10

At the sound of the bell, Urania and her father become rigid, looking at each other as if caught in some mischief. Voices on the ground floor and an exclamation of surprise. Hurried steps coming up the stairs. The door opens almost at the same time that they hear an impatient knock, and a bewildered face peers in; Urania immediately recognizes her cousin Lucinda.

"Urania? Urania?" Her large protruding eyes examine her from top to bottom, from bottom to top, then she opens her arms and walks toward her as if to verify whether or not she is a hallucination.

"It's me, Lucindita." Urania embraces the younger daughter of her Aunt Adelina, the cousin who is her own age, her classmate at school.

"Uranita! I can't believe it! You're here? Let me take a look at you! What's going on? Why didn't you call me? Why didn't you come to the house? Have you forgotten how much we love you? Don't you remember your Aunt Adelina, and Manolita? And me, you ungrateful thing?"

She is so surprised, so full of questions, so curious—"My God, girl, how could you spend thirty-five years—thirty-five, right?—without coming home and seeing your family? Oh, Uranita! You must have so much to tell us!"—that she doesn't give her time to answer her questions. That's one way she hasn't changed much. Even as a little girl she chattered like a parrot, Lucindita the enthusiastic one, the inventive and playful one. The cousin she always liked best. Urania remembers her in her dress uniform, white skirt and navy-blue jacket, and in the everyday pink-and-blue outfit: an agile, plump little girl in bangs, with braces on her teeth and a smile on her lips. Now

she is a stout matron, her face taut and smooth with no sign of a face-lift, wearing a simple flowered dress. Her only adornment is a pair of long, flashing gold earrings. Suddenly she interrupts her affectionate questioning of Urania, goes over to the invalid, and kisses him on the forehead.

"What a nice surprise your daughter gave you, Uncle Agustín. You didn't expect your little girl to come back to life and pay you a visit. It's a happy time, isn't it, Uncle Agustín?"

She kisses him again on the forehead and just as abruptly forgets about him. She sits next to Urania on the edge of the bed. She takes her by the arm, looks at her, examines her, overwhelms her again with exclamations and questions:

"You look so good, girl. We're the same age, right? And you look ten years younger. It's not fair! It must be because you never married and had children. Nothing like a husband and kids to ruin your looks. What a figure, what skin! You look like a kid, Urania!"

She begins to recognize in her cousin's voice the nuances, the accents, the music of the little girl she played with so often in the courtyards of Santo Domingo Academy, and to whom she so often had to explain geometry and trigonometry.

"A whole lifetime of not seeing each other, Lucindita, of not knowing anything about each other," she exclaims at last.

"It's your fault, you ungrateful thing." Her cousin lectures her with affection, but now her eyes blaze with the question, the questions, that uncles, aunts, and cousins must have asked one another so often in the early years, after the sudden departure of Uranita Cabral, at the end of May 1961, for the distant town of Adrian, Michigan, where Siena Heights Preparatory School and College had been established by the same order of Dominican nuns that administered Santo Domingo Academy in Ciudad Trujillo. "I never understood it, Uranita. You and I were such good friends besides being cousins, we were so close. What happened to make you suddenly turn away from us? From your papa, your aunts and uncles, your cousins. Even from me. I wrote twenty or thirty letters and not a word from

you. For years I sent you postcards, birthday cards, and so did Manolita and my mama. What did we ever do to you? What made you so angry that for thirty-five years you never wrote, never even set foot in your own country?"

"The foolishness of youth, Lucindita." Urania laughs and takes her hand. "But now, as you can see, I'm over it, and here I am."

"Are you sure you're not a ghost?" Her cousin pulls back to look at her, and shakes her head in disbelief. "Why come like this, not letting anybody know? We would have met you at the airport."

"I wanted to surprise you," Urania lies. "It was a last-minute decision. An impulse. I threw a couple of things in a suitcase and caught a plane."

"In the family, we were sure you'd never come back again." Lucinda becomes serious. "Uncle Agustín too. I have to tell you, he suffered a lot. Because you didn't want to talk to him, wouldn't answer him on the phone. He was desperate, he used to cry about it to my mama. He never got over your treating him like that. I'm sorry, I don't know why I'm telling you this, I don't want to interfere in your life, Urania. It's because we were always so close. Tell me about yourself. You live in New York, right? I know things are going well for you. We've followed your career, you're a legend in the family. You work in a very important office, don't you?"

