11 "A question, Excellency," said Simon Gittleman, flushed from the glasses of champagne and wine, or, perhaps, emotion. "Of all the steps you have taken to make this country great, which was the most difficult?"

He spoke excellent Spanish, with a very faint accent, nothing like the caricatured language full of errors and incorrect intonations mouthed by so many gringos who had paraded through the offices and reception rooms of the National Palace. Simon's Spanish had improved a good deal since 1921, when Trujillo, a young lieutenant in the National Guard, was accepted as a student at the Officers' Training School at Haina and had the Marine as an instructor; back then, he mouthed a barbaric Spanish peppered with curses. Gittleman had asked the question in so loud a voice that conversations stopped and twenty heads—curious, smiling, grave—turned toward the Benefactor, waiting for his reply.

"I can answer your question, Simon." Trujillo adopted the measured, hollow voice he used on solemn occasions. He fixed his eyes on the crystal chandelier with the petal-shaped bulbs, and added: "The second of October 1937, in Dajabón."

Rapid glances were exchanged among the guests at the luncheon given by Trujillo for Simon and Dorothy Gittleman, following the ceremony in which the former Marine received the Juan Pablo Duarte Order of Merit. When Gittleman expressed his thanks, his voice broke. Now, he tried to guess what His Excellency was alluding to.

"Ah, the Haitians!" His slap on the table made the fine crystal goblets, platters, glasses, and decanters ring. "The day Your Excellency decided to cut the Gordian knot of the Haitian invasion."

Everyone had glasses of wine, but the Generalissimo drank only water. He was solemn, absorbed in his memories. The silence thickened. Hieratic and theatrical, the Generalissimo raised his hands and showed them to his guests:

"For the sake of this country, I have stained these with blood," he stated, emphasizing each syllable. "To keep the blacks from colonizing us again. There were tens of thousands of them, and they were everywhere. If I hadn't, the Dominican Republic would not exist today. The entire island would be Haiti, as it was in 1840. The handful of white survivors would be serving the blacks. That was my most difficult decision in thirty years of government, Simon."

"We followed your orders and traveled the entire length of the border." The young deputy Henry Chirinos leaned over the enormous map displayed on the President's desk and pointed: "If this continues, there will be no future for the Dominican Republic, Excellency."

"The situation is more serious than you were told, Excellency." The slender index finger of the young deputy Agustín Cabral caressed the dotted red line that moved in S curves from Dajabón down to Pedernales. "Thousands and thousands of them, working on plantations, in empty fields, in settlements. They've displaced Dominican laborers."

"They work free of charge, not for wages, but for food. Since there's nothing to eat in Haiti, a little rice and beans is plenty for them. They cost less than donkeys and dogs."

Chirinos made a gesture and let his friend and colleague continue:

"Talking to the ranchers and plantation owners is useless, Excellency," Cabral explained. "They reply by patting their pockets. What do I care if they're Haitians if they can harvest the cane and work for almost nothing? Patriotism won't make me go against my own interests."

He stopped speaking and looked at Deputy Chirinos, who took up the argument:

"All through Dajabón, Elías Piña, Independencia, and

Pedernales, instead of Spanish all you hear are the African grunts of Creole."

He looked at Agustín Cabral, who resumed speaking immediately:

"Voodoo, Santería, African superstitions are uprooting the Catholic religion that, like language and race, distinguishes our nationality."

"We've seen parish priests weeping in despair, Excellency," young Deputy Chirinos said, his voice quavering. "Pre-Christian savagery is taking over the country of Diego Colón, Juan Pablo Duarte, and Trujillo. Haitian sorcerers have more influence than priests, medicine men more than pharmacists and physicians."

"The Army didn't do anything?" Simon Gittleman took a sip of wine. One of the white-uniformed waiters quickly refilled his glass.

"The Army does what the Chief orders, Simon, you know that." Only the Benefactor and the former Marine were speaking. The others listened as their heads turned from one to the other. "The gangrene had moved very high. Montecristi, Santiago, San Juan, Azua, they were all teeming with Haitians. The plague was spreading and no one did anything. They were waiting for a statesman with vision, one whose hand would not tremble."

