7 The third time that Urania insists he take a mouthful, the invalid opens his mouth. When the nurse returns with the glass of water, Señor Cabral is relaxed and, as if distracted, docilely accepts the mouthfuls of pap his daughter offers him, and drinks half a glass of water in little sips. A few drops roll down to his chin. The nurse wipes his face carefully.

"Good, very good, you ate up your fruit like a good boy," she congratulates him. "You're happy with the surprise your daughter gave you, aren't you, Señor Cabral?"

The invalid does not deign to look at her.

"Do you remember Trujillo?" Urania asks the nurse point-blank.

The woman stares at her, disconcerted. She is wide in the hips, sour-looking, with prominent eyes. Her hair, dyed a rusty blond, is dark at the roots. At last she responds:

"How would I remember? I was only four or five when he was killed. I don't remember anything except what I heard in my house. I know your papa was a very important man in those days."

Urania nods.

"Senator, minister, everything," she murmurs. "But, in the end, he fell into disgrace."

The old man looks at her in alarm.

"Well, I mean"—the nurse is trying to be agreeable—"he might have been a dictator and everything else they say about him, but people seemed to live better back then. Everybody had jobs and there wasn't so much crime. Isn't that right, señorita?"

"If my father can understand you, he must be happy to hear you say that."

"Of course he understands me," says the nurse, who is already at the door. "Don't you, Señor Cabral? Your papa and I have long conversations. All right, just call if you need me."

She goes out, closing the door.

Perhaps it was true that because of the disastrous governments that came afterward, many Dominicans missed Trujillo now. They had forgotten the abuses, the murders, the corruption, the spying, the isolation, the fear: horror had become myth. "Everybody had jobs and there wasn't so much crime."

"There was crime, Papa." She looks into the invalid's eyes, and he begins to blink. "Maybe there weren't so many thieves breaking into houses, or so many muggers on the streets grabbing wallets, watches, and necklaces. But people were killed and beaten and tortured, people disappeared. Even the people closest to the regime. His son, for instance, the handsome Ramfis, he committed endless abuses. How you trembled at the thought of him noticing me!"

Her father did not know, because Urania never told him, that she and her classmates at Santo Domingo Academy, and perhaps all the girls of her generation, dreamed about Ramfis. With his thin mustache in the style of a Mexican movie star, his Ray-Ban sunglasses, his well-tailored suits and the variety of uniforms he wore as head of the Dominican Air Force, his big dark eyes and athletic build, his solid-gold watches and rings and his Mercedes-Benzes, he seemed favored by the gods: rich, powerful, good-looking, healthy, strong, happy. You remember it very clearly: when the sisters couldn't see or hear you, you and your classmates showed one another your collections of photographs of Ramfis Trujillo, in civilian clothes, in uniform, in a bathing suit, wearing a tie, a sport shirt, a tuxedo, a riding habit, leading the Dominican polo team, or sitting at the controls of his plane. You pretended you had seen him, talked to him at the club, the exhibition, the party, the parade, the charity fair, and when you dared to say it—all of you blushing, nervous, knowing it was a sin in word and thought and that you'd have to confess it to the chaplain—you whispered to

each other how wonderful, how marvelous it would be to be loved, kissed, embraced, caressed by Ramfis Trujillo.

"You can't imagine how often I dreamed about him, Papa."

Her father does not laugh. He gives another little start and opens his eyes wide when he hears the name of Trujillo's older son. His favorite, and for that very reason, his greatest disappointment. The Father of the New Nation would have liked his firstborn—"Was he his son, Papa?"—to have his appetite for power, to be as energetic and as much of an executive as he was. But Ramfis had inherited none of his virtues or defects, except, perhaps, his frenzied fornicating, his need to take women to bed to convince himself of his own virility. He lacked political ambition, any kind of ambition; he was indolent, prone to depression and neurotic introversion, besieged by complexes, anxieties, and tortuous mood swings, when his behavior zigzagged between hysterical outbursts and long periods of ennui that he drowned in drugs and alcohol.

"Do you know what the Chief's biographers say, Papa? That he became like that when he found out his mother wasn't married to Trujillo when he was born. They say he began to suffer from depression when he learned that his real father was Dr. Dominici, or the Cuban Trujillo had killed, Doña María Martínez's first lover, back when she never dreamed she'd be the Bountiful First Lady and was just another fast-living party girl they called Españolita. You're laughing? I don't believe it!"

