

# **Bon Voyage Mr President**

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## *Bon Voyage, Mr. President*

HE SAT ON a wooden bench under the yellow leaves in the deserted park, contemplating the dusty swans with both his hands resting on the silver handle of his cane, and thinking about death. On his first visit to Geneva the lake had been calm and clear, and there were tame gulls that would eat out of one's hand, and women for hire who seemed like six-in-the-afternoon phantoms with organdy ruffles and silk parasols. Now the only possible woman he could see was a flower vendor on the deserted pier. It was difficult for him to believe that time could cause so much ruin not only in his life but in the world.

He was one more incognito in the city of illustrious incognitos. He wore the dark blue pin-striped suit, brocade vest, and stiff hat of a retired magistrate. He had the

arrogant mustache of a musketeer, abundant blue-black hair with romantic waves, a harpist's hands with the widower's wedding band on his left ring finger, and joyful eyes. Only the weariness of his skin betrayed the state of his health. Even so, at the age of seventy-three, his elegance was still notable. That morning, however, he felt beyond the reach of all vanity. The years of glory and power had been left behind forever, and now only the years of his death remained.

He had returned to Geneva after two world wars, in search of a definitive answer to a pain that the doctors in Martinique could not identify. He had planned on staying no more than two weeks but had spent almost six in exhausting examinations and inconclusive results, and the end was not yet in sight. They looked for the pain in his liver, his kidneys, his pancreas, his prostate, wherever it was not. Until that bitter Thursday, when he had made an appointment for nine in the morning at the neurology department with the least well-known of the many physicians who had seen him.

The office resembled a monk's cell, and the doctor was small and solemn and wore a cast on the broken thumb of his right hand. When the light was turned off, the illuminated X ray of a spinal column appeared on a screen, but he did not recognize it as his own until the doctor used a pointer to indicate the juncture of two vertebrae below his waist.

"Your pain is here," he said.

For him it was not so simple. His pain was improbable and devious, and sometimes seemed to be in his ribs on the right side and sometimes in his lower abdomen,

and often it caught him off guard with a sudden stab in the groin. The doctor listened to him without moving, the pointer motionless on the screen. "That is why it eluded us for so long," he said. "But now we know it is here." Then he placed his forefinger on his own temple and stated with precision:

"Although in strictest terms, Mr. President, all pain is here."

His clinical style was so dramatic that the final verdict seemed merciful: The President had to submit to a dangerous and inescapable operation. He asked about the margin of risk, and the old physician enveloped him in an indeterminate light.

"We could not say with certainty," he answered.

Until a short while before, he explained, the risk of fatal accidents was great, and even more so the danger of different kinds of paralysis of varying degrees. But with the medical advances made during the two wars, such fears were things of the past.

"Don't worry," the doctor concluded. "Put your affairs in order and then get in touch with us. But don't forget, the sooner the better."

It was not a good morning for digesting that piece of bad news, least of all outdoors. He had left the hotel very early, without an overcoat because he saw a brilliant sun through the window, and had walked with measured steps from the Chemin du Beau-Soleil, where the hospital was located, to that refuge for furtive lovers, the Jardin Anglais. He had been there for more than an hour, thinking of nothing but death, when autumn began. The lake became as rough as an angry sea, and an outlaw wind

frightened the gulls and made away with the last leaves. The President stood up and, instead of buying a daisy from the flower vendor, he picked one from the public plantings and put it in his buttonhole. She caught him in the act.

“Those flowers don’t belong to God, Monsieur,” she said in vexation. “They’re city property.”

He ignored her and walked away with rapid strides, grasping his cane by the middle of the shaft and twirling it from time to time with a rather libertine air. On the Pont du Mont-Blanc the flags of the Confederation, maddened by the sudden gust of wind, were being lowered with as much speed as possible, and the graceful fountain crowned with foam had been turned off earlier than usual. The President did not recognize his usual café on the pier because they had taken down the green awning over the entrance, and the flower-filled terraces of summer had just been closed. Inside the lights burned in the middle of the day, and the string quartet was playing a piece by Mozart full of foreboding. At the counter the President picked up a newspaper from the pile reserved for customers, hung his hat and cane on the rack, put on his gold-rimmed glasses to read at the most isolated table, and only then became aware that autumn had arrived. He began to read the international page, where from time to time he found a rare news item from the Americas, and he continued reading from back to front until the waitress brought him his daily bottle of Évian water. Following his doctors’ orders, he had given up the habit of coffee more than thirty years before, but had said, “If I ever

knew for certain that I was going to die, I would drink it again." Perhaps the time had come.

"Bring me a coffee too," he ordered in perfect French. And specified without noticing the double meaning, "Italian style, strong enough to wake the dead."