"Imagine a hydra with countless heads, Excellency." Young Deputy Chirinos's poetic turns of phrase were accompanied by extravagant gestures. "These laborers steal work from Dominicans who, in order to survive, sell their little plots of ground, their farms. Who buys the land? The newly prosperous Haitians, naturally."

"It is the second head of the hydra, Excellency," young Deputy Cabral specified. "They take work from nationals and, piece by piece, appropriate our sovereignty."

"And our women too." His voice thickened, and young Henry Chirinos gave off a whiff of lechery: his reddish tongue appeared like a snake between his thick lips. "Nothing attracts

black flesh more than white. Haitian violations of Dominican women are an everyday occurrence."

"Not to mention robberies and attacks on property," insisted young Agustín Cabral. "Gangs of criminals cross the Masacre River as if there were no customs, checkpoints, or patrols. The border is like a sieve. The gangs demolish villages and farms like swarms of locusts. Then they drive the livestock back into Haiti, along with everything they can find to eat, wear, or adorn themselves with. That region is no longer ours, Excellency. We have lost our language there, our religion, our race. It now forms part of Haitian barbarism."

Dorothy Gittleman barely spoke Spanish and must have been bored with this conversation regarding something that occurred twenty-four years earlier, but she nodded very seriously from time to time, looking at the Generalissimo and her husband as if following every syllable of what they were saying. She had been seated between the puppet president, Joaquín Balaguer, and the Minister of the Armed Forces, General José René (Pupo) Román. She was a small, fragile, upright old woman rejuvenated by the pink tones of her summer dress. During the ceremony, when the Generalissimo had said that the Dominican people would not forget the solidarity displayed by the Gittlemans during this difficult time, when so many governments were stabbing them in the back, she too had shed a few tears.

"I knew what was going on," Trujillo declared. "But I wanted proof, so there would be no doubts. I didn't make a decision even after I received an on-site report from the Constitutional Sot and Egghead. I decided to go there myself. I traveled the length of the border on horseback, accompanied by volunteers from the University Guard. I saw it with my own eyes: they had invaded us again, just as they had in 1822. Peacefully, this time. Could I allow the Haitians to remain in my country for another twenty-two years?"

"No patriot would have allowed it," exclaimed Senator Henry Chirinos, raising his glass. "Least of all Generalissimo

Trujillo. A toast to His Excellency!"

Trujillo continued as if he hadn't heard:

"Could I allow what happened during those twenty-two years of occupation to happen again, allow blacks to murder, rape, and cut the throats of Dominicans, even in churches?"

Seeing the failure of his toast, the Constitutional Sot wheezed, drank some wine, and began to listen again.

"During the entire trip along the border with the University Guard, the cream of our youth, I examined the past," the Generalissimo continued, with increasing emphasis. "I recalled the slaughter in the church at Moca. The burning of Santiago. The march to Haiti by Dessalines and Cristóbal, with nine hundred prominent men from Moca who died along the way or were given as slaves to the Haitian military."

"More than two weeks since we presented our report and the Chief hasn't done a thing." Young Deputy Chirinos was agitated. "Is he going to make a decision, Egghead?"

They had both accompanied Trujillo on his trip along the border, with the hundred volunteers from the University Guard, and they had just reached the city of Dajabón, breathing more heavily than their horses. The two of them, despite their youth, would have preferred to rest their saddle-weary bones, but His Excellency was holding a reception for Dajabón society and they would never offend him. There they were, suffocating with the heat in their stiff-collared shirts and tunics, in the decorated town hall, where Trujillo, as fresh as if he had not been riding since dawn, and wearing an impeccable blue-and-gray uniform studded with medals and gold braid, moved among the various groups with a glass of Carlos I in his right hand, accepting their tributes. Then he caught sight of a young officer in dust-covered boots who burst into the flag-draped room.

