nana will often care for generations of children from the same family.

Patrimonio - literally "patrimony", which derives from the latin "pater", meaning "father".
Heritage, bloodline.

Patrón - Boss, master, patron. Again, this word derives from "pater".

Primogénito - Firstborn son.

I

The Curse

There was a black moon on the night the curse began. The fire covered the fields with ash, yet none of those who survived ever knew the causes of the blaze. Some say she hurled the candlestick and the flames engulfed everything, ravenous. Others say the fire escaped from her eyes, that perhaps it had always been there.

She did it.

She was the one to blame.

Now she dresses always in black, they say. She heralds death, she tears your shadow from you. Now she is coming for what is rightfully hers and should never have been taken from her. The black moon, the fire and the woman were a memory kept alive through stories. Years later, when nobody, living or dead, could even imagine the web of misfortune weaving itself betwixt the shadows, the screams would bring the legend back to life.

Then, the woman in black would appear once more.

The hacienda was located in the Maule region, to the south of the province of Santiago, and one of the most fertile lands in the kingdom of Chile. With freshwater streams, and dry seasons lasting up to half the year, the soil yielded produce that was healthy and strong. Soon, the place was colonised by yet another Spanish conquistador. By the year 1680, the campo was strewn with the first vine plantations. From them came fruits that were deep red in colour and floral in fragrance, tenderly borne from France. Only a few years sufficed for them to heed the fertility of the land, and so, while other valleys produced only thick-skinned grapes, this one granted red and white wines, with flavours both subtle and intense, of oak, apple and chocolate.

The vineyard grew and, with it, the wealth of its master. He was proud to see how little remained of the man he had once been; that poor, simple serf, toiling away on another man's land, with no benefit to himself. That man who had dreamt of the day when property, titles and honour would be his, so that his blood would be recognised by generations to come.

Finally, those dreams were coming true. The vines would continue to prosper, of that he was sure. And, in contrast to him, his heirs would enjoy fame and fortune. For that reason, he could not bring himself to leave his estate to one of the *guachos* he had sired roundabout. No, he needed a true heir, a man through whose veins clean blood ran.

As the vineyard was by now well known in the region and his fame was growing amongst the great Spanish gentlemen, he was able to hunt through the wealthiest families for a woman who could assure him of an heir without taint. In return, he would promise her safety and stability.

Many young ladies were offered to him, all of good manners and dowry, but something inside him clammered out; a voice that spoke from a deep silence to convince him to wait, that the hunt was not yet over. Until, one golden afternoon, when the leaves hung heavy on the trees and the sun's rays had lost their heat, he met her. One of the region's wealthiest gentlemen, keen to unite the two patrimonios, invited him to his hacienda with the promise that in his daughter he would find the woman he was looking for: a pure and chaste young lady, raised between the walls of his house and those of the convent.

In my daughter, you will possess the most beautiful and docile maiden in all Chile, he promised, as a wide-hipped *india* served him a cup of wine. You can take this one too, if you like, he said and gave her a slap such as one might give a mare to make her move. He shook his head, he was no longer interested in fathering *guachos*. He wanted a primogénito of pure Spanish blood.

As this thought came upon him again, she appeared in the room. She wore a long dress of white satin, embellished with lace. The corset narrowed her waist, which — though perhaps not so generous as he would have liked — held the promise of sweeping, angelic curves. Over her shoulders hung a cape, which reached to her elbows and revealed only what was necessary. He pictured the petticoats under her skirt, her smooth, white legs. He pictured, even, the perfect blend that would result if he conceived a son with her.

He stood up, took her hand and lifted it to his mouth, without kissing it. Un placer, he said, and she responded with a mute smile, just as he liked it. The father said something, but he paid no heed; more than being overpowered by her beauty, he had lost himself in her eyes.

He was not a romantic man, he had neither the time nor the desire to devote himself to love. Her gaze held no hint of this either, nor was that the reason he lingered on her. Rather, it was the mystery; that shadow that passed over her, a discontent, a hint of darkness that seemed to reveal itself only to him, beneath all the fabric and the jewellery and the father's promises. Take her or stay, were the words the voice murmured now, that same voice that once called out for the hunt and which now, faced with this angel of death, fell silent. He made the decision like the man that he was, without doubt or fear. He had never fled from a battle. And this would not be the first time.

