

8 The hair that was missing on his head jutted aggressively out of his ears in jet-black clumps, a kind of grotesque compensation for the baldness of the Constitutional Sot. Had he given him that nickname too, before he rebaptized him, in his heart of hearts, as the Walking Turd? Probably. Since his youth he had been good at making up nicknames. Many of the savage labels he stamped on people became part of their very flesh and eventually replaced their real names. That's what had happened to Senator Henry Chirinos. No one in the Dominican Republic, except for the newspapers, called him by name; they used only his devastating epithet: the Constitutional Sot. He had the habit of stroking the greasy bristles that nested in his ears, and though the Generalissimo, obsessed with cleanliness, had forbidden him to do so in his presence, he was doing it now, and, to make matters worse, he was alternating one revolting act with another: smoothing the hairs in his nose. He was nervous, very nervous. The Benefactor knew why: he was bringing him a negative report on his enterprises. But responsibility for things going badly did not lie with Chirinos; it was the fault of the sanctions imposed by the OAS, which were strangling the country.

"If you keep picking at your nose and ears, I'll call in the adjutants and put you behind bars," he said in a bad temper. "I've forbidden you to do those disgusting things here. Are you drunk?"

The Constitutional Sot started in his chair, which faced the Benefactor's desk. He moved his hands away from his face.

"I haven't had a drop of alcohol," he apologized in confusion. "You know I don't drink during the day, Chief. Just in the evening, and at night."

He wore a suit that the Generalissimo thought of as a monument to bad taste: grayish green, with glints of iridescence; like everything he put on, it looked as if he had squeezed his fat body into the suit with a shoehorn. Jiggling on his white shirt was a bluish tie with yellow dots, where the harsh gaze of the Benefactor detected grease spots. He thought with distaste that he had gotten the stains while eating, because Senator Chirinos ate by taking enormous mouthfuls, wolfing them down as if he feared his neighbors would snatch away his plate, and chewing with an open mouth, spraying a shower of food all around him.

"I swear there's not a drop of alcohol in my body," he repeated. "Just the black coffee I had for breakfast."

Probably it was true. When he saw him come into the office a moment ago, balancing his elephantine body and advancing very slowly, testing the floor before putting down his foot, he thought he was intoxicated. No; he must have somatized all his drinking; even when he was sober, he carried himself with the trembling uncertainty of an alcoholic.

"You're pickled in alcohol: even when you don't drink you look drunk," he said, examining him from head to foot.

"It's true," Chirinos quickly acknowledged, making a theatrical gesture. "I am a *poète maudit*, Chief. Like Baudelaire and Rubén Darío."

He had ashen skin, a double chin, thin, greasy hair, and little eyes set deep behind puffy lids. His nose, flattened since the accident, was like a boxer's, and his almost lipless mouth added a perverse quality to his brash ugliness. He had always been so disagreeably ugly that ten years earlier, after the car crash that he miraculously survived, his friends thought plastic surgery would improve his looks. It only made them worse.

That he was still a man trusted by the Benefactor, a member of his narrow circle of intimates that included Virgilio Álvarez Pina, Paíno Pichardo, Egghead Cabral (now in disgrace), or Joaquín Balaguer, was proof that when it was time to choose his collaborators, the Generalissimo did not let himself be

guided by personal likes or dislikes. In spite of the repugnance his physical appearance, slovenliness, and bad manners always inspired in the Chief, from the beginning of his regime Henry Chirinos had been favored with the delicate tasks that Trujillo entrusted to people who were not only reliable but capable. And he was one of the most capable of the men accepted into that exclusive club. An attorney who served as a constitutionalist, while still very young he had been, along with Agustín Cabral, the principal author of the Constitution ordered by Trujillo in the early days of the Era, and of all the amendments made since then. He had also composed the most important institutional and ordinary laws, and written almost all the legal decisions adopted by the Congress to legitimize the needs of the regime. There was no one like him for giving, in parliamentary speeches filled with Latin phrases and quotations that were often in French, the appearance of juridical necessity to the most arbitrary decisions of the Executive, or for refuting, with devastating logic, every proposal that Trujillo disapproved of. His mind, organized like a legal code, immediately found a technical argument to provide a veneer of legality to any decision made by Trujillo, whether it was a ruling by the Treasury or the Supreme Court, or a law passed by Congress. A good part of the legal web of the Era had been spun by the perverse skill of this great pettifogger (that's what he had been called once, in Trujillo's presence, by Senator Agustín Cabral, his close friend and enemy within the circle of favorites).

