# 18

When one of the military adjutants showed Luis Rodríguez, Manuel Alfonso's chauffeur, into the office, the Generalissimo stood to receive him, something he did not do even with the most important people.

"How is the ambassador?" he asked with concern.

"Just fair, Chief." The chauffeur put on an appropriate expression and touched his own throat. "A lot of pain, again. This morning he had me bring the doctor so he could give him an injection."

Poor Manuel. It wasn't fair, damn it. That a man who had devoted his life to caring for his body, to being handsome and elegant, to resisting the perverse law of nature that everything had to grow ugly, should be punished like this, where it would most humiliate him: in the face that had radiated life, grace, and health. He would have been better off dying on the operating table. When he saw him in Ciudad Trujillo after his operation at the Mayo Clinic, the Benefactor's eyes had filled with tears. Manuel had been ravaged. And he could hardly understand him now that they had cut out half his tongue.

"Give him my best." The Generalissimo examined Luis Rodríguez; dark suit, white shirt, blue tie, polished shoes: the best-dressed black in the Dominican Republic. "What's the news?"

"Very good, Chief." Luis Rodríguez's large eyes flashed. "I found the girl, no problem. Whenever you say."

"Are you sure it's the same one?"

The large dark face, with its scars and mustache, nodded several times.

"Absolutely sure. The one who gave you flowers on Monday,

for the San Cristóbal Youth Group. Yolanda Esterel. Seventeen years old. Here's her picture."

It was a photograph from a student ID, but Trujillo recognized the languid eyes, the mouth with the plump lips, the hair hanging loose to her shoulders. The girl had led the parade of students, carrying a large photograph of the Generalissimo, past the raised platform in the main park of San Cristóbal, and then came up on the dais to present him with a bouquet of roses and hydrangeas wrapped in cellophane. He remembered her plump, rounded body, her small breasts moving suggestively inside her blouse, her flaring hips. A tingling in his testicles raised his spirits.

"Take her to Mahogany House, around ten," he said, repressing those fantasies that were wasting his time. "My best regards to Manuel. Tell him to take care of himself."

"Yes, Chief, I'll tell him. I'll bring her there a little before ten."

He left, bowing. On one of the six telephones on his lacquered desk, the Generalissimo called the guard post at Mahogany House so that Benita Sepúlveda would have the rooms perfumed with anise and filled with fresh flowers. (It was an unnecessary precaution, for the housekeeper, knowing he might appear at any moment, always kept Mahogany House shining, but he never failed to let her know ahead of time.) He ordered the military adjutants to have the Chevrolet ready and to call his chauffeur, aide-de-camp, and bodyguard, Zacarías de la Cruz, because tonight, after his walk, he was going to San Cristóbal.

He was enthusiastic at the prospect. Could she be the daughter of that school principal in San Cristóbal who recited a poem by Salomé Ureña ten years ago, during one of his political visits to his native city, and excited him so much with the shaved armpits she displayed during her performance that he left the official reception in his honor when it had just begun and took her to Mahogany House? Terencia Esterel? That was her name. He felt another gust of excitement imagining that Yolanda was the teacher's daughter or younger sister. He

walked quickly, crossing the gardens between the National Palace and Radhamés Manor, and hardly listened to what one of the adjutants in his escort was telling him about repeated calls from the Minister of the Armed Forces, General Román Fernández, who was at his disposal in the event His Excellency wished to see him before his walk. Ah, the call this morning had scared him. He'd be even more scared when he rubbed his damn nose in it and showed him the puddle of filthy water.

He entered his rooms at Radhamés Manor like a whirlwind. His everyday olive-green uniform was waiting for him, laid out on the bed. Sinforoso was a mind reader. He hadn't told him he was going to San Cristóbal, but the old man had prepared the clothes he always wore to the Fundación Ranch. Why this everyday uniform for Mahogany House? He didn't know. The passion for rituals, for the repetition of gestures and actions, that he'd had since he was young. The signs were favorable: no urine stains on his underwear or trousers. His irritation with Balaguer for daring to object to the promotion of Lieutenant Victor Alicinio Peña Rivera had faded. He felt optimistic, rejuvenated by a lively tingle in his testicles and the expectation of holding in his arms the daughter or sister of that Terencia of happy memory. Was she a virgin? This time he wouldn't have the unpleasant experience he'd had with the skinny bitch.

He was glad he would spend the next hour smelling the salt air, feeling the sea breeze, watching the waves break against the Avenida. The exercise would help him wash away the bad taste most of the afternoon had left in his mouth, something that rarely happened to him: he had never been prone to depression or any of that bullshit.