"Well, there are bigger law firms than ours."

"It doesn't surprise me that you've been so successful in the United States," Lucinda exclaims, and Urania detects an acid note in her cousin's voice. "Everybody saw it coming from the time you were a little girl, you were so intelligent and studious. Mother Superior said so, and Sister Helen Claire, Sister Francis, Sister Susana, and especially Sister Mary, you were always her pet: Uranita Cabral, an Einstein in skirts."

Urania bursts out laughing. Not so much because of what her cousin says as for the way she says it: with eloquence and humor, talking with her mouth, eyes, hands, her whole body,

all at the same time and with the effusive high spirits typical of Dominican speech. Something she learned about, by way of contrast, thirty-five years earlier, when she came to Adrian, Michigan, and suddenly found herself surrounded by people who spoke only English.

"When you left and didn't even say goodbye to me, I was so sad I almost died," her cousin says, sorrowful about those long-ago times. "Nobody in the family understood anything. But what does this mean? Uranita goes to the United States and doesn't even say goodbye! We pestered Uncle Agustín with questions, but he seemed to be in the dark too. 'The nuns offered her a scholarship, it was too good an opportunity to miss.' Nobody believed him."

"That's how it was, Lucindita." Urania looks at her father, who once again is motionless and attentive, listening to them. "There was a chance to study in Michigan, and not being a fool, I took it."

"That part I understand," her cousin reiterates, "and I know you deserved a scholarship. But why leave as if you were running away? Why break with your family, your father, your country?"

"I was always a little crazy, Lucindita. And really, even though I didn't write, I thought about all of you a lot. Especially you."

A lie. You didn't miss anyone, not even Lucinda, your cousin and classmate, your confidante and accomplice in mischief. You wanted to forget her too, and Manolita, Aunt Adelina, and your father, this city and this country, during those early months in faraway Adrian, on that beautiful campus of neat gardens with their begonias, tulips, magnolia trees, borders of rosebushes, and tall pines whose resinous scent drifted into the room you shared during your first year with four roommates, among them Alina, the black girl from Georgia, your first friend in that new world so different from the one where you had spent your first fourteen years. Did the Dominican nuns at Adrian know why you had left as if you

were "running away"? Did they find out from Sister Mary, the director of studies at Santo Domingo? They had to know. If Sister Mary hadn't given them some background, they wouldn't have given you the scholarship so quickly. The sisters were models of discretion, because in the two years Urania spent at Siena Heights Prep and the four years following at Siena Heights College, none of them ever made the slightest allusion to the story that tore at your memory. As for the rest, they never repented of having been so generous: you were the first graduate of that school to be accepted at Harvard and earn a degree with honors from the most prestigious university in the world. Adrian, Michigan! You haven't been back in so many years. It must have changed from the provincial town of farmers who went into their houses at sunset and left the streets empty, families whose horizons ended at neighboring towns that seemed like twins—Clinton and Chelsea—and whose greatest diversion was attending the famous barbecued chicken festival in Manchester. A clean city, Adrian, and pretty, especially in winter when the snow hid the straight, narrow streets where people could ice-skate and ski, under white puffs of cotton that children made into snowmen and that you, entranced, watched falling from the sky, and where you would have died of bitterness, and perhaps of boredom, if you hadn't devoted yourself so furiously to studying.

Her cousin has not stopped talking.

"And a little while after that they killed Trujillo, and the calamities began. Do you know the *caliés* went into the academy? They beat the sisters, Sister Helen Claire's face was covered with cuts and bruises, and they killed Badulaque, the German shepherd. They almost burned down our house because we were related to your papa. They said that Uncle Agustín sent you to the United States because he guessed what was going to happen."

"Well, he wanted to get me away from here," Urania interrupts. "Even though he had fallen into disgrace, he knew the anti-Trujillistas would settle accounts with him."

"I understand that too," Lucinda murmurs. "But not your refusing to have anything more to do with us."

"And since you always had a good heart, I'll bet you're not still angry with me," Urania says with a laugh. "Right, Lucindita?"

"Of course not," her cousin agrees. "If you knew how much I begged my papa to send me to the United States. To be with you, at Siena Heights. I had persuaded him, I think, when the disaster came. Everybody began attacking us, telling horrible lies about the family just because my mother was the sister of a Trujillista. Nobody remembered that at the end Trujillo treated your papa like a dog. You were lucky not to be here during those months, Uranita. We were scared to death. I don't know how Uncle Agustín stopped them from burning his house. But sometimes they threw stones at him."