"You showed up at that gala reception, sweating and in your field uniform." The Benefactor abruptly turned his gaze toward the Minister of the Armed Forces. "What disgust I felt!"

"I came to make a report to the head of my regiment, Excellency," General Román said in confusion, after a silence during

which his memory struggled to identify that long-ago episode. "Last night a gang of Haitian criminals slipped across the border. Early this morning they attacked three farms in Capotillo and Parolí and stole all the cattle. And left three men dead."

"You risked your career, appearing before me in that condition," the Generalissimo reproached him with retroactive irritation. "All right. It's the straw that broke the camel's back. The Ministers of War and Government, and all the military present, come here. The rest of you, please step aside."

He had raised his thin, piercing voice to a hysterical pitch, as he used to when he gave instructions in the barracks. He was obeyed immediately, in the midst of voices buzzing like wasps. The military formed a dense circle around him; gentlemen and ladies withdrew to the walls, leaving an empty space in the center of the room decorated with streamers, paper flowers, and little Dominican flags. A resolute President Trujillo gave the order:

"Beginning at midnight, the forces of the Army and the police will proceed to exterminate without mercy every person of Haitian nationality who is in Dominican territory illegally, except for those on the sugar plantations." He cleared his throat and his gray gaze moved around the circle of officers: "Is that clear?"

The heads nodded, some with an expression of surprise, others with glints of savage joy in their eyes. They clicked their heels when they left.

"Head of the Dajabón Regiment: detain and put on bread and water the officer who presented himself here in that disgraceful condition. Let the party continue. Enjoy yourselves!"

On Simon Gittleman's face, admiration mixed with nostalgia.

"His Excellency never hesitated when it was time to act," said the former Marine to the entire table. "I had the honor of training him at the school in Haina. From the first moment I knew he would go far. But I never imagined it would be this far."

He laughed, and amiable chuckles echoed him.

"They never trembled," Trujillo repeated, displaying his hands again. "Because I gave the order to kill only when it was absolutely necessary for the good of the country."

"I read somewhere, Your Excellency, that you ordered the soldiers to use machetes, not guns. Was that to save ammunition?" Simon Gittleman asked.

"To sugarcoat the pill, anticipating international reaction," Trujillo corrected him slyly. "If they only used machetes, the operation could appear to be a spontaneous action by campesinos, without government intervention. We Dominicans are lavish, we've never skimped on anything, least of all ammunition."

The entire table celebrated the witticism with laughter. Simon Gittleman as well. But then he returned to the same subject.

"Is it true about the parsley, Your Excellency? That to distinguish Dominicans from Haitians you made all the blacks say *perejil*? And the ones who couldn't pronounce it properly had their heads cut off?"

"I've heard that story." Trujillo shrugged. "It's just idle gossip."

He lowered his head, as if a profound thought suddenly demanded a great effort of concentration. It hadn't happened; his eyes were still sharp and they did not detect the telltale stain on his fly or between his legs. He gave a friendly smile to the former Marine:

"Like the stories about the number of dead," he said mockingly. "Ask the people sitting at this table and you'll hear all kinds of figures. For example, you, Senator, how many were there?"

Henry Chirinos's dark face came to attention, swelling with satisfaction at being the first one the Chief asked.

"Difficult to know." He gestured, as he did when giving speeches. "It has been greatly exaggerated. Between five and eight thousand, at most."

"General Arredondo, you were in Independencia at the time, cutting throats. How many?"

"About twenty thousand, Excellency," replied the obese General Arredondo, who looked caged inside his uniform. "In the Independencia zone alone there were several thousand. The senator underestimated the number. I was there. No less than twenty thousand."

"How many did you kill personally?" the Generalissimo joked, and another wave of laughter ran around the table, making the chairs creak and the crystal sing.

"What you said about idle gossip is the absolute truth, Excellency," the rotund officer said with a start, and his smile turned into a grimace. "Now they blame everything on us. False, all false.The Army obeyed orders. We began to separate the illegals from the others. But the people wouldn't let us. Everybody began to hunt down Haitians. Campesinos, merchants, and officials revealed their hiding places, and they hung them and beat them to death. They burned them, sometimes. In many places, the Army had to intervene to stop the excesses. There was a lot of resentment against them for their thieving and plundering."