He drank it without sugar, in slow sips, and then turned the cup upside down on the saucer so that the coffee grounds, after so many years, would have time to write out his destiny. The recaptured taste rescued him for an instant from his gloomy thoughts. A moment later, as if it were part of the same sorcery, he sensed someone looking at him. He turned the page with a casual gesture, then glanced over the top of his glasses and saw the pale, unshaven man in a sports cap and a jacket lined with sheepskin, who looked away at once so their eyes would not meet.

His face was familiar. They had passed each other several times in the hospital lobby, he had seen him on occasion riding a motor scooter on the Promenade du Lac while he was contemplating the swans, but he never felt that he had been recognized. He did not, however, discount the idea that this was one of the many persecution fantasies of exile.

He finished the paper at his leisure, floating on the sumptuous cellos of Brahms, until the pain was stronger than the analgesic of the music. Then he looked at the small gold watch and chain that he carried in his vest pocket and took his two midday tranquilizers with the last swallow of Évian water. Before removing his glasses he deciphered his destiny in the coffee grounds and felt

an icy shudder: He saw uncertainty there. At last he paid the bill, left a miser's tip, collected his cane and hat from the rack, and walked out to the street without looking at the man who was looking at him. He moved away with his festive walk, stepping around the beds of flowers devastated by the wind, and thought he was free of the spell. But then he heard steps behind him and came to a halt when he rounded the corner, making a partial turn. The man following him had to stop short to avoid a collision, and his startled eyes looked at him from just a few inches away.

"Señor Presidente," he murmured.

"Tell the people who pay you not to get their hopes up," said the President, without losing his smile or the charm of his voice. "My health is perfect."

"Nobody knows that better than me," said the man, crushed by the weight of dignity that had fallen upon him. "I work at the hospital."

His diction and cadence, and even his timidity, were raw Caribbean.

"Don't tell me you're a doctor," said the President.

"I wish I could, Señor. I'm an ambulance driver."

"I'm sorry," said the President, convinced of his error.

"That's a hard job."

"Not as hard as yours, Señor."

He looked straight at him, leaned on his cane with both hands, and asked with real interest:

"Where are you from?"

"The Caribbean."

"I already knew that," said the President. "But which country?"

"The same as you, Señor," the man said, and offered his hand. "My name is Homero Rey."

The President interrupted him in astonishment, not letting go of his hand.

"Damn," he said. "What a fine name!"

Homero relaxed.

"It gets better," he said. "Homero Rey de la Casa—I'm Homer King of His House."

A wintry knife-thrust caught them unprotected in the middle of the street. The President shivered down to his bones and knew that without an overcoat he could not walk the two blocks to the cheap restaurant where he usually ate.

"Have you had lunch?" he asked.

"I never have lunch," said Homero. "I eat one meal at night in my house."

"Make an exception for today," he said, using all his charm. "Let me take you to lunch."

He led him by the arm to the restaurant across the street, its name in gilt on the awning: Le Boeuf Couronné. The interior was narrow and warm, and there seemed to be no empty tables. Homero Rey, surprised that no one recognized the President, walked to the back to request assistance.

"Is he an acting president?" the owner asked.

"No," said Homero. "Overthrown."

The owner smiled in approval.

"For them," he said, "I always have a special table."

He led them to an isolated table in the rear of the room, where they could talk as much as they liked. The President thanked him.

"Not everyone recognizes as you do the dignity of exile," he said.

The specialty of the house was charcoal-broiled ribs of beef. The President and his guest glanced around and saw the great roasted slabs edged in tender fat on the other tables. "It's magnificent meat," murmured the President. "But I'm not allowed to eat it." He looked at Homero with a roguish eye and changed his tone.

"In fact, I'm not allowed to eat anything."

"You're not allowed to have coffee either," said Homero, "but you drink it anyway."

"You found that out?" said the President. "But today was just an exception on an exceptional day."

Coffee was not the only exception he made that day. He also ordered charcoal-broiled ribs of beef and a fresh vegetable salad with a simple splash of olive oil for dressing. His guest ordered the same, and half a carafe of red wine.

While they were waiting for the meat, Homero took a wallet with no money and many papers out of his jacket pocket, and showed a faded photograph to the President, who recognized himself in shirtsleeves, a few pounds lighter and with intense black hair and mustache, surrounded by a crowd of young men standing on tiptoe to be seen. In a single glance he recognized the place, he recognized the emblems of an abominable election campaign, he recognized the wretched date. "It's shocking!" he murmured. "I've always said one ages faster in photographs than in real life." And he returned the picture with a gesture of finality.

"I remember it very well," he said. "It was thousands of years ago, in the cockpit at San Cristóbal de las Casas."

"That's my town," said Homero, and he pointed to himself in the group. "This is me."

The President recognized him.

"You were a baby!"

"Almost," said Homero. "I was with you for the whole southern campaign as a leader of the university brigades."

The President anticipated his reproach.

"I, of course, did not even notice you," he said.

"Not at all, you were very nice," said Homero. "But there were so many of us there's no way you could remember."

"And afterward?"