Because of these attributes, the perpetual parliamentarian Henry Chirinos had been everything one could be during the thirty years of the Era: deputy, senator, Minister of Justice, member of the Constitutional Tribunal, ambassador plenipotentiary and chargé d'affaires, governor of the Central Bank, president of the Trujillonian Institute, member of the Central Council of the Dominican Party, and, for the past few years, the position that required the greatest confidence, supervisor of the Benefactor's business operations. As such, Agriculture, Commerce, and Finance were subordinate to him. Why entrust such

enormous responsibility to a confirmed alcoholic? Because, in addition to being a shyster, he knew about economics. He had done well as the head of the Central Bank, and in Finance, for a few months. And because, in recent years, due to ambushes from all sides, the Benefactor needed someone in the post who was absolutely reliable and could be told about the family's entanglements and disputes. And for that, this alcoholic greaseball was invaluable.

How did it happen that an uncontrollable drinker had not lost his skill in legal intrigue, or his capacity for work, the only one, perhaps, after the fall into disgrace of Anselmo Paulino, that the Benefactor could compare to his own? The Walking Turd could work ten or twelve hours without stopping, drink himself blind, and the next day be in his office in Congress, in the Ministry, or in the National Palace, fresh and lucid, dictating legal reports to the stenographers or expounding with florid eloquence on political, legal, economic, and constitutional matters. Besides all that, he wrote acrostic, celebratory poems, historical articles and books, and was one of the best-sharpened pens used by Trujillo to distill the poison of "The Public Forum" in *El Caribe*.

"How are the businesses doing?"

"Very badly, Chief." Senator Chirinos took a deep breath. "At this rate, they'll soon be at death's door. I'm sorry to tell you this, but you don't pay me to deceive you. If the sanctions aren't lifted soon, it'll be catastrophic."

He opened his bulky briefcase, took out rolls of papers, and notebooks, and proceeded to analyze the principal enterprises, beginning with the plantations of the Dominican Sugar Corporation and continuing with Dominican Air, the cement factory, the lumber companies and the sawmills, the import-export offices and commercial establishments. The music of names and figures lulled the Generalissimo, who was barely listening: Atlas Commercial, Caribbean Motors, Tobacco Products S.A., Dominican Cotton Consortium, Chocolate Manufacturing Company, Dominican Footwear Manufacturers, Granulated Salt Distributors,

Vegetable Oil Processors, Dominican Cement Factory, Dominican Record Production, Dominican Battery Factory, Sack and Cordage Company, Read Iron Works, El Marino Iron Works, Dominican-Suisse Manufacturing, Dairy Processing, Altagracia Liquor Industries, National Glass Industries, National Paper Industries, Dominican Mills, Dominican Paints, Retreading Plant, Quisqueya Motors, Salt Refinery, Dominican Textile Mills, San Rafael Insurance, Real Estate Corporation, *El Caribe* newspaper. The Walking Turd left for last the businesses in which the Trujillo family had minority interests, barely mentioning that there was no "positive movement" here either. He said nothing that the Benefactor did not already know: what was not paralyzed by a lack of investment and replacement parts was operating at a third, even a tenth, of capacity. The catastrophe had already arrived, in spades. But at least—the Benefactor sighed—what the gringos thought would be the final blow had not succeeded: cutting off his supply of oil and replacement parts for cars and planes. Johnny Abbes García had arranged for fuel to come in through Haiti, crossing the border as contraband. The surcharge was high but the consumer didn't pay for it; the regime was absorbing the subsidy. The State could not tolerate this hemorrhaging for much longer. Because of the restrictions on foreign currency and the paralysis of exports and imports, its economic life had come to a standstill.

"Practically speaking, there is no income in any of the enterprises, Chief. Only expenditures. Since they were flourishing before, they can survive for now. But not indefinitely."

He sighed melodramatically, as he did when he gave a funeral eulogy, another of his great specialties.

"Let me remind you that not a single worker, farmer, or employee has been laid off, even though the economic war has gone on for more than a year. These enterprises provide sixty percent of the jobs in the country. Think of how serious this is. Trujillo cannot go on supporting two-thirds of Dominican families when all of his businesses are half paralyzed because of the sanctions. And so . . ."

