

24 “Manuel Alfonso came for me right on time,” says Urania, staring at nothing. “The cuckoo clock in the living room was sounding eight o’clock when he rang.” Her Aunt Adelina, her cousins Lucinda and Manolita, her niece Marianita, avoid one another’s eyes so as not to increase the tension; breathless and frightened, they look only at her. Samson is dozing, his curved beak buried in his green feathers.

“Papa hurried to his room, on the pretext of going to the bathroom,” Urania continues coldly, almost legalistically. “‘Bye-bye, sweetheart, have a good time.’ He didn’t have the courage to say goodbye while he was looking me in the eye.”

“You remember all those details?” Aunt Adelina moves her small, wrinkled fist, without energy or authority now.

“I forget a good number of things,” Urania replies briskly. “But I remember everything about that night. You’ll see.”

She remembers, for example, that Manuel Alfonso was dressed in sports clothes—sports clothes for a party given by the Generalissimo?—a blue shirt with an open collar, a light cream-colored jacket, loafers, and a silk scarf hiding his scar. In his peculiar voice he said that her pink organdy dress was beautiful, that her high-heeled shoes made her look older. He kissed her on the cheek: “Let’s hurry, it’s getting late, beautiful.” He opened the car door for her, had her go in first, sat down beside her, and the chauffeur in uniform and cap—she remembered his name: Luis Rodríguez—pulled away.

“Instead of going down Avenida George Washington, the car took an absurd route. It went up Independencia and drove across the old city, taking its time. Not true that it was getting late; it was still too early to go to San Cristóbal.”

Manolita extends her hands, leans her plump body forward.

"But if you thought it was strange, didn't you say anything to Manuel Alfonso about it? Nothing at all?"

Not at first: nothing at all. It was very strange, of course, that they were driving through the old city, just as it was strange that Manuel Alfonso had dressed for the Generalísimo's party as if he were going to the Hipódromo or the Country Club, but Urania didn't ask the ambassador anything. Was she beginning to suspect that he and Agustín Cabral had told her a lie? She remained silent, half listening to the awful, ruined speech of Manuel Alfonso, who was telling her about parties long ago for the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II, in London, where he and Angelita Trujillo ("She was a young girl at the time, as beautiful as you are") represented the Benefactor of the Nation. She was concentrating instead on the ancient houses that stood wide open, displaying their interiors, their families out on the streets—old men and women, young people, children, dogs, cats, even parrots and canaries—to enjoy the cool evening after the burning heat of the day, chatting from rockers, chairs, or stools, or sitting in the doorways or on the curbs of the high sidewalks, turning the old streets of the capital into an immense popular get-together, club, or festival, to which the groups of two or four domino players—always men, always mature—sitting around tables lit by candles or lanterns, remained totally indifferent. It was a show, like the scenes of small, cheerful grocery stores with counters and shelves of white-painted wood, overflowing with cans, bottles of Carta Dorada, Jacas, and Bermúdez cider, and brightly colored boxes, where people were always buying things; Urania preserved a very vivid memory of this spectacle that had perhaps disappeared or was dying out in modern Santo Domingo, or perhaps existed only in the rectangle of streets where centuries earlier a group of adventurers came from Europe, established the first Christian city in the New World, and gave it the melodious name of Santo Domingo de Guzmán. The last

night you would see that show, Urania.

"As soon as we were on the highway, perhaps when the car was passing by the place where they killed Trujillo two weeks later, Manuel Alfonso began . . ." A sound of disgust interrupts Urania's story.

"What do you mean?" asks Lucindita after a silence. "Began to what?"

"To prepare me." Urania's voice is firm again. "To soften me up, frighten me, charm me. Like the brides of Moloch, pampered and dressed up like princesses before they were thrown in the fire, into the mouth of the monster."

"So you've never met Trujillo, you've never talked to him," Manuel Alfonso exclaims with delight. "It will be the experience of a lifetime, my girl!"

Yes, it would. The car moved toward San Cristóbal under a star-filled sky, surrounded by coconut palms and silver palms, along the shores of the Caribbean Sea crashing noisily against the reefs.

"But what did he say to you?" urges Manolita, because Urania has stopped speaking.

He described what a perfect gentleman the Generalissimo was in his treatment of ladies. He, who was so severe in military and governmental matters, had made the old proverb his philosophy: "With a woman, use a rose petal." That's how he always treated beautiful girls.

"How lucky you are, dear girl." He was trying to infect her with his enthusiasm, an emotional excitement that distorted his speech even further. "To have Trujillo invite you personally to his Mahogany House. What a privilege! You can count on your fingers the girls who have deserved something like this. I'm telling you, girl, believe me."

And then Urania asked him the first and last question of the night:

"Who else has been invited to this party?" She looks at her Aunt Adelina, at Lucindita and Manolita: "Just to see what he would say. By now I knew we weren't going to any party."

The self-assured male figure turned toward her, and Urania could see the gleam in the ambassador's eyes.

"No one else. It's a party for you. Just for you! Can you imagine? Do you realize what it means? Didn't I tell you it was something unique? Trujillo is giving you a party. That's like winning the lottery, Uranita."

