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"You really don't want a little more arepa?" Aunt Adelina insists affectionately. "Go on, have some. When you were little, every time you came to the house you asked for corn cake. Don't you like it anymore?"

"Of course I like it, Aunt Adelina," Urania protests. "But I've never eaten so much in my life. I won't be able to sleep a wink."

"All right, we'll just leave it here in case you want a little more later," says a resigned Aunt Adelina.

Her firm voice and mental lucidity contrast with how decrepit she looks: bent, almost bald—patches of scalp can be seen through her white hair—her face puckered into a thousand wrinkles, dentures that shift when she eats or speaks. She is a shrunken little woman, half lost in the rocking chair where Lucinda, Manolita, Marianita, and the Haitian maid settled her after carrying her downstairs. Her aunt was determined to have supper in the dining room with her brother Agustín's daughter, who had suddenly reappeared after so many years. She speaks energetically, and in her small, deep-set eyes there is a flashing intelligence. "I never would have recognized her," thinks Urania. Or Lucinda, and certainly not Manolita, whom she last saw when she was eleven or twelve and who is now a prematurely aged matron with wrinkles on her face and neck, and hair badly dyed a rather vulgar blue-black. Marianita, Lucinda's daughter, must be about twenty: thin, very pale, her hair almost in a crew cut, and melancholy eyes. She doesn't stop looking at Urania, as if she were under a spell. What has her niece heard about her?

"I can't believe it's you, that you're really here." Aunt

Adelina fixes her penetrating eyes on her. "I never thought I'd see you again."

"Well, Aunt Adelina, here I am. It makes me so happy."

"Me too, darling. You must have made Agustín even happier. My brother had resigned himself to never seeing you again."

"I don't know, Aunt Adelina." Urania puts up her defenses, foresees recriminations and indiscreet questions. "I spent all day with him, and I don't think he even recognized me."

Her two cousins react in unison:

"Of course he recognized you, Uranita," declares Lucinda.

"He can't speak, so it's hard to tell," Manolita concurs. "But he understands everything, his mind still works."

"He's still Egghead," says Aunt Adelina with a laugh.

"We know because we see him every day," Lucinda continues. "He recognized you, and your coming back made him happy."

"I hope so, Lucinda."

A silence that is prolonged, glances that cross the old table in the narrow dining room, with a china closet that Urania vaguely recognizes, and religious pictures on faded green walls. Nothing is familiar here either. In her memory, the house of her Aunt Adelina and Uncle Aníbal, where she came to play with Manolita and Lucinda, was large, bright, elegant, and airy; this is a cave crowded with depressing furniture.

"Breaking my hip separated me from Agustín forever." She shakes her small fist, the fingers deformed by sclerosis. "Before it happened, I used to spend hours with him. We had long conversations. He didn't need to talk for me to understand what he wanted to say. My poor brother! I would have brought him here. But where would I put him, in this rat hole?"

She speaks angrily.

"The death of Trujillo was the beginning of the end for the family," Lucindita says with a sigh. And then she becomes

alarmed. "I'm sorry, Urania. You hate Trujillo, don't you?"

"It started before that," Aunt Adelina corrects her, and Urania becomes interested in what she is saying.

"When, Grandma?" Lucinda's oldest daughter asks in a thin little voice.

"With the letter in 'The Public Forum,' a few months before they killed Trujillo," Aunt Adelina declares; her eyes pierce the emptiness. "In January or February of 1961. We gave the news to your papa, early in the morning. Aníbal was the first to read it."

"A letter in 'The Public Forum'?" Urania is searching, searching through her memories. "Ah, yes."

"I assume it's nothing important, a foolish mistake that will be straightened out," his brother-in-law said on the phone; he sounded so agitated, so vehement, so false, that Senator Agustín Cabral was taken aback: what was wrong with Aníbal? "Haven't you read *El Caribe*?"

"They've just brought it in, I haven't opened it yet."

He heard a nervous little cough.

"Well, there's a letter, Egghead." His brother-in-law tried to be casual, lighthearted. "It's all nonsense. Clear it up as soon as you can."

"Thanks for calling me." Senator Cabral said goodbye. "My love to Adelina and the girls. I'll stop by to see them."

Thirty years in the highest echelons of political power had made Agustín Cabral a man familiar with imponderables—traps, ambushes, trickery, betrayals—and so, learning there was a letter attacking him in "The Public Forum," the most widely read, and widely feared, section in *El Caribe* because it was fed from the National Palace and served as a political barometer for the entire country, did not unnerve him. It was the first time he had appeared in the infernal column; other ministers, senators, governors, or officials had been burned in its flames, but not him, until now. He went back to the dining room. His daughter, in her school uniform, was eating breakfast: mangú—plantain mashed with butter—and fried cheese. He

kissed the top of her head ("Hi, Papa"), sat down across from her, and while the maid poured his coffee, he slowly, carefully opened the folded paper lying on a corner of the table. He turned the pages until he reached "The Public Forum":

To the Editor:

I am writing out of civic duty to protest the affront to Dominican citizens and to the unrestricted freedom of expression which the government of Generalissimo Trujillo guarantees to this Republic. I refer to the fact that until now, your respected and widely read pages have not disclosed something that everyone knows, which is that Senator Agustín Cabral, nicknamed Egghead (for what reason?) was stripped of the Presidency of the Senate when it was determined that he was guilty of irregularities as the Minister of Public Works, a post he occupied until a short while ago. It is also known that because this regime is scrupulous in questions of probity and the use of public funds, an investigative committee to look into apparent mismanagement and collusion—illegal commissions, acquisition of obsolete materials at elevated prices, misleading inflation of budgets, in which the senator would have been involved in the course of his duties as minister—has been named to examine the charges against him.

Doesn't the Trujillista citizenry have the right to be informed with regard to such serious matters?