The wedding was held before the arrival of winter. Naked trees adorned the garden — like a dire omen, she thought as two maids arranged the folds of her dress. She was incapable of recognising the image in the mirror as her own. Dressed in virginal white, prisoner to a corset which barely allowed her to breathe, she remembered a time when she dreamt of being free. Once, she dreamt of another life. Her father's cruel laughter was sufficient for her to understand that this would never happen, that even her body was not her own. One of the maids held out the immaculate train, while the other let the veil fall softly over her head.

She looked at her reflection for the last time.

It held nothing of her.

She entered the church on her father's arm. She had hoped to take his hand, but held back when she realised she would find in it neither comfort nor courage. Perhaps, had her mother been by her side, she might have been able to offer a few words. Or perhaps there was nothing to add to what he had already said. You should thank me for gifting you a respectable life with a man of worth, he had spluttered between fits of laughter the previous night.

In front of the altar, dressed in solemn black, stood her new master. Through the veil she could make out a blurred picture of him, and in it she recognised the ambition she had seen at their first meeting. He was the same as her father. There is no such thing as a safe life, she

thought, not for us. The priest spoke of vows. Till death do us part, in sickness and in health; they all held the echo of possibility, promises that would be upheld under certain conditions.

Only so long as she fulfilled her duties and gave them the boychild they wanted, could she remain protected beneath his shadow. Till death do us part, so long as she obeyed them, was useful to them.

But all these thoughts were far from being realised.

The first year of marriage was an island in time. In the warm afternoons they would walk together beneath the vines, and when the rain fell on the campo they enjoyed wine beside the hearth. That was the period when he still believed he would have an heir and she wanted to believe that she could give him one, so they could live as in the stories: happily ever after. By that time, she had already relinquished the dreams she had once harboured and all she asked was for the speedy arrival of the *primogénito* who would save her from abandonment. But no matter how much she prayed — and her life had become one prayer after another — the boy never arrived.

Two, five, seven years passed, amidst rumours that ran hidden through the corridors of the house. The maids feared that the *patrón* would throw her to the street like an old dog, and the *campesinos* replied that he would have good reason to do so, because a barren woman is no use to anybody. She understood that the rumours were true, that even her father would not want her back. Well, what kind of woman are you, if you cannot fulfill your only duty in this world, he would bellow at her. He would beat her. He would kill her.

Woman and infertile, doubly cursed. Only one solution remained: listen to the call of the water. For a while she had heard the *indias* talk, but fear of reprisal — divine as much as earthly — had held her back. However, after seven years of fruitless hoping, it seemed the only option. They said that the river Maule brought hope to those who asked for it, that one bathe was enough to bring fertility to the most arid of wombs. Desperate, one day when he was far from home, she went in secret to the river so that its waters may heal her. She bathed with the sun and with the moon.

She returned at night, on tiptoe.

Souls, earth, everything slept.

Everything, except her.

That same night, in her dreams, she found herself once more at the river. As before, she entered and felt her feet turn to ice. She sank into the waters and the current of the Maule stole something from her. Something that would never be returned. As she emerged, a frog jumped to the shore. The creature's sad lips remained shut, but its bulging gaze spoke to her clearly: before a year is over, you will give birth to a daughter.

She awoke in the middle of the night, bathed in sweat. It was not a good omen. The birth of a girlchild would be a death sentence for them both.

In spite of all her hopes, it happened just as the frog had foretold and, within the year, a girl was born on the hacienda. He showed no interest, only disappointment. She became accustomed to weeping behind closed doors. The girl was nothing but the absence of the son that he so dearly wanted. That she would never be able to give him. And, like the rain that appears suddenly in the campo, she saw what her mother's true fate had been.

He is not my father, she told herself time and again, looking at her reflection in the eyes of the girl. He will not take her from me, he will not cast me out.

The years passed, one after another. Until one night, when a black moon concealed itself in the darkness, some men in white came looking for her. He announced that his *indias* had seen her bathing in the river when the sun had gone from the sky, that she was a witch or she was mad, and he was fearful of the influence she may bring to bear on the girl. She made bold to ask who they were, but they replied with an order of silence. The daughter arrived. Who are they, she asked. Silence. They were unable to ask a third time: one took her by the arms, another by the legs. The girl cried out and so did she. He tried to tear them apart but the girl was too quick and threw herself onto her mother. The men collapsed alongside them, tables flew. Candlesticks, candles, fire. Everything fell, everything burned.

They burned together like equals.