"And you? What about you?" her niece Marianita exclaims in her barely audible voice. "What were you thinking, Aunt Urania?"

"I was thinking about the chauffeur, about Luis Rodríguez. Just about him."

How embarrassed you were for that chauffeur in his cap, a witness to the ambassador's hypocritical talk. He had turned on the car radio, and two popular Italian songs—"Volare" and "Ciao, Ciao, Bambina"—were playing, but she was sure he didn't miss a word of the ploys Manuel Alfonso was using to cajole her into feeling happy and fortunate. A party that Trujillo was giving just for her!

"Did you think about your papa?" Manolita blurts out. "Did you think my Uncle Agustín had, that he . . . ?"

She stops, not knowing how to finish. Aunt Adelina's eyes reproach her. The old woman's face has collapsed, and her expression reveals profound despair.

"Manuel Alfonso was the one who thought about Papa," says Urania. "Was I a good daughter? Did I want to help Senator Agustín Cabral?"

He did it with the subtlety acquired in his years as a diplomat responsible for difficult missions. And wasn't this an extraordinary opportunity for Urania to help his friend Egghead climb out of the trap set for him by perpetually envious men? The Generalissimo might be hard and implacable when it came to the country's interests. But at heart he was a romantic; with a charming girl his hardness melted like an ice cube in the sun. If she, being the intelligent girl she was, wanted the Generalissimo to extend a hand to Agustín, to return his position, his prestige, his power, his posts, she could achieve it. All she had

to do was touch Trujillo's heart, a heart that could not deny the appeals of beauty.

"He also gave me some advice," says Urania. "What things I shouldn't do because they annoyed the Chief. It made him happy when girls were tender, but not when they exaggerated their admiration, their love. I asked myself: 'Is he really saying these things to me?'"

They had entered San Cristóbal, a city made famous because the Chief had been born there, in a modest little house next to the great church that Trujillo had constructed, and to which Senator Cabral had taken Urania on a visit, explaining the biblical frescoes painted on the walls by Vela Zanetti, an exiled Spanish artist to whom the magnanimous Chief had opened the doors of the Dominican Republic. On that trip to San Cristóbal, Senator Cabral also showed her the bottle factory and the weapons factory and the entire valley watered by the Nigua. And now her father was sending her to San Cristóbal to beg the Chief to forgive him, to unfreeze his accounts, to make him President of the Senate again.

"From Mahogany House there is a marvelous view of the valley, the Nigua River, the horses and cattle on the Fundación Ranch," Manuel Alfonso explained in detail.

The car, after passing the first guard post, began to ascend the hill; at the top, using the precious wood of the mahogany trees that were beginning to disappear from the island, the house had been erected to which the Generalissimo withdrew two or three days a week to have his secret assignments, do his dirty work, and negotiate risky business deals with complete discretion.

"For a long time the only thing I remembered about Mahogany House was the rug. It covered the entire room and had a gigantic national seal, in full color, embroidered on it. Later, I remembered other things. In the bedroom, a glass-doored closet filled with uniforms of every style, and above them, a row of military hats and caps. Even a Napoleonic two-cornered hat."

She does not laugh. She looks somber, with something cavernous in her eyes and voice. Her Aunt Adelina does not laugh, and neither does Manolita, or Lucinda, or Marianita, who has just come back from the bathroom, where she went to vomit. (She heard her retching.) The parrot is still sleeping. Silence has fallen on Santo Domingo: no car horns or engines, no radios, no drunken laughter, no barking of stray dogs.

"My name is Benita Sepúlveda, come in," the woman said to her at the foot of the wooden staircase. Advanced in years, indifferent, and yet with something maternal in her gestures and expression, she wore a uniform, and a scarf around her head. "Come this way."

"She was the housekeeper," Urania says, "the one responsible for placing fresh flowers in all the rooms, every day. Manuel Alfonso stayed behind, talking to the officer at the door. I never saw him again."

Benita Sepúlveda, pointing with a plump little hand at the darkness beyond the windows protected by metal grillwork, said "that" was a grove of oaks, and in the orchard there were plenty of mangoes and cedars; but the most beautiful things on the place were the almond and mahogany trees that grew around the house and whose perfumed branches were in every corner. Did she smell them? Did she? She'd have a chance to see the countryside—the river, the valley, the sugar mill, the stables on the Fundación Ranch—early in the morning, when the sun came up. Would she have a Dominican breakfast, with mashed plantains, fried eggs, sausage or smoked meat, and fruit juice? Or just coffee, like the Generalissimo?

"It was from Benita Sepúlveda that I learned I was going to spend the night there, that I would sleep with His Excellency. What a great honor!"

