

RODRIGO

Being the dictated record of Don Rodrigo Cervantes de la Noche, notary, of Panama, León, Sevilla, Olinda, and Goa, and of his grandson Pedro Diego Ortiz Cervantes

M. A. Aybar

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For Alexander

Note on the languages. The protocol is given here in the editor's English. Where a word or a sentence stands in Castilian, Portuguese, Tupinambá, Konkani, or the mother-tongue orthography Don Rodrigo devised as a boy for the words his mother said, it stands so because the record itself kept it so: the escribano set some things down in the tongue in which they were said and refused to carry others across, and this edition has translated what he translated and withheld what he withheld. The untranslated is not ornament; it is the part of the account its keeper judged could not be moved from one language into another without ceasing to be the thing that was said.

*Recovered from the diocesan packet at León, in the
shipment of 1604. An account kept as it was left: open.*

PART I: THE NOTARY IN THE INDIES

Panama, 1525–1531

MY GRANDFATHER SAILED FOR THE Indies in the spring of 1525, twenty-five and about to be twenty-six, with a notary's license still smelling of the examiner's ink and a head full of the wrong ideas about what a man crosses an ocean to become; and because I have only ever known him as an old man, I have had to build the young one backward from him, the way you reconstruct a fire from the shape of its ash, and I will tell you honestly, as I go, where I am guessing. Of this much he was certain, and said plainly: that he arrived believing the law to be a kind of lamp a man carried into the dark places of the world, and that the Indies cured him of the belief by stages, gently at the start, and that the first stage was a mule.

He came ashore at Nombre de Dios in a heat that took him, as it would take him again eleven years later on another coast, by both arms; and the first officer of the Church he met in the New World was a bishop standing to his knees in the surf beside a mule that had decided, with the deep theological stubbornness of its kind, to be baptized no further. The bishop was a small round man gone gray, a Franciscan lifted into the mitre by a politics he had never wanted, who wore the office like a borrowed coat two sizes too large and knew that he wore it so; and he looked at my grandfather, the newest and least of the men the ship had set down, and said, "You, son."

"Excellency," said my grandfather.

"Get the mule down for me, and forgive it; in my order a man drew his own, and I never learned the trick of ordering it done."

My grandfather, who had a fresh license and a young man's tender sense of his own dignity, said, "Excellency, I am the notary, not the muleteer."

And the bishop, without heat, with the mild exactness of a man who has already seen to the bottom of the situation and of you, said, "You are the man closest to the mule."

He waded in. He got the mule. And it was, he told me, the first entirely true sentence spoken to him in the New World, and it taught him, before his

trunk was off the sand, the principle that would govern the next six years and, if he was honest, all of them: that in this world the work goes not to the man whose office it is but to the man who is nearest, and that a great deal of what we call duty is only proximity that has stopped apologizing for itself.

I have come to love that bishop, across the distance of a century and a man's whole life, more than the story strictly asks me to, and I think it is because he was the one prince of the Church in my grandfather's telling who knew exactly how badly he fit his throne and blessed things anyway, humbly, as a man does a thing he has been told to do and cannot do well; and because, in the last of his years, the rains took his voice and did not give it back, so that the most powerful man in that province ended it unable to say a word, keeping his half of the world's correspondence in a careful hand at a writing-table by a window, which is to say he ended it as a kind of notary, and my grandfather, who closed his accounts for him, never told me about those silent months without a long pause first, and once, only once, a wet eye that he did not explain and I did not ask him to.

Panama in those years was four notaries in black coats and a heat that undid the ink, and it undid the men too, and I want him to have a body in this book and not only a hand, so let me give him the one he

had at twenty-six: the fever-country wrote itself on him the first year, a salt rash in the crease of every joint, boots gone green in a week, the black coat of his office worn like a penance at noon; he learned to shave by lamplight before the heat came up, to eat when Tomasa said and not when he was hungry, to sleep the siesta like a local and be ashamed of it for exactly one summer. There was an order of precedence among the four notaries so exact and so jealously kept that my grandfather assumed, being young, that it must rest on some deep foundation of law or learning; and he learned on his first solo instrument, a hurried power-of-attorney for a Genoese with a ship to catch, that the order rested on nothing of the kind, that the Latin had nothing to do with it, that the whole grave architecture of who signed above whom was only the ordinary human business of who had been there longest and who had married whose cousin, dressed up in the robes of the profession; and this too the Indies taught him gently, which is to say it let him keep his dignity while it took his illusions, one clean instrument at a time.

And there was Tomasa, who ran the bishop's kitchen and had run the cathedral's before it, and who fed my grandfather across nine years, three more than he served the bishop, a kitchen being a thing that outlasts an office, the plain hot food of a

woman who had decided, without being asked and without announcing it, that this thin serious young man from Castile was hers to keep alive; and it is here, in her kitchen, in the smell of clove and the cocoa she would not let a fevered man refuse, that I want to leave the young Rodrigo for a moment before the deaths come and the comedy of the parrot and the long education of his heart, because it is one of the few rooms of his whole life I can put him in and know that he was, for that hour, simply warm, simply fed, simply young, and not yet the man who would need forgiving.

* * *

The comedy of those years, and there was real comedy in them, the kind that is funny and also true, gathered itself around a parrot and a Dominican; and I have told the story to my own children so often that my wife says I have worn the feathers off it, but I will tell it once more, in order, because my grandfather held that a man who cannot find the comedy in the Church has not yet been close enough to it to love it.

There was in the cathedral a parrot, a yellow-headed Amazon of the kind that lives eighty years and outlasts everyone who teaches it anything, and Tomasa had given it, across nine years of kitchen afternoons, some eighty words of Spanish, most of

them the names of saints and fish and vegetables, because those were the words her days were made of. And there was Fray Honorato de Briviesca, Dominican of San Esteban, the second son of a minor royal house of Old Castile, which is to say a man of excellent blood and no lands, no title and no money, all three having gone by primogeniture to an elder brother he named in every conversation only to set himself above the present company; a man of a refinement so complete and so wasted upon that coast that it had curdled into a standing grievance against the whole of creation for failing to rise to it. He had one great and particular love, which was camarones al ajillo, the Friday shrimp, and he could not leave the kitchen's making of them alone: the garlic exactly so, neither raw nor burnt; the shrimp off the morning boat and not the afternoon; the parsley chopped and never torn. He inspected Tomasa's kitchen each Friday with the air of a man conferring a favor on a grateful world.

Tomasa bore it three weeks. In the fourth she gave the parrot the sentence the whole kitchen had been saying behind the friar's back, in the singsong of a Sevilla market stall: "Fray Honorato, bueno, bonito y barato." Good, and pretty, and cheap. The bird had it by heart in a day, and because both things had gone into its head the same week it married the

rhyme forever to the shrimp, so that ever after, at the sight of any Dominican or the smell of any garlic, it would announce, to the antechamber, to the chapter, to God Himself: "Fray Honorato. Bueno, bonito y barato. Los camarones al ajillo. El ajo justo."