Although only *her* soul remained amongst the vines.

After the fire, the vineyard was not the same. The campo was filled with legends and laments. They said that, on a black-moon night, a woman in black appeared amidst the grapevines. She

mourned a loss, she augured death. No matter whether she appeared for minutes or for days, the result was always the same. Terrified, believers fled the cursed place. A few attempted to make it prosper as he once had, but it was in vain. The land is cursed, the campesinos complained. The land belongs to the woman in black, repeated the voices of the *indias* that no one wanted to hear. The more fortunate ones lost their money; the less so, their children or their life.

More than a century would have to pass before someone dared to make their home there again. The man in question was the young heir of a Spanish migrant and a Chilean noblewoman, who decided to buy the land with the aim of transforming it into the best vineyard in the Maule Valley. Soon, the story reached his ears of a woman in black who brought tragedy to all who encountered her. They warned him that she took both money and life, that she forbade the birth of boychildren and that, when she did allow it, it was only so that she could watch them die. He replied with mockery: these are pagan stories, for uncivilised, superstitious folk. He did not believe, or perhaps he did not want to believe, for within a month the hacienda was his.

The beginning was difficult, even for a man such as he, with all the means necessary to make the business thrive. The land would not yield. Nor would the fear of the campesinos, nor the whispers of the *indias*. Even the house itself spoke to him of abandonment and neglect. The left wing had become a thick mass of charred wreckage, and though the right remained intact thanks to the white sheets that covered the ancient furniture, the light barely entered that part, lending it a gloomy, ghostly air. It was clear that it had not been inhabited for some time, particularly from the smell, which was bitter and damp. Rather than a colonial house surrounded by vines, it resembled an abandoned castle, covered with brambles.

Despite all this, nothing could deter him. He believed that, eventually, the land would reawaken. He also believed that he would become so accustomed to the silence that he would find, in that shadowy place, a mysterious beauty that he could already almost glimpse. Together with a small group of men as brave as himself, he began to work the fields and rebuild the house. It did not take his *indias* long to put the habitable part of the house in order, however, something different was occurring in the part affected by the fire. He was promised that the roof would be completed before the arrival of winter, but everything they tried to put up, fell down. A similar occurrence was taking place outside. The fog brought with

it the first frosts, covering the campo with its blanket of ice. It is because it belongs to them, patrón, to the woman in black and to the weeping girl. Crazy fools, he thought. All this belongs to me. To me and nobody else.

His certainty wavered one afternoon, as the sun sank down behind the horizon and he was still in the fields. After an exceptional day, when the mist disappeared with the morning, he had been amongst the vines from daybreak until the lack of light forced him to return to the house. Little by little, a silent cloak of darkness fell. He felt his way through the vines, barely lit by a few stars. Suddenly he heard the scream of a girl. There was nobody else around, near or far. Unsure of what he had heard, he continued on his way. But the second time, the weeping came. That which his campesinos had told him so much about. That which the *indias* respected and the believers feared. Who goes there, he demanded. Who goes there?! He cried, feeling ridiculous when the only answer he received came from the freezing wind. He convinced himself that it was fatigue and quickened his pace, determined not to delay. However, he was pelted from behind by an icy blast, which, combined with an overwhelming sensation of fear and dread, caused him to turn back.

Under a dark moon, he saw her for the first time.

(...)

II

The spindle

The birth

The window is small and has no curtains, it never has done. The glass reflects my face back to me. If I move closer and look through it, with my hands cupping my eyes, the sun will be setting, sinking down into the ground. The evening will soon be over. And I will keep on sewing.

I bite off more thread, wet it with the tip of my tongue, pass it through the eye of the needle. While I sew the button onto the shirt, I think back over my years on the vineyard. Not just mine, but my ancestors' too. How many women like me have lived in this room behind the kitchen. How many lost pins, how many worn-out thimbles. How many different coloured spools of thread. How many black ones, white ones, blue ones.

More than years, centuries.

We know all the legends, all the secrets. Even the darkest ones.

Outside nothing moves. There is no wind, no light. If it weren't for the moth fighting to get inside, you would be forgiven for thinking there was no life at all. No one in the campo. Only the stories about a woman in black, the weeping and the curse.

My mother told them to me time and time again, as her mother told them to her. They said the stories came from so far back that nobody knew the date. Only the place. Here, on the patrón's vineyard.