The housekeeper, with the assurance that comes from long practice, had her stop on the first landing and go into a spacious, dimly lit room. It was a bar. It had wooden seating all around it, the backrests against the wall, leaving ample room for dancing in the center; an enormous jukebox; and shelves

behind the bar crowded with bottles and different kinds of glasses. But Urania had eyes only for the immense gray rug, with the Dominican seal, that stretched from one end of the huge space to the other. She barely noticed the portraits and pictures of the Generalísimo—on foot and on horseback, in military uniform or dressed as a farmer, sitting at a desk or standing behind a lectern and wearing the presidential sash—that hung on the walls, or the silver trophies and framed certificates won by the dairy cows and thoroughbred horses of the Fundación Ranch, intermingled with plastic ashtrays and cheap decorations, still bearing the label of Macy's in New York, that adorned the tables, sideboards, and shelves of the monument to kitsch where Benita Sepúlveda left her after asking if she really didn't want a nice glass of liqueur.

"I don't think the word 'kitsch' existed yet," she explains, as if her aunt or cousins had made some observation. "Years later, whenever I heard it or read it, and knew what extremes of bad taste and pretension it expressed, Mahogany House always came to mind. A kitsch monument."

And she herself was part of the kitsch, on that hot May night, with her debutante's pink organdy party dress, the silver chain with the emerald and the gold-washed earrings that had belonged to her mama and that Papa allowed her to wear on the special occasion of Trujillo's party. Her disbelief made what was happening unreal. It seemed to her she wasn't really that girl standing on a branch of the national seal, in that extravagant room. Senator Agustín Cabral had sent her, a living offering, to the Benefactor and Father of the New Nation? Yes, she had no doubt at all, her father had arranged this with Manuel Alfonso. And yet, she still wanted to doubt.

"Somewhere, not in the bar, somebody put on a Lucho Gatica record. 'Bésame, bésame mucho, como si fuera esta noche la última vez.' "

"I remember." Manolita, embarrassed at interrupting, apologizes with a grimace: "They played 'Bésame Mucho' all day, on the radio, at parties."

Standing next to a window that let in a warm breeze and a dense aroma of fields, grass, trees, she heard voices. The damaged one of Manuel Alfonso. The other, high-pitched, rising and falling, could only be Trujillo's. She felt a prickle at the back of her neck and on her wrists, where the doctor took her pulse, an itch that always came when she had exams, and even now, in New York, before she made important decisions.

"I thought about throwing myself out the window. I thought about getting down on my knees, begging, crying. I thought I had to clench my teeth and let him do whatever he wanted, so I could go on living and take my revenge on Papa one day. I thought a thousand things while they were talking down below."

In her rocking chair, Aunt Adelina gives a start, opens her mouth. But says nothing. She is as white as a sheet, her deep-set eyes filled with tears.

The voices stopped. There was a parenthesis of silence; then, footsteps climbing the stairs. Had her heart stopped beating? In the dim light of the bar, the silhouette of Trujillo appeared, in an olive-green uniform, without a jacket or tie. He held a glass of cognac in his hand. He walked toward her, smiling.

"Good evening, beautiful," he whispered, bowing. And he extended his free hand, but when Urania, in an automatic movement, put forward her own, instead of shaking it Trujillo raised it to his lips and kissed it: "Welcome to Mahogany House, beautiful."

"The story about his eyes, about Trujillo's gaze, I had heard it often. From Papa, from Papa's friends. At that moment, I knew it was true. A gaze that dug deep, all the way down to the bottom. He smiled, he was very gallant, but that gaze emptied me, left me a hollow skin. I was no longer myself."

"Benita hasn't offered you anything?" Not letting go of her hand, Trujillo led her to the best-lit part of the bar, where a fluorescent tube cast a bluish light. He offered her a seat on a two-person sofa. He examined her, moving his eyes slowly up and down, from her head to her feet, openly, as he would

examine new bovine and equine acquisitions for the Fundación Ranch. In his gray, fixed, inquisitive eyes she perceived no desire, no excitement, but only an inventory, a gauging of her body.

"He was disappointed. Now I know why, but that night I didn't. I was slender, very thin, and he liked full-bodied women with prominent breasts and hips. Voluptuous women. A typically tropical taste. He even must have thought about sending this skeleton back to Ciudad Trujillo. Do you know why he didn't? Because the idea of breaking a virgin's cherry excites men."

Aunt Adelina moans. Her wrinkled fist raised, her mouth half opened in an expression of horror and censure, she implores her, grimacing, but does not manage to say a word.

"Forgive my frankness, Aunt Adelina. It's something he said, later. I'm quoting him exactly, I swear: 'Breaking a virgin's cherry excites men. Petán, that animal Petán, gets more excited breaking them with his finger.'"

He would say it afterward, when he had lost control and his mouth was vomiting disjointed phrases, sighs, curses, discharges of excrement to ease his bitterness. Now, he still behaved with studied correctness. He did not offer her what he was drinking, Carlos I might burn the insides of a girl so young. He would give her a glass of sweet sherry. He served her himself and made a toast, clinking glasses. Though she barely wet her lips, Urania felt something flame in her throat. Did she try to smile? Did she remain serious, showing her panic?

"I don't know," she says, shrugging. "We were close together on that sofa. The glass of sherry was trembling in my hand."

"I don't eat little girls," Trujillo said with a smile, taking her glass and placing it on a table. "Are you always so quiet or is it only now, beautiful?"