Honorato demanded a trial. He demanded it in the chapter house, in form, and here is the part my grandfather loved and made me write down twice: that the friar, given the floor, delivered a syllogism of forty minutes on whether a creature lacking a rational soul that nonetheless appears to speak, and to speak blasphemy, incurs the guilt of one who speaks understanding; a genuinely subtle question, he built it beautifully, Aquinas laid course upon course, and he was, my grandfather said, very likely the finest mind within a thousand leagues, and it had done him not one particle of good, because when he had finished, and the chapter sat stunned under the weight of his Latin, the bishop had the parrot brought in on Tomasa's wrist, as he had ordered, so that the accused might be present at its own cause; and the bird, which had been silent the whole forty minutes, cocked its head at the friar and said, in Tomasa's kitchen Castilian, "Fray Honorato. Bueno, bonito y barato," and the whole question of souls and mimicry and guilt was answered, not by the answer but by the laughter, because the bishop laughed. Once. A single

bark of it, quickly gathered back behind the episcopal hand, because a laugh in a chapter house is rationed; and he ruled for the parrot, and the parrot went back to the kitchen on Tomasa's wrist, and my grandfather drew up the acta, and understood, drawing it, that he had just recorded the truest thing the Church did in his six years there, which was to be laughed at, once, by its own bishop, and to survive it, and to let the bird live. Honorato never forgave the bird and never stopped ordering the shrimp, and there is something in that, my grandfather said, that is the whole of us: that we go on loving what mocks us, at table, on Fridays, and call it appetite.

* * *

But the Indies did not leave a young man long in the country of comedy, and the next spring it took him across the border into the other country and kept him there a fortnight. The fever came up from the lake ports in the March of 1529, and by the third week the church was burying three a day, and my grandfather, in his official capacity, drafted nine instruments of death across nine afternoons, and I want to name them the way he named them to me, slowly, because he said that the naming was the only funeral some of them got. A Sevillian widow of forty. Her cook, a Nicarao woman of about thirty the house

called Mariana, whose Nicarao name my grandfather set down in the acta at her mother's instruction, in the doorway, because a woman should go into the ground under the name her mother called her and not the name a household found convenient. A Genoese clerk of twenty-four. A Franciscan novice of nineteen whose mother in Sevilla would not believe it until the following March. A stevedore whose three sons would go into the governor's kitchen as Tomasa's apprentices. A baker whose ovens his widow would work for their daughters' dowries. A clerk of the alcalde. And two children, a girl of seven and her brother of four, whose parents had gone the week before, and whose burials my grandfather conducted himself, and paid for himself out of the parish fee, and registered without charge, on the principle, which he made that fortnight and kept the rest of his life, that the burial of a child whose parents are already in the ground is the one instrument a notary signs for nothing.

There was no marked grave for Mariana, and he could not make one, but he carved a cross for her of mahogany, badly, with a borrowed knife, over three evenings, the work of a man who had never carved anything and would never carve anything again, and set it where they told him she lay; and forty years on it was the making of that cross, and not the nine acts,

that he could not tell me about without stopping.

And there was her son. He was fifteen at her death, and the parish roll had him as Pedro and his mother's kitchen had called him Yutey, and he answered to both, at both doors, and hesitated at neither; and when my grandfather went, in the week after the burial, to enter him in the parish list of the fever's survivors and asked which name to write, the boy said, "Don Rodrigo. Pedro en la calle. Yutey en la cocina. Lo mismo que con mi madre. Si me pone usted los dos en el papel, los dos están bien." Pedro in the street, Yutey in the kitchen. The same as with my mother. If you put both on the paper, both are right. And my grandfather put both on the paper, and told me, nearly forty years later, that it was the first time it had occurred to him that a document could be made to hold two truths at once without choosing between them, and that he had spent the rest of his life trying to build a book that could do what a grieving boy of fifteen had asked of a list.

The ninth act he wrote the evening before, and the next morning, before the heat, he went down to Lake Xolotlán and sat on the wooden bench at the south end of the fishing dock, the one the harbor-master kept there for any officer who wanted to look at the water without being spoken to, and he sat from ten in the morning until the first light of the

following day. He did not sleep and he did not pray and he did not think in any ordered way. He carried, across those hours, the arithmetic of a man of twenty-nine with nine instruments of death in his case from a single fortnight, and somewhere in the dark he understood the thing he would wait thirty-seven years to say in a sentence, and would finally say to me at that table, which was that the nine acts had been the work of his own hand, and that the work of his own hand was the only honest record any of those nine houses would keep of the leaving, and that this, and not the law and not the light he had imagined carrying into the dark, was the whole of what a notary was for: to be the one who stayed at the bench until first light and wrote down that they had been here, and were gone, and were mourned by at least the man who signed the page.

His mother had given him, before the law ever did, a way of writing. She was of the islands, carried to Sevilla in the transports of his grandfather's generation, and she had taught him as a boy that any sound a person can make can be set down, if the writer will only bend the letters to the sound instead of the sound to the letters, which is the opposite of what the schools later tried, and failed, to beat out of him. So when a Mexica merchant, held three days at the lake wharf over a dispute of cargo, taught him a

single sentence at the close of the second day's business, my grandfather wrote it down as his mother had taught him, in an orthography of his own devising for which no key survives, in the right margin of the kitchen vocabulary he was keeping with Tomasa, at entry two hundred and forty-seven; and it is there still, a sentence no one now alive can read, and I have let it stand unread, because it is the truest monument he left to the woman who made him, she being herself now a sentence no one can read, and he wanted it so, and I do not translate what he chose not to.

That was the winter the fever touched him too, lightly, and Tomasa, who had seen it coming in the set of his eyes at supper, had the cocoa ready at half past five with the clove and the honey her own mother had taught her, and set it down before him without a word, and sat across the table until he drank it, and filled it again, and he drank the second, and the fever broke on the third night. He said afterward that he had learned more theology from Tomasa declining to let a man refuse a cup than from all of Fray Honorato's Latin, because hers was the theology of the kitchen, which holds that the answer to death is not an argument but a cup, set down in front of you, and set down again, until you drink.

Pedrarias Dávila died at first light on the sixth of March 1531, four days past his ninety-first birthday, gripping the cane he had gripped through a long life of making other men grip theirs, and my grandfather took the inventory of the great house the same day, in the same hand he had used for the widow and the baker and the two children, with the single difference that this was the instrument of the man who had signed the paper that first set him in that country. The funeral was Fray Honorato's, forty-five minutes of Latin over a man who had understood none of it living and needed none of it dead, and the body went to the crypt, and Tomasa stood at the back, and that night, over the pot in the emptied kitchen, she said the thing my grandfather carried folded in his coat for thirty-four years. She said it looking at the pot and not at him. "Don Rodrigo. Pedrarias está enterrado, y bien enterrado, que buena falta le hacía el descanso al pobre. Yo he cocinado para gobernadores y para estibadores y para el niño que se murió el martes en la casa de la esquina, y a todos les da el mismo hambre a las siete, y a todos se les enfría la olla igual si nadie la atiza. Yo lo supe el día que enterré al mío, que tenía la edad de la niña de la esquina, y volví a la cocina esa misma noche, porque los otros seguían teniendo hambre y el hambre no espera al luto. La cocina sigue. La cocina siempre sigue.

Coma usted el pan." Pedrarias is buried, and well buried, the poor man needed the rest; she had cooked for governors and for stevedores and for the child who died on Tuesday in the corner house, and all of them got the same hunger at seven, and the pot cooled the same for all of them if nobody stirred the fire; she had learned it the day she buried her own son, the age of the corner-house girl, and had gone back to the kitchen that same night, because the others were still hungry and hunger does not wait for grief. The kitchen goes on. The kitchen always goes on. Eat your bread. And my grandfather, who could find the word for anything, found none for that, and ate the bread, and kept the sentence.