Does he know these stories? If he does, he hides it well. He scarcely speaks, much less to me. Sometimes he speaks to the señora, especially now that she is carrying his child. He believes it will be a boy. The hombrecito, the heir, the future of the family. But it's the moon who decides, and she will always want women. Her curse was for one hundred years, and one hundred years it will be.

If I reminded them of this, they would say the things the patrones always say, the ones they use to make fun of our stories. And when will the hundred years be up, Talía, even you have no idea when this curse began. He laughs because we're women, and she because we're poor. I laugh because they're asleep and they don't even know it.

Better not to tell them, not to remind them.

Maybe they already know. If they don't, they will.

Better to carry on sewing, like my mother, like my grandmother.

Women with needles for fingers, black thread for hair.

If I go backwards I see the same routine, the same fate. Waking before the sun, cooking, cleaning, ironing, washing. Serving, keeping quiet. Waiting until the daylight dims and we can bring out the fabrics hidden beneath the bed. Opening the sewing box, putting on the thimble and the scissors always close, mijita, always by your side.

One hundred years in one day.

My mother and my grandmother, and the women who came before them, they all did their sewing work in secret, except for what the family needed. They let me sew when I've finished the day's housework, when they are sleeping, or when they say they don't need me. I think they always need me. But it's easier to believe that I am the one who depends on them.

Night is here.

It's as dark as only a black moon night can be.

Suddenly, a scream.

It's the señora, from the other end of the house. It's the moon, she's going to give birth. I put down the shirt, the thread, the needle, and quickly get dressed. The cries don't stop, it's the

moon falling on her. I run through the still-deserted corridors. I knock on the door, two dry taps. The patrón opens it, a half-filled bag over his shoulder. He wasn't expecting it. Nobody was. Behind him, in the bed, she writhes in pain. Excuse me, patrón, but the señora should not be moving like that. He doesn't speak or question; for once, he doesn't give orders either. We both know the rough path that has to be traversed to get off the hacienda, the rocks, the dust. Go and find the doctor, I'll stay. She screams again. Go, I repeat. He's not convinced, but her pain makes him drop the bag. I hope it all goes well, he warns me before he leaves.

He doesn't know about the moon.

But I do know about threats.

I hear the front door closing against a winter storm. I go up to the señora, she is a body that screams. I take her hand, it dampens mine. I'm scared, she tells me and she weeps. I don't want to lose him, I don't want to lose him. She thinks she will lose it because it's come early. The black moon is like that, she does what she wants. I squeeze her hand tightly and tell her not to think about that, to breathe with me, just as my grandmother taught my mother and my mother taught me.

I don't tell her the truth, that all this is a bad omen.

The black moon cuts short the destiny of the people she touches.

After a time as long as my family has been on the vineyard, the patrón arrives with the doctor. He is a man the size of a monkey-puzzle tree. From his dizzying height he gives me orders I don't need. I boil water, I bring clean sheets and towels. I do it while he directs us. The patrón waits behind the door. The señora pushes, screams, tears open. I boil water, I bring clean sheets and towels. I do it over again, as my mother did, and my grandmother, and the women who came before them.

The moon falls on us.

The hours and the pain pass. The screams remain and there is no sign of the baby. The patrón has not come back in. The señora feels like she can't give birth, she thinks she's going to die. She cries, she begs the doctor for comfort, and he places his elbow between her ribs and pushes down on her stomach. Thick veins run across his arms, the strength, the damage to

that other body. He doesn't care. He smiles when he hears the cry that fills the room, the house, the whole vineyard. The door opens with a bang and the patrón enters like a hungry wolf. The doctor's smile has been wiped away. There is no happiness for any of us, although our reasons are different from theirs. The doctor passes her to the patrón, who oozes frustration, and leaves the señora with arms outstretched, two white threads waiting for the needle. After a little while, he hands me the girl. He barely looks at me. He doesn't want to. Maybe he's frightened. Or angry.

Now he believes our stories. Now he knows the curse is real.

Little Sun

The clear light of summer filters through the branches of the willow. Some droop down to the ground, touching the earth. Others are shorter, dancing in the air. Little Sun tries to touch these dancing branches, but she can't. I pick her up, place her feet on my thighs, giving her the height she needs. She stretches and reaches a weeping leaf. She pulls it, she wants to break it. What are you doing that for? It hurts the tree. She looks at me and I understand her. She wants to make me a crown. I shake my head. There are no crowns for the likes of us. The tree will give us shade for many more years if we take care of it. She likes my answer, leaves the branch be.