He may be laughing. Or it may merely be his facial muscles relaxing. In any case, this is not the face of someone enjoying himself but of a person who has just yawned or howled and is left slack-jawed, with eyes half closed, nostrils dilated, gullet wide, revealing a dark, toothless hole.

"Do you want me to call the nurse?"

The invalid closes his mouth, puffs out his face, and recovers his attentive, alarmed expression. He remains motionless, shrunken and waiting. Urania is distracted by the sudden clamor of shrieking parrots that fills the bedroom, then stops

as suddenly as it began. The brilliant sun shines on roofs and windowpanes and begins to heat the room.

"Do you know something? Despite all the hatred I had, and still have, for your Chief, and his family, and everything that smells of Trujillo, when I think of Ramfis or read something about him, I can't help feeling sad; I'm sorry for the man."

He had been a monster like everyone else in that family of monsters. What else could he have been, being his father's son, brought up and educated as he was? What else could the son of Heliogabalus, or Caligula, or Nero have been? What else could a boy have been who, at the age of seven, was named a colonel in the Dominican Army by decree—"Did you present him in Congress or was it Senator Chirinos, Papa?"—and promoted at the age of ten to general, in a public ceremony the diplomatic corps was obliged to attend at which all the top-ranking military paid him homage? Etched in Urania's mind is a photograph in the album that her father kept in an armoire in the living room—can it still be there?—showing the elegant Senator Agustín Cabral ("Or were you a minister then, Papa?"), wearing an impeccable swallowtail coat under a brutal sun, bent in a respectful bow as he greets the boy in the general's uniform, who, standing on a small canopied podium, has just reviewed the troops and is accepting congratulations from a line of ministers, legislators, and ambassadors. At the rear of the platform, the smiling faces of the Benefactor and the Bountiful First Lady, his proud mama.

"What else could he have been but the parasite, drunkard, rapist, good-for-nothing, criminal, mentally unbalanced man he was? My friends and I at Santo Domingo didn't know any of that when we were in love with Ramfis. But you knew, Papa. That's why you were so afraid he would notice me and take a liking to your little girl, that's why you looked the way you did the time he kissed me and paid me a compliment. I didn't understand a thing!"

The invalid blinks, two times, three times.

Because unlike her classmates whose girlish hearts throb for Ramfis Trujillo and who invent what they have seen with him and said to him, who pretend he has smiled at them and complimented them, it really did happen to Urania. During the inauguration of the outstanding event held to celebrate twenty-five years of the Trujillo Era, the Fair for Peace and Brotherhood in the Free World, which began on December 20, 1955, and would run through 1956, and cost—"No one ever knew the exact amount, Papa"—between twenty-five and seventy million dollars, between a fourth and a half of the national budget. Those images are very vivid to Urania, the excitement and feeling of wonder flooding the entire country because of that memorable fair: Trujillo was throwing himself a party, and he brought to Santo Domingo ("To Ciudad Trujillo, excuse me, Papa") Xavier Cugat's orchestra, the chorus line from the Lido in Paris, the American skaters of the Ice Capades, and, on the 800,000 square meters of the fairground, he erected seventy-one buildings, some of marble, alabaster, and onyx, to house the delegations from the forty-two countries of the Free World that attended, a choice collection of personalities, notably President Juscelino Kubitschek of Brazil and the purple figure of Francis Cardinal Spellman, Archbishop of New York. The crowning events of the commemoration were the promotion of Ramfis to the rank of lieutenant general, for outstanding service to the nation, and the enthroning of Her Gracious Majesty Angelita I, Queen of the Fair, who arrived by boat, announced by all the sirens in the Navy and all the bells in all the churches of the capital, wearing her crown of precious jewels and her delicate gown of tulle and lace created in Rome by the Fontana sisters, two celebrated modistes who used forty-five meters of Russian ermine to create the costume with a train three meters long and a robe that copied the one worn by Elizabeth II of England at her coronation. Among the ladies-in-waiting and the pages, wearing an exquisite long dress of organdy, and silk gloves, and carrying a bouquet of roses, among the other girls and boys who are the cream of