As he was leaving, a maid came to tell him that Doña María wanted to give him a message from young Ramfis, who had called from Paris. "Later, later, I don't have time." A conversation with the tedious old penny-pincher would ruin his good mood.

Again he crossed the gardens of Radhamés Manor at a

lively pace, impatient to get to the ocean. But first, as he did every day, he stopped at his mother's house on Avenida Máximo Gómez. At the entrance to Doña Julia's large pink residence, the twenty or so men who would accompany him were waiting, privileged persons who, because they escorted him every evening, were envied and despised by those who had not achieved that signal honor. Among the officers and civilians crowded together in the gardens of the Sublime Matriarch, who parted into two lines to let him pass, "Good afternoon, Chief," "Good afternoon, Excellency," he acknowledged Razor Espaillat, General José René Román—what concern in the poor fool's eyes!—Colonel Johnny Abbes García, Senator Henry Chirinos, his son-in-law Colonel León Estévez, his hometown friend Modesto Díaz, Senator Jeremías Quintanilla, who had just replaced Agustín Cabral as President of the Senate, Don Panchito, the editor of *El Caribe*, and, almost invisible among them, the diminutive President Balaguer. He did not shake hands with anyone. He went to the second floor, where Doña Julia usually sat in her rocker at dusk. The aged woman seemed lost in her chair. As small as a midget, she stared at the sun's fireworks display as it sank behind the horizon in an aura of red clouds. The ladies and servants surrounding his mother moved aside. He bent down, kissed the parchment cheeks of Doña Julia, and caressed her hair tenderly.

"You like the sunset a lot, don't you, Ma?"

She nodded, smiling at him with sunken but still nimble eyes, and the tiny claw that was her hand brushed his cheek. Did she recognize him? Doña Altagracia Julia Molina was ninety-six years old and her mind must be like soapy water in which memories dissolved. But instinct would tell her that the man who came punctually to visit her every afternoon was someone she loved. She had always been a very good woman, this illegitimate daughter of Haitian immigrants to San Cristóbal, whose features he and his siblings had inherited, something that never failed to mortify him despite his great love for her. Sometimes, however, at the Hipódromo, the

Country Club, or Fine Arts, when he saw all the aristocratic Dominican families paying him homage, he would think mockingly: "They're licking the ground for a descendant of slaves." How was the Sublime Matriarch to blame for the black blood that ran in her veins? Doña Julia had lived only for her husband, Don José Trujillo Valdez, an easygoing drinker and womanizer, and for her children, never thinking of herself, always putting herself last in everything. He constantly marveled at this tiny woman who never asked him for money, or clothes, or trips, or property. Nothing, not ever. He had to force everything on her. Congenitally frugal, Doña Julia would have continued to live in the modest little house in San Cristóbal where the Generalissimo had been born and spent his childhood, or in one of the huts where her Haitian ancestors had died of hunger. The only thing Doña Julia ever asked of him was compassion for Petán, Blacky, Peepee, Aníbal, his slow-witted, incorrigible brothers, whenever they did something wrong, or for Angelita, Ramfis, and Radhamés, who, from the time they were children, had hidden behind their grandmother to soften their father's wrath. And Trujillo would forgive them, for Doña Julia's sake. Did she know that hundreds of streets, parks, and schools in the Republic were named Julia Molina Widow of Trujillo? In spite of being adored and celebrated, she was still the silent, invisible woman Trujillo remembered from his childhood.

Sometimes he would spend a long time with his mother, recounting the day's events even if she couldn't understand him. Today he merely said a few tender words and returned to Máximo Gómez, impatient to breathe in the scent of the ocean.

As soon as he came out onto the broad Avenida—the cluster of civilians and officers parted again—he began to walk. He could see the Caribbean eight blocks away, aflame with the fiery gold of sunset. He felt another surge of satisfaction. He walked on the right, followed by the courtiers who fanned out behind him in groups that occupied the roadway and sidewalk. At this hour traffic was prohibited on Máximo Gómez and the

Avenida, although, on his orders, Johnny Abbes had made the security on the side streets almost invisible because intersections crawling with guards and *caliés* eventually gave him claustrophobia. No one crossed the barrier of military adjutants a meter from the Chief. Everyone waited for him to indicate who could approach. After half a block, breathing in the perfume of the gardens, he turned, looked for the balding head of Modesto Díaz, and signaled to him. There was some confusion because the fleshy Senator Chirinos, who was next to Modesto Díaz, thought he was the anointed one and hurried toward the Generalissimo. He was intercepted and sent back to the crowd. For Modesto Díaz, who was very stout, keeping pace with Trujillo on these walks cost him a great effort. He was perspiring profusely. He held his handkerchief in his hand and from time to time wiped his forehead, his neck, and his fat cheeks.