Respectfully,
Telésforo Hidalgo Saíno, Engineer
Calle Duarte no. 171

Ciudad Trujillo

"I have to run, Papa," Senator Cabral heard, and without a single gesture that would belie his apparent calm, he moved the newspaper aside to kiss the girl. "I won't be on the school bus, I'm staying to play volleyball. Some friends and I will walk home."

"Be careful at the intersections, Uranita."

He drank his orange juice and had an unhurried cup of steaming, freshly brewed coffee, but did not taste the mangú or fried cheese or toast with honey. Again he read every word,

every syllable, of the letter in "The Public Forum." It undoubtedly had been fabricated by the Constitutional Sot, a pen pusher who delighted in sneak attacks but only when ordered by the Chief; nobody would dare to write, let alone publish, a letter like this without Trujillo's authorization. When was the last time he saw him? The day before yesterday, on his walk. He hadn't been called to walk beside him, the Chief spent the whole time talking to General Román and General Espaillat, but he greeted him with the customary civility. Or did he? He sharpened his memory. Had he noticed a certain hardness in that fixed, intimidating gaze, which seemed to tear through appearances and reach deep into the soul of the person he was scrutinizing? A certain dryness when he responded to his greeting? The beginning of a frown? No, he didn't remember anything unusual.

The cook asked if he'd be home for lunch. No, only for supper, and he nodded when Aleli suggested the menu. When he heard the official car of the Senate Presidency pulling up to the door of his house, he looked at his watch: exactly eight o'clock. Thanks to Trujillo, he had discovered that time is gold. Like so many others, since his youth he had made the Chief's obsessions his own: order, exactitude, discipline, perfection. Senator Agustín Cabral had said it in a speech: "Thanks to His Excellency, the Benefactor, we Dominicans have discovered the wonders of punctuality." Putting on his jacket, he went out to the street: "If I had been dismissed, the official car would not have come for me." His assistant, Humberto Arenal, an Air Force lieutenant who had never hidden his connections to the SIM, opened the door for him. His official car, with Teodosio at the wheel. His assistant. There was nothing to worry about.

"He never found out why he fell into disgrace?" Urania asks in astonishment.

"Never with any certainty," Aunt Adelina explains. "There were plenty of suppositions, but that's all. For years Agustín asked himself what he had done to make Trujillo so angry

overnight. And turn a man who had served him his whole life into a pariah."

Urania observes Marianita's disbelief as she listens to them.

"They sound like things that happened on another planet, don't they, Marianita?"

The girl blushes.

"It's just that it seems so incredible, Aunt Urania. Like something in *The Trial*, the Orson Welles movie they showed at the Cinema Club. Anthony Perkins is tried and executed, and he never finds out why."

Manolita has been fanning herself with both hands, but she stops in order to interject:

"They said he fell into disgrace because somebody made Trujillo believe it was Uncle Agustín's fault that the bishops refused to proclaim him Benefactor of the Catholic Church."

"They said a thousand things," exclaims Aunt Adelina. "The doubt was the worst part of his calvary. The family was being ruined and nobody knew what Agustín had been accused of, what he had done or failed to do."

No other senator was there when Agustín Cabral entered the Senate at a quarter past eight, as he did every morning. The guards gave him the proper salute, and the ushers and clerks he passed in the halls on the way to his office said good morning with their usual effusiveness. But the uneasiness felt by his two secretaries, Isabelita and Paris Goico, a young lawyer, was reflected in their faces.

"Who died?" he joked. "Are you worried about the letter in 'The Public Forum'? We'll clear up that nasty business right now. Call the editor of *El Caribe*, Isabelita. At home—Panchito doesn't go to his office before noon."

He sat down at his desk, glanced at the pile of documents, his correspondence, the day's schedule prepared by the efficient Parisito. "The letter was dictated by the Chief," he thought. A little snake slid down his spine. Was it one of those melodramas that amused the Generalissimo? In the midst of tensions with the Church and a confrontation with the United States

and the OAS, was he in the mood for one of his bravura performances from the past, when he had felt all-powerful, unthreatened? Was this the time for circuses?

"He's on the line, Don Agustín."

He picked up the receiver and waited a few seconds before speaking.

"Did I wake you, Panchito?"

"What an idea, Egghead." The journalist's voice sounded normal. "I'm up at the crack of dawn, like a capon rooster. And I sleep with one eye open, just in case. What's up?"

"Well, as you can imagine, I'm calling about the letter this morning in 'The Public Forum,'" Senator Cabral said hoarsely. "Can you tell me anything about it?"

The answer came in the same light, jocular tone, as if they were talking about something trivial.

"It came recommended, Egghead. I wasn't going to print something like that without checking. Believe me, given our friendship, it didn't make me happy to publish it."

"Yes, yes, sure," he murmured to himself. He mustn't lose his composure for a single instant.

"I intend to rectify the slander," he said softly. "I haven't been dismissed from anything. I'm calling you from the office of the President of the Senate. And that alleged committee investigating my management of the Ministry of Public Works, that's another lie."

"Send me your rectification right away," Panchito replied. "I'll do everything I can to publish it, it's the least I can do. You know the esteem I have for you. I'll be at the paper from four o'clock on. My love to Uranita. Take care of yourself, Agustín."

As soon as he hung up, he began to have his doubts. Had he done the right thing in calling the editor of *El Caribe*? Wasn't it a false move that betrayed his concern? What else could Panchito have said? He received letters for "The Public Forum" directly from the National Palace and printed them, no questions asked. He looked at his watch: a quarter to nine. He

had time; the meeting of the Senate executive committee was at nine-thirty. He dictated his rectification to Isabelita with the same austere clarity he used in all his writing. A brief, dry, fulminating letter: he continued as President of the Senate and no one had questioned his scrupulous management at the Ministry of Public Works, entrusted to him by the regime presided over by that eponymous Dominican, His Excellency Generalissimo Rafael Leonidas Trujillo, Benefactor and Father of the New Nation.

