

**19** When General Juan Tomás Díaz, his brother Modesto, and Luis Amiama came back, and Antonio de la Maza saw their faces, he knew before they opened their mouths that the search for General Román had been futile.

"It's hard to believe," murmured Luis Amiama, biting his thin lips. "But it looks like Pupo skipped out on us. There's no sign of him."

They had gone everywhere he could have been, including the General Staff Headquarters at December 18 Fortress; but Luis Amiama and Bibín Román, Pupo's younger brother, had been thrown out in a very unpleasant way by the guards: their compadre could not or would not see them.

"My last hope is that he's putting the Plan into effect on his own," Modesto Díaz fantasized, without much conviction. "Mobilizing installations, persuading military leaders. In any event, we're in a very compromised situation right now."

They were standing in the living room of General Juan Tomás Díaz's house. Chana, his young wife, served them glasses of lemonade with ice.

"We have to hide until we know what's going on with Pupo," said General Juan Tomás Díaz.

Antonio de la Maza, who had not spoken yet, felt a wave of anger coursing through his body.

"Hide?" he exclaimed in a rage. "Cowards hide. Let's finish the job, Juan Tomás. Put on your general's uniform, give us some uniforms, and we'll go to the Palace. And that's where we'll call for a popular uprising."

"You want the four of us to take the Palace?" Luis Amiama tried to reason with him. "Have you gone crazy, Antonio?"

"Nobody's there now, just the guards," he insisted. "We have to force the hand of the Trujillistas before they can react. We'll call on the people, we can use the Palace connection to every radio station in the country. We'll tell them to take to the streets. In the end, the Army will support us."

The skeptical expressions of Juan Tomás, Amiama, and Modesto Díaz made him even angrier. They were soon joined by Salvador Estrella Sadhalá, who had just left Antonio Imbert and Amadito at the doctor's office, and Dr. Vélez Santana, who had taken Pedro Livio Cedeño to the International Clinic. They were devastated by the disappearance of Pupo Román. They agreed that Antonio's idea of infiltrating the National Palace disguised as officers was futile and rash, an act of suicide. And all of them energetically opposed Antonio's new proposal: to take the body of Trujillo to Independencia Park and hang it from the parapet so that residents of the capital could see how he had died. Rejection by his friends provoked one of those fits of uncontrolled rage De la Maza had recently been subject to. Cowards! Traitors! They weren't equal to what they had done, ridding the Nation of the Beast! When he saw Chana Díaz come into the living room, her eyes terrified by the shouting, he realized he had gone too far. He muttered apologies to his friends and fell silent. But he felt waves of nausea inside.

"We're all upset, Antonio," said Luis Amiama, patting him on the shoulder. "The important thing now is to find a safe place. Until Pupo shows up. And we see how the people react when they find out Trujillo is dead."

An ashen Antonio de la Maza nodded. Yes, after all, Amiama, who had worked so hard to bring the military and highly placed officials in the regime into the conspiracy, perhaps he was right.

Luis Amiama and Modesto Díaz decided to go their separate ways; they thought they had a better chance of avoiding detection if each was on his own. Antonio persuaded Juan Tomás and Turk Sadhalá that they should stay together. They went through possibilities—relatives, friends—and discarded

them; the police would search all those houses. Vélez Santana was the one who came up with an acceptable name:

"Robert Reid Cabral. He's a friend of mine. Totally apolitical, all he cares about is medicine. He won't refuse."

He drove them in his car. General Díaz and Turk didn't know Robert personally, but Antonio de la Maza was a friend of his older brother, Donald Reid Cabral, who was working in Washington and New York in support of the conspiracy. The young doctor was dumbfounded at being awakened close to midnight. He knew nothing about the plot; he wasn't even aware that his brother Donald was collaborating with the Americans. But as soon as he regained his color and his power of speech, he hurried them into his small, Moorish-style, two-story house, which was so narrow it looked like something out of a fairy tale. He was a clean-shaven boy with kindhearted eyes who made a superhuman effort to hide his consternation. He introduced them to his wife, Ligia, who was several months pregnant. She accepted the invasion by strangers good-naturedly, without much apprehension. She showed them her two-year-old son, who slept in a corner of the dining room.