"Good afternoon, Chief."

"You have to go on a diet," Trujillo advised. "Barely fifty and you're breathing hard. Learn from me, seventy years old and in great shape."

"My wife says the same thing every day, Chief. She fixes chicken broth and salads for me. But I don't feel like eating that. I can give up everything except good food."

His obese body could barely keep up with him. Modesto, like his brother, General Juan Tomás Díaz, had a broad face, flat nose, thick lips, and a complexion with unmistakable racial reminiscences, but he was more intelligent than his brother and most of the other Dominicans Trujillo knew. He had been president of the Dominican Party, a congressman, a minister; but the Generalissimo did not allow him to stay too long in the government, precisely because his mental acuity when expounding, analyzing, and solving a problem seemed dangerous, something that could puff up his pride and lead him to treason.

"What conspiracy has Juan Tomás gotten himself involved in?" He asked the question and turned to look at him. "You know what your brother and son-in-law are up to, I suppose."

Modesto smiled, as if enjoying a joke:

"Juan Tomás? Between his estates and his businesses, his whiskey and the movies he shows in his garden, I doubt he has any time left for conspiracies."

"He's conspiring with Henry Dearborn, the Yankee diplomat," Trujillo declared as if he had not heard him. "He should stop that bullshit; he went through a bad time once and he can go through another that's even worse."

"My brother isn't fool enough to conspire against you, Chief. But even so, I'll tell him."

How pleasant: the sea breeze cleared his lungs, and he could hear the crash of waves breaking against the rocks and the cement wall of the Avenida. Modesto Díaz made a move to leave, but the Benefactor stopped him:

"Wait, I haven't finished. Or can't you take it anymore?"

"For you I'd risk a heart attack."

Trujillo rewarded him with a smile. He always liked Modesto, who, in addition to being intelligent, was thoughtful, fair, affable, and unduplicitous. Still, his intelligence could not be controlled and used, like Egghead's, the Constitutional Sot's, or Balaguer's. Modesto's had an indomitable edge, an independence that could become seditious if he acquired too much power. He and Juan Tomás were also from San Cristóbal, he had known them since they were boys, and in addition to awarding him posts, he had used Modesto on countless occasions as an adviser. He had subjected him to rigorous tests, and he had always come through successfully. The first one came in the late forties, after Trujillo visited the Livestock Show for pedigree bulls and dairy cows that Modesto Díaz organized in Villa Mella. What a surprise: his farm, not very large, was as clean, modern, and prosperous as the Fundación Ranch. More than the impeccable stables and splendid cows, it was Modesto's arrogant satisfaction as he showed his breeding farm to him and the other guests that wounded the Chief's sensibilities. The following day he sent the Walking Turd, with a check for ten thousand pesos, to formalize the transfer of

ownership. Without the slightest hesitation at having to sell his most prized possession at a ridiculously low price (just one of his cows cost more), Modesto signed the contract and sent a handwritten note to Trujillo expressing his gratitude that "Your Excellency considers my small cattle-breeding enterprise worthy of being developed by your experienced hand." After considering whether those lines contained some punishable irony, the Benefactor decided they did not. Five years later, Modesto Díaz had another large, beautiful ranch in a remote region of La Estrella. Did he think it was so far away it would go unnoticed? Weak with laughter, he sent Egghead Cabral with another check for ten thousand pesos, claiming he had so much confidence in his cattle-raising talents that he was buying the farm sight unseen. Modesto signed the bill of sale, pocketed the symbolic sum, and thanked the Generalissimo in another affectionate note. To reward his docility, Trujillo subsequently granted him the exclusive concession to import washing machines and electric mixers, which allowed the brother of General Juan Tomás Díaz to recoup his losses.

"The mess with those shiteating priests," Trujillo grumbled. "Does it have a solution or not?"

"Of course it does, Chief." Modesto's tongue protruded; along with his forehead and neck, his bald head dripped perspiration. "But, if you'll permit me, the problems with the Church don't matter. They'll take care of themselves if the main issue is resolved: the gringos. Everything depends on them."

"Then there is no solution. Kennedy wants my head. Since I have no intention of giving it to him, we'll be at war for a long time."

"It isn't you the gringos are afraid of, Chief, but Castro. Especially after the disaster at the Bay of Pigs. Now more than ever they're terrified that Communism will spread through Latin America. This is the moment to show them that the best defense in the region against the Reds is you, not Betancourt or Figueres."

"They've had enough time to realize that, Modesto."