She is interrupted by a timid knock at the door.

"I don't mean to interrupt," the nurse says, pointing at the invalid. "But it's time."

Urania looks at her, not understanding.

"To do his business," Lucinda explains, glancing at the chamber pot. "He's as regular as a clock. He's so lucky: I have problems with my stomach and live on prunes. Nerves, they say. Well, let's go to the living room."

As they walk down the stairs, the memory returns to Urania of her months and years in Adrian, the austere library with stained-glass windows, beside the chapel and adjacent to the refectory, where she spent most of her time when she wasn't in classes and seminars. Studying, reading, scrawling in notebooks, writing essays, summarizing books, in the methodical, intense, absorbed way that her teachers valued so highly and that filled some classmates with admiration and infuriated others. It wasn't a desire to learn and succeed that kept you in the library but the yearning to become distracted, intoxicated, lost in those subjects—sciences or literature, it was all the same—so you wouldn't think, so you could drive away your Dominican memories.

"But you're wearing gym clothes," Lucinda observes when they're in the living room, near the window that faces the garden. "Don't tell me you've done aerobics this morning."

"I went for a run on the Malecón. And on my way back to the hotel, my feet brought me here, dressed in these clothes. I arrived a couple of days ago, and wasn't sure if I'd come to see him or not. If it would be too much of a shock for him. But he hasn't even recognized me."

"Of course he recognized you." Her cousin crosses her legs and takes a pack of cigarettes and a lighter out of her purse. "He can't talk, but he knows who comes in, and he understands everything. Manolita and I see him almost every day. My mama can't, not since she broke her hip. If we miss one day, he puts on a long face the next time."

She sits looking at Urania in a way that makes her predict: "Another string of reproaches." Doesn't it make you sad that your father is spending his final years alone, in the hands of a nurse, visited only by two nieces? Isn't it your job to be with him and give him affection? Do you think that giving him a pension means you've done your duty? It's all in Lucinda's bulging eyes. But she doesn't dare say it. She offers Urania a cigarette, and when her cousin refuses, she exclaims:

"You don't smoke, of course. I thought you wouldn't, living in the United States. They're psychotic about tobacco up there."

"Yes, really psychotic," Urania admits. "They've banned smoking in the office. It doesn't matter to me, I never smoked."

"The perfect girl," Lucindita says with a laugh. "Listen, darling, you can tell me, did you ever have any vices? Did you ever do any of those crazy things everybody else does?"

"Some." Urania laughs. "But I can't tell you about them."

As she talks to her cousin, she examines the living room. The furniture is the same, its shabbiness shows that; the armchair has a broken leg and a wedge of wood props it up; the frayed upholstery is torn and has lost its color, which, Urania

recalls, was a pale brownish red. Worse than the furniture are the walls: damp spots everywhere, and in many places parts of the outside wall are visible. The curtains have disappeared, though the wooden rods and rings where they hung are still there.

"You're upset by how bad your house looks." Her cousin exhales a mouthful of smoke. "Ours is the same, Urania. The family was ruined when Trujillo died, that's the truth. They threw my papa out of the Tobacco Company and he never found another job. Because he was your father's brother-in-law, just because of that. Well, Uncle Agustín had it even worse. They investigated him, made all kinds of accusations, brought lawsuits against him. Even though he had fallen into disgrace with Trujillo. They couldn't prove anything, but his life was ruined too. It's lucky you're doing well and can help him. Nobody in the family could. We were all flat broke, on our uppers. Poor Uncle Agustín! He wasn't like so many others who made accommodations. He was a decent, honest man, and that's why he was ruined."

Urania listens gravely, her eyes encourage Lucinda to go on but her mind is in Michigan, at Siena Heights, reliving those years of obsessive, redemptive study. The only letters she read and answered were from Sister Mary. Affectionate, discreet letters that never mentioned what had happened, though if Sister Mary had—she was the only person in whom Urania had confided, the one who came up with the brilliant solution of getting her out of there and sending her to Adrian, the one who threatened Senator Cabral until he agreed—she would not have been angry. Would it have been a relief to unburden herself occasionally in a letter to Sister Mary, to mention the phantom that gave her no peace?