"You know that better than anybody," said Homero. "After the military coup, the miracle is that we're both here, ready to eat half a cow. Not many were as lucky."

Just then their food was brought to the table. The President tied his napkin around his neck, like an infant's bib, and was aware of his guest's silent surprise. "If I didn't do this I'd ruin a tie at every meal," he said. Before he began, he tasted the meat for seasoning, approved with a satisfied gesture, and returned to his subject.

"What I can't understand," he said, "is why you didn't approach me earlier, instead of tracking me like a bloodhound."

Homero said that he had recognized him from the time he saw him go into the hospital through a door reserved for very special cases. It was in the middle of summer, and he was wearing a three-piece linen suit from the

Antilles, with black and white shoes, a daisy in his lapel, and his beautiful hair blowing in the wind. Homero learned that he was alone in Geneva, with no one to help him, for the President knew by heart the city where he had completed his law studies. The hospital administration, at his request, took the internal measures necessary to guarantee his absolute incognito. That very night Homero and his wife agreed to communicate with him. And yet for five weeks he had followed him, waiting for a propitious moment, and perhaps would not have been capable of speaking if the President had not confronted him.

"I'm glad I did, although the truth is, it doesn't bother me at all to be alone."

"It's not right."

"Why?" asked the President with sincerity. "The greatest victory of my life has been having everyone forget me."

"We remember you more than you imagine," said Homero, not hiding his emotion. "It's a joy to see you like this, young and healthy."

"And yet," he said without melodrama, "everything indicates that I'll die very soon."

"Your chances of recovery are very good," said Homero.

The President gave a start of surprise but did not lose his sense of humor.

"Damn!" he exclaimed. "Has medical confidentiality been abolished in beautiful Switzerland?"

"There are no secrets for an ambulance driver in any hospital anywhere in the world," said Homero.

“Well, what I know I found out just two hours ago from the lips of the only man who could have known it.”

“In any case, you will not have died in vain,” said Homero. “Someone will restore you to your rightful place as a great example of honor.”

The President feigned a comic astonishment.

“Thank you for warning me,” he said.

He ate as he did everything: without haste and with great care. As he did so he looked Homero straight in the eye, and the younger man had the impression he could see what the older man was thinking. After a long conversation filled with nostalgic evocations, the President’s smile turned mischievous.

“I had decided not to worry about my corpse,” he said, “but now I see that I must take precautions worthy of a detective novel to keep it hidden.”

“It won’t do any good,” Homero joked in turn. “In the hospital no mystery lasts longer than an hour.”

When they had finished their coffee, the President read the bottom of his cup, and again he shuddered: The message was the same. Still, his expression did not change. He paid the bill in cash but first checked the total several times, counted his money several times with excessive care, and left a tip that merited no more than a grunt from the waiter.

“It has been a pleasure,” he concluded as he took his leave of Homero. “I haven’t set a date yet for the surgery, and I haven’t even decided if I’m going to have it done or not. But if all goes well, we’ll see each other again.”

“And why not before?” said Homero. “Lázara, my

wife, does cooking for rich people. Nobody makes shrimp and rice better than she does, and we'd like to invite you to our house some night soon."

"I'm not allowed to have shellfish, but I'll be happy to eat it," he said. "Just tell me when."

"Thursday is my day off," said Homero.

"Perfect," said the President. "Thursday at seven I'll be at your house. It will be a pleasure."

"I'll come by for you," said Homero. "Hôtellerie Dames, Fourteen Rue de l'Industrie. Behind the station. Is that right?"

"That's right," said the President, and he stood up, more charming than ever. "It appears you even know my shoe size."

"Of course, Señor," said Homero with amusement. "Size forty-one."

WHAT Homero Rey did not tell the President, but did tell for years afterward to anyone willing to listen, was that his original intention was not so innocent. Like other ambulance drivers, he had made certain arrangements with funeral parlors and insurance companies to sell their services inside the hospital, above all to foreign patients of limited means. The profits were small and had to be shared with other employees who passed around the confidential files of patients with serious illnesses. But it was some consolation for an exile with no future who just managed to support his wife and two children on a ridiculous salary.

Lázara Davis, his wife, was more realistic. A slender mulatta from San Juan, Puerto Rico, she was small and solid, the color of cooked caramel, and had the eyes of a vixen, which matched her temperament very well. They had met in the charity ward of the hospital, where she worked as a general aide after a financier from her country, who had brought her to Geneva as a nursemaid, left her adrift in the city. She and Homero had been married in a Catholic ceremony, although she was a Yoruban princess, and they lived in a two-bedroom apartment on the eighth floor of a building that had no elevator and was occupied by African émigrés. Their daughter, Bárbara, was nine years old, and their son, Lázaro, who was seven, showed signs of slight mental retardation.