"You have to open their eyes, Chief. The gringos are slow sometimes. It's not enough to attack Betancourt, Figueres, or Muñoz Marín. It would be more effective to give some very discreet help to the Venezuelan and Costa Rican Communists. And the Puerto Rican independence movement. When Kennedy sees guerrillas beginning to disrupt those countries, and compares that to the peace and quiet we have here, he'll get the idea."

"We'll talk later." The Generalissimo cut him off abruptly.

Hearing him talk about things in the past had a bad effect on him. No gloomy thoughts. He wanted to maintain the good mood he had when he started his walk. He forced himself to think about the girl with the flowers. "Dear God, do this for me. Tonight I need to fuck Yolanda Esterel right. So I can know I'm not dead. Not an old man. And can go on doing your work for you, moving this damn country of assholes forward. I don't care about the priests, the gringos, the conspirators, the exiles. I can clear away all that shit myself. But I need your help to fuck that girl. Don't be a miser, don't be stingy. Give me your help, give it to me." He sighed, with the disagreeable suspicion that the one he was pleading with, if he existed, must be observing him in amusement from the dark blue backdrop where the first stars had begun to appear.

His route along Máximo Gómez simmered with memories. The houses he was leaving behind were symbols of outstanding people and events in his thirty-one years of power. Ramfis's house, on the lot where Anselmo Paulino's had been; he had been his right hand for ten years until 1955, when he confiscated all his property, kept him in prison for a time, then sent him off to Switzerland with a check for seven million dollars for services rendered. Across from the house of Angelita and Pechito León Estévez had once stood the residence of General Ludovino Fernández, a workhorse who spilled a good deal of blood for the regime; he was obliged to kill him when he succumbed to political inconstancy. Next to Radhamés Manor were the gardens of the embassy of the United States, for more

than twenty-eight years a friendly house that had turned into a nest of vipers. There was the field he had built so that Ramfis and Radhamés could have fun playing baseball. There, like twin sisters, stood Balaguer's house and the nunciature, another building that had turned irritating, ungrateful, vile. And beyond that, the imposing mansion of General Espaillat, his former head of secret services. Facing it, a little farther on, was the house of General Rodríguez Méndez, Ramfis's companion in dissipation. Then the embassies, deserted now, of Argentina and Mexico, and the house of his brother Blacky. And, finally, the residence of the Vicini family, the sugarcane millionaires, with its vast expanse of lawn and well-tended flower borders, which he was passing now.

As soon as he crossed the broad Avenida to walk along the Malecón, right next to the sea, on his way to the obelisk, he could feel the spatter of foam. He leaned against the wall, closed his eyes, and listened to the shrieking and flapping wings of flocks of seagulls. The wind filled his lungs. A purifying bath that would give him back his strength. But he mustn't be distracted; he still had work ahead of him.

"Call Johnny Abbes."

Detaching himself from the cluster of civilians and military men—the Generalissimo was walking quickly toward the cement column, a copy of the Washington Monument—the inelegant, flaccid figure of the head of the SIM took his place beside him. Despite his girth, Johnny Abbes García kept pace without difficulty.

"What's going on with Juan Tomás?" he asked, not looking at him.

"Nothing important, Excellency," the head of the SIM replied. "Today he went to his farm in Moca, with Antonio de la Maza. They brought back a bull calf. The general and his wife, Chana, quarreled because she said that cutting up and cooking a calf is a lot of work."

"Have Balaguer and Juan Tomás seen each other in the past few days?" Trujillo interrupted.

Since Abbes García did not answer immediately, he turned to look at him. The colonel shook his head.

"No, Excellency. As far as I know, they haven't seen each other for some time. Why do you ask?"

"Nothing concrete." The Generalissimo shrugged. "But just now, in his office, when I mentioned Juan Tomás's conspiracy, I noticed something strange. I *felt* something strange. I don't know what it was. Nothing in your reports to justify any suspicions of the President?"

"Nothing, Excellency. You know I have him under surveillance twenty-four hours a day. He doesn't make a move, he doesn't receive anyone, he doesn't make a phone call without our knowing about it."

Trujillo nodded. There was no reason to distrust the puppet president: his hunch could have been wrong. This plot didn't seem serious. Antonio de la Maza was one of the conspirators? Another resentful man who consoled himself for his frustrations with whiskey and huge meals. They'd be gorging on marinated unborn calf this evening. Suppose he burst into Juan Tomás's house in Gazcue? "Good evening, gentlemen. Do you mind sharing your barbecue with me? It smells so good! The aroma reached all the way to the Palace and led me here." Would their faces be filled with terror or joy? Would they think that his unexpected visit marked their rehabilitation? No, tonight he'd go to San Cristóbal, make Yolanda Esterel cry out, and feel healthy and young tomorrow.