Sister Mary wrote to her about the school, she told her about the great events and turbulent months that followed the assassination of Trujillo, the departure of Ramfis and the rest of the family, the changes in government, the violence and disorder in the streets, she expressed interest in her studies and

congratulated her on her academic achievements.

"How is it you never got married?" Lucindita undresses her with a look. "It couldn't be for lack of opportunity. You still look good. I'm sorry, but you know, Dominican women are very nosy."

"I really don't know why," Urania says with a shrug. "Maybe I didn't have the time, Lucinda. I've always been too busy; first studying, then working. I'm used to living alone and couldn't share my life with a man."

She hears herself talking and can't believe what she's saying. Lucinda, on the other hand, doesn't doubt what she hears.

"Girl, you did the right thing." She grows sad. "You tell me what good it did me to get married. Pedro, that bum, left me with two little girls. One day he moved out and never sent a penny. I've had to raise two girls doing the most boring things: renting houses, selling flowers, giving classes to drivers, and they're really fresh, you have no idea. I never studied for anything, it was the only work I could find. I wish I were like you, Uranita. You have a profession and earn a living in the capital of the world, you have an interesting job. You're better off not being married. But you must have had your share of affairs, right?"

Urania feels her cheeks burning, and her blush makes Lucinda laugh:

"Aha, aha, look at you. You have a lover! Tell me about him. Is he rich? Good-looking? Gringo or Latino?"

"A gentleman with graying temples, very elegant," Urania improvises. "Married, with children. We see each other on weekends, if I'm not traveling. A nice relationship, with no commitments."

"Girl, I'm so jealous!" Lucinda claps her hands. "It's my dream. An old man who's rich and distinguished. I'll have to go to New York to find one, here all the old men are disasters: fat as pigs and dead broke."

In Adrian she couldn't avoid attending some parties, going out with boys and girls, pretending to flirt with some freckled

farmer's son who talked about horses or dangerous climbs up snow-covered mountains in winter, but she would return to the dormitory so exhausted by all the pretending she had to do that she looked for reasons to avoid diversion. She developed a repertory of excuses: exams, projects, visits, ailments, pressing deadlines for turning in papers. During her years at Harvard, she didn't recall ever going to a party, or a bar, or dancing, not even once.

"Manolita had terrible luck in her marriage too. Not because her husband was a womanizer, like mine. Esteban wouldn't harm a fly. But he's useless, he loses every job he gets. Now he's working at one of the tourist hotels they built in Punta Canas. He earns a miserable salary, and my sister sees him maybe once or twice a month. Is that what you call a marriage?"

"Do you remember Rosalía Perdomo?" Urania interrupts.

"Rosalía Perdomo?" Lucinda searches her memory, half closing her eyes. "The truth is, I don't . . . Oh, sure! The Rosalía who had that trouble with Ramfis Trujillo? Nobody ever saw her again. They must have sent her overseas."

Urania's admission to Harvard Law School was celebrated at Siena Heights as a great event. Until she had been accepted, she hadn't realized how much prestige the university had in the United States, how reverently everyone referred to those who had graduated, studied, or taught there. It happened in the most natural way; if she had planned it, it couldn't have been easier. She was in her last year. The guidance counselor, after congratulating her on her academic work; asked what professional plans she had, and Urania replied, "I like the law." "A career where you can earn a lot of money," Dr. Dorothy Sallison responded. But Urania had said "law" because it was the first thing that came to mind, she could have just as easily said medicine, economics, or biology. You had never thought about your future, Urania; you were so paralyzed by the past it never occurred to you to think about what lay ahead. Dr. Sallison reviewed various options with her and they chose four

prestigious universities: Yale, Notre Dame, Chicago, and Stanford. One or two days after completing the applications, Dr. Sallison called her: "Why not Harvard too? You have nothing to lose." Urania remembers traveling to interviews, the nights in religious hostels, arranged for by the Dominican sisters. And the joy of Dr. Sallison, the nuns, and her classmates as she received acceptances from all the universities, including Harvard. They gave her a party, where she was obliged to dance.

Her six years in Adrian allowed her to survive, something she thought she would never be able to do. Which is why she was still profoundly grateful to the Dominican sisters. And yet Adrian, in her memory, was a somnambulistic, uncertain time, the only concrete thing the infinite hours in the library, when she worked to keep from thinking.