She hugs me.

It's summer and the damp heat sticks to our bodies. I don't care.

Little Sun is the apple of my eye.

The patrón says she's his little princesa. He doesn't know her. Nor does the señora. They gave her to me so soon. You take care of her Talia, you're still young and you have no hijos of your own. She's still young too, and nor does she have an hijo. That's why she isn't interested in being with the girl. That's why they carry on sleeping. Sometimes I wonder if they'll regret it. They'll see how she glows like a firefly when she's with me, but her light goes out with them, her own flesh and blood.

Blood doesn't matter, not to us.

The smell of burnt meat reaches the willow. Laughter, too. I look over my shoulder towards the terrace. The family is celebrating the abuela's birthday. The patrón's mother is a woman with a shrivelled soul. She doesn't want the girl because she wanted a boy. Or maybe she doesn't like her because she came from the señora. Those two have never got on. Suddenly it occurs to me that they're competing for the patrón's love. It must be strange to fight for something you'll never have.

The family talks beneath a ceiling of dark, juicy grapes. They laugh. Important things for important people. From afar I smell the aroma of wine, wine that I can only try when it's about to be thrown away with the rubbish. In front of them are the primos grandes, as they call them. Boys and girls doing divebombs, disappearing into the water. They call to each other with the summer in their eyes. They know nothing of the fly-laden heat, the sleepless nights, seams stitched with mosquitos.

They never will.

I dry my neck with my apron sleeve. I turn once more towards little Sun. I expect her to be like me, looking at the water, imagining her body inside it. But she's not interested in what's going on over there. She's interested in what's happening here, in the campo. She wants to hug the tree. She tries. She stops when she feels satisfied. A small group of campesinos pass by on their way from the vines, laden with grapes. She moves her hands, both of them. She waves, laughs. I smile too, as they do. That's what the girl brings. Light, leaves and grapes reflected in the water.

The sun's rays play with her golden hair and hide in mine, which is black thread. We are together, we look at each other. We could spend a long time just like this. We have done.

Her willowgreen eyes look through me.

I feel we know each other already, that we came together from other lives.

Her family would say I'm crazy. They believe there's only one life. They'd tell me that even if there were many, the two of us would always be on opposite sides.

But they're the ones who are far away, on the other side. They're the ones who are asleep.

The games

For my grandmother, seven was a sacred number. I was seven years old the first time I heard her say it. I didn't understand. How could I. The patrones of that time had already told me it was three that was special. At first, they spoke to me about the Holy Trinity, and I thought it was someone in their family. Then they showed me how to make the sign of the cross, and I had to copy them until I knew it off by heart. If I forgot and did it with my left hand, they struck me across my palm. They left it red and burning. I never told them what I really thought, that sacred numbers are different for everyone: three for them, seven for us.

I didn't ask my grandmother to explain. Nor my mother. I assumed I would understand when I needed to.

Today, now that more than twenty years have passed since that first time, I do.

Little Sun has just turned seven and she's different. Brighter, more awake. Questions leap out of her mouth; sometimes she finds the answers all by herself. That's not allowed here, and it frightens me. I fear the slumber will catch up with her and she'll fall asleep, like the others.

The harvest is over now and the vines are bare. The whole campo looks deserted. Clouds hide the sun, it's starting to feel cold. Another yellowing leaf falls from the tree. It lands on the table where the family is eating. The abuela picks it up with the tips of her fingers, barely touching it. Leaves don't bite.

Would you like another slice, Suegra, the señora asks. She points to the dessert. She's got in there first, before the abuela can remind her of her duties. Tell her she needs to make sure that we, the staff, do our jobs properly. Getting rid of dry leaves is one of those jobs.

The abuela assents with a nod of her head, she doesn't speak to her. It seems like she never wants to speak to her, unless it's to tell her off for something. The señora sighs, cuts a slice. It's a torta de milhojas. They have bought it many times. I've never tried it.

Where is the girl, Talía. The order comes from the patrón, who is signalling to me to refill his cup. I pick up the coffeepot, walk towards him. Playing, I reply. I pour the coffee out slowly,

so that it doesn't spill over the edge of the cup. It smells good, like chocolate. Playing where. Just here, close by. I barely recognise my voice. A pair of blunt scissors could cut through it. And you just left her there? The abuela shrieks. I'm about to reply, when I realise that she's speaking to the señora, not to me. She answers that I look after her very well, that she shouldn't worry. Well, you're her mother, so... She doesn't finish the sentence, leaves it hanging in the air. Although we all know very well what she wanted to say.