He had, that same season, commissioned a chest of Honduras cedar from Esteban Ruiz, a Sevillian cabinet-maker gone to Panama by way of every port a man goes by, with a lock Ruiz was proud of and did not know was pickable, and into it my grandfather put the three letters he was sending home to Sevilla, and watched the arca that carried it go down the harbor with his four-year-old daughter waiting at the far end of the sea; and he learned, that morning on the dock, standing with his papers all in order and his affairs all arranged, that a man can be the most prepared person in a harbor and still the least informed, because the one thing he had not arranged, had not

even known to arrange, was that he would not be on the ship, that the farewell he was performing so correctly would not be followed by any departure, that he would turn from the dock and buy a solar for a warehouse and tell himself it was a matter of months, and that the months would be years, and the years would take him to another coast and another mill and another woman and back, and that the little girl would be a grown woman in a doorway before he crossed that water himself.

* * *

And there was the bishop, at the last. The rains of 1530 had taken his voice and not given it back, and the most powerful man in the province kept his half of the world's correspondence in a careful hand at the writing-table by the window, a praying man made mute, which my grandfather could never speak of without the long pause first. He closed the bishop's accounts in the spring of 1531, one hundred and forty-eight registers across eleven years, and delivered the summary in the upper room, and the bishop read it through in silence, and nodded once, and set it on the table. Then the bishop wrote out, by his own hand, mute, in the upright posture of a man who has lost the voice and not the hand, the carta de despedida of his notary, the letter of farewell, and

dried it and folded it and sealed it and put it into my grandfather's hands, and embraced him, the careful embrace of a man of sixty-three who has come, across six years, to count a clerk as the second of the three men he leaned on, the first being his old vicar, gone the year before, and the third being God, and who knows the second is now going after the first. And my grandfather went home and wrote a second despedida, to himself, three pages, which he never read aloud to anyone and which would ride in his case to a room in Salamanca thirty-four years later, where he would take it out on the third Wednesday, and not read it aloud even then, and say only, "Pedrito. Hay cartas que el escribano se escribe a sí mismo y no se leen en voz alta. Ésta es una." There are letters a notary writes to himself and does not read aloud. This is one. And he folded it and put it back, and I never learned what it said, and I have made my peace with not knowing, which is the first of the many peaces this book asked me to make.

PART II: THE HOUSE AT SEVILLA

Sevilla, 1535–1536

HE CAME BACK ACROSS THE water in the autumn of 1535, thirty-six years old, with an empty warehouse behind him in Panama and a debt ahead of him he had not yet met, and he took again the high room on the calle del Aire that Doña Felisa kept, who ranked her lodgers in a private taxonomy and had moved him, in his absence, into the second rank, which was reserved, she told him without unkindness, for the men who have lost twice and do not complain of it, who cook in silence and eat in silence and pay on time. He was, my grandfather said, oddly comforted to be so ranked, because it was accurate, and accuracy was the one tenderness the world had never denied him.

And Catalina came down from Salamanca with her aunt Mencía in the second week of October, eight years old, and I have to tell the abrazo, because it is the wound the whole book keeps pressing to see if it still bleeds, and it always does. She had crossed four days of post-road, he learned later, deciding what a father was, and she had settled it, with the terrible economy of a child: a father is a man with nothing in his hands. Mencía had told her, in the coach, that she was not to let herself be embraced until she embraced first, so that nothing would be done to her that she had not chosen; and so Catalina came up the stair and looked first at his hands, to see that they were empty, and only then at his face, and she said, "Padre. Aquí estoy. Soy Catalina. Tía Mencía dice que no la abrace usted hasta que yo le abrace primero, para no sobresaltarme." Father, here I am, I am Catalina; Aunt Mencía says you are not to embrace me until I embrace you first, so that I am not startled. And there was a pause, he said, the exact length of a small child doing arithmetic, and then she said, "Yo le abrazo ahora. Es el primero." I embrace you now. It is the first. And she began, in that sentence, without either of them understanding it for years, the count she would keep her whole life, the ledger set against his ledger, the tally of the embraces a father and a daughter did not give across an ocean and

could never now be given, so that of the two accountants in my family it was the eight-year-old who kept the truer book. I have four children. I have never once been able to read that sentence of hers aloud to them without stopping, and I have stopped trying to pretend the stopping is anything but what it is.

Of the two hundred and three letters of her growing-up that went out to him across the water, I have one, because he kept it folded into the Erasmus with the few things he could not carry loose, and I will give it whole, because the relay was an abstraction to me until my mother's child-hand made it a knife. It is from her seventh year, when he was still in Panama. "Padre. La tía dice que el mar tiene otro lado y que usted está en él. Yo no lo creo. Yo fui a mirar el mar en Sanlúcar con la tía y no se ve ningún lado. Si tiene otro lado, escíbame qué se ve desde allí. Aquí se ve el agua y luego nada. Su hija, Catalina, que ya sabe las cuatro reglas." Father: the aunt says the sea has another side and that you are on it. I do not believe it. I went to look at the sea at Sanlúcar with the aunt and no side can be seen. If it has another side, write me what can be seen from there. Here one sees the water and then nothing. Your daughter, Catalina, who now knows the four rules of arithmetic. He answered it, he told me, with three pages on what could be

seen from the other side, the pelicans and the green water and the mule of a bishop; and he told me also that every word of the three pages was true and that the letter was nevertheless the great lie of his life, because what could truly be seen from the other side was the warehouse, and the months becoming years, and he did not write that.

Mencía I must come to carefully, because he did, and because she is the hinge of a door he kept shut for fifty years and opened, at the last, only the width of a letter. She was Beatriz's cousin, and she had kept Catalina in the house on the calle de Toro since the child was four, and she and Doña Margarita ran between them the relay that carried the daughter's whole growing-up across the years, two hundred and three letters going one way and a hundred and ninety-nine the other. In that November of 1535 she wrote him seven pages, and I do not reproduce them, because they were the private form of two cousins who had not met since 1518 and never would again, and because the last paragraph of them said the thing for which there is no second saying. But I can tell you where that paragraph came from, because he told me, at the table, with the cat asleep and the lamp low, in the one confession he made me swear to keep gently.

He had known Mencía before he ever knew Beatriz. It was in Salamanca, the summer of 1516, she twenty-seven and he seventeen, and for four months she was to him what an older woman who laughs at exactly the right things is to a boy of seventeen: a cascade, he said, water falling fast and clear and without effort, that you could hear from the far end of the house, and she talked the way that water fell, three things for every one he managed, and the three of them better. It was not prudent and it was not long and it was no one's fault when it ended that autumn, in the kind and unspoken way that things end which neither party can yet carry; and the next year she brought him home to meet her cousin Beatriz, who spoke little and well, and Beatriz he married, and Mencía he did not see again, because the two cousins, for reasons that were theirs and that this book will not go looking for, did not meet again. I have wondered whether Beatriz ever knew, and I have decided that a woman who spoke little and well knows everything, and that her silence on it was the largest and least legible entry in the whole account. And here is the thing my grandfather made me understand, the distinction his whole heart turned on: that Mencía was the water you hear from the far end of the house, and Beatriz was the water that makes no sound because it is the house; that the one was the

first sweetness and the other the deep one; that they do not compare and were never asked to; and that he had the fortune, and the misfortune, to have known them both, and to have buried the second at León de Nicaragua in the autumn of 1528 into a silence this book has honored and will go on honoring, because the omission is the record, and some water you do not name.