Dominican society, is Urania. She is the youngest attendant in the court of young people who escort Trujillo's daughter, under a triumphant sun and through the crowd that applauds the poet and Chief of Staff, Don Joaquín Balaguer, when he sings the praises of Her Majesty Angelita I and places the Dominican people at the feet of her grace and beauty. Feeling very much a young lady, Urania listens to her father, in formal attire, as he reads a panegyric to the accomplishments of these twenty-five years, achieved thanks to the tenacity, vision, and patriotism of Trujillo. She is immensely happy. ("I was never so happy again as I was that day, Papa.") She believes she is the center of attention. Now, in the very center of the fair, they unveil the bronze statue of Trujillo, in a morning coat and academic robes, professorial diplomas in his hand. Suddenly—like a gold ribbon around that magical morning—Urania discovers Ramfis Trujillo at her side, looking at her with his silken eyes, wearing his full-dress uniform.

"And who is this pretty young thing?" The brand-new lieutenant general smiles at her. Urania feels warm, slender fingers lifting her chin. "What's your name?"

"Urania Cabral," she stammers, her heart pounding.

"How pretty you are, and more important, how pretty you're going to be," and Ramfis bends over and his lips kiss the hand of the girl who hears the congratulatory clamor of sighs and jokes from the other pages and ladies-in-waiting of Her Majesty Angelita I. The Generalissimo's son has walked away. She cannot contain her joy. What will her friends say when they find out that Ramfis, Ramfis himself, has called her pretty, touched her cheek and kissed her hand, as if she really were a young lady.

"How appalled you were when I told you, Papa. How furious you were. It's funny, isn't it?"

Her father's anger at learning that Ramfis had touched her made Urania suspect for the first time that everything might not have been as perfect in the Dominican Republic as everyone said, especially Senator Cabral.

"What's the harm in his telling me I'm pretty and kissing my hand, Papa?"

"All the harm in the world," and her father raises his voice, frightening her, for he never reprimands her with that admonishing forefinger raised above his head. "Never again! Listen carefully, Uranita. If he approaches you, run away. Don't greet him, don't talk to him. Get away. It's for your own good."

"But, but . . ." The girl is utterly bewildered.

They have just returned from the Fair for Peace and Brotherhood in the Free World, she still has on the exquisite dress of a lady-in-waiting in the entourage of Her Majesty Angelita I, and her father still wears the tailcoat in which he delivered his speech before Trujillo, President Blacky Trujillo, diplomats, ministers, guests, and the thousands upon thousands of people flooding the flag-draped avenues, streets, and buildings of the fair. Why is he acting like this?

"Because Ramfis, that boy, that man is . . . evil." Her father makes an effort not to say everything he would like to. "With girls, with little girls. Don't repeat this to your friends at school. Or to anybody. I'm telling you because you're my daughter. It's my obligation. I have to take care of you. For your own good, Uranita, do you understand? Yes, you do, you're so intelligent. Don't let him near you, don't let him talk to you. If you see him, run over to me. If you're with me, he won't do anything to you."

You don't understand, Urania. You're as pure as a lily, no wickedness in you yet. You tell yourself that your father is jealous. He doesn't want anybody else to kiss you or say you're pretty, only him. Senator Cabral's reaction indicates that by this time the handsome Ramfis, the romantic Ramfis, has begun to do those nasty things to little girls, big girls, and women that will enhance his reputation, a reputation every Dominican male, highborn or low, aspires to. Great Cocksman, Horny-as-a-Goat, Tireless Fucking Machine. You'll start to hear about it soon, in the classrooms and courtyards of Santo Domingo, the academy for upper-class girls,

with its Dominican sisters from the United States and Canada, modern uniforms, students who don't look like novices because they dress in pink, blue, and white and wear thick socks and saddle shoes (black and white), which gives them a sporty, contemporary air. But not even they are safe when Ramfis goes on his forays, alone or with his cronies, hunting for a sweet piece of ass on the streets, in the parks, clubs, bars, or private houses of his great Dominican fiefdom. How many Dominican women did the good-looking Ramfis seduce, abduct, and rape? He doesn't give native girls Cadillacs or mink coats, the gifts he presents to Hollywood stars after he fucks them or in order to fuck them. Because, in contrast to his prodigal father, the elegant Ramfis is, like Doña María, a miser. He fucks Dominican girls free of charge, for the honor of their being fucked by the crown prince, the captain of the nation's invincible polo team, the lieutenant general, the head of the Air Force.

