

**16** “Manuel Alfonso?” Aunt Adelina lifts her hand to her ear, as if she had not heard, but Urania knows the old woman has excellent hearing and is dissembling while she recovers from the shock. Lucinda and Manolita stare at her too, their eyes very wide. Only Mari-anita does not seem to be affected.

“Yes, him, Manuel Alfonso,” Urania repeats. “A name worthy of a Spanish conquistador. Did you know him, Aunt Adelina?”

“I saw him once or twice.” The old woman nods, both intrigued and offended. “What does he have to do with the outrageous things you’ve said about Agustín?”

“He was the playboy who got women for Trujillo,” Manolita recalls. “Isn’t that right, Mama?”

“Playboy, playboy,” shrieks Samson. But this time only her tall, skinny niece laughs.

“He was very good-looking, an Adonis,” says Urania. “Before the cancer.”

He had been the handsomest Dominican of his generation, but in the weeks, perhaps months, since Agustín Cabral had seen him, the demigod whose elegance and grace made girls turn around to look at him had become a shadow of himself. The senator could not believe his eyes. He must have lost ten or fifteen kilos; emaciated, wasted, he had deep shadows around eyes that had always been proud and smiling—the gaze of a pleasure-taker, the smile of a victor—and now were lifeless. He had heard about the small tumor under his tongue that the dentist happened to find when Manuel, who was still ambassador in Washington, went for his annual cleaning. The news, they said, affected Trujillo as much as if they had discovered a tumor

in one of his children, and he remained glued to the telephone during the operation at the Mayo Clinic, in the United States.

"I'm so sorry to bother you when you've just come home, Manuel." Cabral stood up when he saw him come into the small room where he was waiting.

"My dear Agustín, how nice." Manuel Alfonso embraced him. "Can you understand me? They had to take out part of my tongue. But with some therapy I'll speak normally again. Do you understand me?"

"Perfectly, Manuel. I don't notice anything strange in your voice, I assure you."

It wasn't true. The ambassador spoke as if he were chewing pebbles, or was tongue-tied, or had a stammer. The faces he made indicated the effort each word cost him.

"Have a seat, Agustín. Some coffee? A drink?"

"Nothing, thank you. I won't take up much of your time. Again I apologize for bothering you when you're recuperating from surgery. I'm in a very difficult situation, Manuel."

He stopped speaking, embarrassed. Manuel Alfonso put a friendly hand on his knee.

"I can imagine, Egghead. A small country, a huge hell: I even heard the rumors in the United States. You've been stripped of the Presidency of the Senate and they're investigating your management of the ministry."

Illness and suffering had drastically aged the Dominican Apollo whose face, with its perfect white teeth, had intrigued Generalissimo Trujillo on his first official trip to the United States, causing the fortunes of Manuel Alfonso to experience a sudden upturn, as if he were Snow White touched by a magic wand. But he was still an elegant man, dressed like the fashion model he had been in his youth, when he was a Dominican immigrant in New York: suede loafers, cream-colored velour trousers, an Italian silk shirt, and a smart scarf around his neck. A gold ring sparkled on his little finger. He was meticulously shaved, perfumed, and combed.

"I'm so grateful that you've received me, Manuel." Agustín

Cabral recovered his poise: he had always been contemptuous of men who felt sorry for themselves. "You're the only one. I've become a pariah. Nobody wants to see me."

"I don't forget services rendered, Agustín. You were always generous, you supported all my nominations in Congress, you did me a thousand favors. I'll do what I can. What are the charges against you?"

"I don't know, Manuel. If I knew, I could defend myself. So far no one will tell me what crime I've committed."

"Yes, very much so, all our hearts beat faster when he was nearby," Aunt Adelina admits impatiently. "But what connection can he have with what you've said about Agustín?"

Urania's throat has become dry, and she takes a few sips of water. Why do you insist on talking about this? What's the point?

"Because Manuel Alfonso was the only one of all his friends who tried to help Papa. I'll bet you didn't know that, any of you."

The three women look at her as if they thought her unbalanced.

"Well, no, I didn't know that," murmurs Aunt Adelina. "He tried to help him when he fell into disgrace? Are you sure?"

"As sure as I am that my papa didn't tell you or Uncle Aníbal about the steps Manuel Alfonso took to get him out of his difficulty."