The young couple led the conspirators to a narrow little room on the top floor that was used as an attic storeroom. It had almost no ventilation, and the low ceiling made the heat intolerable. There was room for them only if they sat with their legs drawn up, and they had to crouch when they stood to avoid hitting their heads on the beams. On that first night they hardly noticed the discomfort and the heat; they spent the time whispering, trying to guess what had happened to Pupo Román: why did he drop out of sight when everything depended on him? General Díaz recalled his conversation with Pupo on May 24, Román's birthday, on his farm at kilometer fourteen. He had assured him and Luis Amiama that he was ready to mobilize the Armed Forces as soon as they showed him the body.

Marcelino Vélez Santana stayed with them, out of solidarity, for he had no reason to hide. The next morning he went

out to learn the news. He returned a little before noon, highly agitated. There was no sign of a military uprising. On the contrary, one could see a frantic mobilization of SIM Beetles and jeeps and military trucks. Patrols were searching all the neighborhoods. There were rumors that hundreds of men, women, old people, and children were being dragged from their houses and taken to La Victoria, El Nueve, or La Cuarenta. In the interior as well, those suspected of anti-Trujillism were being rounded up. A colleague from La Vega told Dr. Vélez Santana that the entire De la Maza family, beginning with the father, Don Vicente, and including all of Antonio's brothers, sisters, nephews, nieces, and cousins, had been arrested in Moca. That city was now occupied by guards and *caliés*. The houses of Juan Tomás, his brother Modesto, Imbert, and Salvador were all surrounded by barbed-wire barricades and armed guards.

Antonio said nothing. He was not surprised. He always knew that if the plot did not succeed, the regime's response would be unimaginably brutal. His heart constricted as he thought of his aged father, Don Vicente, and his brothers abused and mistreated by Abbes García. At about one o'clock, two black Volkswagens filled with *caliés* appeared on the street. Ligia, Reid Cabral's wife—he had gone to his office so as not to arouse the neighbors' suspicions—came to tell them in whispers that men wearing civilian clothes and carrying submachine guns were searching a nearby house. Antonio exploded in a string of curses (though he kept his voice low):

"You should have listened to me, assholes. Wouldn't it be better to die fighting in the Palace than to be trapped here like rats?"

Throughout the day they kept arguing and reproaching one another. During one of these disputes, Vélez Santana erupted. He grabbed General Juan Tomás Díaz by the shirt and accused him of involving him for no reason in a stupid, absurd plot that hadn't even made provision for the conspirators' escape. Did he have any idea what would happen to them now? Turk Estrella Sadhalá came between them to prevent a

fistfight. Antonio controlled his desire to vomit.

On the second night, they were so exhausted by arguments and insults that they slept, huddled together, using one another as pillows, dripping perspiration, almost suffocating in the burning air.

On the third day, when Dr. Vélez Santana brought a copy of *El Caribe* to their hiding place and they saw their photographs under a huge headline: "Killers Sought in Trujillo Murder," and, below that, the photograph of General Román Fernández embracing Ramfis at the Generalissimo's funeral, they knew they were lost. There would be no civilian-military junta. Ramfis and Radhamés had returned, and the entire country was mourning the dictator.

"Pupo betrayed us." General Juan Tomás Díaz seemed to be foundering. He had taken off his shoes, his feet were very swollen, and he was gasping for breath.

"We have to get out of here," said Antonio de la Maza. "We can't fuck up this family. If they find us here, they'll kill them too."

"You're right," Turk agreed. "It wouldn't be fair. We have to leave."