"Why did you let Cabral's daughter leave for the United States two weeks ago?"

This time Colonel Abbes García really was surprised. He saw him run his hand over his pudgy cheeks, not knowing how to answer.

"Senator Agustín Cabral's daughter?" he mumbled, playing for time.

"Uranita Cabral, Egghead's daughter. The nuns at Santo Domingo gave her a scholarship to the United States. Why did you let her leave the country without consulting me?"

It seemed to him that the colonel was shrinking. He opened and closed his mouth, not knowing what to say.

"I'm sorry, Excellency," he exclaimed, lowering his head. "Your instructions were to follow the senator and arrest him if he tried to seek asylum. It didn't occur to me that the girl, having spent a night at Mahogany House and with an exit permit signed by President Balaguer. . . The truth is, it didn't even occur to me to mention it to you, I didn't think it was important."

"Those things should occur to you," Trujillo berated him. "I want you to investigate the personnel on my secretarial staff. Somebody hid a memo from Balaguer about that girl's trip. I want to know who it was and why he did it."

"Right away, Excellency. I apologize for this oversight. It won't happen again."

"I hope not," and Trujillo dismissed him.

The colonel gave him a military salute (it made him want to laugh) and rejoined the other courtiers. He walked a few blocks without calling anyone; he was thinking. Abbes García had only partially followed his instructions to withdraw the guards and *caliés*. At the corners he didn't see the fortified wire barricades, or the small Volkswagens, or the uniformed police with submachine guns. But from time to time, at the intersections along the Avenida, he could detect in the distance a black Beetle with the heads of *caliés* at the windows, or tough-looking civilians leaning against lampposts, pistols bulging under their armpits. Traffic had not been stopped along Avenida George Washington. People leaned out of trucks and cars and waved to him: "Long live the Chief!" Absorbed in the effort of the walk, which had made his body deliciously warm and his legs a little tired, he waved back his thanks. There were no adult pedestrians on the Avenida, only ragged children, shoeshine boys and vendors of chocolates and cigarettes, who looked at him openmouthed. As he passed, he patted their heads or tossed them some coins (he always carried change in his pockets). A short while later, he called the Walking Turd.

Senator Chirinos approached, panting like a hunting dog,

and perspiring more than Modesto Díaz. The Benefactor felt encouraged. The Constitutional Sot was younger than he, and a short walk demolished him. Instead of responding to his "Good afternoon, Chief," he asked:

"Did you call Ramfis? Did he give his explanations to Lloyds of London?"

"I spoke to him twice." Senator Chirinos was dragging his feet, and the soles and tips of his misshapen shoes stumbled over paving stones raised by the roots of ancient palms and almond trees. "I explained the problem to him and repeated your orders. Well, you can imagine. But finally he accepted my reasoning. He promised to write to Lloyds, clarify the misunderstanding, and confirm that payment should be transferred to the Central Bank."

"Has he done it?" Trujillo interrupted brusquely.

"That's why I called him a second time, Chief. He wants a translator to correct his telegram. His English is imperfect and he doesn't want mistakes. He'll send it without fail. He told me he's sorry about what happened."

Did Ramfis think he was getting too old to obey him? There was a time when he wouldn't have put off following an order of his with such a trivial excuse.

"Call him again," he ordered, in a bad humor. "If he doesn't straighten out this business with Lloyds today, he'll have to deal with me."

"Right away, Chief. But don't worry, Ramfis has understood the situation."

He dismissed Chirinos and resigned himself to finishing his walk alone so as not to dash the hopes of others who yearned to exchange a few words with him. He waited for his human train and joined it, positioning himself with Virgilio Álvarez Pina and the Minister of the Interior and Religious Practice, Paíno Pichardo. The group also included Razor Espaillat, the Chief of Police, the editor of *El Caribe*, and the new President of the Senate, Jeremías (Monkey) Quintanilla, to whom he offered his congratulations and best wishes for success. The man gleamed

with happiness as he poured out his thanks. At the same swift pace, still walking east on the side of the street that hugged the ocean, he asked, in a loud voice:

"Come, gentlemen, tell me the latest anti-Trujillista stories."