She stops speaking because the Haitian servant comes into the dining room. She asks, in hesitant, lilting Spanish, if they need her or if she can go to bed. Lucinda dismisses her with a wave of her hand: go on, then.

"Who was Manuel Alfonso, Aunt Urania?" Marianita's barely audible voice inquires.

"A personality, Marianita. Good-looking, from an excellent family. He went to New York to make his fortune and ended up modeling clothes for designers and expensive stores, and appearing on billboards with his mouth open, advertising

Colgate, the toothpaste that refreshes and cleans and makes your teeth sparkling white. Trujillo, on a trip to the United States, learned that the handsome young man on the signs was a Dominican hustler. He sent for him and he adopted him. He made him a person of consequence. His interpreter, because he spoke perfect English; his instructor in protocol and etiquette, because he was professionally elegant; and, an extremely important function, the one who selected his suits, ties, shoes, hose, and the New York tailors who dressed him. He kept him up-to-date on the latest trends in men's fashions. And helped him design his uniforms, one of the Chief's hobbies."

"Most of all, he picked his women," Manolita interrupted. "Isn't that right, Mama?"

"What does all of this have to do with my brother?" She shakes a small, angry fist.

"Women were the least of it," Urania continues to inform her niece. "Trujillo couldn't care less because he had all of them. But clothes and accessories, he cared a great deal about them. Manuel Alfonso made him feel exquisite, refined, elegant. Like that Petronius in *Quo Vadis?* he was always quoting."

"I haven't seen the Chief yet, Agustín. I have an audience this afternoon, at his house, at Radhamés Manor. I'll find out what it is, I promise."

He had let him speak without interrupting, limiting himself to nodding and waiting when the senator's spirits fell and bitterness or anguish affected his voice. He told him what had happened, what he had said, done, and thought since the first letter appeared in "The Public Forum" ten days earlier. He poured out his heart to this considerate man, the first who had shown him sympathy since that terrible day; he told him the intimate details of his life, devoted, since the age of twenty, to serving the most important man in Dominican history. Was it fair of him to refuse to listen to someone who had lived in him and for him for the past thirty years? He was prepared to recognize his errors, if he had committed any. To examine his conscience. To pay for his mistakes, if any existed. But the Chief

had to at least grant him five minutes.

Manuel Alfonso patted him again on the knee. The house, in a new neighborhood, Arroyo Hondo, was enormous, surrounded by a park, and furnished and decorated in exquisite taste. Infallible in detecting hidden possibilities in people—a faculty that always amazed Agustín Cabral—the Chief had done a good job of gauging the former model. Manuel Alfonso could move easily in the diplomatic world, thanks to his amiability and his gift for dealing with people, and obtain advantages for the regime. He had done so on all his assignments, especially the last one, in Washington, during the most difficult period, when Trujillo stopped being the spoiled darling of Yankee governments and became an embarrassment attacked by the press and many in Congress. The ambassador raised his hand to his face, in a gesture of pain.

“From time to time, it’s like a whiplash,” he apologized. “It’s passing now. I hope the surgeon told me the truth. That they found it in time. A ninety percent guarantee of success. Why would he have lied? The gringos are brutally frank, they don’t have our delicacy, they don’t sugarcoat the pill.”

He stops speaking, because another grimace convulses his devastated face. He reacts immediately, becomes serious, philosophizes:

“I know how you feel, Egghead, what you’re going through. It’s happened to me a couple of times in my twenty-some years of friendship with the Chief. It didn’t go as far as it has with you, but there was a distancing on his part, a coldness I couldn’t explain. I remember my worry, the solitude I felt, the sensation of having lost my compass. But everything was resolved, and the Chief honored me again with his confidence. It must be intrigue on the part of some envious man who can’t forgive your talent, Agustín. But, as you already know, the Chief is a just man. I’ll speak to him this afternoon, you have my word.”

Cabral rose to his feet, very moved. There were still decent people left in the Dominican Republic.

“I’ll be at home all day, Manuel,” he said, shaking his hand

warmly. "Don't forget to tell him that I'm prepared to do anything to regain his confidence."