Where would they go? They spent all of June 2 considering possible flight plans. Shortly before noon, two Beetles carrying *caliés* pulled up to the house across the way and half a dozen armed men forced the door and went in. Alerted by Ligia, they waited, guns at the ready. But the *caliés* left after dragging out a young man in handcuffs. Of all the suggestions, Antonio's seemed the best: get hold of a car or van and try to reach Restauración, where he knew a good many people because he owned pine and coffee plantations there, and managed Trujillo's sawmill. It was so close to the border, it wouldn't be difficult to cross over into Haiti. But where would they find a car? Who would lend them one? They didn't get any sleep that night either, tormented by apprehension, fatigue, despair, and doubt. At midnight, Reid Cabral came up to their garret with tears in his eyes:

"They've searched three houses on this street," he pleaded.

"Any minute now it'll be my turn. I don't care about dying. But what about my wife and little boy? And the baby she's carrying?"

They swore they'd leave the next day, no matter what. And they did, at dusk on June 4. Salvador Estrella Sadhalá decided to go alone. He didn't know where, but thought he had more chance of getting away on his own than with Juan Tomás and Antonio, whose names and faces were the ones appearing most frequently on television and in the papers. Turk was the first to leave, at ten minutes to six, when it was beginning to grow dark. Through the blinds in Reid Cabral's bedroom, Antonio de la Maza watched him walk quickly to the corner, where he raised his hand and hailed a cab. He felt very troubled: Turk had been his closest friend, and they had never completely reconciled after that damn fight. There wouldn't be another chance.

Dr. Marcelino Vélez Santana decided to stay a little while longer with his colleague and friend, Dr. Reid Cabral, who seemed overwhelmed. Antonio shaved his mustache, put on an old hat he found in the attic, and pulled it down over his ears. Juan Tomás Díaz, however, made no effort to disguise himself. They both embraced Dr. Vélez Santana.

"No hard feelings?"

"No hard feelings. Good luck."

Ligia Reid Cabral, when they thanked her for her hospitality, burst into tears and made the sign of the cross over them: "May God protect you."

They walked eight blocks along deserted streets, their hands in their pockets, clutching their revolvers, until they reached the house of Antonio de la Maza's brother-in-law, Toñito Mota. He had a Ford van; perhaps he'd lend it to them, or agree to let them steal it. But Toñito wasn't home, and the van wasn't in the garage. The servant who opened the door recognized De la Maza immediately: "Don Antonio! What are you doing here?" He had a horrified look on his face, and Antonio and the general, certain he would call the police as soon as they left, hurried away. They didn't know what the hell

to do.

"Shall I tell you something, Juan Tomás?"

"What, Antonio?"

"I'm glad to be out of that rattrap. That heat, the dust that got in your nose and didn't let you breathe. The discomfort. It's good to be in the fresh air and feel your lungs clearing out."

"The only thing I need is for you to say: 'Let's go have a couple of beers and celebrate how beautiful life is.' Brother, you have a lot of balls!"

They both broke into intense, fleeting little laughs. On Avenida Pasteur they tried for a long time to hail a cab. The ones that passed had passengers.

"I'm sorry I wasn't with you on the Avenida," General Díaz said suddenly, as if remembering something important. "And didn't have the chance to shoot the Goat. Damn it to hell!"

"It's as if you had been there, Juan Tomás. Just ask Johnny Abbes, Blacky, Petán, and Ramfis, then you'll see. As far as they're concerned, you were with us on the highway pumping the Chief full of lead. Don't worry. I fired one of those shots for you."

Finally a taxi stopped. They climbed in, and when they didn't tell him right away where they wanted to go, the driver, a fat, gray-haired black in shirtsleeves, turned to look at them. Antonio de la Maza saw in his eyes that he had recognized them.

"To San Martín," he told him.

The driver nodded, not saying a word. A short while later, he murmured that he was running out of gas; he had to fill the tank. He drove along March 30, where the traffic was heavy, and stopped at a Texaco station at the corner of San Martín and Tiradentes. He got out of the car to open the gas tank. Now Antonio and Juan Tomás held the revolvers in their hands. De la Maza took off his right shoe, twisted the heel, and removed a small cellophane bag, which he put in his pocket. Juan Tomás looked at him, intrigued, and Antonio explained:

"It's strychnine. I got it in Moca; I said it was for a rabid

dog."