Cambridge, Massachusetts, was different. There she began to live again, to discover that life was worth living, that studying was not only therapy but a joy, the most glorious of diversions. How she had relished the classes, the lectures, the seminars! Overwhelmed by the abundance of possibilities (in addition to studying law, she audited a course in Latin American history, a seminar on the Caribbean, a series on Dominican social history), she found there were not enough hours in the day or weeks in the month to do everything that appealed to her.

Years of intensive work, and not only intellectual. In her second year at Harvard, her father let her know, in one of those letters she never answered, that in view of how badly things were going, he found himself obliged to cut the five hundred dollars a month he was sending her down to two hundred. She obtained a student loan, and her studies were assured. But to meet her frugal needs, in her free hours she worked as a cashier at a supermarket, a waitress at a Boston pizzeria, a clerk at a pharmacy, and—her least tedious job—as a companion and reader to a paraplegic millionaire of Polish origin, Mr. Melvin Makovsky, to whom, from five to eight in the evening, in his Victorian brownstone house on Massachusetts

Avenue, she read voluminous eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels (*War and Peace*, *Moby Dick*, *Bleak House*, *Pamela*) and who, after she had been his reader for three months, unexpectedly proposed marriage.

"A paraplegic?" Lucinda's large eyes open wide.

"Seventy years old," Urania says. "And very rich. He proposed marriage, that's right. So I could keep him company and read to him, that's all."

"You were a fool, Urania." Lucindita was scandalized. "You would have inherited a fortune, you'd be a millionaire."

"You're right, it would have been a terrific deal."

"But you were young, idealistic, and you believed a girl should marry for love." Her cousin makes her explanations easy. "As if any of that lasts. I missed a chance too, with a doctor who was rolling in money. He was crazy about me. But he was dark-skinned, they said his mother was Haitian. I'm not prejudiced, but suppose my child was a throwback and came out black as coal?"

She liked studying so much, she felt so happy at Harvard, that she planned to complete a Ph.D. and go into teaching. But she didn't have the money. Her father was in an increasingly difficult situation, in her third year he cut off her already reduced monthly allowance, and she needed to get a degree and begin earning money as soon as she could to pay off her student loans and support herself. The prestige of Harvard Law School was immense; when she began to send out applications, she was called to a good number of interviews. She decided on the World Bank. She was sorry to leave; during her years in Cambridge, she acquired her "perverse hobby": reading and collecting books on the Trujillo Era.

In the shabby living room there is another photograph of her graduation—a morning of brilliant sun that lit up the Yard, festive with canopies, elegant clothing, the many-colored mortarboards and robes of professors and graduates—identical to the one that Senator Cabral has in his bedroom. How did he get it? She certainly didn't send it to him. Of course, Sister

Mary. She'd sent this photograph to Santo Domingo Academy. For, until the nun's death, Urania maintained a correspondence with her. That charitable soul must have kept Senator Cabral informed about Urania's life. She remembers Sister Mary looking at the sea, leaning against the stone balustrade on the top floor of the academy building facing southeast—off-limits to students, it was where the nuns lived; at that distance, from the courtyard where the two German shepherds, Badulaque and Brutus, raced around the tennis courts, the volleyball courts, and the swimming pool, her lean silhouette seemed smaller.

It's hot, and she drips perspiration. She has never felt anything like this volcanic heat even in steamy New York summers, which are offset by the chill of air conditioning. This was a different kind of heat: the heat of her childhood. And she had never heard that extravagant symphony of blowing horns, voices, music, barking, squealing brakes, which came in through the windows and obliged her and her cousin to raise their voices.

"Is it true that Johnny Abbes put Papa in prison when they killed Trujillo?"

"Didn't he tell you about it?" her cousin asks in surprise.

"I was already in Michigan," Urania reminds her.

Lucinda nods, with an apologetic half-smile.

"Of course he did. Those men went crazy. Ramfis, Radhamés, the Trujillistas. They began killing and locking up people left and right. Well, I really don't remember much about it.I was a little girl and didn't care anything about politics. Uncle Agustín had been distanced from Trujillo, and they must have thought he was involved in the plot. They held him in that awful prison, La Cuarenta, the one that Balaguer tore down, there's a church there now. My mama went to talk to Balaguer, to plead with him. They kept him locked up for a few days until they proved he wasn't part of the conspiracy. Later, the President gave him a miserable little job that seemed like a joke: as an official in the Civil Government of the Third District."