"And so . . ."

"Either you give me authorization to reduce personnel in order to cut costs, hoping for better times . . ."

"Do you want an explosion of thousands of unemployed workers?" Trujillo categorically cut him off. "Add a social problem to the ones I already have?"

"There is an alternative, one that has been used in exceptional circumstances," Senator Chirinos replied with a Mephistophelian little smile. "And isn't this one? Well, then. The State, in order to guarantee employment and economic activity, assumes control of strategic enterprises. The State nationalizes, say, a third of manufacturing firms and a half of farming and livestock enterprises. There are still enough funds for that in the Central Bank."

"What the hell do I gain by that?" an irritated Trujillo interrupted. "What do I gain if dollars move from the Central Bank to an account in my name?"

"What you gain is that from now on, the damage signified by three hundred enterprises operating at a loss doesn't come out of your pocket, Chief. I repeat, if this goes on, they'll all be bankrupt. My advice is technical. The only way to avoid the dissolution of your patrimony because of the economic blockade is to transfer the losses to the State. It isn't good for anybody if you're ruined, Chief."

Trujillo had a feeling of fatigue. The sun was growing hotter, and like all visitors to his office, Senator Chirinos was perspiring. From time to time he wiped his face with a blue handkerchief. He too would have liked the Generalissimo to have an air conditioner. But Trujillo detested the fake air that chilled you, the false atmosphere. He tolerated only a fan, on extremely hot days. Besides, he was proud of being the man-who-never-sweats.

He was silent for a moment, meditating, and his face soured.

"You're another one who thinks, in the back of your pig-gish brain, that I take over farms and businesses for profit," he said in a weary tone. "Don't interrupt. If you don't know me

yet, after so many years at my side, what can I expect from the rest? They believe I'm interested in power in order to get rich."

"I know very well that isn't so, Chief."

"Do you need me to explain it again, for the hundredth time? If those businesses didn't belong to the Trujillo family, those jobs wouldn't exist. And the Dominican Republic would still be the backward African country it was when I picked it up and put it on my shoulders. You haven't realized that yet."

"I realize that perfectly, Chief."

"Are you stealing from me?"

Chirinos gave another start, and the ashen color of his face darkened. He blinked in alarm.

"What are you saying, Chief? As God is my witness . . ."

"I know you aren't," Trujillo reassured him. "And why don't you steal, even though you have the power to make or break us financially? Out of loyalty? Maybe. But more than anything else, out of fear. You know that if you steal from me and I find out, I'd turn you over to Johnny Abbes, and he'd take you to La Cuarenta, sit you on the Throne, and burn you to a crisp before he threw you to the sharks. All the things that tickle the overheated imaginations of the head of the SIM and the little team he's put together. That's why you don't steal from me. And that's why the managers, administrators, accountants, engineers, veterinarians, foremen, et cetera, et cetera, in the companies you oversee, that's why they don't steal from me either. That's why their work is conscientious and efficient, that's why the enterprises have prospered and multiplied and turned the Dominican Republic into a modern, prosperous country. Do you understand?"

"Of course, Chief." The Constitutional Sot gave another start. "You're absolutely right."

"On the other hand," Trujillo continued, as if he hadn't heard him, "you'd steal everything you could lay your hands on if you were doing the work you do for the Vicini family, the Valdéz family, the Armenteros family, instead of the Trujillo family. And you'd steal even more if the enterprises belonged

to the State. Then you'd really line your pockets. Now can your brain grasp the reason for all the businesses, all the land, all the livestock?"

"To serve the nation, I know that better than anybody, Excellency," Senator Chirinos swore. He was frightened, and Trujillo could see it in the way he clutched the briefcase tight against his belly, and the increasingly unctuous manner in which he spoke. "I didn't mean to suggest anything to the contrary, Chief. God forbid!"

"But, it's true, not all the Trujillos are like me." The Benefactor eased the tension with a disillusioned expression. "My brothers, my wife, my children, none of them has the passion for this country that I do. They're a greedy bunch. Worst of all, these days they waste my time, forcing me to make sure they don't ignore my orders."

He adopted the belligerent, direct gaze he used to intimidate people. The Walking Turd shrank into his seat.

"Ah, I see, one of them has disobeyed," he murmured.

Senator Henry Chirinos nodded, not daring to speak.