* * *

There was the other Sevilla too, the loud and lit one, and it gathered on Wednesday evenings at the corner table and then the long table of Banco Anselmi, and I give it to you as my grandfather gave it to me, as a quartet, because he said you never understood a man in that city by getting him alone, only by hearing him against the others. Don Sancho Anselmi sat at the head and ran the talk the way he ran an account, opening on the largest entry and closing it before it could cost him, his chocolate rising and falling at his elbow cup after cup while the guests' Madeira was poured once and never refilled; and he had opened my grandfather a thousand ducats against nothing but the man, on the reasoning, which he stated once and never softened, that a man who paid in Panama would pay in Sevilla, "y la regla es la regla," the rule being the rule, and had leaned in

over the second Madeira to give my grandfather the one article of faith he never entered in any book: "Un banco, Don Rodrigo, es como el pulpo: muchos brazos, un solo estómago, y tinta de sobra para enturbiar el agua cuando conviene." Many arms, one belly, and ink enough to cloud the water when it suits. At the foot of the table Doña Margarita smoked the Indies tobacco she alone allowed herself in that city and governed the smoke with her fan the way a judge governs a room, keeping it off the men she liked and letting it drift, with a carelessness that was nothing of the kind, toward the ones she had measured and found short; and when a Genoese factor praised his own scheme a third time she closed the fan with a snap that in her grammar was a verdict and said, with all the courtesy in the world and no mercy in it, "Señor, un negocio que se explica tres veces es que no se sostiene una." A business that must be explained three times, sir, is one that does not stand up once. And at Don Sancho's right hand sat Antonio Lourenço, who undid every number the table produced back into a person, "Menino," he would say, to Anselmi, to my grandfather, to the room, "el precio no sube ni baja, sube y baja el hombre," the price does not rise or fall, it is the man who rises and falls, and who was, my grandfather said, the wisest man he ever loved and the only one who was never once, in

thirty years, unkind; so that between Anselmi who counted and Antonio who wept and Margarita who judged, my grandfather sat and kept still and ordered the table inside himself as he ordered a protocol, and learned the city, which is to say learned that a table is a small orchestra and that a man is the instrument he cannot help being.

And the table handled the world as well as the wharf, and this is where my grandfather learned the size of the machine he was a screw in. It was there he heard the Emperor's finances discussed the way Tomasa discussed a pot, practically, without reverence: that the silver came up the river to Sevilla and was German before it dried, pledged to the bankers of Augsburg against loans already spent; that the Crown borrowed against fleets not yet built, cargoes not yet grown, souls not yet baptized; and Anselmi would tap the table once and observe that the greatest lender in Christendom was owed by the greatest debtor in Christendom, "y la regla es la regla, también para el César," the rule is the rule, for Caesar too. And Margarita, through her smoke, gave the verdict my grandfather called the truest sentence of political philosophy he ever heard at a table: "El imperio, señores, es un negocio que se explica tres veces." An empire, gentlemen, is a business that has to be explained three times. The table laughed; Antonio

did not; and when my grandfather asked him after, on the stair, why he had not, Antonio said, “Menino, porque en la tercera explicación siempre hay un hombre con un hacha.” Because in the third explanation there is always a man with a hatchet. My grandfather wrote that down the same night, not knowing yet that he would spend five years of his life in the third explanation, within reach of the nail where the hatchet hung.

And it was at that table, in the spring of 1536, that the brazilwood was conceived, brought to it by a partner named Aníbal Mendieta who trusted his own arithmetic the way other men trust their salvation, and whose arithmetic was beautiful; and my grandfather, who could see that the beauty was real and the venture doomed and that he would sign it anyway because he needed it more than it needed him, wrote himself a letter on the eve of sailing and folded it into the Erasmus he carried, and did not read it again for thirty years. What the venture made of him is Part III, and I will tell it as he told it to me, first and most often, the way you press first on the place that hurts. But he sailed to it from this table and this city and this daughter and this shut door, and a man should be seen setting out warm and surrounded before you follow him into the heat, so that you feel, as I have never stopped feeling, the exact distance of the fall.

PART III: THE ENGENHO

Olinda and Espírito Santo, 1536–1541

OF ALL THE YEARS MY grandfather laid down for me across those eighty-six Wednesday afternoons, it was the Brazilian ones he returned to most often and entered most slowly, the way a man goes back into the single room of a house he has never quite finished walking out of; so let me take you into them as he took me, not by the ledger, which came afterward and did its lying by telling the truth, but by the smell, which came first and never left: the burnt-sugar reek that stood over the engenho of Espírito Santo, the sugar mill and the whole world that fed it, like a second weather, sweet past sweetness, thick enough to lean on. He came ashore at Olinda in the May of 1536 into a heat that did not so much fall on him as take him by both arms, and Don Cristóvão of the Pereira Coutin-

ho line embraced him before he had said a word, with that wide Portuguese warmth I have come to understand was the warmth of a man who has already decided what you are worth to him and is only waiting, pleasantly, for you to catch up. "Bem-vindo, bem-vindo," he said, "à melhor terra que Deus fez e o diabo administra," welcome, welcome, to the best land God made and the devil administers, laughing as though the line were fresh; and behind him, not laughing, not moving, stood the Tupinambá man the Coutinhos called their guide and who called himself, when he chose to, Aimoré, watching my grandfather with the flat unhurried attention of a person measuring exactly how long a guest intends to stay.

The engenho did not announce itself as cruelty; that was the first thing, and the thing he understood far too late, that it announced itself as work, as industry, as the good and reasonable turning of green cane into white money, and that the cruelty was not a departure from the labor but its engine, the way fire is not a flaw in the lamp but the whole of its purpose. There was a woman, and he gave me her name before he gave me anything else about the place, as though the name were a debt he was paying late: Inhaia, who fed the great rollers of the moenda on the night shift because her hands were quick, and the rollers were without mercy to the slow. Beside them,

on a nail, hung a hatchet, and it hung in every mill in that country for one reason, which the overseers explained to him his first night with the pride of practical men explaining a sensible tool: that when the rollers took a hand, the hand did not come back, and the arm followed the hand, and the shoulder the arm, and the whole person was drawn in and crushed, cane and blood together, unless someone near was quick enough to take up the hatchet and strike the arm off at the elbow before the mill could have the rest. The hatchet was the mercy. That was the thing he could never get past, forty years on, in a warm room in Salamanca with a cat asleep by the inkpot: not the rollers, but that in that place the hatchet was the mercy; and he had seen it used, once, in his second week, and for thirty years he kept that seeing folded into half a sentence, and in the second year of the Wednesdays he unfolded it, and made it a night, and made me write the night.

He had heard the singing his first week and thought it was custom, the way a new man thinks everything he does not understand is custom. There was a song at the rollers on the night shift, low, antiphonal, one voice laying a line down and the others returning it, hour upon hour, and it never stopped while the mill turned; and it was Cristóvão who explained it to him, at supper, over wine, in the pleas-

ant voice of a man showing a guest the cleverness of his house: "Cantam para guardar as mãos, Don Rodrigo. A mão entra na linha e sai na resposta. Quem guarda a cantiga guarda as mãos. É a segurança mais barata do mundo, e ainda canta." They sing to keep their hands. The hand goes in on the line and comes out on the answer. Whoever keeps the song keeps her hands. It is the cheapest safety in the world, and it sings. And my grandfather said that from that supper on he could never again hear singing anywhere, in a church, in a kitchen, at a wedding, without listening for the machine underneath it.