"He called me beautiful, something that Manuel Alfonso had called me too. Not Urania, Uranita, girl. Beautiful. It was a game the two of them were playing."

"Do you like to dance? Sure you do, like all the girls your age," said Trujillo. "I like to, a lot. I'm a good dancer, though I don't have time to go to dances. Come on, let's dance."

He stood up and Urania did too. She felt his strong body, his somewhat protruding belly rubbing against her stomach, his cognac breath, the warm hand holding her waist. She thought she was going to faint. Lucho Gatica wasn't singing "Bésame Mucho" now, but "Alma Mía."

"He really did dance very well. He had a good ear, and he moved like a young man. I was the one who lost the beat. We danced two boleros, and a guaracha by Toña la Negra. Merengues too. He said they danced the merengue in clubs and decent homes now thanks to him. Before, there had been prejudices, and respectable people said it was music for blacks and Indians. I don't know who was changing the records. When the last merengue ended, he kissed me on the neck. A light kiss that gave me gooseflesh."

Holding her by the hand, their fingers intertwined, he walked her back to the sofa and sat down very close to her. He examined her, amused, as he breathed in and drank his cognac. He seemed serene and content.

"Are you always a sphinx? No, no. It must be that you have too much respect for me." Trujillo smiled. "I like beautiful girls who are discreet, who let themselves be admired. Indifferent goddesses. I'm going to recite a poem, it was written for you."

"He recited a poem by Pablo Neruda. Into my ear, brushing my ear, my hair, with his lips and his little mustache: 'I like it when you're quiet, it's as if you weren't here; as if your eyes had flown away, as if a kiss had closed your mouth.' When he came to 'mouth,' his hand moved to my face and he kissed me on the lips. That night I did so many things for the first time: I drank sherry, wore Mama's jewelry, danced with an old man of seventy, and received my first kiss on the mouth."

She had gone to parties with boys and danced, but a boy had kissed her only once, on the cheek, at a birthday party in

the mansion of the Vicini family, at the intersection of Máximo Gómez and Avenida George Washington. His name was Casimiro Sáenz, the son of a diplomat. He asked her to dance, and when they had finished she felt his lips on her face. She blushed to the roots of her hair, and at Friday confession with the school chaplain, when she mentioned the sin, her voice broke with embarrassment. But that kiss was nothing like this one: the little brush mustache of His Excellency scratched her nose, and now, his tongue, its tip hot and sticky, was trying to force open her mouth. She resisted and then parted her lips and teeth: a wet, fiery viper pushed into her mouth in a frenzy, moving greedily. She felt herself choking.

"You don't know how to kiss, beautiful." Trujillo smiled at her, kissing her again on the hand, agreeably surprised. "You're a little virgin, aren't you?"

"He had become aroused," says Urania, staring at nothing. "He had an erection."

Manolita gives a short, hysterical laugh, but her mother, her sister, her niece don't follow suit. Her cousin lowers her eyes in confusion.

"I'm sorry, I have to talk about erections," says Urania. "If the male becomes aroused, his sex stiffens and grows larger. When he put his tongue in my mouth, His Excellency became aroused."

"Let's go up, beautiful," he said, his voice somewhat thickened. "We'll be more comfortable. You're going to discover something wonderful. Love. Pleasure. You'll like it. I'll teach you. Don't be afraid of me. I'm not an animal like Petán, I don't enjoy being brutal to girls. I like them to enjoy it too. I'll make you happy, beautiful."

"He was seventy and I was fourteen," Urania specifies for the fifth or tenth time. "We were a mismatched couple, climbing that staircase with the metal railing and heavy wooden bars. Holding hands, like sweethearts. The grandfather and his granddaughter on their way to the bridal chamber."

The lamp on the night table was lit, and Urania saw the

square wrought-iron bed, the mosquito netting raised, and she heard the blades of the fan turning slowly on the ceiling. A white embroidered spread covered the bed, and a number of pillows and cushions were piled against the headboard. It smelled of fresh flowers and grass.

"Don't undress yet, beautiful," Trujillo murmured. "I'll help you. Wait, I'll be right back."

"Do you remember how nervous we were when we talked about losing our virginity, Manolita?" Urania turns toward her cousin. "I never imagined I'd lose it in Mahogany House with the Generalissimo. I thought: 'If I jump off the balcony, Papa will really be sorry.'"

He soon returned, naked under a blue silk robe with white flecks and wearing garnet-colored slippers. He took a drink of cognac, left his glass on a dresser among photographs of himself surrounded by his grandchildren, and, grasping Urania by the waist, sat her down on the edge of the bed, on the space left open by the mosquito netting, two great butterfly wings crossed over their heads. He began to undress her, slowly. He unbuttoned the back of her dress, one button after another, and removed her belt. Before taking off her dress, he kneeled, and with some difficulty leaned forward and bared her feet. Carefully, as if a sudden movement of his fingers could shatter the girl, he pulled off her nylon stockings, caressing her legs as he did so.