"Did he say anything about how he was treated in La Cuarenta?"

Lucinda exhales smoke that hides her face for a moment.

"Maybe to my parents, but not to me or Manolita, we were very young. It hurt Uncle Agustín that they thought he could have betrayed Trujillo. For years he protested the injustice that had been done to him."

"The Generalissimo's most loyal servant," mocks Urania. "For a man capable of committing monstrous crimes for Trujillo to be suspected of complicity with his assassins—that really was an injustice!"

She stops because of the reproach she sees on her cousin's round face.

"I don't know why you talk about monstrous crimes," she murmurs in astonishment. "Maybe my uncle was wrong to be a Trujillista. Now they say he was a dictator and all. Your father served him in good faith. Even though he held such high posts, he didn't take advantage of them. Did he? He's spending his final years as poor as a dog; without you, he'd be in an old-age home."

Lucinda tries to control the irritation that has overwhelmed her. She takes a final drag on her cigarette, and since she has no place to put it out—there are no ashtrays in the dilapidated living room—she tosses it out the window into the withered garden.

"I know very well that my papa didn't serve Trujillo out of self-interest." Urania cannot avoid a trace of sarcasm. "That doesn't seem extenuating to me. It's more like an aggravating circumstance."

Her cousin looks at her, uncomprehending.

"The fact that he did what he did out of admiration, out of love for him," Urania explains. "Of course he must have been offended when Ramfis, Abbes García, and the rest suspected him. He almost went mad with despair when Trujillo turned his back on him."

"Well, maybe he was wrong," her cousin repeats, her eyes

begging her to change the subject. "At least recognize that he was a very decent man. He didn't make accommodations, like so many others, who went on living the good life with every government, especially the three run by Balaguer."

"I wish he had served Trujillo out of self-interest, to steal or have power," Urania says, and again she sees perplexity and displeasure in Lucinda's eyes. "Anything, rather than seeing him whimper because Trujillo wouldn't grant him an audience, because letters appeared in 'The Public Forum' insulting him."

It is a persistent memory, one that tormented her in Adrian and in Cambridge, in somewhat attenuated form stayed with her through all her years at the World Bank in Washington, D.C., and that still assaults her in Manhattan: the helpless Senator Agustín Cabral pacing frantically in this very living room, asking himself what intrigue had been mounted against him by the Constitutional Sot, the unctuous Joaquín Balaguer, the cynical Virgilio Álvarez Pina, or Paíno Pichardo, to make the Generalissimo wipe out his existence overnight. Because what existence could a senator and ex-minister have when the Benefactor did not answer his letters or permit him to appear in Congress? Was the history of Anselmo Paulino repeating itself in him? Would the *caliés* come for him in the middle of the night and bury him in some dungeon? Would *La Nación* and *El Caribe* come out with vile reports of his thefts, embezzlements, betrayals, crimes?

"Falling into disgrace was worse for him than if they had killed the person he loved best."

Her cousin listens to her with increasing discomfort.

"Was that why you got so angry, Uranita?" she says at last. "Over politics? But I remember very clearly that you had no interest at all in politics. When those two girls nobody knew came in at midyear, for example. Everybody said they were *caliesas* and nobody talked about anything else, but you were bored by political gossip and told us all to shut up."

"I've never been interested in politics," Urania agrees. "You're right, why talk about things that happened thirty years

ago?"

The nurse appears on the stairs. She comes down drying her hands on a blue cloth.

"All cleaned up and powdered like a baby," she announces. "You can go up whenever you want. I'm going to prepare Don Agustín's lunch. Can I fix something for you too, señora?"

"No, thank you," says Urania. "I'm going back to the hotel to shower and change."

"Well, tonight you'll come to the house for supper. You'll give my mama such a nice surprise. I'll call Manolita too, she'll be so happy." Lucinda puts on a mournful face. "You'll be shocked, Uranita. Do you remember how big and pretty the house was? Only half of it is left. When Papa died, we had to sell the garden along with the garage and the servants' quarters. Well, enough of that. Seeing you has made me remember my childhood. We were happy then, weren't we? It never occurred to us that everything would change, that lean years would come. Well, I'm going, Mama hasn't had her lunch yet. You'll come for supper, won't you? You won't disappear for another thirty-five years? You must remember the house, on Calle Santiago, about five blocks from here."