And on a night in his second week the song faltered. A woman had been put new to the second feed that evening, and her name was Potira, and the line came to her and she was tired in the way that is past the reach of song, and she returned it late, half a breath late, no more; and the rollers, which knew nothing, which had never been taught anything, took her right hand as evenly as they took the cane. My grandfather was at the door with his lantern and his book. He saw the oldest man on the shift, a man whose own left arm ended at the wrist, come off his station without hurry, the way a man moves who has done a thing twice in his life and had hoped to die before doing it a third time, and take the hatchet down off its nail, and strike once, at the elbow, exact;

and then go down with her into the crushed cane and hold her, while two others tied the arm off with a strip torn from her own shift; and the rollers did not stop, because a mill that stops in the harvest is money burning, and the song came back, he said, before the blood was sanded over. It had to come back. There were other hands on the line. He stood in the door and did not look away, and he made me set down that the not looking away was not courage, that he could not have moved if the mill itself had caught fire, and that there is no credit in it anywhere.

The next morning he opened his book and entered the night against the account, in a fair round hand, one woman, reduced in value; and the entry did not ask her name, and he did not give it, and this book, which is not his, is the first of his books to hold it: Potira. He found the words that morning, because he always found the words, and the words were the sin.

I have to tell this slowly, because he told it slowly, and because I have spent the better part of my life deciding whether a man who writes a thing down is absolved by the writing or condemned more deeply by it, and I have not decided, and I no longer believe the account was meant to let me.

And yet in the same season, in the same wet un-breaking heat, three leagues down the coast at Olinda, there was Dona Violetta, widow of the Coutinho factor, and I have to tell that too, because a book that gave you only the mill and not the widow would be telling you a lie about what a man is, which is that a man is never only one thing. He came to her the first time the way a clerk comes to a grief, with a document in his hand, to read her aloud the letter her husband had dictated on the last morning of his life, because she had told the house, and meant it, that she could not open it alone. When he finished she did not weep as he had braced for; she said only, "Otra vez," and he read it again, and again, four times through the falling afternoon, until the words stopped being her husband's and became weather in the room, and the distance a widow and a widower are supposed to keep had thinned to the width of the sheet between them, and neither of them was reading anymore.

He rode to her after that, the three leagues from Espírito Santo to Olinda, most often at night, and I want you to ride it with him, because he made me ride it in the telling every time. For the first league the cane-smoke came with him, in his clothes and his hair, the smell of the day's arithmetic, of Inhaia and the hatchet and the coppers; and then the road bent

toward the sea and the wind thinned it strand by strand, until the salt took over, cool and rank and living; and by the third league, as the white town rose, there was another thread coming in under the salt, the jasmine she grew against the courtyard wall in clay pots because it reminded her of a country she would not see again. So the road itself did the carrying, cruelty to tenderness by way of the sea, and he never made that ride without feeling the exact league at which he stopped being the man with the book and became the man she was waiting for. What came of those nights he would not let me tell in my own hand, and he was right to stop me; so here I gave him the pen.

She undressed me slowly and without shyness, the way you handle a thing you have already decided is yours, and then her own shift came over her head in one motion and there was all of her in the lamplight, the heavy dark-nippled breasts of a woman who had nursed and buried, the soft belt of her middle that she did not hide and I would not have let her, and she came down over me on the low wide bed with the net moving around us like water disturbed. She took me in her hand and guided me, unhurried, watching my face, and then she was over me and I was in her to the root in one long slow descent that pulled the breath from us both, and she held there with her eyes shut and her thighs gripping, and then

she began to move, and the sweat came up between us and ran, and I put my hands on the great warm swell of her hips and let her set the pace, which was the pace of a woman who has all night and means to use it; and the coast came into the room, the jasmine and, still, under it, the cane-smoke I had ridden in on, so that even at the height of her, even with her breath gone ragged and her nails set in my chest and my own end climbing in me like fire up a wick, I breathed the two together and could not get the one loose from the other. When I broke it was with a cry I did not know I had in me, and she rode it out of me slow and complete and did not stop until she had taken her own, shuddering down over me with her face in my neck, and we lay welded there, her heart going against my ribs, breathing the one braided air. God forgive me, I did not think of the mill. That is the confession under the confession: not that I sinned in her bed, which was no sin, but that her bed was the one place in that country where I could stop hearing the rollers turn.

He came back to me then with a small dry cough, as if to apologize for the heat of it, and said only, "Apúntalo, Pedrito. Todo. Lo dulce también." Write it down. All of it. The sweet part too.

He came back from Olinda remade, and the first thing the mill handed him each dawn to remake him

with was the boiling house. If the bed was the one room in that country where the heat meant tenderness, the casa das caldeiras was the room the country kept for its other heat, the heat it had decided certain human beings existed to stand inside of until they could no longer stand. The Portuguese who had been long on that coast had a name for it they used without irony, the way a man names a tool. They called it o inferno. Hell. They were not being poets; they were being exact, and every priest who blessed the harvest knew it and blessed it anyway, and my grandfather kept the book of the harvest in a fair round hand and came to understand that he was one more priest of it, the clerk of hell. There was a man at the third copper called Cauã, whose own name was never entered anywhere, and one morning in my grandfather's third month he simply folded and went down between the furnace mouths, boiled and stopped at once, and it was, the overseer said, a mercy, because the coppers rarely let a man go so quick; and my grandfather stood in the red light and understood that here was the day's other mercy, the twin of the hatchet, and that he had a page for it, and that he would fill it: one man, of the third copper, spent. Spent. He chose the word himself. No one made him choose it. A lie he could have repented; the truth he had merely recorded.

Aimoré was at the door, as he was often at the door of the places my grandfather had to enter, never going in, and he watched him come out of the boiling house with the ledger under his arm and the red light going off his face, and said nothing, because he had said the only thing he meant to say on the first night and did not intend to say it twice, that the mill was the white man's house and the road outside it was his; and my grandfather told me the not-saying was the loudest sentence anyone spoke to him in that country, a silence held at exactly the pitch of a man watching you learn what you are and declining to spare you the lesson.

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There is one more night of Olinda that he gave me whole, from the middle of those years, and he gave it because, he said, a love that is only its first night and its last is a lie told twice, and the truth of a thing lives in its Tuesdays. So: a Tuesday. He took the pen.