When Isabelita left to type the letter, Paris Goico came into the office.

"The meeting of the Senate executive committee has been canceled, Don Agustín."

He was young and didn't know how to dissemble; his mouth hung open and his face was livid.

"Without consulting me? By whom?"

"The Vice President of the Senate, Don Agustín. He just told me so himself."

He weighed what he had just heard. Could it be a separate incident, unrelated to the letter in "The Public Forum"? Parisito waited in distress, standing beside the desk.

"Is Dr. Quintanilla in his office?" His secretary nodded, and he rose to his feet. "Tell him I'm on my way to see him."

"It can't be that you don't remember, Uranita," her Aunt Adelina admonished her. "You were fourteen years old. It was the most serious thing that had happened in the family, even worse than the accident that killed your mother. And you didn't know anything about it?"

They'd had coffee and tea. Urania tried a mouthful of arepa. They sat around the dining-room table, talking in the wan light of a small floor lamp. The Haitian servant, as silent as a cat, had cleared the table.

"I remember how Papa suffered, of course I do, Aunt Adelina," Urania explains. "I forget the details, the daily incidents. He tried to hide it from me at first. 'There are some problems, Uranita, they'll be resolved soon.' I didn't imagine

that from then on my life would turn upside down."

She feels the eyes of her aunt, her cousins, her niece, burning into her. Lucinda says what they are all thinking:

"Some good came out of it for you, Uranita. You wouldn't be where you are now if it hadn't. But for us, it was a disaster."

"And most of all, for my poor brother," her aunt says accusingly. "They stabbed him in the back and left him to bleed for another thirty years."

A parrot shrieks above Urania's head, startling her. She hadn't realized it was there until now; the bird is agitated, moving from side to side on its wooden bar inside a large cage with heavy blue bars. Her aunt, cousins, and niece burst into laughter.

"This is Samson." Manolita introduces him. "He's upset because we woke him. He's a sleepyhead."

The parrot helps to ease the atmosphere.

"I'm sure if I understood what he was saying, I'd learn a lot of secrets," Urania jokes, pointing at Samson.

Senator Agustín Cabral is in no mood for smiling. He responds with a solemn nod to the honeyed greeting of Dr. Jeremías Quintanilla, Vice President of the Senate; he has just burst into his office, and with no preliminaries, he rebukes him:

"Why have you canceled the meeting of the Senate executive committee? Isn't that the responsibility of the President? I demand an explanation."

The heavy, cocoa-colored face of Senator Quintanilla nods repeatedly, while his lips, in a cadenced, almost musical Spanish, attempt to placate him:

"Of course, Egghead. Don't be angry. Everything except death has a reason."

A plump man in his sixties, with puffy eyelids and a wet mouth, he is wearing a blue suit and a glistening tie with silver stripes. He smiles persistently, and Agustín Cabral sees him remove his glasses, wink at him, roll his eyes, revealing the gleaming whites, then step toward him, take his arm, and pull him as he says, very loudly:

"Let's sit here, we'll be more comfortable."

He doesn't lead him to the heavy, tiger-foot chairs in his office but to a balcony with half-opened doors. He obliges him to go out with him so they can talk in the open air, across from the droning hum of the ocean, away from indiscreet ears. The sun is strong; the brilliant morning is ablaze with engines and horns from the Malecón, and the voices of street peddlers.

"What the hell's going on, Monkey?" Cabral whispers.

Quintanilla is still holding his arm and is now very serious. In his eyes he can detect a vague feeling of solidarity or compassion.

"You know very well what's going on, Egghead, don't be stupid. Didn't you realize that three or four days ago the papers stopped calling you a 'distinguished gentleman' and demoted you to 'señor'?" Monkey Quintanilla murmurs in his ear. "Didn't you read *El Caribe* this morning? That's what's going on."

For the first time since reading the letter in "The Public Forum," Agustín Cabral is afraid. It's true: yesterday or the day before somebody at the Country Club joked that the society page in *La Nación* had deprived him of "distinguished gentleman," which was usually a bad omen: those kinds of warnings amused the Generalissimo. This was serious. A storm. He had to use all his experience and intelligence not to drown in it.

"Did the order to cancel the meeting of the executive committee come from the Palace?" he whispers. The Vice President, leaning over, has his ear against Cabral's mouth.

"Where else would it come from? There's more. All committees in which you participate are canceled. The directive says: 'Until the status of the President of the Senate is regularized.' "

He is silent. It has happened. The nightmare is happening, the one that came periodically to drag down his triumphs, his ascent, his political achievements: he has been estranged from the Chief.

"Who sent it to you, Monkey?"

Quintanilla's chubby face tightens in alarm, and Cabral finally understands Monkey's agitation. Is the Vice President

going to say he cannot commit an act of such disloyalty? Abruptly, he makes his decision:

"Henry Chirinos." He takes his arm again. "I'm sorry, Egghead. I don't think there's much I can do, but if I can, you can count on me."

"Did Chirinos tell you what I'm accused of?"

"He only gave me the order and made a speech: 'I know nothing. I am the humble messenger of a higher decision.' "

"Your papa always suspected that the schemer was Chirinos, the Constitutional Sot," Aunt Adelina recalls.

"That fat repulsive nigger was one of the people who made the best accommodation," Lucindita interrupts. "From Trujillo's bed and board to Balaguer's minister and ambassador. Do you see what kind of country this is, Uranita?"

"I remember him very well, I saw him in Washington a few years ago, when he was ambassador," says Urania. "He often came to the house when I was little. He seemed like one of Papa's intimate friends."

"And Aníbal's, and mine," adds Aunt Adelina. "He would come here with all his flattery, he'd recite his poems for us. He was always quoting books, pretending to be educated. He invited us to the Country Club once. I didn't want to believe he had betrayed his lifelong friend. Well, that's what politics is, you make your way over corpses."