A wave of laughter celebrated his witticism, and a few moments later they were all chattering like parrots. Pretending to listen, he nodded and smiled. At times he caught sight of the dejected face of General José René (Pupo) Román. The Minister of the Armed Forces could not hide his anguish: what would the Chief reproach him for? You'll find out soon enough, imbecile. Moving from group to group so that no one would feel overlooked, he crossed the well-tended gardens of the Hotel Jaragua, where he heard the sounds of the orchestra that played for cocktail hour, and a block after that he passed under the balconies of the Dominican Party. Clerks and secretaries and the people who had gone there to ask for favors came out to applaud him. When he reached the obelisk, he looked at his watch: an hour and three minutes. It was growing dark. The gulls had stopped circling and had gone back to their hiding places on the beach. A handful of stars were visible, but big-bellied clouds hid the moon. At the foot of the obelisk, the new Cadillac, driven for the first time last week, was waiting for him. He said a collective goodbye ("Good evening, gentlemen, thank you for your company") while, at the same time, not looking at him, with an imperious gesture, he pointed General José René Román to the car door that the uniformed chauffeur held open:

"You, come with me."

General Román—an energetic click of his heels, a hand at the visor of his cap—quickly obeyed. He climbed into the car and sat on the edge of the seat, very erect, his hat on his knees.

"To San Isidro, the base."

As the official car drove toward the center of the city in order to cross to the eastern bank of the Ozama on the Radhamés Bridge, Trujillo contemplated the landscape, as if he were alone. General Román did not dare say a word, waiting for the

storm to break. It began to loom when they had covered about three of the ten miles that separated the obelisk from the air base.

"How old are you?" he asked, without turning to look at him.

"I just turned fifty-six, Chief."

Román—everyone called him Pupo—was tall, strong, and athletic, with a very close crew cut. He played sports and maintained an excellent physique, without a trace of fat. He replied very quietly, humbly, trying to placate him.

"How many years in the Army?" Trujillo continued, looking out the window, as if he were questioning someone who wasn't there.

"Thirty-one, Chief, ever since my graduation."

He allowed a few seconds to go by without saying anything. Finally he turned toward the head of the Armed Forces, with the infinite contempt the man always inspired in him. In the shadows, which had deepened rapidly, he could not see his eyes, but he was sure that Pupo Román was blinking, or had his eyes half closed, like children when they wake at night and squint fearfully into the darkness.

"And in all those years you haven't learned that a superior answers for his subordinates? That he is responsible for their mistakes?"

"I know that very well, Chief. If you tell me what this is about, perhaps I can give you an explanation."

"You'll see what it's about," said Trujillo, with the apparent calm his collaborators feared more than his shouting. "You bathe with soap every day?"

"Of course, Chief." General Román tried to laugh, but since the Generalissimo was still very serious, he fell silent.

"I hope so, for Mireya's sake. I think it's fine that you bathe with soap every day, that your uniform is well pressed and your shoes shined. As head of the Armed Forces you're obliged to set an example of cleanliness and proper appearance for Dominican officers and soldiers. Isn't that true?"

"Of course it is, Chief." The general groveled. "I beg you to tell me how I've failed. So I can set things right and make amends. I don't want to disappoint you."

"Appearance is the mirror of the soul," Trujillo philosophized. "If somebody goes around smelling bad with snot running out of his nose, he isn't a person who can be entrusted with public hygiene. Don't you agree?"

"Of course, Chief."

"The same is true of institutions. What respect can you have for them if they don't even tend to their appearance?"

General Román chose not to speak. The Generalissimo had become more incensed and did not stop rebuking him for the fifteen minutes it took to reach San Isidro Air Base. He reminded Pupo how sorry he had been when the daughter of his sister Marina was crazy enough to marry a mediocre officer like him, which he still was despite the fact that because of his relationship by marriage to the Benefactor, he had been promoted to the very top of the hierarchy. These privileges, rather than motivating him, had led him to rest on his laurels and betray Trujillo's confidence a thousand times over. Not content with being the nonentity he was as an officer, he had taken up farming, as if you didn't need brains to raise cattle and manage lands and dairies. What was the result? He was drowning in debt and was an embarrassment to the family. Barely eighteen days ago he had personally paid with his own money the four-hundred-thousand-peso debt Román had contracted with the Agrarian Bank, so that the farm at kilometer fourteen on the Duarte Highway would not be put up for auction. And despite that, he made no effort to stop being a fool.

General José René Román Fernández remained mute and motionless as the recriminations and insults poured down on him. Trujillo did not rush; rage made him speak carefully, as if, in this way, each syllable, each letter, would strike a harder blow. The chauffeur drove at high speed, not deviating a millimeter from the center of the deserted highway.

"Stop," Trujillo ordered a little before the first sentry post

along the fence that encircled the sprawling San Isidro Air Base.

He jumped out, and despite the dark, he immediately located the large puddle of pestilential water. Sewage was still pouring out of the broken pipe, and in addition to mud and filth, the air was thick with mosquitoes that rushed to the attack.