Lázara Davis was intelligent and evil-tempered, but she had a tender heart. She considered herself a pure Taurus and believed with blind faith in her astral portents. Yet she had never been able to realize her dream of earning a living as an astrologer to millionaires. On the other hand, she made occasional and sometimes significant contributions to the family's finances by preparing dinners for wealthy matrons who impressed their guests by making them believe they had cooked the exciting Antillean dishes themselves. Homero's timidity was painful, and he had no ambitions beyond the little he earned, but Lázara could not conceive of life without him because of the innocence of his heart and the caliber of his member. Things had gone well for them, but each year was more difficult and the children were growing. At the time of the President's arrival they had begun dipping into their savings

of five years. And so when Homero Rey discovered him among the incognito patients in the hospital, their hopes were raised.

They did not know with precision what they were going to ask for, or with what right. At first they planned to sell him the complete funeral, including embalming and repatriation. But little by little they realized that his death did not seem quite as imminent as it had at the beginning. On the day of the lunch they were confused by doubts.

The truth is that Homero had not been a leader of the university brigades or of anything else, and the only part he ever played in the election campaign was to be included in the photograph that they managed to find as if by miracle under a pile of papers in the closet. But his fervor was true. It was also true that he had been obliged to flee the country because of his participation in street protests against the military coup, although his only reason for still living in Geneva after so many years was his poverty of spirit. And so one lie more or less should not have been an obstacle to gaining the President's favor.

The first surprise for both of them was that the illustrious exile lived in a fourth-class hotel in the sad district of Les Grottes, among Asian émigrés and ladies of the night, and ate alone in cheap restaurants, when Geneva was filled with suitable residences for politicians in disgrace. Day after day, Homero had seen him repeat that day's actions. He had accompanied him with his eyes, sometimes at a less than prudent distance, in his nocturnal strolls among the mournful walls and tattered yellow bell-flowers of the old city. He had seen him lost in thought for hours in front of the statue of Calvin. Breathless with

the ardent perfume of the jasmines, he had followed him step by step up the stone staircase to contemplate the slow summer twilights from the top of the Bourg-de-Four. One night he saw him in the first rain of the season, without an overcoat or an umbrella, standing in line with the students for a Rubinstein concert. "I don't know why he didn't catch pneumonia," Homero said afterward to his wife. On the previous Saturday, when the weather began to change, he had seen him buy an autumn coat with a fake mink collar, not in the glittering shops along the Rue du Rhône, where fugitive emirs made their purchases, but in the flea market.

"Then there's nothing we can do!" exclaimed Lázara when Homero told her about it. "He's a damn miser who'll give himself a charity funeral and be buried in a pauper's grave. We'll never get anything out of him."

"Maybe he's really poor," said Homero, "after so many years out of work."

"Oh baby, it's one thing to be a Pisces with an ascendant Pisces, and another thing to be a damn fool," said Lázara. "Everybody knows he made off with the country's gold and is the richest exile in Martinique."

Homero, who was ten years her senior, had grown up influenced by news articles to the effect that the President had studied in Geneva and supported himself by working as a construction laborer. Lázara, on the other hand, had been raised among the scandals in the opposition press, which were magnified in the opposition household where she had been a nursemaid from the time she was a girl. As a consequence, on the night Homero came home breathless with jubilation because he had

eaten lunch with the President, she was not convinced by the argument that he had taken him to an expensive restaurant. It annoyed her that Homero had not asked for any of the countless things they had dreamed of, from scholarships for the children to a better job at the hospital. The President's decision to leave his body for the vultures instead of spending his francs on a suitable burial and a glorious repatriation seemed to confirm her suspicions. But the final straw was the news Homero saved for last, that he had invited the President for a meal of shrimp and rice on Thursday night.

"That's just what we needed," shouted Lázara, "to have him die here, poisoned by canned shrimp, and have to use the children's savings to bury him."

In the end, what determined her behavior was the weight of her conjugal loyalty. She had to borrow three silver place settings and a crystal salad bowl from one neighbor, an electric coffeepot from another, and an embroidered tablecloth and a china coffee service from a third. She took down the old curtains and put up the new ones, used only on holidays, and removed the covers from the furniture. She spent an entire day scrubbing the floors, shaking out dust, shifting things around, until she achieved just the opposite of what would have benefited them most, which was to move their guest with the respectability of their poverty.

On Thursday night, when he had caught his breath after climbing to the eighth floor, the President appeared at the door with his new old coat and melon-shaped hat from another time, and a single rose for Lázara. She was impressed by his virile good looks and his manners worthy

of a prince, but beyond all that she saw what she had expected to see: a false and rapacious man. She thought him impertinent, because she had cooked with the windows open to keep the smell of shrimp from filling the house, and the first thing he did when he entered was to take a deep breath, as if in sudden ecstasy, and exclaim with eyes closed and arms spread wide, "Ah, the smell of our ocean!" She thought him stingier than ever for bringing her just one rose, stolen no doubt from the public gardens. She thought him insolent for the disdain with which he looked at the newspaper clippings of his presidential glories, and the pennants and flags of the campaign, which Homero had pinned with so much candor to the living room wall. She thought him hardhearted, because he did not even greet Bárbara and Lázaro, who had made a gift for him, and in the course of the dinner he referred to two things he could not abide: dogs and children. She hated him. Nevertheless, her Caribbean sense of hospitality overcame her prejudices. She had put on the African gown she wore on special occasions, and her *santería* beads and bracelets, and during the meal she did not make any unnecessary gestures or say a single superfluous word. She was more than irreproachable: She was perfect.