"Uncle Agustín had too much integrity, he was too good, that's why they turned on him."

Lucindita waits for her to corroborate this, to protest the injustice done to him. But Urania does not have the strength to pretend. She merely listens, with an air of regret.

"But my husband, may he rest in peace, behaved like a gentleman, he gave your papa all his support." Aunt Adelina gives a sarcastic little laugh. "What a Quixote he was! He lost his job at the Tobacco Company and never found work again."

Samson the parrot lets loose another flood of shouts and noises that sound like curses. "Quiet, lazybones," Lucindita scolds him.

"Just as well we haven't lost our sense of humor, girls," exclaims Manolita.

"Find Senator Henry Chirinos and tell him I want to see him right away, Isabel," Senator Cabral says as he enters his office. And addressing Paris Goico: "Apparently he's the one who cooked up this mess."

He sits down at his desk, prepares to review again the day's schedule, but becomes aware of his circumstances. Does it make sense to sign letters, resolutions, memoranda, notes, as the President of the Senate of the Republic? It's doubtful he still is. The worst thing would be to show signs of discouragement to his subordinates. Put the best face on a bad situation. He picks up the papers and is beginning to reread the first page when he notices that Parisito is still there. His hands are trembling:

"President Cabral, I wanted to tell you," he stammers, devastated by emotion. "Whatever happens, I'm with you. In everything. I know how much I owe you, Dr. Cabral."

"Thank you, Goico. You're new to this world, and you'll see things that are worse. Don't worry. We'll weather the storm. And now, let's get to work."

"Senator Chirinos is expecting you at his house, Senator Cabral." Isabelita is speaking as she comes into the office. "He answered himself. Do you know what he said? 'The doors of my house are open day and night to my great friend Senator Cabral.' "

When he leaves the Congress building, the guards salute him as usual. The black, funereal car is still there. But his assistant, Lieutenant Humberto Arenal, has disappeared. Teodosio, the driver, opens the door for him.

"Senator Henry Chirinos's house."

The chauffeur nods, not saying a word. Later, when they are driving along Avenida Mella, on the edge of the colonial city, he looks at him in the rearview mirror and says:

"Since we left Congress, we've been followed by a Beetle full of *caliés*, Senator."

Cabral turns around: fifteen or twenty meters behind them

is one of the unmistakable black Volkswagens of the Intelligence Service. In the blinding morning light he can't tell how many *caliés* are inside. "Now I'm escorted by people from the SIM instead of my assistant," he thinks. As the car enters the crowded, narrow streets of the colonial city, lined with little one- and two-story houses with bars at the windows and stone entrances, he tells himself that the matter is even graver than he supposed. If Johnny Abbes is having him followed, he may have decided to arrest him. The story of Anselmo Paulino repeated. What he had feared so much. His brain is a red-hot forge. What did he do? What had he said? What mistake did he make? Whom had he seen recently? They were treating him like an enemy of the regime. Him, him!

The car stopped at the corner of Salomé Ureña and Duarte, and Teodosio opened the door for him. The Beetle parked a few meters behind them but no *calié* got out. He was tempted to go over and ask them why they were following the President of the Senate, but he restrained himself: what good would it do to challenge some poor bastards who were only obeying orders?

Senator Henry Chirinos's old two-story house with its little colonial balcony and jalousied windows resembled its owner; time, age, and neglect had deformed it and made it asymmetrical; it had widened excessively in the middle, as if it had grown a belly and were about to explode. A long time ago it must have been a solid, noble house; now it was dirty, neglected, and seemed on the verge of collapse. Splotches and stains defaced the walls, and spiderwebs hung from the roof. The door was opened as soon as he knocked. He climbed a lugubrious, groaning staircase with a greasy banister, and on the first landing the butler opened a creaking glass door: he recognized the large library, the heavy velvet drapes, the tall cases filled with books, the thick, faded carpet, the oval pictures, and the silvery threads of cobwebs catching the beams of sunlight that penetrated the shutters. It smelled of age and rank humors, and the heat was infernal. He remained standing

and waited for Chirinos. The number of times he had been here, over so many years, for meetings, agreements, negotiations, conspiracies, all in the service of the Chief.

"Welcome to your house, Egghead. A sherry? Sweet or dry? I recommend the fino amontillado. It's chilled."

Wearing pajamas and wrapped in a flamboyant green flannel robe with silk binding that accentuated the rotundity of his body, with a huge handkerchief in the pocket, and on his feet, backless bedroom slippers misshapen by his bunions, Senator Chirinos smiled at him. His uncombed, thinning hair, the mucus on his puffy face, his purplish lids and lips, the dried saliva at the corners of his mouth, revealed to Senator Cabral that he had not yet bathed. He allowed him to pat his shoulder and lead him to the ancient easy chairs with silk antimacassars over the backs, without responding to the effusions of his host.

"We've known each other for many years, Henry. We've done many things together. Good things, and some bad. No two people in the regime have been as close as you and I. What's going on? Why did the sky start falling in on me this morning?"

He had to stop talking because the butler came in, an old, bent mulatto as ugly and slovenly as his employer, carrying a glass decanter into which he had poured the sherry, and two glasses. He left them on the table and hobbled out of the room.

"I don't know." The Constitutional Sot touched his own chest. "You probably don't believe me. You probably think I've schemed, instigated, provoked what's happening to you. By my mother's memory, the most sacred thing in this house, I don't know. Since I found out yesterday afternoon, I've been utterly dumbfounded. Wait, wait, a toast. To this mess being resolved quickly, Egghead!"

He spoke with animation and emotion, with his heart in his hand and the sugary sensibility of heroes on the radio soap operas that HIZ imported, before the Castro revolution, from CMQ in Havana. But Agustín Cabral knew him: he was a first-rate actor.