She talked that night, after, which she had never done. The lamp was low and the net was still, and she lay with her head on my arm and one leg across me and told me, in the flat voice a woman keeps for the things that have stopped being stories, where she was from: Viana, in the north of Portugal, where the river comes down to the sea;

a courtyard with her mother's jasmine in it; a marriage at sixteen to a man of thirty-nine because the houses wanted the alliance, and the crossing after him, first to Lisboa and then over the whole of the ocean; a boy she buried in Lisboa before his second year, and a girl she buried at Olinda inside her first. So that when I had seen her that first night in the lamplight, the body of a woman who had nursed and buried, I had been reading an inscription without knowing where the graves were. She said all of it dry-eyed, and then she took my hand and laid it on the soft of her belly, on the silver marks the children had left in her skin, and said, Esto es lo que queda de ellos. Tócalo. This is what remains of them. Touch it. And I touched it, and that was the door into the second time, which went slow because we made it slow, on purpose, with the whole night laid out ahead of us like a coast; she came over me laughing at something she had found, three grey hairs at my temple, and counted them against my ear like a miser, tres, escribano, tres, and the laughing went down into the kissing and the kissing went down into the rest, and I was in her again, deep and unhurried, her hips learning mine and mine learning hers until the learning was itself the pleasure; and when her time came it came quietly, a long gripping shudder with her brow pressed against my brow and her breath inside my mouth, and when mine came, a moment behind, she took my face in both her hands and watched me all the way through it, and would not let me

hide, which no one in my life had done before or has done since. After, we went down barefoot to her kitchen and ate bread with the lemons of her own wall, which she preserved in salt the way her mother had in Viana, and she stood at the window with nothing on her, unashamed, the sea faint beyond the roofs, and said that the jasmine was her mother's and the lemons were her mother's and that a woman carries her country in clay pots. And I rode home in the first grey with salt and lemon on my mouth, and the mill took me back at the gate, as it always did, and I let it, as I always did.

I will set one thing against that night, because he set it there himself and held it there: the jasmine in those pots was watered before dawn by a girl of twelve whom the house owned, as it owned the well-rope and the shutters, and the bread they ate barefoot had been ground and baked by hands the house owned too; there was no room in that country, not the mill's and not the widow's, that the thing was not in, and he knew it that night, and he ate the bread. I have now written twice in this book that he ate the bread, once in a kitchen in Panama and once in a kitchen in Olinda, and I mean for the two to sit on the one page and be read together.

He did not cough when he came back to me, that time. He was quiet a while, and then he said, "Los martes, Pedrito. Cuando quieras saber si un hombre

amó de verdad, no preguntes por la primera noche ni por la última. Pregunta por los martes.” When you want to know whether a man truly loved, do not ask about the first night or the last. Ask about the Tuesdays.

For the better part of two years the two roads held, the mill-road and the Violetta-road, and a man can live a long time on two roads if he never lets them cross, and the not-letting became the true labor of those years.

There was an evening in the middle of those two years that I set down because he set it down and made me leave it exactly where it fell, and because it is the one thing in the whole Brazilian account that is not about him. He came on Aimoré at the edge of the clearing at dusk, sitting with a boy of the coastal people, teaching him to read a certain reach of the river, the names of the pools and where the fish lay in which month, a long patient handing-down in a tongue my grandfather had no share of; and Aimoré did not look up, and did not perform it for the man at the tree line, and did not know or care that he was watched, because for once he was not watching back. My grandfather stood a while and then went in. He never learned the boy’s name and never asked. It was Aimoré’s evening and Aimoré’s boy and Aimoré’s river, and it is in this book only as the one

page that belongs wholly to him and not at all to the man whose account this is.

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Then the project failed, in the ordinary way large plans fail, not by catastrophe but by an absence: the two Norman captains who were to carry the brazil-wood north, under a contract it was better not to show in Lisboa, the dye-wood being the King of Portugal's monopoly and the Normans being the men who ignored it, did not come in the November of 1539, and did not come, and my grandfather waited five months on the Olinda dock watching the sea give him nothing, and understood at last that the loss the letter of 1536 had foreseen had arrived on schedule, unhurried, the way everything true arrived in that country.

So began the fifteen months of closing the engenho in good order, and it was in those months that he did the one thing of that whole country he permitted himself to set down without the word sin beside it, and even that he would not let me call atonement. He wrote eight cartas de manumissão. He freed eight people, with the partido's money and, when it was not enough, with his own, and among the eight he saw to it, without a word to Cristóvão, that Inhaia's name was set down first, and Potira's second; and

Potira's carta cost less than any of the eight, and he made me set down why it cost less, and I will not soften what he would not: the mill had already taken the difference. But there were twenty-one, and thirteen were never his to free, because in the partilha, the dividing of the partnership's goods, they had already gone south to the Lisbon partner's engenho three rivers down, and no carta followed them there; and he kept the number in his private book to the day he died: eight freed, thirteen sent on, and he made me write both, because a book that gave you the eight and not the thirteen would be doing exactly what he had done, which was to let the good he could reach stand in for the good he could not, and call the account closed.

Aimoré carried the eight to the coastal villages himself, on the inland paths that were his. Inhaia was in the yard the morning he took them, and my grandfather came out onto the step, and she looked at him once, not long, with exactly the flat unhurried look that had measured him at the water's edge five years before, a look with no thanks in it and no hatred in it either, only the full and accurate measure of the man on the step; and then she turned to the gate and did not look at him again, and he told me that her not looking back was the only payment of those years he ever felt to be just, because her freedom, if

the paper was to be worth anything, had to include the freedom never to spend another look on him. When it was done Aimoré came to the office door and did not stand in it, and told my grandfather that his uncle was dying and the village had called him back; and he said the sentence he had said once at the first fire five years before, turned by the smallest degree into the cadence a leaving requires, the sentence this manuscript keeps in his tongue and does not translate: *Arerobiáne nde arasý, ko 'arýpe, abá nde rerekoara*. And he walked into the trees and did not look back.

And there was the leaving of Violetta, and here he took the pen again.

She knew before I told her, from the set of my shoulders in the door. She did not weep and did not ask me to stay, because she had buried a husband and knew the difference between a man who can be kept and a man already on the water. She took me that last night with a fierceness that was half grief, saying my name and only my name against my ear as if to set it somewhere the sea could not reach; and in the morning she put into my hand a single flower off the lemon tree by the wall, pressed already flat between two leaves of paper as though she had prepared it days before, and said, Para que te acuerdes de lo dulce y no sólo de lo otro. So that you remember the sweet and not only the other. And I have carried it, and

carry it still.

He gave the pen back, and did not speak for a while, and then said only, "Apúntalo." And I have. He came out of Brazil carrying a pressed flower and a private column of thirteen names, the sweet and the other, in the same coat, against the same heart, and he spent the next fifty years unable to set either one down; and this, and not the ledger and not even the love, is the man.

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He came back to Sevilla in the summer of 1541 with the flower and the names in the same coat, and Catalina was fourteen, and she met him on the stair of the house on the calle de Toro, standing one step above him so that their eyes were level, which he understood at once she had arranged. She looked at his hands first, as at eight. They were empty. And then she said the sentence my mother never repeated to me entire and he never repeated to anyone, of which I have only the opening, because at the table, thirty years on, his voice went out in the middle of it the way a candle goes in a draught: that an embrace, Padre, is a thing that must be learned anew every six years, because the body it is owed to is no longer the body that was owed it, and, and there the sentence ends for this book, and I have left the rest of it on the

stair, where the two of them left it. She took the second abrazo the way an accountant takes a payment on an old debt, exactly, entirely, and without confusing it for the principal; and he held a girl of fourteen who had been eight the last time, and it was, he told me, the only hour of his life in which he wished to be a smaller man than he was, small enough to have stayed.

The road ran both ways to the end of him.