"I thought of him as a Hollywood star, Tyrone Power or Errol Flynn," says Urania. "I was very disappointed when I saw him that night. He wasn't the same person. They had cut out half his throat. He looked like anything but a Don Juan."

Her Aunt Adelina, her cousins, her niece, listen in silence, exchanging glances. Even the parrot Samson seems interested, for he hasn't silenced her with his screeching for some time.

"You're Urania? Agustín's little girl? How you've grown, and how pretty you are! I've known you since you were in diapers. Come over here, my girl, and give me a kiss."

"He dribbled when he talked, he looked retarded. He was very affectionate with me. I couldn't believe that this human wreck was Manuel Alfonso."

"I have to talk with your papa," he said, taking a step toward the interior of the house. "You really are pretty. You'll break a lot of hearts. Is Agustín home? Go on, call him."

"He had spoken to Trujillo and had come to our house from Radhamés Manor to report on what he had done. Papa couldn't believe it. 'The only one who didn't turn his back on me, the only one who offered his hand,' he kept repeating."

"Didn't you just dream that Manuel Alfonso did anything for him?" Aunt Adelina exclaims, disconcerted. "Agustín would have told Aníbal and me right away."

"Let her go on, don't interrupt so much, Mama," Manolita intervenes.

"That night I made a promise to Our Lady of Altagracia if she would help my papa out of his difficulty. Can you imagine what it was?"

"That you'd enter a convent?" Her cousin Lucinda laughs.

"That I'd remain a virgin the rest of my life." Urania laughs.

Her cousins and her niece laugh too, but unwillingly, hiding their embarrassment. Aunt Adelina remains serious, not taking her eyes off her and not hiding her impatience: what

else, Urania, what else?

"That child has grown so big and so pretty," Manuel Alfonso repeats as he drops into an armchair across from Agustín Cabral.

"She reminds me of her mother. The same languid eyes as your wife, Egghead, the same slim, graceful body."

He thanks him with a smile. He has brought the ambassador to his study instead of receiving him in the living room, so that the girl and the servants won't hear. He thanks him again for taking the trouble to come in person instead of calling him. The senator speaks in a rush, feeling his heart coming out with each word. Was he able to talk to the Chief?

"Of course, Agustín. I promised you I would, and I did. We talked about you for almost an hour. It won't be easy. But you mustn't lose hope. That's the main thing."

He wore an impeccably tailored dark suit, a white shirt with a starched collar, and a white-flecked blue tie held in place by a pearl. The top of a white silk handkerchief peeked out of the breast pocket of his jacket, and since he had raised his trousers slightly when he sat down to keep them from losing their crease, his blue hose, without a single wrinkle, was visible. His shoes gleamed.

"He's very unhappy with you, Egghead." It seemed that the wound from his surgery was bothering him, because from time to time he contorted his lips in a strange way, and Agustín Cabral could hear his dentures click. "It's not anything concrete but a number of things that have piled up over the past few months. The Chief is exceptionally perceptive. Nothing escapes him, he detects the smallest changes in people. He says that since this crisis began, since the Pastoral Letter, since the problems with the OAS unleashed by the monkey Betancourt and the rat Muñoz Marín, you've been growing cold. You haven't shown the devotion he expected."

The senator nodded: if the Chief noticed it, perhaps it was true. Nothing premeditated, of course, and certainly not due to any lessening of his admiration and loyalty. Something unconscious, fatigue, the tremendous tension of this past year,

the hemispheric conspiracy against Trujillo by the Communists and Fidel Castro, the priests, Washington and the State Department, Figueres, Muñoz Marín, and Betancourt, economic sanctions, the despicable actions of the exiles. Yes, yes, it was possible that, unintentionally, his dedication to his work, the Party, the Congress, had flagged.

"The Chief doesn't accept discouragement or weakness, Agustín. He wants us all to be like him. Tireless, a rock, a man of iron. You know that."

"And he's right." Agustín Cabral banged his fist on his small desk. "Because he is the way he is, he has made this country. He is always in the saddle, Manuel, as he said in the campaign of 1940. He has a right to demand that we emulate him. I disappointed him without realizing it. Perhaps because I didn't succeed in persuading the bishops to proclaim him Benefactor of the Church? He wanted that as compensation after the villainy of the Pastoral Letter. I formed part of the commission, along with Balaguer and Paíno Pichardo. Was it that failure, do you think?"