"Did they try to take out currency again?" he asked, his voice turning cold. "Who was it? The old woman?"

The flabby face, dripping with perspiration, nodded again, as if against its will.

"She called me aside last night, during the poetic soiree." He hesitated and thinned his voice until he had almost extinguished it. "She said she was thinking about you, not about herself or the children. To make sure you have a peaceful old age, if something happens. I'm sure it's true, Chief. She adores you."

"What did she want?"

"Another transfer to Switzerland." The senator choked up. "Only a million this time."

"I hope for your sake you didn't go along with it," Trujillo said dryly.

"I didn't," stammered Chirinos, his apprehension deforming his words, his body shaken by a light tremor. "The captain

gives the orders, not the soldier. And with all the respect and devotion Doña María deserves, my first loyalty is to you. This is a very delicate situation for me, Chief. Because of my refusals, I'm losing Doña María's friendship. For the second time in a week I've had to turn down a request of hers."

Was the Bountiful First Lady another one who thought the regime would collapse? Four months ago she had told Chirinos to transfer five million dollars to Switzerland; now it was another million. She thought that any day now they would have to run, that they needed hefty overseas accounts to enjoy a golden exile. Like Pérez Jiménez, Batista, Rojas Pinilla, or Perón, that trash. The old miser. As if their backs weren't more than covered. For her, it was never enough. She had been greedy when she was young, and had gotten worse with age. Was she going to take those accounts with her to the next world? It was the one area in which she dared to defy her husband's authority. Twice this week. She was plotting behind his back, that was it, pure and simple. That was how she bought the house in Spain, without Trujillo's knowing anything about it, after their official visit to Franco in 1954. That was how she opened and fed numbered accounts in Switzerland and New York, which he learned about eventually, sometimes by accident. In the past, he hadn't paid much attention to it, limiting himself to cursing her a few times and then shrugging his shoulders at the whims of an old, menopausal woman to whom, because she was his legitimate wife, he owed some consideration. Now, it was different. He had given categorical orders that no Dominican, including the Trujillo family, could take a single peso out of the country as long as the sanctions were in effect. He was not going to allow the rats to flee, trying to escape a ship that really would sink if the entire crew, beginning with the officers and the captain, ran away. No, damn it. Relatives, friends, enemies—they all stayed here, with everything they owned, to fight or leave their bones on the field of honor. Like the Marines, damn it. Stupid old bitch! How much better it would have been if he had left her and married one of the magnificent

women he had held in his arms; the beautiful, docile Lina Lovatón, for example; he had sacrificed her, too, for this ungrateful country. He'd have to tell off the Bountiful First Lady this afternoon, remind her that Rafael Leonidas Trujillo Molina wasn't Batista, or that pig Pérez Jiménez, or that hypocrite Rojas Pinilla, or even the slick-haired General Perón. He wasn't going to spend his last years as a retired statesman overseas. He'd live until his final moment in this country, which, thanks to him, had stopped being a tribe, a mob, a caricature, and become a Republic.

He noticed that the Constitutional Sot was still trembling. Foam had gathered at the corners of his mouth. His little eyes, behind the two lumps of fat that were his eyelids, opened and closed frantically.

"There's something else. What is it?"

"Last week, I reported that we had managed to avoid their blocking the payment from Lloyds of London for sugar sold in Great Britain and the Netherlands. Not too much. About seven million dollars, of which four go to your enterprises and the rest to the Vicini mills and the Romana Plantation. Following your instructions, I asked Lloyds to transfer those monies to the Central Bank. This morning they indicated that the order had been countermanded."

"Who countermanded it?"

"General Ramfis, Chief. He telegraphed a request that the entire amount be sent to Paris."

"And Lloyds of London is full of dumb shits who follow counterorders from Ramfis?"

The Generalissimo spoke slowly, making an effort not to explode. This stupid crap was taking up too much of his time. And besides, it hurt him to have all his family's defects laid bare in front of strangers, no matter how trusted they were.

"They haven't processed General Ramfis's request yet, Chief. They're confused, that's why they called me. I reiterated that the money should be sent to the Central Bank. But, since General Ramfis has your authorization and has withdrawn

funds on other occasions, it would be a good idea to let Lloyds know that there was a misunderstanding. A question of appearances, Chief."

"Call him and tell him to apologize to Lloyds. Today."

Chirinos shifted uneasily in his seat.