PART IV: GOA

Goa, 1552–1555

THE DEBT TO ANSELM WAS cleared in the February of 1549, eight years paid to the day, and a man who has spent eight years climbing out of a hole does not, my grandfather said, know what to do standing on the flat ground at the top of it; the climbing had become the shape of his days, and with it gone he was, at forty-nine, a man with a closed account and no next one. So when Don Sancho poured the Madeira at the start of an interview instead of at the close, which he had done only once before in fourteen years, and named Goa, and a wage large enough to be the Salamanca fund at last, my grandfather understood that he was being made a proposal and not shown an accounting, and he asked for eight days. He did not need them to decide; the decision, he told me, was already made, the way the

tide is already made while you are still deciding to walk down to it. He needed them to find its reasons: Catalina two years married now to Diego Ortiz the younger, in her own house, so that his going would take from her nothing the relay had not already taken for twenty years; the savings that the eastern wage would round out; and, under those, the reason he gave only to me, which was that Mencía had once written him that a man does not choose the account that follows a closed one, "*la elige la mañana*," the morning chooses it, and that he had waited, that whole clear-ground year, to see what the morning would put in front of him, and the morning had put Goa.

But I cannot let him board yet, because between the hand he shook and the ship he took, the empire itself spoke, and he heard it, and he put the two things side by side for me at the table and then sat back and let me do the arithmetic. In those years the court convened a junta at Valladolid to hear argued, in form, with all the apparatus of the schools, whether the conquests of the Indies were just and whether the peoples of them might lawfully be compelled; and the finest minds of Castile stood up across many days and laid Aquinas course upon course, for and against; and my grandfather, reading the relations of it at the Anselmi table, said he already knew

the form of the proceeding, because he had recorded it once in a chapter house in Panama, forty minutes of perfect Latin and the accused brought in on a wrist. Only this time no bishop laughed, and there was no acta with a bird's sentence in it, and the junta dispersed without a ruling, which is a thing the law can do that a parrot cannot. And in the season he took ship there was printed in Sevilla itself a small furious book by the Dominican Las Casas, an account of the destruction of the Indies in language no notary would be permitted to use, and Antonio Lourenço laid it on the table beside the Madeira and said only, "Menino. Lee esto y dime si el precio sube o baja." Read this and tell me whether the price rises or falls. My grandfather read it that night, all of it, and put it into the case beside the Erasmus, and boarded on the Friday. He made me write those three things in exactly that order, he read it, he packed it, he boarded, and he would not let me set anything between them, because he said that everything a man needs to know about him is in the fact that nothing came between them.

The voyage was half a year, Lisboa to Goa by the great volta around the Cape, and I have his log of it, eleven lines for a hundred and eighty days, because a notary at sea is a man with nothing to notarize; but he told me one of the days, and I will spend it. Off

the Guinea coast a topman called Baltasar, seventeen, of Setúbal, fell from the yard in a following sea and broke on the deck and lived until evening; and the ship's *escrivão* had died of the flux at the Cape Verdes, so the master came down the deck looking for a man who could write, and found my grandfather at the rail, and did not ask him his office, and my grandfather did not offer it. He wrote the boy's death into the ship's book at the master's dictation; and then, because there was no one else and he was the man nearest the pen, he sat with the sailmaker while the sailmaker sewed the boy into his hammock with a round shot at his feet and put, as the custom of the sea is, the last stitch through the nose, which is the sailmaker's mercy, the sea's own hatchet, the stitch that makes death certain before the deep takes the body; and my grandfather watched it done and did not look away, being by then a man who had spent a life learning that someone must be the one who does not look away. They gave the boy to the water at sunset with a psalm, and he stood at the rail a long time after, and thought of a bishop up to his knees in the surf at *Nombre de Dios* telling a young man with clean hands that he was the man closest to the mule; and it had taken him twenty-seven years and three oceans to understand that the sentence had never once, in all that time, stopped being true.

He came into Goa in the third week of September of 1552, the monsoon going off the sky in long grey curtains and the whole white-and-laterite city steaming, and he was met on the wharf by Don Lourenço Falcão, factor of the five houses, a trumpet of a man who introduced the world to you as a series of accounts payable: “A casa Falcão fica aqui, Don Rodrigo; a Anselmi em Sevilha, a Cifuentes em Salamanca, a Almeida em Lisboa, a Ortiz na calle de Compañía. As cinco casas continuam. Embarque,” the house of Falcão is here, the Anselmi in Sevilla, the Cifuentes in Salamanca, the Almeida in Lisboa, the Ortiz in the calle de Compañía, the five houses go on, board; as though a man were only the last stop on a route of money, which in Falcão’s theology he was. And the work he had been brought to keep was not a mill, and there were no rollers and no coppers, and it took my grandfather three months to understand that he had been set down inside a machine crueller than the mill in the one way that mattered, which was that the mill only wanted the body and this wanted the soul.

For the thing the accounts of Goa recorded, under the spices and the areca and the fine cottons, was an erasure. In those years the Estado was confiscating the lands of the temples and turning their revenues to the building of churches and the keeping of the men

who built them; and the gods of that coast, who had stood in their places longer than Castile had been Christian, were being pulled down stone from stone or left to starve of the offerings the law now forbade, and the people of the temples were being brought, by a pressure that called itself persuasion and kept a soldier at the door, to the font; and my grandfather's fair round hand was wanted to make the confiscations lawful, to inventory what a torn-down temple had held and against what account its lands should now be entered, so that the erasure of a people's gods should be, like everything he had ever touched, correctly documented.

I will take you into one of them, because he took me, the first that was his. It was a small temple two rivers up from the city, not one of the great ones, a village house of a god, stone below and wood above, and the order for it crossed his table in the October of his first year with the seal already on it, so that his work was not to decide anything but to count what the deciding had left. He went up by boat with a soldier, a factor's boy, and a priest. The keeper of the temple was an old man who stood in the doorway while they worked, in the exact place and the exact silence in which Aimoré had stood at the doors of the mill, and my grandfather passed him at a distance of two feet going in, and could not look at him, and

made himself look at him, and wished he had not. Inside, the lamp was still burning. That was the thing he chose to tell me first, the way he had told me Inhaia's name first: the confiscation had arrived faster than the news of it, and the morning's oil was still in the lamp, and the morning's flowers were still at the foot of the god, wilting but not yet wilted; and he stood in the smell of the oil and the marigolds with his book open and counted what the law required him to count: one image of the god, in black stone, the height of a child of seven; four lamps of brass; a bell; a drum; the lands, so many palms, so much rice, entered by their bounds; and last on the page, because the form of the instrument required a valuation, the god himself, entered at the worth of the stone. He wrote the number. The old man in the doorway watched him write it. And my grandfather told me that of all the entries of his life, the woman reduced in value and the man of the third copper spent, the one his hand still remembered the weight of was that one: the day he priced a god at the stone it was cut from, in front of the man whose mornings had kept its lamp lit for fifty years.

He wrote it. He wrote the inventory of a god the way, twenty years before, he had written the loss of a woman at the rollers, and he found, again, that he had the words, and that the words were, again, the

sin, only larger now, because a body is one death and a god is the death of a way of dying, the closing of the door through which a whole people had always walked out of the world.