The ambassador shook his head.

"He's very tactful. Even if he feels unhappy about that, he wouldn't have told me so. Perhaps it is one of the reasons. You have to understand him. For thirty-one years he has been betrayed by the people he helped the most. How could a man not be sensitive when his best friends stab him in the back?"

"I remember his scent," says Urania, after a pause. "Since then, and it's no lie, every time a man wearing scent happens to be near me, I see Manuel Alfonso again. And hear that gibberish he spoke on the two occasions I had the honor of enjoying his charming company."

Her right hand crumples the runner on the table. Her aunt, cousins, and niece, disoriented by her hostility and sarcasm, hesitate, feeling uncomfortable.

"If talking about this upsets you, don't do it, Urania," Manolita suggests.

"It sickens me, it makes me want to vomit," Urania replies.



"It fills me with hatred and disgust. I never told anyone about this. Maybe it will do me good to finally get it off my chest. And who better than my family to listen?"

"What do you think, Manuel? Will the Chief give me another chance?"

"Why don't we have some whiskey, Egghead," the ambassador exclaims, avoiding a reply. He holds up his hands, cutting off the senator's objections. "I know I shouldn't, I'm not allowed to drink alcohol. Bah! Is it worth living if you have to deprive yourself of the good things? Great whiskey is one of those things."

"Excuse me for not asking earlier. I'll have a drink too. Let's go down to the living room. Uranita must be in bed by now."

But she still hasn't gone to her room. She has just finished supper and stands when she sees them coming down the stairs.

"You were just a little girl the last time I saw you," Manuel Alfonso compliments her, smiling. "Now you're a very beautiful young lady. You probably haven't even noticed the change, Agustín."

"See you tomorrow, Papa." Urania kisses her father. She is going to shake the visitor's hand, but he offers his cheek. She barely kisses him, and blushes: "Good night, señor."

"Call me Uncle Manuel," and he kisses her on the forehead.

Cabral tells the butler and maid that they can go to bed, and he brings in the bottle of whiskey, the glasses, the ice bucket. He pours his friend a drink and another for himself, both on the rocks.

"*Salud*, Manuel."

"*Salud*, Agustín."

The ambassador savors his drink with satisfaction, half closing his eyes. "Ah, how nice," he exclaims. But he has difficulty getting the liquor down, and his face contracts with pain.

"I've never been a drunkard, never lost control of my actions," he says. "But I've always known how to enjoy life. Even when I was wondering if I would eat the next day, I knew how to derive pleasure from small things: a good drink, a good

cigar, a landscape, a well-cooked dish, a woman who bends her waist gracefully."

He laughs nostalgically, and Cabral follows suit, unwillingly. How can he get him back to the only thing that matters? To be courteous, he controls his impatience. He hasn't had a drink for days, and two or three sips go to his head. Still, after refilling Manuel Alfonso's glass, he also fills his own.

"Nobody would think you ever had money problems, Manuel." He tries to flatter him. "I always think of you as elegant, lavish, extremely generous, paying for everyone."

The former model, swirling his glass, nods, and is gratified. The light from the chandelier shines directly down on his face, and only now does Cabral notice the sinuous scar that twists around his throat. Difficult, for someone so proud of his face and body, to have been cut up like that.

"I know what it means to go hungry, Egghead. As a young man, in New York, I even slept in the streets like a tramp. There were many days when my only meal was a plate of beans or a roll. Without Trujillo, who knows what would have happened to me? I always liked women, but I never could play the gigolo, like our good Porfirio Rubirosa. I probably would have ended up as a bum on the Bowery."

He drinks what is left in his glass in one swallow. The senator fills it again.

"I owe him everything. What I have, what I became." With his head lowered, he contemplates the ice cubes. "I've rubbed elbows with ministers and presidents of the most powerful countries, I've been invited to the White House, played poker with President Truman, gone to the Rockefellers' parties. The tumor was removed at the Mayo Clinic, the best in the world, by the best surgeon in the United States. Who paid for the operation? The Chief, of course. Do you understand, Agustín? Like our country, I owe everything to Trujillo."