"The leading military installation in the Republic," Trujillo said slowly, barely containing a new surge of rage. "Does it seem right to you that at the entrance to the most important air base in the Caribbean, the visitor is greeted by this stinking shit pile of garbage, mud, and vermin?"

Román squatted down. He inspected, stood up, bent down again, did not hesitate to dirty his hands as he felt along the sewage pipe, looking for the break. He seemed relieved to discover the reason for the Chief's anger. Had the idiot been afraid of something more serious?

"It's a disgrace, no doubt about it." He tried to display more indignation than he felt. "I'll take all necessary steps to make certain the damage is repaired immediately, Excellency. I'll punish those responsible, from top to bottom."

"Beginning with Virgilio García Trujillo, the commander of the base," the Benefactor roared. "You're the first one responsible, and he's the second. I hope you have the courage to impose the most severe sanctions on him, even though he's my nephew and your brother-in-law. And if you don't have the courage, I'll be the one who'll impose them on both of you. Not you, not Virgilio, not any of you shitty little generals is going to destroy my work. The Armed Forces will continue to be the model institution I created, even if I have to throw you and Virgilio and all the rest of you uniformed bunglers into jail for the rest of your lives."

General Román came to attention and clicked his heels.

"Yes, Excellency. It won't happen again, I swear."

But Trujillo had already turned and was climbing into the car.

"Too bad for you if there's any trace of what I'm seeing and smelling now when I come back here. Fucking tin soldier!"

Turning to the chauffeur, he ordered: "Let's go." They pulled away, leaving the Minister of the Armed Forces in the mudhole.

As soon as he left Román behind, a pathetic figure splashing in the muck, his bad temper vanished. He gave a little laugh. He was sure about one thing: Pupo would move heaven and earth and curse out everybody necessary to make sure the pipe was repaired. If this kind of thing went on while he was alive, what would happen when he could no longer personally keep laziness, negligence, and imbecility from tearing down what it had cost him so much effort to build up? Would anarchy and misery, the backwardness and isolation of 1930, return? Ah, if only Ramfis, the son he had longed for, were capable of continuing his work. But he did not have the slightest interest in politics or the country; all he cared about was booze, polo, and women. Fuck! General Ramfis Trujillo, head of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Dominican Republic, playing polo and fucking the dancers at the Lido in Paris while his father did battle here alone against the Church, the United States, conspirators, and cretins like Pupo Román. He moved his head, trying to shake off those bitter thoughts. In an hour and a half he would be in San Cristóbal, in the peaceful refuge of the Fundación Ranch, surrounded by fields and gleaming stables, beautiful woods, the broad Nigua River, whose unhurried movement through the valley he would observe through the tops of mahogany trees, royal palms, and the great cashew tree by the house on the hill. It would do him good to wake there tomorrow, stroking the sweet little body of Yolanda Esterel as he contemplated the tranquil, unsullied landscape. It was the prescription of Petronius and King Solomon: a fresh little cunt to restore youth to a veteran of seventy years.

At Radhamés Manor, Zacarías de la Cruz had already

taken out the light blue four-door 1957 Bel Air Chevrolet in which he always drove to San Cristóbal. A military adjutant was waiting for him with the briefcase full of documents that he would study tomorrow at Mahogany House, and 110,000 pesos in bills, for the ranch payroll, plus incidental expenses. For twenty years he had not gone anywhere, even for a few hours, without the dark brown briefcase with his engraved initials, and a few thousand dollars or pesos in cash for gifts and incidental expenses. He indicated to the adjutant that he should put the briefcase in the back seat and told Zacarías, the tall, husky black who had been with him for three decades—he had been his orderly in the Army—that he would be right down. Nine o'clock already. It was getting late.

He went up to his rooms to clean up, and as soon as he walked in the bathroom, he saw the stain. On his fly and down his leg. He felt himself trembling from head to foot: it had to happen now, damn it. He asked Sinforoso for another olive green uniform and another change of underwear. He lost fifteen minutes at the bidet and sink, soaping his testicles, his penis, his face, and his armpits, and applying creams and perfumes before he changed. His attack of bad humor, brought on by that shiteating Pupo, was to blame. Again he sank into a state of gloom. It was a bad omen for San Cristóbal. While he was dressing, Sinforoso handed him a telegram: "Lloyds matter resolved. Spoke with person in charge. Remittance directly to Central Bank. Fond regards Ramfis." His son was ashamed: that's why he sent a telegram instead of calling him.

"We're a little late, Zacarías," he said. "So step on it."

"Understood, Chief."