You begin finding out all about it in the students' whispered exchanges of gossip, fantasies, and exaggerations mixed with realities, behind the sisters' backs, during recreational periods, believing and not believing, attracted and repulsed, until, at last, the earthquake occurs at school, in Ciudad Trujillo, because this time the victim of his papa's darling boy is one of the most beautiful girls in Dominican society, the daughter of an Army colonel. The radiant Rosalía Perdomo, with the long blond hair, sky-blue eyes, translucent skin, who plays the part of the Virgin Mary in Passion plays, shedding tears like a genuine Mater Dolorosa when her Son expires. There are many versions of what happened. Ramfis met her at a party, saw her at the Country Club, at a festival, looked her way at the Hipódromo, and he besieged her, called, wrote, and made a date with her for that Friday afternoon, after the practice that Rosalía stayed for because she was on the school's volleyball team. Many classmates see her when she leaves—Urania doesn't remember if she saw her, it's not impossible—and instead of taking the school bus she gets into Ramfis's car, which is waiting for her a few meters from the door. He isn't alone. Papa's

darling boy is never alone, he is always accompanied by two or three friends who celebrate him, adulate him, serve him, and prosper at his expense. Like his brother-in-law, Angelita's husband Pechito, another good-looking kid, Colonel Luis José León Estévez. Was his younger brother with them? The homely, stupid, unattractive Radhamés? No doubt. Were they already drunk? Or do they get drunk while they do what they do to the golden, snow-white Rosalía Perdomo? Surely they don't wait until the girl begins to bleed. Later they conduct themselves like gentlemen, but first they rape her. Ramfis, being who he is, must have been the one to deflower the exquisite morsel. Then comes everybody else. Do they go by age or by closeness to the firstborn? Do they gamble on the order? How would they have done it, Papa? And at the height of their fun, the last thing they expect, a hemorrhage.

Instead of throwing her in a ditch somewhere in the countryside, which is what they would have done if instead of being a Perdomo, a white, blond, rich girl from a respected Trujillista family, Rosalía had been a girl with no name and no money, they behave with consideration. They take her to the door of Marión Hospital, where, fortunately or unfortunately for Rosalía, the doctors save her. And also spread the story. They say poor Colonel Perdomo never recovers from the shock of knowing that Ramfis Trujillo and his friends happily violated his beloved daughter, between lunch and supper, as if they were killing time watching a movie. Her mother, devastated by shame and grief, never goes out again. She isn't even seen at Mass.

"Is that what you were afraid of, Papa?" Urania pursues the invalid's eyes. "That Ramfis and his friends would do to me what they did to Rosalía Perdomo?"

"He understands," she thinks, falling silent. His father's gaze is fixed on her; at the back of his eyes there is a mute entreaty: be quiet, stop opening wounds, digging up memories. She doesn't have the slightest intention of complying. Isn't that why you've come to this country when you swore you'd never return?

"Yes, Papa, that must be why I've come," she says so quietly her voice is barely audible. "To give you a bad time. Though with the stroke, you took your precautions. You tore unpleasant things out of your memory. And my, our, unpleasantness, did you erase that too? I didn't. Not for a day. Not a single day in thirty-five years, Papa. I never forgot and I never forgave you. That's why when you called me at Siena Heights or at Harvard, I would hear your voice and hang up and not let you finish. "Uranita, is that you . . . ?" Click. "Uranita, listen to me . . ." Click. That's why I never answered any of your letters. Did you write a hundred? Two hundred? I tore them all up or burned them. Pretty hypocritical, those little notes of yours. You always talked in circles, in allusions, in case other eyes saw them, in case other people learned the story. Do you know why I could never forgive you? Because you were never really sorry. After so many years of serving the Chief, you had lost your scruples, your sensitivity, the slightest hint of rectitude. Just like your colleagues. Just like the whole country, perhaps. Was that a requirement for staying in power and not dying of disgust? To become heartless, a monster like your Chief. To be unfeeling and self-satisfied, like the handsome Ramfis after raping Rosalía and leaving her to bleed in the doorway of Marión Hospital."