Agustín Cabral regretted all the times, when in the familiarity of the Country Club or Congress or an outlying estate, in a circle of intimate friends (he believed they were intimate), he

had laughed at jokes about the former Colgate model who owed his high diplomatic posts, and his position as Trujillo's adviser, to the soaps, talcs, and perfumes he ordered for His Excellency and his good taste in choosing the ties, suits, shirts, pajamas, and shoes worn by the Chief.

"I also owe him everything I am and everything I've accomplished, Manuel," he declared. "I understand you very well. And that's why I'm prepared to do anything to regain his friendship."

Manuel Alfonso looked at him, his head craning forward. He did not say anything for a long time but continued to scrutinize him, as if weighing, millimeter by millimeter, the seriousness of his words.

"Then let's get to work, Egghead!"

"He was the second man, after Ramfis Trujillo, to flirt with me and pay me compliments," says Urania. "Telling me I was pretty, I looked like my mama, what nice eyes. I had already gone to parties with boys, and danced. Five or six times. But no one had ever talked to me like that. Because Ramfis's compliments were paid to a little girl. The first man who flirted with me as if I were a woman was my *uncle*, Manuel Alfonso."

She has said all this very quickly, with mute fury, and none of her relatives asks any questions. The silence in the small dining room is like the one that precedes the thunder in a violent summer storm. A distant siren cuts through the night. Samson paces nervously along his wooden bar, ruffling his feathers.

"He seemed like an old man to me, the mangled way he talked made me laugh, the scar on his neck scared me." Urania wrings her hands. "Why would he bother to flirt with me, why just then? But afterward I thought a good deal about all the compliments he paid me."

She falls silent again, exhausted. Lucinda asks a question—"You were fourteen, weren't you?"—that seems stupid to Urania. Lucinda knows they were born the same year. Fourteen, what a deceptive age. They had stopped being children but were not yet women.

"Three or four months before that, I had my first period," she whispers. "I think it made me look more mature."

"It just occurred to me, it occurred to me when I came in," says the ambassador, extending his hand and pouring himself another whiskey; he serves his host as well. "I've always been this way: the Chief comes first, then me. You're upset, Agustín. Am I wrong? I didn't say anything, forget it. I've forgotten it. *Salud*, Egghead!"

Senator Cabral takes a long drink. The whiskey burns his throat and reddens his eyes. Was that a rooster crowing at this hour?

"It's just, it's just . . .," he repeats, not knowing what to add.

"Let's forget it. I hope you haven't taken this the wrong way, Egghead. Forget it! Let's forget it!"

Manuel Alfonso has stood up. He walks among the innocuous furnishings in the living room, neat, clean, but lacking the feminine touch an efficient housekeeper can give. Senator Cabral thinks—how many times has he thought this over the years?—that he made a mistake remaining alone after his wife's death. He should have married, had other children, then perhaps this misfortune would not have happened. Why didn't he? Was it for Uranita's sake, as he told everyone? No. It was so he could devote more time to the Chief, dedicate days and nights to him, prove to him that nothing and no one was more important in the life of Agustín Cabral.

"I didn't take it the wrong way." He makes an enormous effort to appear calm. "But I am disconcerted. It's something I wasn't expecting, Manuel."

"You think she's a little girl, you didn't realize she had become a young woman." Manuel Alfonso rattles the ice cubes in his glass. "A pretty girl. You must be proud of having a daughter like her."

"Of course." And adds, mindlessly: "She's always at the head of her class."

"Do you know something, Egghead? I wouldn't have hesi-

tated for a second. Not to regain his confidence, not to show him that I'm capable of any sacrifice for him. Simply because nothing would give me more satisfaction, more happiness, than to have the Chief give pleasure to a daughter of mine and take his pleasure with her. I'm not exaggerating, Agustín. Trujillo is one of those anomalies in history. Charlemagne, Napoleon, Bolívar: that breed of men. Forces of Nature, instruments of God, makers of nations. He's one of them, Egghead. We've had the privilege of being at his side, watching him act, collaborating with him. That's something beyond price."

He drained his glass and Agustín Cabral raised his to his mouth but barely wet his lips. He was no longer dizzy, but now his stomach was churning. At any moment he would start to vomit.

"She's still a little girl," he stammered.