The truth was that shrimp and rice was not one of the accomplishments of her kitchen, but she prepared it with the best will, and it turned out very well. The President took two helpings and showed no restraint in his praise, and he was delighted by the slices of fried ripe plantain and the avocado salad, although he did not share in their nostalgia. Lázara resigned herself to just listening until dessert, when for no apparent reason Homero became

trapped in the dead-end street of the existence of God.

"I do believe God exists," said the President, "but has nothing to do with human beings. He's involved in much bigger things."

"I only believe in the stars," said Lázara, and she scrutinized the President's reaction. "What day were you born?"

"The eleventh of March."

"I knew it," said Lázara with a triumphant little start, and asked in a pleasant voice, "Don't you think two Pisces at the same table are too many?"

The men were still discussing God when she went to the kitchen to prepare coffee. She had cleared the table, and longed with all her heart for the evening to end well. On her way back to the living room with the coffee, she was met with a passing remark of the President's, which astounded her.

"Have no doubt, my dear friend: It would be the worst thing that could happen to our poor country if I were president."

Homero saw Lázara in the doorway with the borrowed china cups and coffeepot and thought she was going to faint. The President also took notice. "Don't look at me like that, Señora," he said in an amiable tone. "I'm speaking from the heart." And then, turning to Homero, he concluded:

"It's just as well I'm paying a high price for my foolishness."

Lázara served the coffee and turned off the light above the table because its harsh illumination was not conducive to conversation, and the room was left in intimate shad-

ow. For the first time she became interested in the guest, whose wit could not hide his sadness. Lázara's curiosity increased when he finished his coffee and turned the cup upside down in the saucer so the grounds could settle.

The President told them he had chosen the island of Martinique for his exile because of his friendship with the poet Aimé Césaire, who at that time had just published his *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, and had helped him begin a new life. With what remained of his wife's inheritance, the President bought a house made of noble wood in the hills of Fort-de-France, with screens at the windows and a terrace overlooking the sea and filled with primitive flowers, where it was a pleasure to sleep with the sound of crickets and the molasses-and-rum breeze from the sugar mills. There he stayed with his wife, fourteen years older than he and an invalid since the birth of their only child, fortified against fate by his habitual rereading of the Latin classics, in Latin, and by the conviction that this was the final act of his life. For years he had to resist the temptation of all kinds of adventures proposed to him by his defeated partisans.

"But I never opened another letter again," he said. "Never, once I discovered that even the most urgent were less urgent after a week, and that in two months one forgot about them and the person who wrote them."

He looked at Lázara in the semi-darkness when she lit a cigarette, and took it from her with an avid movement of his fingers. After a long drag, he held the smoke in his throat. Startled, Lázara picked up the pack and the box of matches to light another, but he returned the burning cigarette to her. "You smoke with so much pleasure I

could not resist," he said. Then he had to release the smoke because he began to cough.

"I gave up the habit many years ago, but it never gave me up altogether," he said. "On occasion it has defeated me. Like now."

The cough jolted him two more times. The pain returned. The President checked his small pocket watch and took his two evening pills. Then he peered into the bottom of his cup: nothing had changed, but this time he did not shudder.

"Some of my old supporters have been presidents after me," he said.

"Sáyago," said Homero.

"Sáyago and others," he said. "All of us usurping an honor we did not deserve with an office we did not know how to fill. Some pursue only power, but most are looking for even less: a job."

Lázara became angry.

"Do you know what they say about you?" she asked.

Homero intervened in alarm:

"They're lies."

"They're lies and they're not lies," said the President with celestial calm. "When it has to do with a president, the worst ignominies may be both true and false at the same time."

He had lived in Martinique all the days of his exile, his only contact with the outside world the few news items in the official paper. He had supported himself teaching classes in Spanish and Latin at an official *lycée*, and with the translations that Aimé Césaire commissioned from time to time. The heat in August was unbearable, and he

would stay in the hammock until noon, reading to the hum of the fan in his bedroom. Even at the hottest times of the day his wife tended to the birds she raised in freedom outdoors, protecting herself from the sun with a broad-brimmed straw hat adorned with artificial fruit and organdy flowers. But when the temperature fell, it was good to sit in the cool air on the terrace, he with his eyes fixed on the ocean until it grew dark, and she in her wicker rocking chair, wearing the torn hat, and rings with bright stones on every finger, watching the ships of the world pass by. "That one's bound for Puerto Santo," she would say. "That one almost can't move, it's so loaded down with bananas from Puerto Santo," she would say. For it did not seem possible to her that any ship could pass by that was not from their country. He pretended not to hear, although in the long run she managed to forget better than he because she lost her memory. They would sit this way until the clamorous twilights came to an end and they had to take refuge in the house, defeated by the mosquitoes. During one of those many Augusts, as he was reading the paper on the terrace, the President gave a start of surprise.