Silence returns to the table. I'm worried. Any moment now they're going to ask if little Sun is alone or with someone else. I know who she's with. And they're not going to like it.

I pray that they'll get up, go to sleep their siesta.
That they won't hear, won't see.

Suddenly, the girl comes running through the fields. Her golden hair leaves a clear slipstream across the campo. She's laughing, she's happy, she's a three and a seven. Behind her runs a boy. He's laughing too, he's happy too. But he's not three, only seven. He's different. He's like me. Like us.

They lose each other, they seek each other, they chase each other through the empty vines.

(...)

III

100 years

(...)

The morning mist is gone. The wind carried it away, along with the rain clouds. All that's left now is a soft breeze, so we eat lunch on the terrace. Mid season is like this in the campo — icy cold mornings, warm afternoons. Possibly this will be the last lunch outside. Soon winter will come.

Mamá doesn't speak and nor do I. You can just about make out the murmured conversation Papá is having with Abuelita. They're talking about things neither one of us is interested in. Whether or not to open the premium reserve, whether or not to move me off the kids' table. Would you like that, *mi linda*? Abuelita asks me, and I reply that I don't mind either way. A few hours ago I would've been delighted to be promoted to the status of a grown up, but after everything that's happened, the only thing I'm interested in is solving the mystery and helping the ghosts that suffer in the vineyard. Ay, how tiresome she's become, Abuelita says. My papá nods, and his face says yes, it's a difficult age, and to be a woman to boot —that's hard on her, *pobrecita*.

I'm just about to tell them they don't understand anything, when the woman in black appears. She's directly in front of me, but in the distance, standing among the grapevines. I want to get up and go over to ask her about the letters, but I can't. They'd think I was crazy if I told them what I was doing. Even if I didn't tell them, they'd say it's bad manners to leave the table in the middle of lunch. I beg the woman not to go, to wait for me. And although at first I don't think she's going to, she hears me and she stays. A black smudge amongst the empty vines. Dessert arrives, then coffee, until at last the adults decide to go off for their siesta.

Then, I go into the campo.

I walk towards her, without anyone seeing. I want to run, but I don't want to attract attention. I approach her slowly, leaving the noise of the house behind. It's just her, me and the empty vines.

She turns her back to me, starting to move away, and I stride to catch up. Occasionally she looks over her shoulder at me, through the lace of her veil, as if to reassure herself that I'm following. We get to an old willow tree. It isn't far from the house, and it's strategically positioned, because although you can see the terrace from here, from over there this is just another tree. If the woman in black brought me to this tree, it's because its branches guard a secret.

She stands there, mute, while I walk around the tree's trunk. I examine every detail, hunting for a clue. I'm just coming full circle when I see something written on the bark, carved by hand. It is small, but clear: "Sun, moon and Talia". For some reason that I don't quite understand, these three words fill me with fear, sorrow and anger. All at the same time. Maybe it's because that's what they do to *her*. That's how the spirit bond works: the closer I am to the woman in black, the more power she holds over me. I put my hand on the tree to hear its story. No sooner have I touched the rough bark than my eyelids droop.

The pictures come in a rain of fire:

a night with no moon
the grief of a girl
the fire that covered the campo with ash

a woman
another woman
all in black
one who sleeps
another who weeps
neither one dreams, only nightmares come to them
monsters disguised as frogs
men who are snakes
the silence, the needles, the darkness
the wheel that turns until it is consumed by sleep
it's been one hundred years, a voice says, one hundred years.

I come out of the trance and open my eyes. But they're not the eyes they were before. I'm not the girl I was before. I'm no longer convinced that it's me who needs to help the woman in black. Perhaps it works both ways. Or maybe it's the other way around. Maybe it's she who is helping me to blow away the fog.

I march determinedly back to the house. There's a book my papá commissioned for the harvest, to commemorate the vineyard's one hundredth anniversary, that he keeps on the coffee table in the living room. It holds the whole history of the campo, or almost. I cross my fingers, hoping to find more information. I go in through the french doors that lead off the terrace. Already there are noises coming from the kitchen and one of the interior courtyards, they must be busy with the final preparations before the guests arrive. Curfew is approaching.