It might be true or false, he had no way to find out. He took a small, unwilling sip of sherry, for he never drank alcohol in the morning. Chirinos smoothed the hairs in his nostrils.

"Yesterday, at a meeting with the Chief, he suddenly ordered me to instruct Monkey Quintanilla, as Vice President of the Senate, to cancel all meetings until the vacancy in the Presidency had been filled," he continued, gesticulating. "I don't know, I thought you had an accident, a heart attack. 'What happened to Egghead, Chief?' 'That's what I'd like to know,' he replied, with that gruffness that freezes your bones. 'He's no longer one of us, he's gone over to the enemy.' I couldn't ask any more questions, his tone was categorical. He sent me to carry out his order. And this morning, like everyone else, I read the letter in 'The Public Forum.' Again, I swear to you on the memory of my sainted mother: that's all I know."

"Did you write the letter in 'The Public Forum'?"

"I write Spanish correctly," the Constitutional Sot said in indignation. "That ignoramus committed three syntactical errors. I've marked them."

"Who was it, then?"

The fat-enclosed eyes of Senator Chirinos poured out compassion as they looked at him:

"What the hell difference does it make, Egghead? You're one of the intelligent men in this country, don't play dumb with me, I've known you since you were a boy. The only thing that matters is that for some reason you've made the Chief angry. Talk to him, ask his forgiveness, give him explanations, promise to make amends. Regain his confidence."

He picked up the glass decanter, refilled his glass, and drank. There was less noise from the street than at Congress. Because of the thick colonial walls, or because the narrow streets in the center of the city discouraged cars.

"Ask his forgiveness, Henry? What have I done? Don't I devote my days and nights to the Chief?"

"Don't tell me. Convince him. I already know. Don't be discouraged. You know how he is. Basically, a magnanimous

man. A deep sense of justice. If he weren't suspicious, he wouldn't have lasted thirty-one years. There's been a mistake, a misunderstanding. It ought to be resolved. Ask him for an audience. He knows how to listen."

As he spoke, he waved his hand, savoring every word his ashen lips expelled. He looked even more obese seated than when he was standing: his enormous belly had pushed open his robe and pulsated in a rhythmic ebb and flow. Cabral imagined those intestines dedicated, for so many hours a day, to the arduous task of absorbing and digesting the masses of food swallowed by that voracious maw. He regretted being here. Did he think the Constitutional Sot would help him? If he hadn't actually devised this, in his heart of hearts he was celebrating it as a great victory over someone who, despite all appearances, had always been his rival.

"Thinking it over, racking my brains," Chirinos added, with a conspiratorial air, "I think the reason may be the disappointment the Chief felt when the bishops refused to proclaim him Benefactor of the Catholic Church. You were on the commission that failed to achieve that."

"There were three of us, Henry! Balaguer, and Paíno Pichardo too, as Minister of the Interior and Religious Practice. The negotiations took place months ago, right after the Pastoral Letter. Why would I get all the blame?"

"I don't know, Egghead. In fact, it seems pretty farfetched. I can't see any reason either why you should fall into disgrace. Sincerely, after all, we've been friends for so many years."

"We've been something more than friends. We've been together, behind the Chief, in every decision that transformed this country. We're living history. We set traps for each other, gave each other low blows, played dirty tricks to gain an advantage. But total annihilation seemed out of the question. This is different. I can end up ruined, discredited, in prison. Without knowing why! If you've cooked this up, congratulations. It's a masterpiece, Henry!"

He had risen to his feet. He spoke calmly, impersonally,

almost didactically. Chirinos stood up too, leaning on one of the arms of the chair to hoist his weight. They were very close, almost touching. Cabral saw a quotation from Tagore in a small, square frame on the wall, between the shelves of books: *An open book is a mind that speaks; closed, a friend who waits; forgotten, a soul that forgives; destroyed, a heart that weeps*. "He's pretentious in everything he does, touches, says, and feels," he thought.

"Frankness deserves frankness in return." Chirinos brought his face close to Agustín Cabral, who was dazed by the stink that accompanied his words. "Ten years ago, five years ago, I wouldn't have hesitated to concoct anything that got you out of the way, Agustín. And you would have done the same to me. Including annihilation. But now? To what end? Do we have some account left to settle? No. We're no longer in competition, Egghead, you know that as well as I do. How much oxygen is left to a dying cause? For the last time: I have nothing to do with what's happening to you. My hope, my wish, is that you resolve it. Difficult days are coming, and it's to the regime's advantage if you're there to help withstand the onslaught."

Senator Cabral nodded. Chirinos patted his shoulder.

"If I go down to the *caliés* who are waiting for me and tell them what you've said, that the regime is suffocating, that it's a dying cause, you'll be keeping me company," he murmured, instead of saying goodbye.

"You won't do that." The great dark mouth of his host laughed. "You're not like me. You're a true gentleman."

"What happened to him?" Urania asks. "Is he still alive?"

Aunt Adelina laughs, and the parrot Samson, who seemed to be asleep, reacts with another series of shrieks. When he stops, Urania can hear the rhythmic creak of the rocking chair where Manolita is sitting.

"Weeds don't die," her aunt explains. "He's still in his lair in the colonial city, at the corner of Salomé Ureña and Duarte. Lucindita saw him a little while ago, walking with a cane in Independencia Park, in his house slippers."

"Some kids were running after him and shouting: 'The bogeyman, the bogeyman!' " Lucinda laughs. "He's uglier and more repulsive than ever. He must be over ninety, right?"

Have they had enough after-dinner conversation so that she can leave? Urania hasn't felt comfortable all night. She's been tense, waiting for the attack. This is the only family she has left and she feels more distant from them than from the stars. And she's beginning to be irritated by Marianita's large eyes constantly staring at her.

"Those were terrible days for the family." Aunt Adelina keeps harping on the same subject.