"That's even better!" exclaimed the ambassador. "The Chief will appreciate the gesture even more. He'll understand that he made a mistake, that he judged you too hastily, letting himself be guided by his own sensitivities, or listening to your enemies. Don't think only of yourself, Agustín. Don't be an egotist. Think of your daughter. What will happen to her if you lose everything and end up in jail accused of mismanagement and fraud?"

"Do you think I haven't thought about that, Manuel?"

The ambassador shrugged.

"It just occurred to me when I saw how pretty she's become," he repeated. "The Chief appreciates beauty. If I say to him: 'Egghead, to prove his affection and loyalty, wants to offer you his pretty daughter, who's still a virgin,' he won't refuse. I know him. He's a true gentleman, with a tremendous sense of honor. His heart will be touched. He'll call you. He'll return what's been taken from you. Uranita's future will be secure. Think of her, Agustín, and shake off your antiquated prejudices. Don't be an egotist."

He picked up the bottle again and splashed more whiskey

into his glass and Cabral's. He used his hand to put more ice cubes in both glasses.

"It just occurred to me when I saw how attractive she's become," he intoned, for the fourth or fifth time. Did it bother him, did his throat drive him mad? He moved his head and caressed the scar with his fingertips. "If it offends you, I didn't say anything."

"You said vile and evil," Aunt Adelina suddenly explodes. "You said that about your father who's had a living death and is only waiting for the end. About my brother, the person I've loved and respected most. You won't leave this house without explaining the reason for your insults, Urania."

"I said vile and evil because there are no stronger words," Urania says very slowly. "If there were, I would have said them. He had his reasons, certainly. His extenuating circumstances, his motivations. But I haven't forgiven him and I'll never forgive him."

"Why do you help him if you hate him so much?" The old woman vibrates with indignation; she is very pale, as if she were about to faint. "Why the nurse, and the food? Why don't you let him die?"

"I want him to go on with his living death, I want him to suffer." She speaks very calmly, her eyes lowered. "That's why I help him, Aunt Adelina."

"But, but what did he do to make you hate him so much, to make you say something so horrible?" Lucindita raises her arms, incapable of believing what she has just heard. "Holy God!"

"You'll be surprised at what I'm going to tell you, Egghead," Manuel Alfonso exclaims dramatically. "When I see a beauty, a real woman, the kind that makes you turn around, I don't think of myself. I think of the Chief. Yes, of him. Would he like to hold her in his arms, make love to her? I've never told this to anyone. Not even the Chief. But he knows. Knows that for me, he always comes first, even in this. And make no mistake, I like women a lot, Agustín. Don't think I've made the

sacrifice of giving him gorgeous women to flatter him, or to get favors or positions. That's what contemptible people think, what pigs think. Do you know why I do it? Out of love, compassion, pity. You can understand, Egghead. You and I know what his life has been. Working from dawn till midnight, seven days a week, twelve months a year. Never resting. Taking care of important matters and trivial ones. Constantly making decisions that determine the life and death of three million Dominicans. In order to bring us into the twentieth century. And having to be concerned about the resentful and the mediocre, the ingratitude of so many bastards. Doesn't a man like him deserve to have an occasional distraction? To enjoy a few minutes with a woman? One of the few compensations in his life, Agustín. Which is why I feel proud to be what so many vipers say I am: the Chief's procurer. I'll drink to the honor, Egghead!"

He raised the glass without whiskey to his lips and put an ice cube in his mouth. He remained silent for a long time, sucking, abstracted, exhausted by his soliloquy. Cabral observed him, saying nothing, caressing his glass full of whiskey.

"We've finished the bottle and I don't have another one," he apologized. "Take mine, I can't drink any more."

Nodding, the ambassador held out an empty glass and Senator Cabral poured in the contents of his.

"I'm moved by what you say, Manuel," he murmured. "But I'm not surprised. What you feel for him, that admiration and gratitude, is what I've always felt for the Chief. That's why I find this situation so painful."

The ambassador put his hand on his shoulder.