"Your feet are cold, beautiful," he murmured tenderly. "Are you cold? Come here, let me warm them for you."

Still kneeling, he rubbed her feet with both hands. From time to time he lifted them to his mouth and kissed them, beginning at the instep, going down to her toes and around to her heels, asking with a sly little laugh if he was tickling her, as if he were the one feeling a joyful itch.

"He spent a long time like that, holding my feet. In case you're interested, I didn't feel the least excitement, not for a second."

"You must have been so scared," Lucindita says encouragingly.

"Not then, not yet. Later on, I was terrified."

With difficulty His Excellency stood, and sat down again on the edge of the bed. He took off her dress, the pink bra that held her budding little breasts, the triangle of her panties. She allowed him to do it, not offering any resistance, her body limp. When Trujillo slid the pink panties down her legs, she noticed that His Excellency's fingers were hurrying; they were sweaty, burning the skin where they touched her. He made her lie down. He stood, took off his robe, and lay down beside her, naked. Carefully, he moved his fingers through the girl's sparse pubic hair.

"He was still very excited, I think. When he began to touch and caress me. And kiss me, his mouth always forcing my mouth open. Kissing my breasts, my neck, my back, my legs."

She did not resist; she allowed herself to be touched, caressed, kissed, and her body obeyed with the movements and postures that His Excellency's hands indicated for her. But she did not return the caresses, and when her eyes were not closed, she kept them glued on the slow blades of the fan. Then she heard him say to himself: "Breaking a virgin's cherry always excites men."

"The first dirty word, the first vulgarity of the night," Urania declares. "Later, he would say much worse. That was when I realized that something was happening to him. He began to get angry. Because I was still, limp, because I didn't kiss him back?"

That wasn't it: she understood that now. Whether or not she participated in her own deflowering wasn't anything His Excellency cared about. To feel satisfied, it was enough for her to have an intact cherry that he could break, making her moan—howl, scream—in pain, with his battering ram of a prick inside her, squeezed tight by the walls of that newly violated intimate place. It wasn't love, not even pleasure, that he expected of Urania. He had agreed to the young daughter of Senator Agustín Cabral coming to Mahogany House only to prove that Rafael Leonidas Trujillo Molina, despite his seventy

years, despite his prostate problems, despite his headaches with priests, Yankees, Venezuelans, conspirators, was still a real man, a stud with a prick that could still get hard and break all the virgin cherries that came his way.

"I had no experience, but I knew." Her aunt, cousins, and niece lean their heads forward to hear her whisper. "Something was happening to him, I mean down below. He couldn't. He was about to go wild and forget all his good manners."

"That's enough playing dead, beautiful," she heard him order, a changed man. "On your knees. Between my legs. That's it. Take it in your hands and mouth. And suck it, the way I sucked your cunt. Until it wakes up. Too bad for you if it doesn't, beautiful."

"I tried, I tried. In spite of my terror, my disgust. I did everything. I squatted on my haunches, I put it in my mouth, I kissed it, I sucked it until my gorge rose. Soft, soft. I prayed to God it would stop."

"That's enough, Urania, that's enough!" Aunt Adelina isn't crying. She looks at her in horror, without compassion. Her eyes roll back in her head, the whites bulging, sclerotic; she is shocked, violently agitated. "What are you telling us for, Urania? My God, that's enough!"

"But I failed," Urania insists. "He covered his eyes with his arm. He didn't say anything. When he moved his arm away, he hated me."

His eyes were red and his pupils burned with a yellowish, feverish light of rage and shame. He looked at her without a hint of courtesy, with belligerent hostility, as if she had done him irreparable harm.

"You're wrong if you think you're leaving here a virgin so you can laugh at me with your father," he spelled out, with mute fury, spitting as he spoke.

He seized her by the arm and threw her down beside him. Assisted by movements of his legs and waist, he mounted her. That mass of flesh crushed her, pushed her down into the mattress; the smell of cognac and rage on his breath made her

dizzy. She felt her muscles and bones crumbling, ground to dust. She was suffocating, but that did not prevent her from feeling the roughness of that hand, those fingers, exploring, digging, forcing their way into her. She felt herself pierced, stabbed with a knife; a lightning bolt ran from her head down to her feet. She cried out, feeling as if she were dying.

"Go on and screech, you little bitch, see if you learn your lesson," the wounding, offended voice of His Excellency spat at her. "Now open up. Let me see if it's really broken or if you're faking it."

"It really was. I had blood on my legs; it stained him, and the spread, and the bed."

"That's enough, that's enough! Why tell us more, Urania?" her aunt shouts. "Come, let's make the sign of the cross and pray. For the sake of what you hold most dear, Urania. Do you believe in God? In Our Lady of Altagracia, patron saint of Dominicans? Your mother was so devoted to her, Uranita. I remember her getting ready every January 21 for the pilgrimage to the Basilica of Higüey. You're full of rancor and hate. That's not good. No matter what happened to you. Let's pray, Urania."

"And then," says Urania, ignoring her, "His Excellency lay on his back again and covered his eyes. He was still, very still. He wasn't sleeping. He let out a sob. He began to cry."