"I remember my papa and Uncle Agustín whispering together in this living room," says Lucindita. "And your papa was saying: 'But my God, what could I have done to the Chief to make him treat me this way?' "

She is silenced by a dog barking wildly near the house; two more, five more, respond. Through a small skylight in the ceiling, Urania can see the moon: round, yellow, splendid. There were no moons like that in New York.

"What upset him most was your future if something happened to him." Aunt Adelina's look is heavy with reproach. "When they took over his bank accounts, he knew it was hopeless."

"His bank accounts!" Urania nods. "That was the first time my papa talked to me about it."

She was already in bed and her father came in without knocking. He sat at the foot of her bed. In shirtsleeves, very pale, he looked thinner, more fragile, older. He hesitated over every syllable.

"This business is going very badly, darling. You have to be prepared for anything. So far, I've kept the gravity of the situation from you. But, today, well, you must have heard something at school."

The girl nodded solemnly. She wasn't worried; her confidence in him was limitless. How could anything bad happen to a man who was so important?

"Yes, Papa, there were letters against you in 'The Public Forum,' accusing you of crimes. Nobody will believe it, it's so silly. Everybody knows you're incapable of doing bad things."

Her father embraced her, through the quilt.

It was more serious than slanders in the newspaper. They had removed him from the Presidency of the Senate. A congressional committee was looking into mismanagement and misuse of public funds during his tenure as minister. For days the Beetles of the SIM had been following him; there was one outside the front door right now, with three *caliés* inside. This past week he had received notifications of expulsion from the Trujillonian Institute, the Country Club, the Dominican Party, and this afternoon, when he went to withdraw money from the bank, the final blow. The manager, his friend Josefo Heredia, informed him that his two accounts had been frozen for the duration of the congressional investigation.

"Anything can happen, Uranita. They can confiscate this house, throw us out on the street. Even into prison. I don't mean to frighten you. Maybe nothing will happen. But you ought to be prepared. And be brave."

She listened to him, stunned; not because of what he was saying but because of the weakness of his voice, the hopelessness of his expression, the fear in his eyes.

"I'll pray to the Virgin," she said. "Our Lady of Altagracia will help us. Why don't you talk to the Chief? He's always liked you. He'll give an order, and everything will be settled."

"I've requested an audience and he won't even respond, Uranita. I go to the National Palace and the secretaries and aides barely greet me. And President Balaguer doesn't want to see me, and neither does the Minister of the Interior; that's right, Paíno Pichardo. I'm the living dead, my dear. Maybe you're right, maybe the only thing we can do is trust in the Virgin."

His voice broke. But when the girl sat up to embrace him, he regained his composure. He smiled at her:

"You had to know about this, Uranita. If anything happens

to me, go to your aunt and uncle. Aníbal and Adelina will take care of you. It may be a test. Sometimes the Chief does things like this, to test his collaborators."

"Accusing a man like him of mismanagement," Aunt Adelina says with a sigh. "Except for that little house on Gazcue, he never had anything. No estates, no companies, no investments. Except for his savings, the twenty-five thousand dollars he doled out to you while you were studying up there. The most honorable politician and the best father in the world, Uranita. And, if you'll permit some interference in your private life from this doddering old aunt, you didn't act properly with him. I know you support him and pay for the nurse. But do you know how much you made him suffer when you wouldn't answer a single letter or come to the phone when he called? Aníbal and I often saw him crying over you, right here in this house. Now, after so much time has gone by, Urania, can I ask why?"

Urania reflects, enduring the censorious look of the old woman bent like a hook in her chair.

"Because he wasn't as good a father as you think, Aunt Adelina," she says at last.

Senator Cabral had the taxi drop him at the International Clinic, four blocks from the Intelligence Service, which was also located on Avenida México. When he was about to give the address to the driver, he felt a strange rush of shame and embarrassment, and instead of telling him to go to the SIM, he mentioned the clinic. He walked the four blocks slowly; the domains of Johnny Abbes were probably the only important places in the regime he had never visited, until now. The Beetle full of *caliés* followed him openly, in slow motion, right next to the sidewalk, and he could see the turning heads and alarmed expressions of passers-by when they became aware of the emblematic Volkswagen. He recalled that when he was on the Budget Committee in Congress, he argued in favor of the appropriation to import the hundred Beetles in which Johnny Abbes's *caliés* now cruised the entire country looking for enemies of the regime.

At the drab, anonymous building, uniformed and plain-

clothes police armed with submachine guns, guarding the entrance behind barbed wire and sandbags, let him pass without searching him or demanding identification. Inside, César Báez, one of Colonel Abbes's adjutants, was waiting for him. Husky, pockmarked, with curly red hair, he offered a sweating hand and led him along narrow corridors, where men with pistols in holsters hanging over their shoulders or dangling under their armpits were smoking, arguing, or laughing in smoke-filled cubicles that had bulletin boards covered with memos on the walls. It smelled of sweat, urine, and feet. A door opened. There was the head of the SIM. Cabral was surprised at the monastic spareness of the office, the walls bare of pictures or posters except for the one behind the colonel, which was a portrait in parade uniform—three-cornered feathered hat, his chest gleaming with medals—of the Benefactor. Abbes García, in civilian clothes, wore a short-sleeved summer shirt and had a cigarette dangling from his mouth. In his hand he held the red handkerchief that Cabral had seen so often.

"Good morning, Senator." He extended a soft, almost feminine hand. "Have a seat. We have few amenities here, you must forgive us."

"I'm grateful to you for seeing me, Colonel. You're the first. No one, not the Chief or President Balaguer, not a single minister, has replied to my requests for an audience."

The small, somewhat hunchbacked, potbellied figure nodded. Above the double chin, thin mouth, and flabby cheeks, Cabral could see the colonel's deep-set, watery eyes darting like quicksilver. Could he be as cruel as they said?