"I'll be damned," he said. "I've died in Estoril!"

His wife, adrift in her drowsiness, was horrified by the news. The article consisted of six lines on the fifth page of the newspaper printed just around the corner, in which his occasional translations were published and whose manager came to visit him from time to time. And now it said that he had died in Estoril de Lisboa, the resort and refuge of European decadence, where he had never been and which was, perhaps, the only place

in the world where he would not have wanted to die. His wife did die, in fact, a year later, tormented by the last memory left to her: the recollection of her only child, who had taken part in the overthrow of his father and was later shot by his own accomplices.

The President sighed. "That's how we are, and nothing can save us," he said. "A continent conceived by the scum of the earth without a moment of love: the children of abductions, rapes, violations, infamous dealings, deceptions, the union of enemies with enemies." He faced Lázara's African eyes, which scrutinized him without pity, and tried to win her over with the eloquence of an old master.

"Mixing the races means mixing tears with spilled blood. What can one expect from such a potion?"

Lázara fixed him to his place with the silence of death. But she gained control of herself a little before midnight and said good-bye to him with a formal kiss. The President refused to allow Homero to accompany him to the hotel, although he could not stop him from helping him find a taxi. When Homero came back, his wife was raging with fury.

"That's one president in the world who really deserved to be overthrown," she said. "What a son of a bitch."

Despite Homero's efforts to calm her, they spent a terrible, sleepless night. Lázara admitted that he was one of the best-looking men she had ever seen, with a devastating seductive power and a stud's virility. "Just as he is now, old and fucked up, he must still be a tiger in bed," she said. But she thought he had squandered these gifts of God in the service of pretense. She could not bear his

boasts that he had been his country's worst president. Or his ascetic airs, when, she was convinced, he owned half the sugar plantations in Martinique. Or the hypocrisy of his contempt for power, when it was obvious he would give anything to return to the presidency long enough to make his enemies bite the dust.

"And all of that," she concluded, "just to have us worshipping at his feet."

"What good would that do him?" asked Homero.

"None at all," she said. "But the fact is that being seductive is an addiction that can never be satisfied."

Her rage was so great that Homero could not bear to be with her in bed, and he spent the rest of the night wrapped in a blanket on the sofa in the living room. Lázara also got up in the middle of the night, naked from head to toe—her habitual state when she slept or was at home—and talked to herself in a monologue on only one theme. In a single stroke she erased from human memory all traces of the hateful supper. At daybreak she returned what she had borrowed, replaced the new curtains with the old, and put the furniture back where it belonged so that the house was as poor and decent as it had been until the night before. Then she tore down the press clippings, the portraits, the banners and flags from the abominable campaign, and threw them all in the trash with a final shout.

"You can go to hell!"

A WEEK after the dinner, Homero found the President waiting for him as he left the hospital, with the re-

quest that he accompany him to his hotel. They climbed three flights of steep stairs to a garret that had a single skylight looking out on an ashen sky; clothes were drying on a line stretched across the room. There was also a double bed that took up half the space, a hard chair, a washstand and a portable bidet, and a poor man's armoire with a clouded mirror. The President noted Homer's reaction.

"This is the burrow I lived in when I was a student," he said as if in apology. "I made the reservation from Fort-de-France."

From a velvet bag he removed and displayed on the bed the last remnants of his wealth: several gold bracelets adorned with a variety of precious stones, a three-strand pearl necklace, and two others of gold and precious stones; three gold chains with saints' medals; a pair of gold and emerald earrings, another of gold and diamonds, and a third of gold and rubies; two reliquaries and a locket; eleven rings with all kinds of precious settings; and a diamond tiara worthy of a queen. From a case he took out three pairs of silver cuff links and two of gold, all with matching tie clips, and a pocket watch plated in white gold. Then he removed his six decorations from a shoe box: two of gold, one of silver, and the rest of no value.

"It's all I have left in life," he said.

He had no alternative but to sell it all to meet his medical expenses, and he asked Homero to please do that for him with the greatest discretion. But Homero did not feel he could oblige if he did not have the proper receipts.

The President explained that they were his wife's jewels, a legacy from a grandmother who had lived in colonial times and had inherited a packet of shares in Colombian gold mines. The watch, the cuff links, and tie clips were his. The decorations, of course, had not belonged to anyone before him.

"I don't believe anybody has receipts for these kinds of things," he said.