The Perdomo girl did not return to school, of course, but her delicate Virgin Mary face continued to inhabit the classrooms, halls, and courtyards of Santo Domingo Academy, the rumors, whispers, fantasies that her misfortune provoked lasted for weeks, months, even though the sisters had forbidden them to mention the name of Rosalía Perdomo. But in the homes of Dominican society, even in the most Trujillista families, her name was mentioned over and over again, an ominous premonition, a terrible warning, above all in houses with girls and young ladies of marriageable age, and the story inflamed the fear that the handsome Ramfis (who was, moreover, married to a divorced woman, Octavia—Tantana—Ricart!) would suddenly discover the little girl, the big girl, and have a party

with her, one of those parties that the spoiled heir had regularly with whatever girl he wanted, because who was going to challenge the Chief's oldest son and his circle of favorites?

"It was because of Rosalía Perdomo that your Chief sent Ramfis to the military academy in the United States, wasn't it, Papa?"

To the Fort Leavenworth Military Academy in Kansas City, in 1958. To get him away from Ciudad Trujillo for a couple of years, because, they said, the story of Rosalía Perdomo had irritated even His Excellency. Not for moral reasons but for practical ones. This idiotic boy, instead of becoming knowledgeable about affairs and preparing himself as the Chief's firstborn, devoted his life to dissipation, to polo, to getting drunk with an entourage of bums and parasites and doing clever things like raping the daughter of one of the families most loyal to Trujillo and causing her to hemorrhage. A spoiled, pampered boy. Send him to the Fort Leavenworth Military Academy in Kansas City!

Hysterical laughter overcomes Urania, and the invalid, disconcerted by this sudden outburst, shrinks as if wanting to disappear inside himself. Urania laughs so hard her eyes fill with tears. She wipes them away with her handkerchief.

"The cure was worse than the disease. Instead of a punishment, the handsome Ramfis's little trip to Fort Leavenworth turned out to be a reward.

"It must have been funny, wasn't it, Papa? This little Dominican officer comes for an elite course of study in a select class of American officers and shows up with the rank of lieutenant general, dozens of medals, a long military career behind him (he had started at the age of seven), an entourage of aides-de-camp, musicians, and servants, a yacht anchored in San Francisco Bay, and a fleet of automobiles. What a surprise for all those captains, majors, lieutenants, sergeants, instructors, professors. He came to Fort Leavenworth to study, and the tropical bird displayed more medals and titles than Eisenhower ever had. How should they treat him? How could they permit him

to enjoy such prerogatives without discrediting the academy and the U.S. Army? Could they look the other way when every other week the heir apparent would escape spartan Kansas for boisterous Hollywood, where, with his friend Porfirio Rubirosa, he went on millionaire's sprees with famous actresses, which the scandal sheets and gossip columns were thrilled to report? The most famous columnist in Los Angeles, Louella Parsons, revealed that Trujillo's son gave a top-of-the-line Cadillac to Kim Novak and a mink coat to Zsa Zsa Gabor. At a session of the House of Representatives, a Democratic congressman estimated that those gifts cost the equivalent of the annual military aid that Washington graciously supplied to the Dominican Republic, and he asked if this was the best way to help poor countries defend themselves against Communism, the best way to spend the American people's money.

"Impossible to avoid a scandal. In the United States, not in the Dominican Republic, where not a word was published or spoken about Ramfis's diversions. But up there, say what you like, there is such a thing as public opinion and a free press, and politicians are crushed if they expose a weak flank. And so, at the request of Congress, military aid was cut off. Do you remember that, Papa? The academy discreetly informed the State Department, which even more discreetly informed the Generalissimo that there wasn't the remotest possibility that his boy would complete the course, and since his service record was so deficient, it was preferable for him to withdraw rather than suffer the humiliation of being expelled from the Fort Leavenworth Military Academy.

"His papa didn't like it at all when they treated poor Ramfis so badly, did he, Papa? All he did was sow some wild oats and look how the puritanical gringos reacted! In retaliation your Chief wanted to remove the American naval and military missions, and he called the ambassador to register his protest. His closest advisers, Paíno Pichardo, you, Balaguer, Chirinos, Arala, Manuel Alfonso, had to perform miracles to convince him that a break would be enormously prejudicial. Do you

remember? The historians say you were one of the men who kept relations with Washington from being poisoned by Ramfis's exploits. But you were only partially successful, Papa. From that time on, after those excesses, the United States realized that this ally had become an embarrassment and it was prudent to find someone more presentable. But how did we end up talking about your Chief's dear boys, Papa?"