"If you order me to, I'll do it," he whispered. "But allow me to make a request, Chief. From your old friend. From the most faithful of your servants. I've already earned the ill will of Doña María. Don't turn me into your older son's enemy too."

The discomfort he felt was so visible that Trujillo smiled.

"Call him, don't be afraid. I won't die yet. I'm going to live ten more years and complete my work. It's the time I need. And you'll stay with me, until the last day. You're ugly, drunk, and dirty, but you're one of my best collaborators." He paused, and looking at the Walking Turd as tenderly as a beggar looking at his mangy dog, added something extraordinary, coming from him: "I only wish one of my brothers or sons was worth as much as you, Henry."

The senator was overwhelmed and did not know how to respond.

"What you have said compensates for all my sleepless nights," he stammered, bending his head.

"You're lucky you never married, that you don't have a family," Trujillo continued. "You must have thought it was a misfortune not to have any children. Bullshit! The great mistake of my life has been my family. My brothers, my own wife, my children. Have you ever seen disasters like them? Their only horizon is booze, pesos, and fucking. Is there one of them capable of continuing my work? Isn't it a shame that at a time like this, Ramfis and Radhamés are playing polo in Paris instead of standing at my side?"

Chirinos listened with downcast eyes, not moving, his face somber, expressing solidarity, not saying a word, undoubtedly afraid of compromising his future if he let slip a remark against the Chief's sons and brothers. It was unusual for the Generalissimo to give himself over to such bitter reflections; he never

talked about his family, not even to intimates, and certainly not in such harsh terms.

"The order stands," he said, changing his tone and the subject at the same time. "Nobody, least of all a Trujillo, takes money out of the country while the sanctions are in effect."

"Understood, Chief. In fact, even if they wanted to they couldn't. Unless they carry out their dollars in suitcases, there are no transactions with foreign countries. Financial activity is at a standstill. Tourism has disappeared. Our reserves are dwindling every day. Do you flatly reject the State's taking over some enterprises? Not even the ones in the worst shape?"

"We'll see." Trujillo yielded slightly. "Leave your proposal with me, I'll study it. Anything else that's urgent?"

The senator consulted his notebook, bringing it close to his eyes. He adopted a tragicomic expression.

"There's a paradoxical situation in the United States. What shall we do with our so-called friends? The congressmen, politicians, and lobbyists who receive stipends for defending our country. Manuel Alfonso kept them up until he got sick. After that, they stopped. Some people have made discreet requests for payment."

"Who ordered them to be suspended?"

"Nobody, Chief. It's a good question. The accounts dedicated to that purpose, in New York, are dwindling too. They can't be added to, given the circumstances. It comes to several million pesos a month. Will you continue to be so generous with gringos who can't help us lift the sanctions?"

"I always knew they were leeches." The Generalissimo made a contemptuous gesture. "But they're also our only hope. If the political situation changes in the United States, they can use their influence to have the sanctions eased or lifted. And, in the short term, they can get Washington to at least pay us for the sugar already received."

Chirinos did not look hopeful. He shook his head solemnly.

"Even if the United States agreed to hand over what they've held back, it wouldn't do much good, Chief. What's twenty-two

million dollars? Money for basic investment and the importation of crucial commodities for just a few weeks. But if you've made up your mind, I'll inform Consuls Mercado and Morales to resume payments to those parasites. By the way, Chief. The funds in New York might be frozen. If the proposal of three members of the Democratic Party is successful, they'll freeze the accounts of nonresident Dominicans in the United States. I know they appear as corporate accounts at Chase Manhattan and Chemical. But suppose the banks don't respect our confidentiality? Allow me to suggest that we transfer them to a country that's more secure. Canada, for example, or Switzerland."

The Generalissimo felt a hollow in his stomach. It wasn't anger that produced acid, it was disappointment. In the course of his long life, he had never wasted time licking his wounds, but what was happening now with the United States, the country to whom his regime had always given its vote at the UN no matter why it was needed, that really upset him. What had been the point of giving a royal welcome and a medal to every Yankee who set foot on the island?

"It's hard to understand the gringos," he murmured. "I can't get it into my head that they're treating me this way."

"I never trusted those jerks," echoed the Walking Turd. "They're all alike. You can't even say that this harassment is Eisenhower's fault. Kennedy is hounding us too."