"To cry?" Lucindita exclaims.

Her reply is a sudden jabbering. The five women turn their heads: Samson is awake and announces it by chattering.

"Not for me," declares Urania. "For his enlarged prostate, his dead prick, for having to fuck virgins with his fingers, the way Petán liked to do."

"My God, Urania, for the sake of what you hold most dear," her Aunt Adelina implores, crossing herself. "No more."

Urania caresses the old woman's wrinkled, spotted hand.

"They're horrible words, I know, things that shouldn't be said, Aunt Adelina." Her voice sweetens. "I never use them, I swear. Didn't you want to know why I said those things about Papa? Why, when I went to Adrian, I didn't want anything to

do with the family? Now you know why."

From time to time he sobs, and his sighs make his chest rise and fall. A few white hairs grow between his nipples and around his dark navel. He keeps his eyes hidden under his arm. Has he forgotten about her? Has she been erased by his overpowering bitterness and suffering? She is more frightened than before, when he was caressing her or violating her. She forgets about the burning, the wound between her legs, her fear of the bloodstains on her thighs and the bedspread. She does not move. Be invisible, cease to exist. If the weeping man with hairless legs sees her, he won't forgive her, he'll turn the rage of his impotence, the shame of his weeping, on her and annihilate her.

"He said there was no justice in this world. Why was this happening to him after he had fought so hard for this ungrateful country, these people without honor? He was talking to God. The saints. Our Lady. Or maybe the devil. He shouted and begged. Why was he given so many trials? The cross of his sons that he had to bear, the plots to kill him, to destroy the work of a lifetime. But he wasn't complaining about that. He knew how to beat flesh-and-blood enemies. He had done that since he was young. What he couldn't tolerate was the low blow, not having a chance to defend himself. He seemed half crazed with despair. Now I know why. Because the prick that had broken so many cherries wouldn't stand up anymore. That's what made the titan cry. Laughable, isn't it?"

But Urania wasn't laughing. She listened, not moving, scarcely daring to breathe, hoping he wouldn't remember she was there. His soliloquy was discontinuous, fragmented, incoherent, interrupted by long silences; he raised his voice and shouted, or lowered it until it was almost inaudible. A pitiful noise. Urania was fascinated by that chest rising and falling. She tried not to look at his body, but sometimes her eyes moved along his soft belly, white pubis, small, dead sex, hairless legs. This was the Generalissimo, the Benefactor of the Nation, the Father of the New Nation, the Restorer of Financial Independence. The Chief whom Papa had served for thirty years with

devotion and loyalty, and presented with a most delicate gift: his fourteen-year-old daughter. But things didn't happen as the senator hoped. And that meant—Urania's heart filled with joy—he wouldn't rehabilitate Papa; maybe he'd put him in prison, maybe he'd have him killed.

"Suddenly, he lifted his arm and looked at me with red, swollen eyes. I'm forty-nine years old, and I'm trembling again. I've been trembling for thirty-five years, ever since that moment."

She holds out her hands and her aunt, cousins, and niece see it is true: she is trembling.

He looked at her with surprise and hatred, as if she were a malevolent apparition. Red, fiery, fixed, his eyes froze her. She couldn't move. Trujillo's eyes ran over her, moved down to her thighs, darted to the bloodstained spread, and glared at her again. Choking with revulsion, he ordered:

"Go on, get washed, see what you've done to the bed? Get out of here!"

"A miracle that he let me go," Urania reflects. "After I saw him desperate, crying, moaning, feeling sorry for himself. A miracle from our patron saint, Aunt Adelina."

She sat up, jumped out of bed, picked up the clothes scattered on the floor, and, stumbling against a chest of drawers, took refuge in the bathroom. There was a white porcelain tub stocked with sponges and soaps, and a penetrating perfume that made her dizzy. With hands that barely responded she cleaned her legs, used a washcloth to stanch the bleeding, got dressed. It was difficult to button her dress, buckle her belt. She didn't put on her stockings, only her shoes, and when she looked at herself in one of the mirrors, she saw her face smeared with lipstick and mascara. She didn't take the time to wash it off; he might change his mind. Run, get out of Mahogany House, escape. When she returned to the bedroom, Trujillo was no longer naked. He had covered himself with his blue silk robe and held the glass of cognac in his hand. He pointed to the stairs:

"Get out, get out," he said in a strangled voice. "Tell Benita

to bring fresh sheets and a spread and clean up this mess.”

“On the first step I tripped and broke the heel of my shoe and almost fell down three flights of stairs. My ankle swelled up afterward. Benita Sepúlveda was on the ground floor. Very calm, smiling at me. I tried to say what he had told me to. Not a word came out. I could only point upstairs. She took my arm and walked me to the guards at the entrance. She showed me a recess with a seat: ‘Here’s where they polish the Chief’s boots.’ Manuel Alfonso and his car weren’t there. Benita Sepúlveda had me sit on the shoeshine stand, surrounded by guards. She left, and when she came back, she led me by the arm to a jeep. The driver was a soldier. He brought me to Ciudad Trujillo. When he asked: ‘Where’s your house?’ I said: ‘I’m going to Santo Domingo Academy. I live there.’ It was still dark. Three o’clock. Four, maybe. It took them a long time to open the gate. I still couldn’t talk when the caretaker finally appeared. I could only talk to Sister Mary, the nun who loved me so much. She took me to the refectory, she gave me water, she put wet cloths on my forehead.”