He leaned back against the cushioned seat and closed his eyes, prepared to rest for the hour and ten minutes the trip to San Cristóbal would take. They were driving to the southwest, toward Avenida George Washington and the highway, when he opened his eyes:

"Do you remember Moni's house, Zacarías?"

"On Wenceslao Álvarez, near where Marrero Aristy lived?"
"Let's go there."

It had been an illumination, a lightning flash. Suddenly he saw Moni's round little cinnamon-colored face, her curly mane of hair, the mischief in her star-filled almond eyes, her compact shape, high breasts, sweet ass with firm buttocks, voluptuous hips, and again he felt the delicious tingling in his testicles. The head of his penis woke up and brushed against his trousers. Moni. Why not? She was a pretty, affectionate girl who had never disappointed him, not since the time in Quinigua when her father in person brought her to the party the Americans from La Yuquera were holding for him: "Look at the surprise I have for you, Chief." The little house where she lived, in the new development at the end of Avenida México, was his present to her on the day she married a boy from a good family. When he required her, from time to time, he took her to one of the suites at El Embajador or El Jaragua that Manuel Alfonso kept ready for such occasions. The idea of fucking Moni in her own house excited him. They'd send her husband out for a beer at Rincón Pony, as Trujillo's guest—he laughed—or he could pass the time talking to Zacarías de la Cruz.

The street was dark and deserted, but a light was burning on the first floor of the house. "Call her." He saw the driver walk through the front gate and ring the bell. It took a while for anyone to answer. Finally, a maid must have come to the door, and Zacarías spoke to her in whispers. He was left at the door, waiting. Beautiful Moni! Her father had been a good leader of the Dominican Party in Cibao, and he brought her to the reception himself, a nice gesture. That was a few years ago now, and the truth was that every time he fucked this good-looking woman he felt very happy. The door opened again, and in the light coming from the house he saw Moni's silhouette. He felt another surge of excitement. After speaking for a moment with Zacarías, she walked to the car. In the darkness he couldn't see what she was wearing. He opened the door to let her in, and welcomed her with a kiss on the hand:

"You weren't expecting a visit from me, beautiful."

"Really, what an honor. How are you, Chief, how are you?"

Trujillo kept her hand between his. Feeling her so close, touching her, inhaling her scent, he felt in control of all his powers.

"I was going to San Cristóbal, but suddenly I thought of you."

"What an honor, Chief," she repeated, flustered and confused. "If I had known, I would have fixed myself up to receive you."

"You're always beautiful, fixed up or not." He pulled her to him, and as his hands caressed her breasts and legs, he kissed her. He felt the beginnings of an erection that reconciled him with the world and with life. Moni let herself be caressed, and she kissed him, with some restraint. Zacarías stood outside, a few meters from the Chevrolet, on guard as always, holding a submachine gun. What was going on? There was an edginess in Moni that was unusual.

"Is your husband home?"

"Yes," she replied, in a quiet voice. "We were about to eat."

"Have him go out for a beer," said Trujillo. "I'll go around the block. I'll be back in five minutes."

"It's just that . . . ," she stammered, and the Generalissimo felt her tensing. She hesitated, and finally she mumbled, almost inaudibly: "I have the curse, Chief."

All his excitement left him in a matter of seconds.

"Your period?" he exclaimed in disappointment.

"Please forgive me, Chief," she stammered. "The day after tomorrow I'll be fine."

He let her go and sighed deeply, repulsed.

"All right, I'll come see you soon. Goodbye." He leaned his head toward the open door through which Moni had just left. "We're leaving, Zacarías!"

A short while later he asked De la Cruz if he had ever fucked a menstruating woman.

"Never, Chief." He was shocked, and made a disgusted face. "They say it gives you syphilis."

"And worst of all, it's dirty," Trujillo lamented. What if Yolanda Esterel, by some damn coincidence, had her period today too?

They had taken the highway to San Cristóbal, and on the right he saw the lights of the Livestock Fairgrounds and the Pony, crowded with couples eating and drinking. Wasn't it strange that Moni seemed so reluctant and inhibited? She was usually so sassy, ready for anything. Did the presence of her husband make her like that? Could she have invented a period so he'd leave her alone? Vaguely he noticed that a car was blowing its horn at them. Its brights were on.

"These drunks . . . ," Zacarías de la Cruz remarked.

At that moment, it occurred to Trujillo that perhaps it wasn't a drunk, and he turned to get the revolver he carried in the back seat, but he couldn't reach it, because at that moment he heard the blast of a rifle whose bullets shattered the glass in the back window and tore off a piece of his shoulder and his left arm.