Homero was adamant.

"In that case," the President reflected, "there's nothing I can do but take care of it myself."

He began to gather up the jewelry with calculated calm. "I beg you to forgive me, my dear Homero, but there is no poverty worse than that of an impoverished president," he said. "Even surviving seems contemptible." At that moment Homero saw him with his heart and laid down his weapons.

Lázara came home late that night. From the door she saw the jewels glittering on the table under the mercurial light, and it was as if she had seen a scorpion in her bed.

"Don't be an idiot, baby," she said, frightened. "Why are those things here?"

Homero's explanation disturbed her even more. She sat down to examine the pieces, one by one, with all the care of a goldsmith. At a certain point she sighed and said, "They must be worth a fortune." At last she sat looking at Homero and could find no way out of her dilemma.

"Damn it," she said. "How can we know if everything that man says is true?"

“Why shouldn’t it be?” said Homero. “I’ve just seen that he washes his own clothes and dries them on a line in his room, just like we do.”

“Because he’s cheap,” said Lázara.

“Or poor,” said Homero.

Lázara examined the jewels again, but now with less attention because she too had been conquered. And so the next morning she put on her best clothes, adorned herself with the pieces that seemed most expensive, wore as many rings as she could on every finger, even her thumb, and all the bracelets that would fit on each arm, and went out to sell them. “Let’s see if anyone asks Lázara Davis for receipts,” she said as she left, strutting with laughter. She chose just the right jewelry store, one with more pretensions than prestige, where she knew they bought and sold without asking too many questions, and she walked in terrified but with a firm step.

A thin, pale salesman in evening dress made a theatrical bow as he kissed her hand and asked how he could help her. Because of the mirrors and intense lights the interior was brighter than the day, and the entire shop seemed made of diamonds. Lázara, almost without looking at the clerk for fear he would see through the farce, followed him to the rear of the store.

He invited her to sit at one of three Louis XV escritoirs that served as individual counters, and over it he spread an immaculate cloth. Then he sat across from Lázara and waited.

“How may I help you?”

She removed the rings, the bracelets, the necklaces, the earrings, everything that she was wearing in plain view,

and began to place them on the escritorio in a chessboard pattern. All she wanted, she said, was to know their true value.

The jeweler put a glass up to his left eye and began to examine the pieces in clinical silence. After a long while, without interrupting his examination, he asked:

"Where are you from?"

Lázara had not anticipated that question.

"Ay, Señor," she sighed, "very far away."

"I can imagine," he said.

He was silent again, while Lázara's terrible golden eyes scrutinized him without mercy. The jeweler devoted special attention to the diamond tiara and set it apart from the other jewelry. Lázara sighed.

"You are a perfect Virgo," she said.

The jeweler did not interrupt his examination.

"How do you know?"

"From the way you behave," said Lázara.

He made no comment until he had finished, and he addressed her with the same circumspection he had used at the beginning.

"Where does all this come from?"

"It's a legacy from my grandmother," said Lázara in a tense voice. "She died last year in Paramaribo, at the age of ninety-seven."

The jeweler looked into her eyes. "I'm very sorry," he said. "But their only value is the weight of the gold." He picked up the tiara with his fingertips and made it sparkle under the dazzling light.

"Except for this," he said. "It is very old, Egyptian perhaps, and would be priceless if it were not for the poor

condition of the diamonds. In any case it has a certain historical value.”

But the stones in the other treasures, the amethysts, emeralds, rubies, opals—all of them, without exception—were fake. “No doubt the originals were good,” said the jeweler as he gathered up the pieces to return them to her. “But they have passed so often from one generation to another that the legitimate stones have been lost along the way and been replaced by bottle glass.” Lázara felt a green nausea, took a deep breath, and controlled her panic. The salesman consoled her:

“It often happens, Madame.”

“I know,” said Lázara, relieved. “That’s why I want to get rid of them.”

She felt then that she was beyond the farce, and became herself again. With no further delay she took the cuff links, the pocket watch, the tie clips, the decorations of gold and silver, and the rest of the President’s personal trinkets out of her handbag and placed them all on the table.

“This too?” asked the jeweler.

“All of it,” said Lázara.

She was paid in Swiss francs that were so new she was afraid her fingers would be stained with fresh ink. She accepted the bills without counting them, and the jeweler’s leave-taking at the door was as ceremonious as his greeting. As he held the glass door open for her, he stopped her for a moment.

“And one final thing, Madame,” he said. “I’m an Aquarius.”

Early that evening Homero and Lázara took the money

to the hotel. After further calculations, they found that a little more money was still needed. And so the President began removing and placing on the bed his wedding ring, his watch and chain, and the cuff links and tie clip he was wearing.

Lázara handed back the ring.

"Not this," she said. "A keepsake like this can't be sold."

The President acknowledged what she said and put the ring back on his finger. Lázara also returned the watch and chain. "Not this either," she said. The President did not agree, but she put him in his place.