"President Balaguer, you were one of the negotiators with Haiti following those events," said Trujillo, continuing his survey. "How many were there?"

The small, gray figure of the President of the Republic, half swallowed up by his chair, stretched his benign head forward. After observing the gathering from behind his nearsighted man's glasses, the soft, well-modulated voice emerged, the one that recited poems at poetry competitions, celebrated the crowning of Miss Dominican Republic (he was always the Royal Poet), made speeches to the crowds on Trujillo's political tours, or expounded on the government's policies in the National Assembly.

"The exact figure could never be determined, Excellency." He spoke slowly, with a professorial air. "A prudent estimate is between ten and fifteen thousand. In our negotiations with the Haitian government, we agreed on a symbolic figure: 2,750.

In this way, each affected family would, in theory, receive a hundred pesos of the 275,000 in cash paid by Your Excellency's government as a gesture of goodwill and for the sake of Haitian-Dominican harmony. But, as you will remember, that is not what happened."

He fell silent, a hint of a smile on his round little face narrowing the small, pale eyes behind his thick glasses.

"Why didn't the compensation reach the families?" asked Simon Gittleman.

"Because the President of Haiti, Sténio Vincent, was a thief and kept the money." Trujillo laughed. "Only 275,000? As I recall, we agreed on 750,000 to make them stop protesting."

"That is true, Excellency," Dr. Balaguer replied immediately, with the same calm, perfect diction, "750,000 pesos were agreed on, but only 275,000 in cash. The remaining half million was to be remitted in annual payments of 100,000 pesos over a period of five years. However, and I remember this quite clearly, I was interim Minister of Foreign Affairs at the time, and I and Don Anselmo Paulino, who advised me during the negotiations, imposed a clause according to which the payments were contingent upon the presentation, before an international tribunal, of the death certificates issued for the 2,750 recognized victims during the first two weeks of October 1937. Haiti never fulfilled this requirement. And consequently the Dominican Republic was exempted from paying the remaining sum. Reparations never went beyond the initial remittance. Your Excellency made the payment out of your own patrimony, so that it did not cost the Dominican state a cent."

"A small amount to end a problem that might have wiped us out," concluded Trujillo, who was serious now. "It's true, some innocent people died. But we Dominicans recovered our sovereignty. Since then our relations with Haiti have been excellent, thank God."

He wiped his lips and took a sip of water. They had begun to serve coffee and to offer liqueurs. He did not drink coffee, and never drank alcohol at lunch, except in San Cristóbal, on

the Fundación Ranch or in Mahogany House, in the company of intimates. Along with the images his memory brought back of those bloody weeks in October 1937, when his office received reports of the horrifying dimensions the hunting down of Haitians had reached along the border and throughout the entire country, the hateful figure again appeared of that stupid, terrified girl watching his humiliation. He felt insulted.

"Where is Senator Agustín Cabral, the famous Egghead?" Simon Gittleman gestured toward the Constitutional Sot: "I see Senator Chirinos but not his inseparable partner. What happened to him?"

The silence lasted many seconds. The diners raised their little cups of coffee to their mouths, sipped, and looked at the tablecloth, the floral arrangements, the crystal, the chandelier hanging from the ceiling.

"He is no longer a senator and he does not set foot in this Palace," the Generalissimo declaimed with the slowness characteristic of his cold rages. "He is alive, but as far as this regime is concerned, he has ceased to exist."

The former Marine was uncomfortable as he drained his glass of cognac. He must be close to eighty years old, the Generalissimo estimated. He carried his years magnificently: he kept himself erect and slim, with thinning hair in a crew cut, not an ounce of fat or loose skin on his neck, energetic in his gestures and movements. The web of fine wrinkles that surrounded his eyelids and extended down his weather-beaten face betrayed his age. He grimaced and tried to change the subject.