"It'll work out, Egghead. I'll talk to him. I know how to say things to him. I'll explain it to him. I won't say it's my idea, but yours. An initiative from Agustín Cabral. An absolutely loyal man, even in disgrace, even in humiliation. You know the Chief. He likes gestures. He may have a few years on him, a few problems with his health. But he's never refused the challenges of love. Don't worry. You'll recover your position,

those who turned their backs on you will soon be lining up at your door. Now, I have to go. Thanks for the whiskey. In my house they don't let me have a drop of alcohol. How good it's been to feel that burning, bitter little tickle in my poor throat. Goodbye, Egghead. You can stop agonizing over this. Leave everything to me. Just prepare Uranita. Without going into details. It isn't necessary. The Chief will take care of that. You can't imagine the delicacy, the tenderness, the human touch he uses in cases like this. He'll make her happy, and he'll reward her, her future will be assured. He's always done that. Especially with a creature as sweet and beautiful as she is."

He staggered to the door and let it slam behind him when he left the house. From the sofa in the living room, where he still held the empty glass in his hand, Agustín Cabral heard the car pull away. He felt lassitude, an immeasurable lack of will. He would never have the strength to stand, climb the stairs, undress, go to the bathroom, brush his teeth, lie down, turn out the light.

"Are you trying to say that Manuel Alfonso proposed to your father that, that . . . ?" Aunt Adelina cannot finish, she is choked by rage, she cannot find the words that will soften, make presentable, what she wants to say. In order to conclude somehow, she shakes her fist at the parrot Samson, who has not even opened his beak: "Be still, you miserable creature!"

"I'm not trying. I'm telling you what happened," says Urania. "If you don't want to hear it, I'll stop talking and leave."

Aunt Adelina opens her mouth but cannot say anything.

For the first time in his life, the senator did not go upstairs to bed. He fell asleep in the living room, in his clothes, a glass and an empty whiskey bottle at his feet. The sight of him the next morning, when Urania came down to eat breakfast and go to school, left her shaken. Her papa wasn't a drunkard; on the contrary, he always criticized heavy drinking and dissipation. He had drunk too much because he was desperate, because he was hounded, pursued, investigated, dismissed, had his bank accounts frozen, for something he hadn't done. She sobbed



and embraced her papa, who was sprawled on the armchair in the living room. When he opened his eyes and saw her next to him, weeping, he kissed her over and over again: "Don't cry, precious. We'll get out of this, you'll see, we won't let them defeat us." He stood up, straightened his clothes, sat with his daughter while she had breakfast. As he smoothed her hair and told her not to say anything about it at school, he looked at her in a strange way.

"He must have had doubts, gone back and forth," Urania imagines. "Thought about exile. But he never could have gone into an embassy. Since the sanctions, there were no more Latin American legations. And the *caliés* made the rounds, watching the entrances to the ones that were left. He must have spent a horrible day, struggling with his scruples. That afternoon, when I came home from school, he had already made his decision."

Aunt Adelina does not protest. She only looks at her from the depths of her deep-set eyes, reproach combined with horror and a disbelief that, despite all her efforts, is fading. Manolita twists and untwists a strand of hair. Lucinda and Marianita have turned into statues.

He had bathed, and was dressed with his usual propriety; there was no trace left of the bad night he had spent. But he hadn't eaten a bite of food, and his doubts and bitterness were reflected in his deathly pallor, the circles under his eyes, the glint of fear in his gaze.

"Don't you feel well, Papa? Why are you so pale?"

"We have to talk, Uranita. Come, let's go up to your room. I don't want the servants to hear us."

"They're going to arrest him," the girl thought. "He's going to tell me that I have to go live with Uncle Aníbal and Aunt Adelina."

They entered the room, Urania dropped her books on her desk and sat on the edge of the bed ("A blue spread with Walt Disney characters"), and her father leaned against the window.

"You're what I love most in the world." He smiled at her. "The best thing I have. Since your mama died, you're all I have

left in this life. Do you know that, sweetheart?"

"Of course I do, Papa," she replied. "What other terrible thing has happened? Are they going to arrest you?"

"No, no," and he shook his head. "In fact, there's a chance everything will be all right."

He stopped, incapable of continuing. His lips and hands were trembling. She looked at him in surprise. But then this was a great piece of news. A chance the radio and newspapers would stop attacking him? That he'd be President of the Senate again? If that was true, why do you look like that, Papa, so discouraged and sad?

"Because I'm being asked to make a sacrifice, my dear," he murmured. "I want you to know something. I would never do anything, anything, you must understand, really understand, that wasn't for your own good. Swear to me you'll never forget what I'm saying."