I sit down, pick up the book and rest it on my lap. It's heavy: it's a hardback and it has so many pages it feels like a huge brick. I find the index page and spend a while looking over the contents. When the vineyard was founded, who founded it, all the different varieties of grape, blends, blah blah blah. Since none of the actual writing is helpful, I concentrate on the photographs. I only see men. Rich men and poor men, dark men and fair men, tall men and short men. Boys, young men, old men. I see the campo, the wine cellar, the office. Not the house. Nor the women inside it. I slam the book shut.

I don't want to steal more letters from nana, sneak into her room, snoop through her things. But it's the only way, a voice tells me. I'm not sure if it's mine, or if it comes from the woman in black. I have to risk it.

Nana's room is still empty. The sewing box is where I left it too. I drag the chair over, climb up and stretch my arm out until I reach it. I bring it down, open it, and before I can put my hand in, I hear her footsteps. There isn't time to put everything back, I'm going to have to make something up. The door opens and I put on my best birthday-girl smile, the one I don't know how to do, that I've never done. She stops dead and I can't tell if she's surprised, angry or scared. Please don't let it be the second one.

"What are you doing here?"

"Nana, is that all you've got to say to me?"

"Happy birthday mija," she says, and sits down by my side, close to the sewing box. "And? Tell me what you were doing. You know that —"

"That you don't like people going in your room. I know, but I needed some thread. I have to sew up this hole."

I show her a hole in my sweater.

Nana gives me a strange look.

"Try that one."

She points out a thread in the first compartment. She believes me. Only just, but she believes me.

I pick it up, smiling.

Thank you, goddesses and witches, that for all the times Abuelita told me off about it, calling me a dirty hippy, I never mended this tiny hole.

"Something's happened to you."

"Why do you say that?"

I don't look at her, I'm struggling to thread the needle.

She takes it from me and in a split second has it ready, knot and all. "Tell me,"

"Maybe it's better if you tell me."

"Tell you what?"

"About the woman in black."

"Since when do you know about her?"

"So it's true then."

"Of course it is. How long have you known?"

"Not long."

"And how... how...?"

She's unable to finish the thought and I am too. Nana would believe me if I told her I'd seen the woman's ghost, but the voice — the same one that's been speaking to me since I woke up this morning — is telling me not to.

She doesn't press me, either. She must see that the woman in black showed herself to me, what that means. Her call cannot be ignored. Even less so by someone like me, like us.

Witches.

"Tell me about her, please."

Nana looks at the clock.

"We've got time," I urge her.

"My time is different from yours."

"Please." I need to know.

"Just this one story."

"Yes. the last one, if that's what you want."

Outside rain is falling.

We hear it on the roof, the trees, the ground.

But nana's voice rises above it:

"There was a black moon on the night the curse began..."

(Time passes. I don't know how much. I don't care).

Now I know when the hundred years began. I understand the girl's weeping, the woman in black's sorrow, the empty campo, the black moon, the fire, the silence. And although I know the story, I still have the feeling that it doesn't finish there. The time is not up, the hundred years are not over. Something tells me they are just about to be.

I go back to my room and get ready for the party. Papá commissioned a modista to make me a dress. I told him nana could have done it, but he didn't want that. At least he let me pick out the design. For yesterday's me, picking out a design was something that mattered. Now that's

changed. The story of the women who came before me, before nana and Mamá, has changed me. Now I understand why this sorrow has been following me around all day. It's their sadness, chasing me, and I open my arms to receive it, because you can't come out of a story like that the same person you were before. What I still haven't worked out is what I can do to change what has been, what is to come.

I'm not clear what my role is in all this, but I know that it exists, that it's real.

The corridors are decorated with white roses, one of Abuela's favourite flowers. Mamá doesn't like them because of their thorns. I can see her at the back of the marquee, staring silently into the emptiness. I go to her and take her hand, and we both pretend that we're here. I'm with the woman in black. Maybe she is, too.

Abuela is surrounded by people, smiling as the waiters treat her like a queen. She looks happy. Papá talks about his wines, and people listen, nod, sip. They tell him it's the best wine in Chile, no, the world. They wear shirts with ties, or long dresses with necklaces made of pearls. And bit by bit the wine reaches their eyes, which cloud over, letting me become invisible. I'm not here. I'm with her, with all of them. Those who weren't invited, who weren't photographed, weren't named.