"How did Your Excellency feel when you gave the order to eliminate thousands of illegal Haitians?"

"Ask your former President Truman how he felt when he gave the order to drop the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Then you'll know what I felt that night in Dajabón."

Everyone celebrated the Generalissimo's sally. The tension provoked by the former Marine when he mentioned Agustín Cabral was dissipated. Now it was Trujillo who steered the

conversation in another direction.

"A month ago, the United States suffered a defeat at the Bay of Pigs. The Communist Fidel Castro captured hundreds of men. What consequences will it have in the Caribbean, Simon?"

"That expedition of Cuban patriots was betrayed by President Kennedy," he murmured sorrowfully. "They were sent to the slaughterhouse. The White House prohibited the air cover and artillery support they had been promised. The Communists used them for target practice. But, if you'll permit me, Your Excellency. I was glad it happened. It will be a lesson to Kennedy, whose government is infiltrated by fellow travelers. Maybe he'll decide to get rid of them. The White House won't want another failure like the Bay of Pigs. Which reduces the danger of his sending Marines to the Dominican Republic."

As he said these final words, the former Marine became emotional and made a noticeable effort to maintain his self-control. Trujillo was surprised: had his old instructor from Haina been on the verge of tears at the idea of a landing by his comrades in arms to overthrow the Dominican regime?

"Excuse my weakness, Your Excellency," Simon Gittleman murmured, regaining his composure. "You know I love this country as if it were my own."

"This country is yours, Simon," said Trujillo.

"The idea that because of leftist influences, Washington might send Marines to fight the government that is the United States' best friend, seems diabolical to me. That is why I spend time and money trying to open my countrymen's eyes. That is why Dorothy and I have come to Ciudad Trujillo, to fight alongside Dominicans if the Marines land."

A burst of applause that made the plates, glasses, and silverware resound greeted the Marine's impassioned speech. Dorothy smiled, nodding in solidarity with her husband.

"Your voice, Mr. Simon Gittleman, is the true voice of the United States," the Constitutional Sot said in exaltation, firing a salvo of saliva. "A toast to this friend, this man of honor. To

Simon Gittleman, gentlemen!"

"One moment." The thin, high-pitched voice of Trujillo ripped the fervent atmosphere into shreds. The other guests looked at him, disconcerted, and Chirinos remained holding his glass in the air. "To our friends, our sister and brother, Dorothy and Simon Gittleman!"

Overwhelmed, the couple expressed their thanks to those present with smiles and nods.

"Kennedy won't send in the Marines, Simon," said the Generalissimo, when the echoes of the toast died down. "I don't think he's that stupid. But if he does, the United States will suffer its second Bay of Pigs. Our Armed Forces are more modern than Castro's. And here, with me leading them, they will fight to the last Dominican."

He closed his eyes, wondering if his memory would allow him to recall the citation exactly. Yes, he had it, it came to him, complete, from the commemoration of the twenty-ninth anniversary of his first election. He recited it, and was listened to in reverential silence:

" 'Whatever surprises the future may hold in store for us, we can be certain that the world may see Trujillo dead, but not a fugitive like Batista, an escapee like Pérez Jiménez, or a prisoner before the bar like Rojas Pinilla. The Dominican statesman follows a different ethic and comes from a different lineage.' "

He opened his eyes and sent a pleased gaze around the table, and his guests, after listening to the citation with great attention, made gestures of approval.

"Who wrote the words I've just quoted?" asked the Benefactor.

They examined each other, looking around with curiosity, misgiving, alarm. Finally, their eyes converged on the amiable round face, abashed by modesty, of the diminutive writer upon whom the first magistracy of the Republic had fallen when Trujillo forced his brother Blacky to resign in the vain hope of avoiding the OAS sanctions.

"I marvel at the memory of Your Excellency," Joaquín Balaguer whispered, displaying excessive humility, as if stunned by the honor being shown him. "It makes me proud that you remember a modest speech of mine delivered on the third of August last."