Trujillo pulled himself together—"Back to work, damn it," he thought—and changed the subject again.

"Abbes García has everything ready to get that bastard Bishop Reilly out from behind the nuns' skirts," he said. "He has two proposals. Deport him, or have the people lynch him and teach a lesson to plotting priests. Which do you prefer?"

"Neither one, Chief." Senator Chirinos recovered his self-assurance. "You know my opinion. We have to soften the conflict. The Church is two thousand years old, and nobody has ever defeated it. Look at what happened to Perón when he challenged it."

"He told me that himself, sitting right where you are

now," Trujillo acknowledged. "Is that your advice? To bend over for those sons of bitches?"

"You should corrupt them with gifts and concessions, Chief," explained the Constitutional Sot. "Or maybe scare them, but don't do anything irreparable, and leave the door open for a reconciliation. What Johnny Abbes proposes would be suicide. Kennedy would send the Marines in a heartbeat. That's my opinion. You'll make the decision, and it will be the right one. I'll defend it with pen and tongue. As always."

The poetic flights that the Walking Turd was prone to amused the Benefactor. This latest one pulled him out of the dejection that was beginning to get the better of him.

"I know," he said with a smile. "You're loyal and that's why I appreciate you. Tell me, confidentially. How much do you have overseas in case you need to get out right away?"

For the third time the senator became agitated, as if his seat had turned into a bucking horse.

"Very little, Chief. Well, relatively speaking, I mean."

"How much?" Trujillo insisted, affectionately. "And where?"

"About four hundred thousand dollars," he admitted rapidly, lowering his voice. "In two separate accounts. In Panama. Opened before the sanctions, of course."

"That's peanuts," Trujillo admonished him. "With the posts you've held, you should have been able to save more."

"I'm not a saver, Chief. Besides, you know I never cared about money. I've always had all I needed to live."

"To drink, you mean."

"To dress well, to eat well, to drink well, and to buy the books I want," the senator agreed, looking at the ceiling and the crystal lamp in the office. "Thank God, with you I've always had interesting work to do. Should I repatriate that money? I'll do it today if you tell me to."

"Leave it where it is. If I need a hand when I'm in exile, you can help me out."

He laughed, in good humor. But as he laughed he sud-

denly recalled the scared little girl at Mahogany House, a compromising, accusatory witness who ruined his mood. It would have been better to shoot her, hand her over to the guards, let them raffle her off, or share her. The memory of that stupid little face watching him suffer reached all the way into his soul.

"Who's taken the most precautions?" he asked, hiding his distress. "Who has the most money overseas? Paíno Pichardo? Álvarez Pina? Egghead Cabral? Modesto Díaz? Balaguer? Who's accumulated the most? Because none of you believed me when I said the only way I'd leave here was in a coffin."

"I don't know, Chief. But if you'll permit me, I doubt that any of them has much money outside the country. For a very simple reason. Nobody ever thought the regime could end, that we'd find ourselves obliged to leave. Who would ever think that one day the earth could stop moving around the sun?"

"You would," Trujillo replied sarcastically. "That's why you took your miserable pesos to Panama, figuring I wouldn't last forever, that one of the conspiracies might succeed. You've given yourself away, asshole."

"I'll repatriate my savings this afternoon," Chirinos protested, gesticulating. "I'll show you the deposit slips from the Central Bank. Those savings have been in Panama a long time. My diplomatic missions allowed me to put something away. For cash outlays on the trips I make in your service, Chief. I've never padded the expenses the position required."

"You're scared, you think what happened to Egghead might happen to you." Trujillo was still smiling. "It's a joke. I've forgotten the secret you told me. Come on, tell me some gossip before you go. Bedroom gossip, not politics."

The Walking Turd smiled with relief. But as soon as he began telling him that the talk of Ciudad Trujillo right now was the beating the German consul gave his wife because he thought she was cheating on him, the Benefactor became distracted. How much money had his closest collaborators taken out of the country? If the Constitutional Sot had done it, they all had. Was it only four hundred thousand he had tucked away? It had

to be more. All of them, in the darkest corner of their souls, had lived in fear that the regime would collapse. Bah, they were trash. Loyalty was not a Dominican virtue. He knew that. For thirty years they had worshiped him, applauded him, deified him, but the first time the wind changed, they would reach for their daggers.