"I remember it very well." Urania stands and embraces her cousin. "This neighborhood hasn't changed at all."

She accompanies Lucinda to the front door and says goodbye with another hug and a kiss on the cheek. When she sees her walking away in her flowered dress, along a street boiling in the sun, where the response to frantic barking is the cackling of hens, she is filled with anguish. What are you doing here? What have you come to find in Santo Domingo, in this house? Will you go to have supper with Lucinda, Manolita, and Aunt Adelina? The poor thing must be a fossil, just like your father.

She climbs the stairs, slowly, putting off seeing him again. She is relieved to find him asleep, huddled in his chair; his eyes are wrinkled, his mouth open, and his rachitic chest rises and falls in a rhythmic pattern. "Just a piece of a man." She sits on the bed and contemplates him. Studies him, reads him. They

imprisoned him too, when Trujillo died. Believing he was one of the Trujillistas who conspired with Antonio de la Maza, General Juan Tomás Díaz and his brother Modesto, Antonio Imbert, and company. How frightening and how frightful for you, Papa. She had learned many years later, in a passing reference in an article about the events of 1961 in the Dominican Republic, that her father had also been caught in the dragnet. But she never knew the details. As far as she could remember, Senator Cabral did not allude to the experience in the letters she never answered. "That anyone could imagine, even for a second, that you planned to assassinate Trujillo, must have hurt you as much as falling into disgrace without knowing why." Did Johnny Abbes himself interrogate him? Ramfis? Pechito León Estévez? Did they sit him on the Throne? Was her father linked in some way to the conspirators? True, he had made superhuman efforts to regain Trujillo's favor, but what did that prove? Many conspirators kissed Trujillo's ass until moments before they killed him. It very well might be that Agustín Cabral, a good friend of Modesto Díaz, had been informed of the plan. Even Balaguer knew about it, according to some. If the President of the Republic and the Minister of the Armed Forces had heard about it, why not her father? The conspirators knew that the Chief had ordered the fall from grace of Senator Cabral several weeks earlier; nothing strange about their thinking of him as a possible ally.

From time to time her father emits a quiet snore. When a fly settles on his face, he drives it away, not waking, with a movement of his head. How did you find out they had killed him? On May 30, 1961, you were already in Adrian. She was beginning to shake off the heaviness, the exhaustion that kept her disengaged from the world and from herself, in a kind of somnambulism, when the sister in charge of the dormitory came to the room that Urania shared with four other girls and showed her the headline in the newspaper she held in her hand: TRUJILLO KILLED. "I'll lend it to you," she said. What did you feel? She would swear she felt nothing, that the news slid

over her without piercing her consciousness, like everything else she heard and saw around her. It's possible you didn't even read the article, didn't look past the headline. She recalls, however, that days or weeks later, in a letter from Sister Mary, there were details about the crime, about the *caliés* breaking into the academy to take away Bishop Reilly, about the lawlessness and uncertainty they were living through. But not even that letter from Sister Mary could pull her out of the profound indifference to everything and everyone Dominican into which she had fallen and from which she was freed only years later, by a course on Antillean history at Harvard.

This sudden decision to come to Santo Domingo, to visit your father, does it mean you're cured? No. You must have felt happy, been moved, at seeing Lucinda again, she was so close to you, your companion in rounds of vermouth, and at the matinees at the Olimpia and Elite movie theaters, on the beach or at the Country Club, and you must have felt sorry for the apparent mediocrity of her life, her lack of hope that it would improve. No. She didn't make you happy, she didn't move you, she didn't make you feel sorry. She bored you because of that sentimentality and self-pity you find so objectionable.

"You're an iceberg. You really don't seem Dominican. I'm more Dominican than you are." Well, well; imagine remembering Steve Duncan, her colleague at the World Bank. 1985 or 1986? Around then. They had been in Taipei that night, having supper together in the Grand Hotel, shaped like a Hollywood pagoda, where they were staying; through its windows the city looked like a blanket of fireflies. For the third, fourth, or tenth time, Steve proposed marriage and Urania, more categorically than before, told him no. Then, in surprise, she saw Steve's ruddy face contort. She couldn't contain her laughter.

"Don't tell me you're going to cry, Steve. For love of me? Or have you had too much whiskey?"