"Who'd even try to sell a watch in Switzerland?"

"We already did," said the President.

"Yes, but not the watch. We sold the gold."

"This is gold too," said the President.

"Yes," said Lázara. "You may get by without surgery, but you have to know what time it is."

She would not take his gold-rimmed eyeglasses either, although he had another pair with tortoiseshell frames. She hefted the pieces in her hand, and put an end to all his doubts.

"Besides," she said, "this will be enough."

Before she left she took down his damp clothes, without consulting him, to dry and iron them at home. They rode on the motor scooter, Homero driving and Lázara sitting behind him, her arms around his waist. The streetlights had just turned on in the mauve twilight. The wind had blown away the last leaves, and the trees looked like plucked fossils. A tow truck drove along the Rhône, its radio playing at full volume and leaving a stream of music

along the streets. Georges Brassens was singing: *Mon amour tiens bien la barre, le temps va passer par là, et le temps est un barbare dans le genre d'Attila; par là où son cheval passe l'amour ne repousse pas.* Homero and Lázara rode in silence, intoxicated by the song and the remembered scent of hyacinth. After a while, she seemed to awaken from a long sleep.

"Damn it," she said.

"What?"

"The poor old man," said Lázara. "What a shitty life!"

ON THE following Friday, the seventh of October, the President underwent five hours of surgery that, for the moment, left matters as obscure as they had been before. In the strictest sense, the only consolation was knowing he was alive. After ten days he was moved to a room with other patients, and Homero and Lázara could visit him. He was another man: disoriented and emaciated, his sparse hair fell out at a touch of the pillow. All that was left of his former presence was the fluid grace of his hands. His first attempt at walking with two orthopedic canes was heartbreaking. Lázara stayed and slept at his bedside to save him the expense of a private nurse. One of the other patients in the room spent the first night screaming with his terror of dying. Those endless nights did away with Lázara's last reservations.

Four months after his arrival in Geneva, he was discharged from the hospital. Homero, a meticulous administrator of the President's scant funds, paid the hospital bill and took him home in his ambulance with

other employees who helped carry him to the eighth floor. They put him in the bedroom of the children he never really acknowledged, and little by little he returned to reality. He devoted himself to his rehabilitative exercises with military rigor, and walked again with just his cane. But even in his good clothes from the old days, he was far from being the same man in either appearance or behavior. Fearing the winter that promised to be very severe, and which in fact turned out to be the harshest of the century, he decided, against the advice of his doctors, who wanted to keep him under observation for a while longer, to return home on a ship leaving Marseilles on December 13. At the last minute he did not have enough money for his passage, and without telling her husband Lázara tried to make up the difference with one more scraping from her children's savings, but there too she found less than she expected. Then Homero confessed that without telling her he had used it to finish paying the hospital bill.

"Well," Lázara said in resignation. "Let's say he's our oldest son."

On December 11 they put him on the train to Marseilles in a heavy snowstorm, and it was not until they came home that they found a farewell letter on the children's night table, where he also left his wedding ring for Bárbara, along with his dead wife's wedding band, which he had never tried to sell, and the watch and chain for Lázaro. Since it was a Sunday, some Caribbean neighbors who had learned the secret came to the Cornavin Station with a harp band from Veracruz. The President was gasping for breath in his raffish overcoat and a long multi-

colored scarf that had belonged to Lázara, but even so he stood in the open area of the last car and waved good-bye with his hat in the lashing wind. The train was beginning to accelerate when Homero realized he still had his cane. He ran to the end of the platform and threw it hard enough for the President to catch, but it fell under the wheels and was destroyed. It was a moment of horror. The last thing Lázara saw was the President's trembling hand stretching to grasp the cane and never reaching it, and the conductor who managed to grab the snow-covered old man by his scarf and save him in midair. Lázara ran in utter terror to her husband, trying to laugh behind her tears.

"My God," she shouted, "nothing can kill that man."

He arrived home safe and sound, according to his long telegram of thanks. Nothing more was heard from him for over a year. At last they received a six-page handwritten letter in which it was impossible to recognize him. The pain had returned, as intense and punctual as before, but he had resolved to ignore it and live life as it came. The poet Aimé Césaire had given him another cane, with mother-of-pearl inlay, but he had decided not to use it. For six months he had been eating meat and all kinds of shellfish, and could drink up to twenty cups a day of the bitterest coffee. But he had stopped reading the bottom of the cup, because the predictions never came true. On the day he turned seventy-five, he drank a few glasses of exquisite Martinique rum, which agreed with him, and began to smoke again. He did not feel better, of course, but neither did he feel worse. Nevertheless, the

real reason for the letter was to tell them that he felt tempted to return to his country as the leader of a reform movement—a just cause for the honor of the nation—even if he gained only the poor glory of not dying of old age in his bed. In that sense, the letter ended, his trip to Geneva had been providential.

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