Behind his lashes, the Generalissimo observed how the faces of Virgilio Álvarez Pina, the Walking Turd, Paíno Pichardo, and all the generals contorted with envy. They were suffering. They were thinking that the timid, discreet poet, the shy professor and jurist, had just won a few points in their eternal competition to receive the favors of the Chief, to be recognized, mentioned, chosen, distinguished over the rest. He felt tenderness for his diligent scions, whom he had maintained for thirty years in a state of perpetual insecurity.

"Those are not mere words, Simon," the Benefactor affirmed. "Trujillo is not one of those leaders who abandon power when the bullets fly. I learned what honor is at your side, in the Marines. I learned that one is a man of honor at every moment. And men of honor don't run. They fight, and if they have to die, they die fighting. Not Kennedy or the OAS, not Betancourt the repulsive black faggot or Fidel Castro the Communist, none of them is going to make Trujillo run from the country that owes everything it is to him."

The Constitutional Sot began to clap, but when many hands were lifted to follow suit, Trujillo's gaze cut short the applause.

"Do you know what the difference is between those cowards and me, Simon?" he continued, looking into the eyes of his old instructor. "I was trained in the Marine Corps of the United States of America. I've never forgotten it. You taught me, in Haina and in San Pedro de Macorís. Do you remember? Those of us from that first class of the Dominican National Police are made of iron. Rancorous people said DNP stood for 'Dominican Niggers Panic.' The truth is, that class of men changed the country, they created it. I'm not surprised at what you're doing for this nation. Because you're a real Marine, like

me. A loyal man. Who dies without bowing his head, looking at the sky, like Arabian horses. Simon, no matter how badly your country behaves, I bear it no grudge. Because I owe what I am to the Marines."

"One day the United States will regret being ungrateful to its Caribbean partner and friend."

Trujillo took a few sips of water. Conversations resumed. The waiters offered more coffee, more cognac and other liqueurs, cigars. The Generalissimo listened to Simon Gittleman again:

"How is this trouble with Bishop Reilly going to end, Your Excellency?"

He made a contemptuous gesture:

"There is no trouble, Simon. The bishop has taken the side of our enemies. The people were angry, he became frightened, and he ran to hide behind the nuns at Santo Domingo Academy. What he's doing there with so many women is his business. We've placed guards there so he won't be lynched."

"It would be good if this could be resolved soon," the former Marine insisted. "In the United States, many ill-informed Catholics believe the statements made by Monsignor Reilly. That he's being threatened, that he had to take refuge because of a campaign of intimidation, all the rest of it."

"It's not important, Simon. Everything will be straightened out and our relations with the Church will be excellent again. Don't forget that my government has always been filled with devout Catholics, and that Pius XII awarded me the Great Cross of the Papal Order of St. Gregory." And abruptly he changed the subject: "Did Petán take you to visit the Dominican Voice?"

"Of course," replied Simon Gittleman; Dorothy nodded, with a broad smile.

The center that belonged to his brother, General José Arismendi (Petán) Trujillo, had begun twenty years earlier with a small radio station. The Voice of Yuna had grown into a formidable complex, the Dominican Voice, the first television

station, the largest radio station, the best cabaret and musical theater on the island (Petán insisted it was the best in the Caribbean, but the Generalissimo knew it had not managed to unseat the Tropicana in Havana). The Gittlemans had been impressed by the magnificent facilities; Petán himself had been their guide, and he had them attend the rehearsal for the Mexican ballet that would perform tonight at the cabaret. Petán wasn't a bad person if you dug deep enough; when the Benefactor needed him, he could always count on him and his picturesque private army, "the mountain fire beetles." But, like his other brothers, he had done him more harm than good: because of him and a stupid fight, he had been forced to intervene, and, to maintain the principle of authority, eliminate that magnificent giant—and his classmate at the Haina Officers' Training School besides—General Vázquez Rivera. One of his best officers—a Marine, damn it—who had always served him loyally. But the family, even if it was a family of parasites, failures, fools, and scoundrels, came before friendship and political gain: this was a sacred commandment in his catalogue of honor. Without abandoning his own line of thought, the Generalissimo listened to Simon Gittleman telling him how surprised he had been to see the photographs of film, show business, and radio celebrities from all over the Americas who had come to the Dominican Voice. Petán had them displayed on the walls of his office: Los Panchos, Libertad Lamarque, Pedro Vargas, Ima Súmac, Pedro Infante, Celia Cruz, Toña la Negra, Olga Guillot, María Luisa Landín, Boby Capó, Tintán and his brother Marcelo. Trujillo smiled: what Simon didn't know was that Petán, besides brightening the Dominican night with the stars he brought in, also wanted to fuck them, the way he fucked all the girls, single or married, in his small empire of Bonao. The Generalissimo let him do what he wanted there as long as he didn't go too far in Ciudad Trujillo. But that crazy prick Petán sometimes fucked around in the capital, convinced that the performers hired by the Dominican Voice were obliged to go to bed with him if he