The invalid raises and lowers his shoulders, as if saying, "How do I know? You tell me." Did he understand, then? No. At least, not all the time. The stroke didn't completely wipe out his ability to comprehend; it must have been reduced to five or ten percent of normal. That limited, impoverished brain, moving in slow motion, was surely capable of retaining and processing the information his senses perceived, at least for a few minutes or seconds, before it clouded over again. Which is why his eyes, his face, his gestures, like that movement of his shoulders, suddenly suggest that he is listening, that he understands what you are saying. But only in fragments, spasms, flashes, without any sequential coherence. Don't kid yourself, Urania. He understands for a couple of seconds and then he forgets. You're not communicating with him. You're still talking to yourself, as you've done every day for more than thirty years.

She isn't sad or depressed. She is saved from that, perhaps, by the sun coming in the windows and illuminating objects with a brilliant light, outlining them in all their detail, exposing defects, discolorations, age. How shabby, abandoned, and old the bedroom—the house—is now, of the once powerful President of the Senate, Agustín Cabral. What made you think of Ramfis Trujillo? She has always been fascinated by the strange directions memory takes, the geographies it creates in response to mysterious stimuli and unforeseen associations. Ah, yes, it has to do with the piece you read in *The New York Times* the night before you left the United States. The article was about the younger brother, the stupid, ugly Radhamés. What a report! What an ending. The journalist had made a thorough investigation.

Radhamés had lived, penniless, for some years in Panama, engaged in suspicious activities, nobody knew exactly what, until he vanished. The disappearance occurred the previous year, and none of the efforts of his relatives and the Panamanian police—his small room in Balboa was searched, and his meager belongings were still there—turned up any clues. Until, finally, one of the Colombian drug cartels let it be known in Bogotá, with the syntactical pomp characteristic of the Athens of America, that "the Dominican citizen Don Radhamés Trujillo Martínez, a resident of Balboa in our sister Republic of Panama, has been executed in an unnamed location in the Colombian jungle after unequivocally demonstrating dishonorable conduct in the fulfillment of his obligations." *The New York Times* reported that for years a derelict Radhamés had apparently earned his living serving the Colombian Mafia. Wretched work, no doubt, judging by the modest circumstances in which he lived: acting as a gofer for the bosses, renting apartments for them, driving them to hotels, airports, brothels, or, perhaps, acting as an intermediary for money laundering. Did he try to steal a few dollars to make his life a little better? Since he was so short on brains, they caught him right away. They abducted him to the forests of Darién, where they were lords and masters. Perhaps they tortured him with the same kind of ferocity used by him and Ramfis in 1959, when they tortured and killed the invaders of Constanza, Maimón, and Estero Hondo, and in 1961, when they tortured and killed the people involved in the events of May 30.

"A just ending, Papa." Her father, who has been dozing, opens his eyes. "Whoever lives by the sword, dies by the sword. It was true in the case of Radhamés, if he really did die like that. Because nothing has been confirmed. The article also said that there are those who swear he was an informant for the DEA while he worked for the Colombian mafiosi, and that for services rendered, the agency changed his face and put him under their protection. Rumors, conjectures. In any event, what an ending for the darling children of your Chief and the Bountiful First Lady. The handsome Ramfis killed in a car accident in

Madrid. An accident, some say, arranged by the CIA and Balaguer to stop the firstborn, who was conspiring in Madrid, prepared to invest millions to recover the family fiefdom. Radhamés transformed into a poor devil murdered by the Colombians for trying to steal the dirty money he helped to launder, or for being an agent of the DEA. And Angelita, Her Majesty Angelita I, whose lady-in-waiting I was, do you know where she is now? In Miami, brushed by the wings of the divine dove. A born-again Christian. In one of the thousands of evangelical sects driven by madness, idiocy, anguish, fear. That's how the queen of this country has ended up. In a clean little house in very bad taste, a hybrid of gringo and Caribbean vulgarity, devoted to missionary work. They say she can be seen on the street corners of Dade County, in Latino and Haitian neighborhoods, singing hymns and exhorting passers-by to open their hearts to the Lord. What would the Heroic Father of the New Nation say to all that?"