Samson, who has been quiet for a while, displays his pleasure or displeasure again by puffing out his feathers and shrieking. No one says anything. Urania picks up her glass, but it is empty. Marianita fills it; she is nervous and knocks over the pitcher. Urania takes a few sips of cool water.

“I hope it’s done me good, telling you this cruel story. Now forget it. It’s over. It happened and there’s nothing anyone can do about it. Maybe another woman might have gotten over it. I wouldn’t and couldn’t.”

“Uranita, my dear cousin, what are you saying?” Manolita protests. “What do you mean? Look what you’ve done. What you have. A life every Dominican woman would envy.”

She stands and walks over to Urania. She embraces her, kisses her cheeks.

“You’ve really battered me, Uranita,” Lucinda scolds her affectionately. “But how can you complain? You have no right. In your case it’s really true that some good always comes out of

the bad. You studied at the best university, you've had a successful career. You have a man who makes you happy and doesn't interfere with your work . . ."

Urania pats her arm and shakes her head. The parrot is quiet and listens.

"I lied to you, Lucinda, I don't have a lover." She smiles vaguely, her voice still breaking. "I've never had one, I never will. Do you want to know everything, Lucindita? No man has ever laid a hand on me again since that time. My only man was Trujillo. It's true. Whenever one gets close and looks at me as a woman, I feel sick. Horrified. I want him to die, I want to kill him. It's hard to explain. I've studied, I work, I earn a good living. But I'm empty and still full of fear. Like those old people in New York who spend the whole day in the park, staring at nothing. It's work, work, work until I'm exhausted. You have no reason to envy me, I assure you. I envy all of you. Yes, yes, I know, you have problems, hard times, disappointments. But you also have families, husbands, children, relatives, a country. Those things fill your life. But Papa and His Excellency turned me into a desert."

Samson has begun to move nervously around the bars of his cage; he sways back and forth, stops, sharpens his beak on his claws.

"Those were different times, dear Uranita," stammers Aunt Adelina, swallowing her tears. "You have to forgive him. He has suffered, he is suffering. It was terrible, darling. But those were different times. Agustín was desperate. He could have gone to prison, they could have killed him. He didn't want to hurt you. Perhaps he thought it was the only way to save you. Those things happened, even though nobody can understand it now. That's how life was here. Agustín loved you more than anyone else in the world, Uranita."

The old woman wrings her hands, distraught, and moves in her rocking chair, overcome with emotion. Lucinda goes to her, smooths her hair, gives her a few drops of valerian: "Calm down, Mama; don't upset yourself."

Through the window that looks out on the garden, the stars twinkle in the peaceful Dominican night. Were they different times? Gusts of warm wind blow into the dining room from time to time, fluttering the curtains and the flowers in a pot that stands among statues of saints and family photographs. "They were and they weren't," thinks Urania. "Something from those times is still in the air."

"It was terrible, but it let me learn about the generosity, the delicacy, the humanity of Sister Mary," she says, sighing. "Without her I'd be crazy or dead."

Sister Mary found solutions for everything, and was a model of discretion. From her first aid in the school infirmary to stop the bleeding and ease the pain, to her calling on the Superior of the Dominican Sisters, in less than three days, and convincing her to cut through red tape and grant Urania Cabral, an exemplary student whose life was in danger, a scholarship to Siena Heights in Adrian, Michigan. Sister Mary spoke to Senator Agustín Cabral (reassuring him? frightening him?) in the office of the director, the three of them alone, urging him to allow his daughter to travel to the United States. And persuading him as well not to see her again because of how disturbed she was after what happened in San Cristóbal. Urania has often wondered what face Agustín Cabral wore for the nun: hypocritical surprise? discomfort? confusion? remorse? shame? She never asked, and Sister Mary never told her. The sisters went to the American consulate to obtain her visa and requested an audience with President Balaguer, asking him to expedite the authorization that Dominicans needed to apply for in order to leave the country, a process that took weeks. The school paid her fare, since Senator Cabral was now insolvent. Sister Mary and Sister Helen Claire accompanied her to the airport. When the plane took off, what pleased Urania most was that they had kept their promise not to let Papa see her again, not even from a distance. Now, she was also grateful to them for saving her from the belated rage of Trujillo, who could have kept her confined on this island or fed her to the sharks.

"It's very late," she says, looking at her watch. "Almost two in the morning. I haven't even packed yet and I have an early plane."

"You're going back to New York tomorrow?" Lucinda asks sadly. "I thought you'd stay a few days."

"I have to work," says Urania. "A pile of papers is waiting for me at the office, high enough to give you vertigo."

"It won't be like before, will it, Uranita?" Manolita embraces her. "We'll write, you'll answer our letters. Once in a while you'll come for a vacation, visit your family. Won't you, Urania?"