wanted them to. Sometimes he was successful; other times, there was a scandal, and he—he was always the one—had to put out the fire, making a millionaire's gifts to artists who had been offended by that moronic delinquent; Pétan had no manners with ladies. Ima Súmac, for example, an Incan princess with an American passport. Petán's brashness forced the intervention of the ambassador of the United States. And the Benefactor, distilling bile, paid damages to the Incan princess and obliged his brother to apologize. The Benefactor sighed. With the time he had wasted filling in the deep holes that opened before the feet of his horde of relatives, he could have built a second country.

Yes, of all the outrages committed by Petán, the one he would never forgive was that stupid fight with the head of the Army General Staff. The giant Vázquez Rivera had been Trujillo's good friend since they trained together in Haina; he possessed an uncommon strength that he cultivated by practicing every sport. He was one of the officers who contributed to the realization of Trujillo's dream: transforming the Army, born of the small National Police, into a professional, disciplined, efficient force, a replica in miniature of the U.S. Army. And then, when it had been accomplished, the stupid fight. Petán held the rank of major and served in the leadership of the Army General Staff. He disobeyed an order when he was drunk, General Vázquez Rivera reprimanded him, and Petán became insulting. The giant took off his insignia, pointed to the courtyard, and suggested they forget about rank and resolve the matter with their fists. It was the most ferocious beating of Petán's life, and with it he paid for all the ones he had given to so many poor bastards. Saddened, but convinced that the family's honor obliged him to act as he did, Trujillo demoted his friend and sent him to Europe on a merely symbolic mission. A year later, the Intelligence Service informed him of the resentful general's subversive plans: he was visiting garrisons, meeting with former subordinates, hiding arms on his small farm in Cibao. He had him arrested, sent to the military

prison at the mouth of the Nigua River, and some time later secretly condemned to death by a military tribunal. To drag him to the gallows, the commander of the fortress had to use twelve prisoners serving sentences for common crimes. So there would be no witnesses to the titanic end of General Vázquez Rivera, Trujillo ordered the twelve outlaws shot. Despite the time that had passed, he sometimes felt, as he did now, a certain nostalgia for that companion of his heroic years, the one he had to sacrifice because Petán was an imbecile and a troublemaker.

Simon Gittleman was explaining that the committees he had established in the United States had begun collecting money for a major campaign: that very day they would publish full-page advertisements in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Time*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and all the publications that were attacking Trujillo and supporting the OAS sanctions, to refute the accusations and argue in favor of reopening relations with the Dominican regime.

Why had Simon Gittleman asked about Agustín Cabral? He made an effort to control the irritation that overpowered him as soon as he thought about Egghead. There could be no evil intent. If anyone admired and respected Trujillo, it was the former Marine, dedicated body and soul to defending his regime. He must have mentioned the name through an association of ideas, when he saw the Constitutional Sot and recalled that Chirinos and Cabral were—in the eyes of someone who was not privy to the workings of the regime—inseparable companions. Yes, they had been. Trujillo often gave them joint assignments. As he had in 1937, when he named them Director General of Statistics and Director General of Migration and sent them to travel along the border and report on the infiltration of Haitians. But the friendship between the two men was always relative: it ceased as soon as consideration or flattery from the Chief came into play. It amused Trujillo—an exquisite, secret game that he could permit himself—to observe the subtle maneuvers, the secretive stabbings, the