Again the invalid raises and lowers his shoulders, and blinks, and becomes lethargic. He lowers his eyelids and curls up, ready for a little nap.

It's true, you've never felt hatred for Ramfis, Radhamés, or Angelita, nothing like what Trujillo and the Bountiful First Lady still inspire in you. Because, somehow, the three children have paid in degradation or violent deaths for their part in the family's crimes. And you've never been able to avoid a certain benevolent feeling toward Ramfis. Why, Urania? Perhaps because of his emotional crises, his depressions and fits of madness, the mental instability his family always concealed and which, following the murders he ordered in June 1959, obliged Trujillo to commit him to a psychiatric hospital in Belgium. In all of Ramfis's actions, even the cruelest, there was something caricatured, fraudulent, pathetic. Like his spectacular gifts to the Hollywood actresses Porfirio Rubirosa fucked free of charge (when he wasn't making them pay him). Or the way he had of botching the plans devised for him by his father. Hadn't it been grotesque, for instance, when Ramfis ruined

the reception given in his honor by the Generalissimo to compensate for his failure at Fort Leavenworth? He had the Congress—"Did you propose the law, Papa?"—name Ramfis Head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff of the Armed Forces, and, on his return, he was to be recognized as such at a military review on the Avenida, at the foot of the obelisk. Everything was arranged, and the troops in formation, on that morning when the yacht *Angelita*, which the Generalissimo sent to pick him up in Miami, entered the port on the Ozama River, and Trujillo himself, accompanied by Joaquín Balaguer, went to the docking berth to welcome him and drive him to the parade. What astonishment, what disappointment, what confusion overwhelmed the Chief when he boarded the yacht and discovered the calamitous condition, the slobbering incapacity in which a shipboard orgy had left poor Ramfis. He could barely stand, he was incapable of speaking. His slack, recalcitrant tongue emitted grunts instead of words. His bulging eyes were glassy, his clothes streaked with vomit. And his cronies, and the women who accompanied them, were in even worse shape. Balaguer described it in his memoirs: Trujillo turned white and trembled with indignation. He ordered the cancellation of the military parade and Ramfis's swearing-in as Head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. And, before he left, he picked up a glass and proposed a toast meant as a symbolic slap in the face of the worthless drone (his inebriation prevented him from understanding): "Here's to work, the only thing that will bring prosperity to the Republic."

Urania is overcome by another attack of hysterical laughter, and the invalid opens his eyes in terror.

"Don't be afraid." Urania becomes serious. "I can't help laughing when I imagine the scene. Where were you at that moment, when your Chief discovered his boy drunk, surrounded by his drunken whores and buddies? On the platform on the Avenida, dressed in your morning coat, waiting for the new Head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff of the Armed Forces? What explanation was given? The parade is canceled because

General Ramfis is suffering from delirium tremens?"

She laughs again under the profound gaze of the invalid.

"A family to laugh at and cry over, not to be taken seriously," Urania murmurs. "Sometimes you must have been ashamed of all of them. And felt fear and remorse, when you allowed yourself to, though that kind of audacity would be kept very secret. I'd like to know what you would have thought of the melodramatic fates met by the Chief's darling children. Or the sordid story of the final years of Doña María Martínez, the Bountiful First Lady, the terrible, the vengeful, who screamed her demand that Trujillo's assassins have their eyes put out and be skinned alive. Do you know that in the end she was eroded by arteriosclerosis? That the grasping woman secretly got all those millions and millions of dollars away from the Chief? And had all the numbers to the secret accounts in Switzerland and hid them from her children? With good reason, no doubt. She was afraid they'd steal her millions and bury her in an old-age home, where she'd spend her final years not being any trouble to them. She, with her hardening arteries, was the one who had the last laugh. I would have given anything to see the Bountiful First Lady in Madrid, stupefied by misfortune and losing her memory, but maintaining, from the depths of her avarice, enough lucidity not to reveal to her dear children the numbers of the Swiss accounts. And to see the efforts the poor things made—in Madrid, in the house of homely, stupid Radhamés, or in Miami, in Angelita's house, before she turned to mysticism—to have her remember where she had scribbled them down or hidden them. Can you picture it, Papa? How they must have hunted, and pulled open, and broken, and slashed, looking for the hiding place. They took her to Miami, they brought her back to Madrid. And they never found it. She took her secret to the grave. What do you think of that, Papa? Ramfis managed to squander a few million that he got out of the country in the months following his father's death, because the Generalissimo (was this true, Papa?) insisted on not taking a penny out of the country in order to