"Who invented the slogan of the Dominican Party, using the initials of my name?" he asked unexpectedly. "Rectitude, Liberty, True Work, Morality. Was it you or Egghead?"

"Yours truly, Chief," Senator Chirinos exclaimed proudly. "On the tenth anniversary. It caught on, and twenty years later it's on all the streets and squares in the country. And in the overwhelming majority of the homes."

"It ought to be in the minds and memories of Dominicans," said Trujillo. "Those words summarize everything I've given them."

And at that moment, like the blow of a club to his head, he was seized by doubt. By certainty. It had happened. Dissembling, not listening to the praises of the Era that Chirinos had embarked on, he lowered his head, as if concentrating on an idea, focused his eyes, and looked, filled with anxiety. His bones turned to water. There it was: the dark stain covered his fly and part of his right leg. It must have been recent, it was still damp, at this very moment his insensible bladder was still leaking. He didn't feel it, he wasn't feeling it. A lashing rage shook him. He could dominate men, bring three million Dominicans to their knees, but he could not control his bladder.

"I can't listen to any more gossip, I don't have time," he lamented, not looking up. "Go on and take care of Lloyds, don't let them pay that money to Ramfis. Tomorrow, at the same time. Goodbye."

"Goodbye, Chief. If you'll permit me, I'll see you this afternoon, on the Avenida."

As soon as he heard the Constitutional Sot close the door, he called Sinforoso. He told him to bring another suit, also gray, and a change of underwear. He stood, and moving

quickly, bumping into a sofa, he locked himself in the bathroom. He felt faint with disgust. He took off the trousers, shorts, and undershirt soiled by his involuntary urination. His shirt was not stained, but he took it off as well and then sat on the bidet. He soaped himself carefully. As he was getting dried he cursed once again the dirty trick his body was playing on him. He was waging war against many enemies, he could not constantly be distracted by his fucking bladder. He sprinkled talcum powder on his genitals and between his legs, and sat down on the toilet to wait for Sinforoso.

His meeting with the Walking Turd had left him troubled. What he told the senator was true: unlike his hoodlum brothers, and the Bountiful First Lady, an insatiable vampire, and his children, parasites sucking him dry, he had never cared very much about money. He used it in the service of power. Without money he would not have been able to make his way at first, for he had been born into a very modest family in San Cristóbal, which meant that as a boy he had to get what he needed, any way he could, to dress decently. Later, money helped him to be more efficient, to remove obstacles, to buy, attract, or bribe the people he needed and punish those who interfered with his work. Unlike María, who, when they were still lovers, thought up the idea of a laundry for constabulary guards and since then dreamed only of hoarding money, he liked to give it away.

If he hadn't been like that, would he have given gifts to the people, those countless presents every October 24, so that Dominicans could celebrate the Chief's birthday? How many millions of pesos had he spent over the years on sacks of caramels, chocolates, toys, fruits, dresses, trousers, shoes, bracelets, necklaces, soft drinks, blouses, records, guayaberas, brooches, magazines for the interminable processions that came to the Palace on the Chief's birthday? And how many more on gifts for his compadres and godchildren at the collective baptisms in the Palace chapel, when, for the past three decades, once and even twice a week, he became godfather to

at least a hundred infants? Millions and millions of pesos. A productive investment, of course. An inspiration, in the first year of his government, that came from his profound knowledge of Dominican psychology. To establish that relationship, to be compadres with a campesino, a laborer, a craftsman, a merchant, was to guarantee the loyalty of the poor man and poor woman whom he embraced after the baptism of his godchild and whom he presented with two thousand pesos. Two thousand when times were good. As the list of his godchildren grew to twenty, fifty, a hundred, two hundred a week, the gifts—due in part to howls of protest from Doña María and also to the decline in the Dominican economy following the Fair for Peace and Brotherhood in the Free World in 1955—had gradually shrunk to fifteen hundred, a thousand, five hundred, two hundred, a hundred pesos for each godchild. Now, the Walking Turd was insisting that the collective baptisms be suspended or the gift be symbolic, a loaf of bread or ten pesos for each godchild, until the sanctions ended. Damn the Yankees!

He had founded enterprises and established businesses to create jobs and progress for the country and have the resources to give away presents left and right and keep the Dominicans happy.