Florentine intrigues devised against one another by the Walking Turd and Egghead, but also by Virgilio Álvarez Pina and Paíno Pichardo, Joaquín Balaguer and Fello Bonnelly, Modesto Díaz and Vicente Tolentino Rojas, and everyone else in his close circle—to displace a comrade, move ahead, be closer to and deserve greater attention, a closer hearing, more jokes, from the Chief. "Like women in a harem competing to be the favorite," he thought. And in order to keep them always on the alert, to keep them from becoming moth-eaten and to avoid routine and ennui, he alternated them on the list, sending one, then the other, into disgrace. He had done it with Cabral: distanced him, made him aware that everything he was, everything he was worth, everything he had, he owed to Trujillo, that without the Benefactor he was nobody. A trial he had forced all his collaborators, close or distant, to endure. Egghead had handled it badly and become desperate, like a woman in love abandoned by her man. Because he wanted to straighten things out too soon, he was making serious mistakes. He would have to swallow a lot more shit before he came back into existence.

Could it be that Cabral, knowing Trujillo was going to decorate the former Marine, had begged Gittleman to intercede on his behalf? Was that the reason he had mentioned, in so inopportune a way, the name of someone who was out of favor with the regime, as every Dominican who read "The Public Forum" knew? Well, perhaps Simon Gittleman didn't read *El Caribe*.

His blood froze: urine was coming out. He felt it, he thought he could see the yellow liquid pouring out of his bladder without asking permission of that useless valve, that dead prostate incapable of containing it, then moving toward his urethra, running merrily through it and coming out in search of air and light, through his underwear, his fly, the crotch of his trousers. He felt faint. He closed his eyes for a few seconds, shaken by indignation and impotence. Unfortunately, instead of Virgilio Álvarez Pina, he had Dorothy Gittleman on his

right and Simon on his left, and they couldn't help him. Virgilio could. He was president of the Dominican Party, but, in fact, since Dr. Puigvert, brought in secret from Barcelona, had diagnosed the damn infection in his prostate, his really important function had been to act quickly when one of these acts of incontinence occurred, to spill a glass of water or wine on the Benefactor and then beg a thousand pardons for his clumsiness, or, if it happened on a podium or during a parade, to place himself like a screen in front of the stained trousers. But the imbeciles in charge of protocol had placed Virgilio Álvarez four seats away. Nobody could help him. When he stood up he would suffer the horrific mortification of letting the Gittlemans and some of the guests see that he had pissed in his pants without realizing it, like an old man. Rage kept him from moving, from pretending he was going to take a drink and spilling the glass or pitcher that was in front of him.

Very slowly, looking around with a distracted air, he began to move his right hand toward the glass full of water. Very, very slowly, he drew it toward him until it was on the edge of the table, so that the slightest movement would tip it over. Suddenly he remembered that the first daughter born in Aminta Ledesma to his first wife, Flor de Oro—that mad little thing with the body of a woman and the soul of a man who changed husbands as often as she changed shoes—habitually wet her bed until she was in high school. He had the courage to take another peek at his trousers. Instead of the mortifying sight, the stain he was expecting, he discovered—his sight was still formidable, just like his memory—that his fly and pant legs were dry. Completely dry. It had been a false impression, motivated by his fear, his panic at "passing water," as they said about women in labor. He was overwhelmed by happiness and optimism. The day, which had begun with bad humor and gloomy presentiments, had just become beautiful, like the coastline when the sun came out after a storm.

He stood, and, like soldiers obeying a command, everyone followed suit. As he bent down to help Dorothy Gittleman to

her feet, he decided, with all the strength of his soul: "Tonight, in Mahogany House, I'll make a girl cry out, the way I did twenty years ago." It seemed to him that his testicles were coming to a boil and his penis beginning to stiffen.