Uranita begins to feel irritated. What was he talking about? Why didn't he come out and tell her what it was?

"Sure, Papa," she says finally, with a weary gesture. "But what's happened, why are you being so roundabout?"

Her father sat beside her on the bed, took her by the shoulders, pulled her to him, kissed her hair.

"There's a party and the Generalissimo has invited you." He kept his lips tight against the girl's forehead. "In the house he has in San Cristóbal, on the Fundación Ranch."

Urania slips out of his arms.

"A party? And Trujillo is inviting us? But, Papa, that means everything's all right again. Doesn't it?"

Senator Cabral shrugged.

"I don't know, Uranita. The Chief is unpredictable. His intentions aren't always easy to guess. He hasn't invited both of us. Only you."

"Me?"

"Manuel Alfonso will take you there. And he'll bring you home. I don't know why he's inviting you and not me. Certainly, it's a first gesture, a way of letting me know that everything's

not lost. At least, that's what Manuel assumes."

"How bad he must have felt," says Urania, seeing that Aunt Adelina, with lowered head, no longer reproaches her with eyes from which all certainty has been erased. "He talked in circles, he contradicted himself. He was terrified I wouldn't believe his lies."

"Manuel Alfonso could have deceived him too . . .," Aunt Adelina begins but can't continue. She makes a contrite gesture, apologizing with her hands and head.

"If you don't want to go, you won't go, Uranita." Agustín Cabral rubs his hands, as if, on that hot afternoon that is turning into night, he felt cold. "I'll call Manuel Alfonso right now and tell him you're not well, and give your regrets to the Chief. You're under no obligation, dear girl."

She doesn't know how to respond. Why did she have to make a decision like that?

"I don't know, Papa," she says, hesitant and confused. "It seems very strange. Why is he inviting just me? What am I going to do at a party with grown-ups? Or are other girls my age invited too?"

His Adam's apple moves up and down in Senator Cabral's slender throat. His eyes avoid Urania's.

"If he's invited you, there'll be other girls there too," he stammers. "It must be that he no longer considers you a little girl, but a young lady."

"But he doesn't even know me, he's only seen me at a distance, in crowds of people. How can he remember me, Papa?"

"Somebody must have told him about you, Uranita," her father says evasively. "I repeat, you're under no obligation. If you like, I'll call Manuel Alfonso and tell him you're sick."

"Well, I don't know, Papa. If you want me to, I'll go, and if not, I won't. What I want is to help you. Won't he be angry if I say no?"

"Didn't you understand anything?" Manolita dares to ask her.

Not a thing, Urania. You were still a girl, when being a girl

meant being totally innocent about certain things that had to do with desire, instincts, power, and the infinite excesses and bestialities that a combination of those things could mean in a country shaped by Trujillo. She was a bright girl, and everything seemed very hasty, of course. Who ever heard of an invitation made on the day of the party, not giving the guest any time to get ready? But she was a normal, healthy girl—the last day you would be, Urania—and very inquisitive, and suddenly a party in San Cristóbal, on the Generalissimo's famous ranch, where the horses and cows that won all the prizes were raised, couldn't help but excite her, fill her with curiosity as she thought of what she would tell her friends at Santo Domingo, how jealous she would make those classmates who had made her suffer so much in recent days, telling her the awful things that were said about Senator Agustín Cabral in the newspapers and on the radio. Why would she have misgivings about something her father approved? Instead, she felt hopeful that, as the senator said, the invitation might be the first sign of making amends, a gesture to let her father know that his calvary had ended.

She suspected nothing. Like the budding young lady she was, she worried about the most trivial things. What would she wear, Papa? Which shoes? Too bad it was so late, they could have called the hairdresser who did her hair and made her up last month, when she was a lady-in-waiting to the Queen of Santo Domingo. It was her only concern from the moment when, to avoid offending the Chief, she and her father decided she would go to the party. Don Manuel Alfonso would come for her at eight. She didn't have time to do homework.

"How late did you tell Señor Alfonso I could stay?"

"Well, until people begin to leave," says Senator Cabral, squeezing his hands. "If you want to leave earlier, because you feel tired or whatever, you just tell him and Manuel Alfonso will bring you right home."