"Nobody wants to risk contagion, Señor Cabral," Johnny Abbes said coldly. It occurred to the senator that if snakes could talk, they would have that same, sibilant voice. "Falling into disgrace is an infectious disease. How can I help you?"

"Tell me what I'm accused of, Colonel." He paused to take a breath and appear more composed. "My conscience is clear. Since the age of twenty I've devoted my life to Trujillo and to the country. There's been some mistake, I swear it."

The colonel silenced him with a movement of the soft hand holding the red handkerchief. He put out his cigarette in a brass ashtray:

"Don't waste your time giving me explanations, Dr. Cabral. Politics is not my field, I'm concerned with security. If the Chief refuses to see you because he's unhappy with you, write to him."

"I already have, Colonel. I don't even know if they've given him my letters. I took them to the Palace personally."

Johnny Abbes's bloated face distended slightly:

"Nobody would hold back a letter addressed to the Chief, Senator. He's probably read them, and if you've been sincere, he'll respond." He paused, constantly watching him with his nervous eyes, and added, rather defiantly: "I see you've noticed the color of my handkerchief. Do you know the reason? It's a Rosicrucian teaching. Red is a good color for me. You probably don't believe in Rosicrucianism, you must think it's primitive superstition."

"I don't know anything about the Rosicrucian religion, Colonel. I have no opinion in that regard."

"Now I don't have the time, but when I was a young man I read a lot about Rosicrucianism. I learned a number of things. How to read a person's aura, for example. Right now yours is the aura of someone scared to death."

"I am scared to death," Cabral replied immediately. "For days your men have been following me constantly. Tell me, at least, if you're going to arrest me."

"That doesn't depend on me," said Johnny Abbes, casually, as if the matter were not important. "If I'm ordered to, I will. The escort is to discourage you from seeking asylum. If you try that, then my men will arrest you."

"Asylum? But, Colonel, seeking asylum, as if I were an enemy of the regime? I've been a part of the regime for thirty years."

"With your friend Henry Dearborn, the head of the mission the Yankees left us," Colonel Abbes continued, sarcastically.

Astonishment silenced Agustín Cabral. What did he mean?

"The American consul, my friend?" he stammered. "I've seen Mr. Dearborn only two or three times in my life."

"He's an enemy of ours, as you know," Abbes García went on. "When the OAS imposed sanctions, the Yankees left him here so he could keep on plotting against the Chief. For the past year, every conspiracy has passed through Dearborn's office. And despite that, you, the President of the Senate, recently attended a cocktail party at his house. Do you remember?"

Agustín Cabral's amazement increased. Was that it? Having attended a cocktail party at the house of the chargé d'affaires appointed by the United States when they closed their embassy?

"The Chief ordered Minister Paíno Pichardo and me to attend that cocktail party," he explained. "To sound out his government's plans. I've fallen into disgrace because I obeyed an order? I submitted a written report about the gathering."

Colonel Abbes García shrugged his rounded shoulders in a puppetlike movement.

"If it was an order from the Chief, forget what I said," he conceded, with a touch of irony.

His attitude betrayed a certain impatience, but Cabral did not leave. He was encouraged by the foolish hope that this talk might bear some fruit.

"You and I have never been friends, Colonel," he said, forcing himself to speak normally.

"I can't have friends," Abbes García replied. "It would prejudice my work. My friends and enemies are the friends and enemies of the regime."

"Please let me finish," Agustín Cabral continued. "But I've always respected you, and recognized the exceptional service you render the nation. If we've had any differences . . ."

The colonel seemed to be raising a hand to silence him, but it was only to light another cigarette. He inhaled greedily and calmly exhaled smoke through his mouth and nose.

"Of course we've had differences," he acknowledged. "You

were one of those who fought hardest against my theory that in view of the Yankee betrayal, we had to approach the Russians and the Eastern bloc. You, along with Balaguer and Manuel Alfonso, have been trying to convince the Chief that reconciliation with the Yankees is possible. Do you still believe that bullshit?"

Was this the reason? Had Abbes García stabbed him in the back? Had the Chief accepted that idiotic idea? Were they distancing him so they could move the regime closer to the Communists? It was useless to go on humiliating himself before a specialist in torture and assassination who, as a result of the crisis, now dared to think of himself as a political strategist.

"I still believe we have no alternative, Colonel," he affirmed, with conviction. "What you propose, and you'll forgive my frankness, is an illusion. The U.S.S.R. and its satellites will never accept a rapprochement with the Dominican Republic, the bulwark of anti-Communism in Latin America. The United States won't accept it either. Do you want another eight years of American occupation? We have to come to some understanding with Washington or it will mean the end of the regime."

The colonel allowed his cigarette ash to fall to the floor. He took one puff after the other, as if he were afraid someone would take away his cigarette, and from time to time he wiped his forehead with the flame-colored handkerchief.

"Your friend Henry Dearborn doesn't think so, unfortunately." He shrugged again, like a cheap comic. "He keeps trying to finance a coup against the Chief. Well, there's no point to this discussion. I hope your situation is resolved and I can remove your escort. Thank you for the visit, Senator."

He did not offer his hand. He merely nodded his fat-cheeked face, partially obscured in a wreath of smoke, with the photograph of the Chief in grand parade uniform in the background. Then the senator recalled the quotation from Ortega y Gasset that was written in the notebook he always carried in his pocket.

The parrot Samson also seems petrified by Urania's words;

he is as still and mute as Aunt Adelina, who has stopped fanning herself and opened her mouth. Lucinda and Manolita are looking at her, disconcerted. Marianita doesn't stop blinking. Urania has the absurd thought that the beautiful moon she sees through the window approves of what she has said.