The fat general shrugged disdainfully, and showed him his revolver:

"There's no better strychnine than this, brother. Poison is for dogs and women, don't fuck around with bullshit like that. Besides, asshole, you commit suicide with cyanide, not strychnine."

They laughed again, with the same fierce, sad little laugh.

"Did you notice the guy at the register?" Antonio de la Maza pointed at the cashier's window. "Who do you think he's calling?"

"Maybe his wife, to ask how her pussy's doing."

Antonio de la Maza laughed again, a real, long, open laugh this time.

"What the fuck are you laughing at, asshole?"

"Don't you think it's funny?" asked Antonio, who was serious again. "The two of us in this taxi. What the hell are we doing here? We don't even know where we're going."

They told the driver to go back to the colonial district. Antonio had thought of something, and once they were in the old city, they told him to turn onto Calle Espailat from Billini. Generoso Fernández, an attorney whom they both knew, lived there. Antonio recalled hearing him say the most bitter things about Trujillo; perhaps he could get them a car. The lawyer came to the door but did not ask them in. When he recovered from the shock—he looked at them in horror, blinking—all he could do in his indignation was berate them:

"Are you crazy? How can you compromise me like this? Don't you know who went into the house across the street just a minute ago? The Constitutional Sot! Couldn't you stop and think before doing this to me? Get away, go on, I have a family. For God's sake, leave! I'm nobody, nobody."

He slammed the door in their faces. They went back to the cab. The old black was still sitting docilely at the wheel, not looking at them. After a while he mumbled:

"Where to now?"

"To Independencia Park," Antonio told him, just to say something.



Seconds after he pulled away—the streetlamps at the corners had turned on and people were coming out on the sidewalks to enjoy the cool air—the driver alerted them:

“There are Beetles behind us. I’m really sorry, gentlemen.”

Antonio felt relieved. This ridiculous trip to nowhere was finally ending. Better to go out shooting than like a couple of assholes. They turned around. Two green Volkswagens were following them at a distance of about ten meters.

“I don’t want to die, gentlemen,” the driver pleaded, crossing himself. “By the Blessed Virgin, please!”

“Okay, get to the park however you can and drop us at the corner by the hardware store,” said Antonio.

There was a good deal of traffic. The driver maneuvered his way between a truck and bus with clusters of people hanging from the doors. He braked hard a few meters from the large plate-glass windows of the Reid hardware store. When he jumped out of the cab, with his revolver in his hand, Antonio noticed that the lights in the park were coming on, as if to welcome them. There were shoeshine boys, street peddlers, cardplayers, bums and beggars leaning against the walls. It smelled of fruit and fried food. He turned around to hurry along Juan Tomás, who was fat and tired, and could not keep up with him. At that moment, shots broke out behind him. There were deafening screams all around him; people ran between cars, and automobiles drove onto the sidewalks. Antonio heard hysterical voices: “Surrender, damn it!” “You’re surrounded, assholes!” When he saw that Juan Tomás was stopping, exhausted, he stopped too, beside him, and began to shoot. He fired blindly, because *caliés* and guards were hiding behind the Volkswagens that criss-crossed the road like parapets, blocking traffic. He saw Juan Tomás fall to his knees and raise the pistol to his mouth, but he couldn’t fire because the impact of several shots knocked him down. By now Antonio had been hit by a number of bullets, but he wasn’t dead. “I’m not dead, shit, I’m not dead.” He had fired all the rounds in his clip, and as he lay on the ground, he tried to slip his hand into his pocket and swallow the strychnine.

His damn fucking hand did not obey him. No need, Antonio. He could see the brilliant stars in the night that was just beginning, he could see Tavito's smiling face, and he felt young again.