Steve did not smile. He sat looking at her for a long time, without answering, and then he said those words: "You're an iceberg. You really don't seem Dominican. I'm more Dominican

than you are." Well, well; the redhead fell in love with you, Urania. Whatever happened to him? A wonderful person, with a degree in economics from the University of Chicago, his interest in the Third World encompassed its problems of development, its languages, and its women. He finally married a Pakistani, an official of the Bank in the area of communications.

Are you an iceberg, Urania? Only with men. And not with all of them. With those whose glances, movements, gestures, tones of voice announce a danger. When you can read, in their minds or instincts, the intention to court you, to make advances. With them, yes, you do make them feel the arctic cold that you know how to project around you, like the stink skunks use to frighten away an enemy. A technique you handle with the mastery you've brought to every goal you set for yourself: studies, work, an independent life. "Everything except being happy." Would she have been happy if, applying her will, her discipline, she had eventually overcome the unconquerable revulsion and disgust caused by men who desired her? You could have gone into therapy, seen a psychologist, an analyst. They had a remedy for everything, even finding men repugnant. But you never wanted to be cured. On the contrary, you don't consider it a disease but a character trait, like your intelligence, your solitude, your passion for doing good work.

Her father's eyes are open, and he looks at her with a certain fear.

"I was thinking about Steve, a Canadian at the World Bank," she says in a quiet voice, scrutinizing him. "Since I didn't want to marry him, he told me I was an iceberg. An accusation that would offend any Dominican woman. We have a reputation for being ardent, unbeatable in love. I earned a reputation for being just the opposite: prudish, indifferent, frigid. What do you think of that, Papa? Just now, for my cousin Lucinda, I had to invent a lover so she wouldn't think badly of me."

She falls silent because she notices that the invalid, shrinking in his chair, seems terrified. He no longer shakes off the

flies that walk undisturbed across his face.

"A subject I would have liked us to talk about, Papa. Women, sex. Did you have affairs after Mama died? I never noticed anything. You didn't seem like a womanizer. Did power satisfy you so much you didn't need sex? It happens, even in this hot country. It happened to our perpetual President, Don Joaquín Balaguer, didn't it? A bachelor at the age of ninety. He wrote love poems, and there are rumors he had a daughter he never recognized. I always had the impression that sex never interested him, that power gave him what other men got in bed. Was that the case with you, Papa? Or did you have discreet adventures? Did Trujillo invite you to his orgies at Mahogany House? What happened there? Did the Chief, like Ramfis, amuse himself by humiliating his friends and courtiers, forcing them to shave their legs, shave their bodies, make themselves up like old queens? Did he do those charming things too? Did he do them to you?"

Senator Cabral has turned so pale that Urania thinks: "He's going to faint." To let him recover, she moves away. She goes to the window and looks out. She feels the strength of the sun on her head, on the feverish skin of her face. She is sweating. You ought to go back to the hotel, fill the tub with bubbles, take a long, cool bath. Or go down and dive into the tiled pool and then try the Dominican buffet at the restaurant in the Hotel Jaragua, they'll have beans with rice and pork. But you don't feel like doing that. You'd rather go to the airport, take the first plane to New York, and resume your life at the busy law firm, and in your apartment at 73rd and Madison.

She sits down again on the bed. Her father closes his eyes. Is he sleeping or pretending to sleep because of the fear you inspire in him? You're giving the poor invalid a bad time. Is that what you wanted? To frighten him, inflict a few hours of terror on him? Do you feel better now? Weariness has overwhelmed her, and since her eyes are beginning to close, she gets to her feet.

In a mechanical way she goes to the large armoire of dark

wood that takes up one whole wall of the room. It is half empty. On wire hangers she sees a dark gray suit, yellowing like the skin of an onion, and a few shirts, washed but not ironed; two of them are missing buttons. Is this all that is left of the wardrobe of the President of the Senate, Agustín Cabral? He had been an elegant man. Meticulous in his person and dress, the way the Chief liked men to be. What had happened to his dinner jackets, his dress tails, his dark suits made of English worsted, the white ones of finest linen? The servants must have stolen them, the nurses, the impoverished relatives.

Weariness is stronger than her will to stay awake. Finally, she lies down on the bed and closes her eyes. Before she falls asleep, she thinks that the bed smells of old man, old sheets, very old dreams and nightmares.