"Absolutely," Urania agrees, embracing her in turn. But she isn't sure. Perhaps, once she's left this house, this country, she'll prefer to forget this family again, these people, her past; she'll regret coming here and talking the way she did tonight. Or maybe not. Maybe she'll want to rebuild somehow the connection with these remnants of her family. "Can I call a cab at this hour?"

"We'll drive you." Lucindita stands up.

When Urania leans over to embrace her Aunt Adelina, the old woman clutches at her, digging her sharp fingers, curved like talons, into her. She seemed to have regained her composure but now she is agitated again, with an anguished look of astonishment in her sunken eyes, surrounded by wrinkles.

"Perhaps Agustín didn't know," she stammers with difficulty, as if her dentures were loose. "Manuel Alfonso could have deceived my brother, he was basically very naive. Don't be so angry with him, Urania. He's had a lonely life, he's suffered a lot. God teaches us to forgive. For the sake of your mother, she was such a good Catholic."

Urania tries to calm her: "Yes, yes, Aunt Adelina, whatever you say, don't be upset, I beg you." Her two daughters stand by the old woman, trying to soothe her. Finally she grows calmer and shrinks into her chair, her face contorted.

"Forgive me for telling you these things." Urania kisses her on the forehead. "It was stupid. But it's been burning in me for so many years."

"She'll be all right now," says Manolita. "I'll stay with her. You did the right thing by telling us. Please write, and call us once in a while. Let's not lose touch again, Urania."

"I promise," says Urania.

She walks with her to the door and says goodbye as they stand beside Lucinda's old car, a secondhand Toyota parked at the entrance. When she embraces her again, Manolita's eyes are filled with tears.

In the car, on the way to the Hotel Jaragua, as they drive along the deserted streets of Gazcue, Urania is tormented. Why did you do it? Are you going to feel different, free of all the incubi that have sucked out your soul? Of course not. It was a weakness, a fall into the kind of sentimentality and self-pity you've always hated in other people. Were you hoping they'd feel sorry for you, pity you? Is that the satisfaction you wanted?

And then—sometimes it's a cure for depression—she finally thinks of Johnny Abbes García. She heard the story years ago, from Esperancita Bourricaud, a colleague of hers at the World Bank who had been assigned to Port-au-Prince, where the former head of the SIM had settled after traveling through Canada, France, and Switzerland—he never set foot in Japan—in the golden exile imposed on him by Balaguer. Esperancita and the Abbes Garcías were neighbors. He went to Haiti as an adviser to President Duvalier. But, after a time, he began to plot against his new chief, supporting the subversive plans of Colonel Dominique, the Haitian dictator's son-in-law. Papa Doc resolved the problem in ten minutes. In the middle of the morning, Esperancita saw about twenty Tonton Macoutes climb out of two vans and storm her neighbors' house, guns blazing. Ten minutes, that's all. They killed Johnny Abbes, they killed Johnny Abbes's wife, they killed Johnny Abbes's two young children, they killed Johnny Abbes's two servants, and they also killed Johnny Abbes's chickens, rabbits, and dogs. Then they set fire to the house and left. Esperancita Bourricaud needed psychiatric help when she returned to

Washington. Is that the death you would have wanted for Papa? Are you filled with rancor and hatred, as Aunt Adelina said? She feels empty—again.

"I'm very sorry about that scene, all the melodrama, Lucindita," she says at the door of the Jaragua. She has to speak loudly because the music playing in the casino on the ground floor drowns out her voice. "I've made the night a very bitter one for Aunt Adelina."

"What are you talking about, girl? Now I understand what happened, the reason for the silence that made us all so sad. Please, Urania, come back and see us. We're your family, this is your country."

When Urania says goodbye to Marianita, the girl embraces her as if she wanted to weld herself to her, bury herself in her. The girl's slender body trembles as if it were a sheet of paper.

"I'm going to love you very much, Aunt Urania," she whispers in her ear, and Urania feels paralyzed by sadness. "I'm going to write every month. It doesn't matter if you answer or not."

She kisses her several times on the cheek, her thin lips like the peck of a little bird. Before she goes into the hotel, Urania waits until her cousin's old car is lost from view on Avenida George Washington, with its backdrop of noisy white waves. She walks into the Jaragua, and on her left the casino and adjoining nightclub are bright and noisy: rhythms, voices, music, slot machines, exclamations of the players at the roulette wheel.

As she heads for the elevators, a male figure cuts her off. He is a tourist in his forties, a redhead in a checked shirt, jeans, and loafers, slightly drunk:

"May I buy you a drink, dear lady?" he says in English, making a courtly bow.

"Get out of my way, you dirty drunk," Urania replies, not stopping but seeing the bewildered, astonished expression on the face of this incautious man.

In her room she begins to pack, but in a little while she goes to sit by the window and look at the twinkling stars and

foaming waves. She knows she won't sleep and has all the time in the world to finish packing her suitcase.

"If Marianita writes to me, I'll answer all her letters," she decides.