Mamá lets go of my hand. They want to sing happy birthday and she needs to bring in the cake. It's her duty as a mother, I heard Abuela say once, and Papá nodded, saying of course, who else could do it. I used to think like them too. But the witch inside me no longer agrees.

Suddenly, the lights go out. The marquee is almost completely dark, the only light you can see is from the candles outside. Mamá appears with the cake. There are dark circles under her eyes that are growing, it's the sleep that won't leave her alone. The guests begin to sing, they make way for her as she comes towards me, fifteen candles burning, the flames lighting up her face from beneath, creating shadows I hadn't noticed before. Beside me, Papá, his back ramrod straight, his white moustache hiding a smile of conformity. Beside him, always Abuelita. Around us, people. Among them I see nana. She isn't singing. She isn't smiling.

She's waiting for something.

Mamá stops in front of me, With her, the cake and the fire. She moves her lips, but I don't hear her.

The song isn't over yet when I see a shadow in the background, silhouetted by the candles placed in the doorway. It's a woman dressed in black, but it's not the woman in black. It's someone else, and she walks among us. Everyone can see her.

Nobody invited her, but my family knows her.

I don't.

Or do I?

Papá's face falls. Abuelita's, too. Mamá turns around. When her eyes land on the other woman in black, she falls apart like Papá, like Abuelita. Suddenly it's as if everyone has woken from a long sleep. Everyone except me. I don't know who she is. I look for nana, because her eyes always tell me something, give me clues, but this time hers are the most broken of all. I never knew anyone could carry so much pain and still be alive.

The shadow-woman walks towards us, towards me. I recognise something about her features. I've seen them somewhere before. The birthday song gets weaker with every step she takes, as if people are recognising her as she gets closer. Or maybe it's fear at coming face to face with a living ghost. Only Papá's and Abuelita's voices can be heard loudly over all the rest. They don't stop singing, they're afraid of what will come next. Que los cumplas feliz, they say, and the cake with the candles waiting to be put out. I blow, and before everything goes dark, before the lights and the music comes back on, I look for the shadow-woman. I don't know her, but there's a black thread that ties us together. I look for answers from Mamá, from Papá. I find fear. What is this fear that spills out of their sleeping eyes.

In her silence

she has the skin of a ghost.

In his words

he has the tongue of a snake.

They're hiding something, they're holding something back.

I hear clapping, the lights come on. Beside the unknown visitor is the woman in black.

They walk together, but only I can see the second. I weave the threads that bind the women of my story together

those from before, those of today.

Those threads resolve the questions, they bring me answers that are ancient, painful.

The woman in black comes closer.

The shadow-woman as well.

It is she who hugs me.

At last I have found you, she says, and she gives me a kiss.

Just one kiss.

Then, distant memories come to me. They're like pictures in a kaleidoscope appearing, hiding, changing. They tell me about other women, all in black. They tell me what happened to each of them, until they get to me.

The nana with a girl, playing beneath the willow tree. The girl, the nana, a boy, three of them together. Her and him, two of them together.

The black moon.

The pregnancy, the coup, the separation. The disappeared.

A secret birth.

Another girl, the weeping is mine.

The woman who leaves.

The other who stays.

The girl

who also disappears

is me.

The voice of my papá, who is my abuelo

threatens nana

Don't speak, don't you dare tell the truth

If she does, she's gone

It destroys her

It squeezes her lungs

Takes out all the air.

The voice of my mamá who is my abuela, telling him he can't throw her out, if he does all the Maule will know what kind of man he is

The things he made them do for his vineyard, his name, his blood.

Because he thought it was all his

The threads, the needles, the colours
the fire
even me.

But he couldn't.

He can't beat us.

Now I know
all the stories
all the secrets.

Now I am awake.

Reading Group Questions

1. Who do you think "The Sleepers" in the title of the book refers to? In what way are the characters asleep?
2. Several words in this book have been left untranslated, but only two are italicised. Can you identify these words and consider what differentiates them from other Spanish words in the text?
3. *The Sleepers* is told from three different perspectives, at three different points in Chilean history. Why do you think the author chose to tell the story in this way?
4. *The Sleepers* is a retelling of the fairy tale, *Sleeping Beauty*. What aspects of the fairy tale do you recognise in this story? How does it differ? Who is the hero of this version?
5. What did you think of the way the story ends? Why do you think the author left the story there? What do you think might happen next if the story continued?