oblige his family and followers to die here, to face the consequences. But Angelita and Radhamés were out on the street. And thanks to her hardening arteries, the Bountiful First Lady died poor too, in Panama, where Kalil Haché buried her, taking her to the cemetery in a taxi. She left the family's millions to the Swiss bankers! To cry over or to laugh at, but in no case to be taken seriously. Isn't that so, Papa?"

She laughs again, until tears come to her eyes. As she dries them, she struggles against a fragment of depression growing inside her. The invalid observes her, accustomed to her presence. He no longer seems interested in her monologue.

"Don't think I've become a hysteric," she says with a sigh. "Not yet, Papa. What I'm doing now, digging up the past, rooting around in memories, is something I never do. This is my first vacation in years. I don't like vacations. When I was a girl here, I used to like them. But I never did again, not after I went to Adrian, thanks to the sisters. I've spent my life working. I never took a vacation at the World Bank. Or at the law firm in New York. I don't have time to go around giving monologues on Dominican history."

It's true, your life in Manhattan is exhausting. Every hour is accounted for, starting at nine, when you walk into your office at 47th and Madison. By then you've run for three-quarters of an hour in Central Park, if the weather is good, or done aerobics at the Fitness Center on the corner, where you have a membership. Your morning is a series of interviews, reports, discussions, consultations, research in the archives, working lunches in a private dining room at the office or at a nearby restaurant, and your afternoon is just as busy and frequently does not end until eight. Weather permitting, you return home on foot. You prepare a salad and open a container of yogurt before watching the news on television, you read for a while and go to bed, so tired that the letters in the book or the images on the screen begin to dance before ten minutes have passed. There is always one trip a month, sometimes two, within the United States or to Latin America, Europe, or Asia;

and recently to Africa as well, where some investors are finally daring to risk their money, and for that they come to the firm for legal advice. That's your specialty: the legal aspect of financial operations in companies anywhere in the world. A specialty you came to after working for many years in the Legal Department of the World Bank. The trips are more fatiguing than your days in Manhattan. Flying five, ten, twelve hours, to Mexico City, Bangkok, Tokyo, Rawalpindi, or Harare, and going immediately to give or listen to reports, discuss figures, evaluate projects; changing landscapes and climates, from heat to cold, from humidity to drought, from English to Japanese, Spanish, Urdu, Arabic, and Hindi, using interpreters whose mistakes can cause erroneous decisions. Which is why her five senses are always alert, in a state of concentration that leaves her drained, so that at the inevitable receptions she can barely stifle her yawns.

"When I have a Saturday and Sunday to myself, I'm happy to stay home, reading Dominican history," she says, and it seems to her that her father nods. "A rather peculiar history, it's true. But I find it restful. It's my way of not losing my roots. Even though I've lived there twice as long as I lived here, I haven't turned into a gringa. I still talk like a Dominican, don't I, Papa?"

Is there an ironic little glimmer in the invalid's eyes?

"Well, more or less a Dominican, one from up there. What do you expect from somebody who has lived more than thirty years with gringos, who goes for weeks without speaking Spanish? Do you know, I was sure I'd never see you again? I wasn't going to come back, not even to bury you. It was a firm decision. I know you'd like to know why I changed my mind. Why I'm here. The truth is, I don't know. I did it on impulse. I didn't think much about it. I asked for a week's vacation and here I am. I must have come for something. Maybe it was you. To find out how you were. I knew you were sick, that after the stroke it was no longer possible to talk to you. Would you like to know what I'm feeling? What I felt when I came back to the

house of my childhood? When I saw the ruin you've become?"

Her father is paying attention again. He is waiting, with curiosity, for her to continue. What do you feel, Urania? Bitterness? A certain melancholy? Sadness? The old anger reborn? "The worst thing is that I don't think I feel anything," she thinks.

The front doorbell rings. It keeps chiming, vibrating in the heat-filled morning.