"I don't know how you can say that about your father," her Aunt Adelina responds. "In all my days I never knew anyone who sacrificed more for a daughter than my poor brother. Were you serious when you called him a bad father? He worshiped you, and you were his torment. So you wouldn't suffer, he didn't marry again after your mother died, even though he was widowed so young. Who's responsible for your being lucky enough to study in the United States? Didn't he spend every cent he had on you? Is that what you call being a bad father?"

You mustn't say anything, Urania. She's an old woman, spending her final years, months, weeks immobilized and embittered, she's not to blame for something that happened so long ago. Don't answer her. Agree with her, pretend. Make some excuse, say goodbye, and forget about her forever. Calmly, without any belligerence at all, she says:

"He didn't make those sacrifices out of love for me, Aunt Adelina. He wanted to buy me. Salve his guilty conscience. Knowing it would do no good, that whatever he did, he would live the rest of his days feeling as vile and evil as he really was."

When he left the offices of the Intelligence Service on the corner of Avenida México and Avenida March 30, it seemed that the police on guard gave him pitying looks, and that one of them, staring into his eyes, meaningfully caressed the San Cristóbal submachine gun he carried over his shoulder. He felt suffocated, and somewhat faint. Did he have the quotation from Ortega y Gasset in his notebook? So opportune, so prophetic. He loosened his tie and removed his jacket. Taxis passed by but he didn't hail any of them. Would he go home? And feel caged, and rack his brains as he came down to his study from his bedroom or went up again to his bedroom, passing through the living room, asking himself a thousand

times what had happened? Why was the rabbit being pursued by invisible hunters? They had taken away his office at the Congress, and the official car, and his membership at the Country Club, where he could have taken refuge, had a cool drink, and seen from the bar a landscape of well-tended gardens and distant golfers. Or he could visit a friend, but did he have any left? Everyone he had called on the phone sounded frightened, reticent, hostile: he was harming them by wanting to see them. He walked aimlessly, his jacket folded under his arm. Could the cocktail party at Henry Dearborn's house be the reason? Impossible. At a meeting of the Council of Ministers, the Chief decided that he and Paíno Pichardo would attend, "to explore the terrain." How could he punish him for obeying? Perhaps Paíno suggested to Trujillo that at the cocktail party he had seemed overly cordial to the gringo. No, no, no. Impossible that for something so trivial and stupid the Chief would trample on a man who had served him with more devotion and less self-interest than anyone.

He walked as if he were lost, changing direction every few blocks. The heat made him perspire. It was the first time in many years he had wandered the streets of Ciudad Trujillo. A city he had seen grow, transformed from a small town in ruins, devastated by the San Zenón hurricane of 1930, into the beautiful, prosperous, modern metropolis it was now, with paved streets, electric lights, broad avenues filled with new cars.

When he looked at his watch it was a quarter past five. He had been walking for two hours, and he was dying of thirst. He was on Casimiro de Moya, between Pasteur and Cervantes, a few meters from a bar: El Turey. He went in, sat down at the first table. He ordered an ice-cold Presidente. It wasn't air-conditioned but there were fans, and the shade felt good. The long walk had calmed him. What would happen to him? And to Uranita? What would happen to the girl if they put him in jail, or if, in a fit of rage, the Chief ordered him killed? Would Adelina be prepared to rear her, be her mother? Yes, his sister was a good, generous woman. Uranita would be another

daughter to her, like Lucindita and Manolita.

He tasted the beer with pleasure as he turned the pages in his notebook, looking for the quotation from Ortega y Gasset. The cold liquid, sliding down his throat, produced a feeling of well-being. Don't lose hope. The nightmare could disappear. Didn't that sometimes happen? He had sent three letters to the Chief. Frank, heartfelt letters, baring his soul. Begging his forgiveness for whatever mistake he might have committed, swearing he would do anything to make amends and redeem himself if, by some inadvertent, thoughtless act, he had offended him. He had reminded him of his long years of service and absolute honesty, as demonstrated by the fact that now, when his accounts at the Reserve Bank had been frozen—some two hundred thousand pesos, his life's savings—he was out on the street, with only the little house in Gazcue to live in. (He concealed only the twenty-five thousand dollars deposited in the Chemical Bank of New York, which he kept for an emergency.) Trujillo was magnanimous, that was true. He could be cruel, when the country required it. But generous, too, as magnificent as that Petronius in *Quo Vadis?* he was always quoting. Any day now he would summon him to the National Palace or to Radhamés Manor. They'd have one of those theatrical explanations, the kind the Chief liked so much. Everything would be settled. He would say that, for him, Trujillo had been not only the Chief, the statesman, the founder of the Republic, but a human model, a father. The nightmare would come to an end. His former life would rematerialize, as if by magic. The quotation from Ortega y Gasset appeared at the corner of a page, written in his tiny hand: "Nothing that a man has been, is, or will be, is something he has been, is, or will be forever; rather, it is something he *became* one day and *will stop being* the next." He was a living example of the precariousness of existence as postulated in that philosophy.

On one of the walls in El Turey, a poster announced that the piano music of Maestro Enriquillo Sánchez would begin at seven o'clock. Two tables were occupied by couples whispering

to one another and exchanging romantic looks. "Accusing me, me, of being a traitor," he thought. A man who, for Trujillo's sake, had renounced pleasures, diversions, money, love, women. On a nearby chair, someone had left a copy of *La Nación*. He picked up the paper, and just for something to do with his hands, leafed through the pages. On page three, a panel announced that the illustrious and very distinguished ambassador Don Manuel Alfonso had just returned after traveling abroad for reasons of health. Manuel Alfonso! No one had more direct access to Trujillo; the Chief favored him and entrusted to him his most intimate affairs, from his wardrobe and perfumes to his romantic adventures. Manuel was a friend, and he owed him favors. He might be the key.

He paid and left. The Beetle wasn't there. Had he evaded them without intending to, or had the persecution stopped? A feeling of gratitude, of jubilant hope, blossomed in his chest.