And with his friends, collaborators, employees, hadn't he been as magnificent as Petronius in *Quo Vadis*? He had showered them with money, giving generous gifts for birthdays, weddings, births, jobs well done, or simply to show that he knew how to reward loyalty. He had presented them with pesos, houses, land, stocks, he had made them partners in his farms and enterprises, he had created businesses for them so they could earn good money and not plunder the State.

He heard a discreet knock at the door. Sinforoso, with the suit and underwear. He handed them over with lowered eyes. He had been with him more than twenty years; he had been his orderly in the Army, and the Chief had promoted him to majordomo and taken him to the Palace. He feared nothing from Sinforoso. He was deaf, dumb, and blind regarding everything

that had to do with Trujillo, and he had the sense to know that where certain intimate subjects were concerned, such as his involuntary urinations, the slightest betrayal would deprive him of all he had—a house, a little cattle farm, a car, a large family—and, perhaps, even his life. The suit and underwear, hidden in a bag, would not attract anyone's attention, for the Benefactor was in the habit of changing clothes several times a day in his private office.

He dressed while Sinforoso—husky, his hair in a crew cut, impeccably groomed in his uniform of black trousers, white shirt, and white jacket with gold buttons—picked up the clothing scattered on the floor.

“What should I do with those two terrorist bishops, Sinforoso?” he asked as he was buttoning his trousers. “Expel them from the country? Send them to jail?”

“Kill them, Chief,” Sinforoso answered without hesitation. “Everybody hates them, and if you don't do it, the people will. Nobody can forgive the Yankee and the Spaniard who came to this country to bite the hand that feeds them.”

The Generalissimo had stopped listening. He would have to reprimand Pupo Román. That morning, after receiving Johnny Abbes and the Ministers of Foreign Affairs and of the Interior, he had gone to San Isidro Air Base to meet with the heads of the Air Force. And he saw something that turned his stomach: right at the entrance, a few meters from the guard post, under the flag and seal of the Republic, a pipe was spewing out filthy black water that had formed a quagmire at the edge of the highway. He ordered the car to stop. He got out and walked to the spot. It was a pipe carrying thick, stinking sewage—he had to put his handkerchief over his nostrils—and, of course, it had attracted a swarm of flies and mosquitoes. The waste kept flowing, inundating the area, poisoning the air and soil of the leading Dominican garrison. He felt rage, burning lava flooding his body. He controlled his first impulse, to return to the base and curse the officers who were present and demand if this was the image they were trying to give to the

Armed Forces: an institution overrun by stinking water and vermin. But he immediately decided that he had to take the warning to the head man. And make Pupo Román in person swallow a little of the liquid shit pouring out of that sewage pipe. He decided to call him right away. But when he got back to his office, he forgot to do it. Was his memory beginning to fail, just like his bladder? Damn. The two things that had responded best throughout his whole life were failing now that he was seventy.

When he was clean and dressed, he returned to his desk and picked up the telephone that communicated automatically with Armed Forces headquarters. It did not take long to hear the voice of General Román:

"Yes, hello? Is that you, Excellency?"

"Come to the Avenida this afternoon," he said, very curtly, by way of greeting.

"Of course, Chief." General Román sounded alarmed. "Would you prefer me to come right now to the Palace? Has something happened?"

"You'll find out what's happened," he said, slowly, imagining the nervousness of his niece Mireya's husband, on hearing how dryly he spoke to him. "Any news?"

"Everything normal, Excellency," General Román said hurriedly. "I was receiving the routine regional reports. But if you prefer . . ."

"On the Avenida," he cut him off. And hung up.

It cheered him to imagine the sizzling questions, suppositions, fears, suspicions he had put into the head of that asshole who was the Minister of the Armed Forces. What did they say about me to the Chief? What gossip, what slander have my enemies told him? Have I fallen into disgrace? Did I fail to carry out one of his orders? He would be in hell until the evening.

But this thought occupied him for only a few seconds, and once again the humiliating memory of the girl filled his mind. Anger, sadness, nostalgia mixed together in his spirit and kept him in a state of turmoil. And then it occurred to him: "A cure

equal to the disease." The face of a beautiful woman, exploding with pleasure in his arms, thanking him for the joy he had given her. Wouldn't that erase the frightened little face of that idiot? Yes: he'd go tonight to San Cristóbal, to Mahogany House, and wipe away the affront in the same bed and with the same weapons. This decision—he touched his fly in a kind of exorcism—raised his spirits and stiffened his resolve to continue with the day's schedule.