* * *

There was a man he came to know, and I want you to meet him the way my grandfather met him, which was not as a lesson. It was music first. In his second month, kept late over ledgers in the factory house, he heard through the window an instrument he had no name for, bowed, close to a voice but closer to a grief, coming from the courtyard of the metal-workers' street; and he went out, because the sound would not let him add, and stood at the edge of the lamplight while an old man played to six or seven people sitting on their heels, a long raga going down into the dark the way water goes down into sand. He came back the next week, and the week after, and stood always at the same edge, and the old man played and never once looked at him; and in the fifth or sixth week, without turning his head, the old man said, in good Portuguese, "Pode sentar-se, escrevão. A música não fica mais barata de pé." You may sit down, notary. The music does not come cheaper standing. His name was Anand, and he was a player of the sarangi, and he had been, before there

were no more temple accounts to keep, the keeper of a temple's accounts, thirty years of oil and flowers and land-rents in a fair hand, a colleague, the only man in Asia who had held my grandfather's own office on the other side of the wall. They did not become friends; Anand did not permit it and my grandfather did not deserve it, and both of them knew both of those things, and what they had instead was two evenings a month, on their heels in a courtyard, one playing and one listening, which Anand said was the correct division of labor between them, since the Portuguese had arranged matters so that everything else his people made would be written down by somebody else.

And it was Anand, my grandfather understood at last and told me plainly, who was the same man as Aimoré wearing a different life, the man each of his colonies had set in his path to watch him learn what he was; and Anand watched him carry the inventories out of the emptied places with the same flat unhurried attention, and stood, as Aimoré had stood, at the doors he would not cross, and said, one evening on the coast road as the light went, a thing in his own tongue that he did not translate, and that my grandfather, who could bend letters to any sound, confessed he could not hold long enough to bend them to this one; so that of the sentences he carried

out of his three countries, Aimoré's this book writes, and Anand's it can hold only as a shape, which may be the truest keeping of the two. The gloss Anand allowed, in the Portuguese they shared, was this: that a temple is not the stone, that the stone is the least of it, that they might pull down every stone on the coast and the thing the stone had housed would go on being housed, in the body, in the going-down of the hand to the water at dawn, in the account a people keeps of itself that no confiscation reaches. And my grandfather heard the rhyme across the twenty years and the two seas and understood that he had been told the one true thing twice now, in two tongues, by two men he had helped to rob, and had written down the robbery both times, because that, and not the listening, was what he was for.

In his third year the city was given a spectacle, and he stood in it, and I set it here because he set it beside the temple in the telling and said, "Apunta las dos casas, Pedrito. Una al lado de la otra." Write down the two houses, one beside the other. In the spring of 1554 the body of Master Francisco Xavier, dead two years on an island off China, was brought at last to Goa, and the city met it at the water and carried it through the streets, and the body was incorrupt, the flesh sweet, the color of a sleeping man, and the people pressed to touch the bier in a weeping

crush and called it what it was to them, a miracle, the very body of holiness kept whole by God in the latitudes that rot a sail in a season. My grandfather stood in that crowd, a Christian man, and he told me he did not doubt the miracle, that is not the confession; the confession is that he stood in the roar of that devotion with his ledger hand aching and thought of a small stone god two rivers up, priced at the weight of its stone in front of its keeper, and understood that he lived in an empire that preserved one body incorrupt and inventoried the others for demolition, and that both of those things were done by the same faith in the same city in the same year, and that his own fair round hand was how the second of them was done. He went home from the procession and opened his private book and wrote one line in it that he read to me at the table and did not let me copy then, and I am ready to copy it now: Dios guarda un cuerpo y yo taso los demás. God keeps one body, and I appraise the rest.

Here, and only here, is the difference the whole of this Part turns on, and he made me write it down twice, and underline it once. He had gone to Brazil a man of thirty-seven who did not yet know what he was, and the mill had taught him; and he went to Goa a man of fifty-three who knew exactly, who carried the pressed lemon-flower and the private col-

umn of thirteen names in the same coat as proof of the knowing, and who read the Dominican's furious little book on a Thursday and boarded on the Friday. Brazil was the sin of a man who had not yet met himself. Goa was the sin of a man who had met himself, and shaken the hand, and taken ship. The second time is not the first time repeated; it is a different and graver thing, because the first time a man can plead the dark, and the second time he has brought his own lamp and chosen to hold it low.

What he did differently in Goa, being older and holding his own lamp low, was small, and he would not let me make it larger than it was. He kept a truer private book, the confiscations set against what he judged their true and monstrous cost, in a hand meant for no archive. He declined, when Falcão proposed it as a courtesy to a curious house in Sevilla, to make relief drawings of the carved gods before they came down, as he had once drawn the seven figures of Aimoré's village; he had learned from the seven figures, he said, that to draw a thing you are helping to destroy is to steal it a second time and call the theft a rescue, and he would not do it twice, and this refusal, this one not-drawing, was the whole of what he brought back from Goa that he was not ashamed of, and it is a poor thing to weigh against an erasure, and he knew it. He made me write that he knew it.

Catarina Falcão, the factor's daughter, a woman with a needle for a tongue, said to him at his leaving, having watched him three years, "Usted escucha en dos lenguas y calla en cuatro, Don Rodrigo. Vuelva a Castilla antes de la quinta." You listen in two tongues and keep silent in four; go home before the fifth. And he went.

* * *

He sailed for home in 1555 and came at last, in the September of that year, to the door of the house on the calle de Compañía, and it was opened to him by a woman of twenty-eight with a child of her own fisted in her skirts and a thin band of Malabar gold on the wrist that had been bare in every version of him she had ever built, and she looked at his hands first and his face second, as she had at eight, and she said, "Padre. Aquí estoy. La cuenta intermedia tiene un nieto. Tomo el tercer abrazo." Father, here I am. The account in between has a grandson. I take the third embrace. The second she had collected at fourteen, on the stair I have already told, with the sentence that goes out in the middle. She did not say aloud, this time, what number the third left unbought, or how the arithmetic ran now that she had a son of her own to be arrived-at and departed-from; she had stopped keeping the count aloud somewhere in the Goa

years, and she took the third embrace the way a grown woman takes a debt paid late and in the wrong currency, with both arms and without forgiveness, the two not being the same thing, and my grandfather stood in the doorway a returned and guilty man and was, for the length of that embrace, forgiven nothing and held anyway, which is, I have come to think, the only kind of homecoming the account permits, and more than he had any right to, and he knew that too. She told me the arithmetic once, years later, in the kitchen, and never told him: "Las cartas llegaban. Los abrazos había que ir a buscarlos, y a veces el barco tardaba veinticuatro años." The letters arrived; the embraces you had to go and fetch, and sometimes the ship took twenty-four years. There was no ledger in which to enter the reply, and she did not ask for one.

PART V: SALAMANCA

Salamanca, 1555–1567

MENCÍA HAD BEEN ARRANGING A reunion for twenty-four years, patiently, against his notarial reluctance and her own, and she brought it about at last in the autumn of 1555, in the house on the calle de Toro, and I have only the shape of it, because it is the one afternoon of his life about which my grandfather would tell me nothing except that it had happened and that he did not regret it. He was fifty-six and she was sixty-six, and the cascade he had heard from the far end of a house in 1516 had gone, he said, to a thin clear trickle over stones, quieter but the same water. They sat a long afternoon and said, he told me, almost nothing, because the letter of 1535 had already said the thing for which there is no second saying, and what is left to two old people who have already exchanged the one unsayable thing

is only the enormous and sufficient fact of the other's face across a room, alive, and having lasted. She died six months after, in the March of 1556, and among her things Catalina found, inside a copy of Bernardim Ribeiro's *Menina e moça*, a carta Mencía had prepared and not sent, and it is not in this book and its whereabouts are not in this book, on the model of the book it serves; I will say only that my grandfather read it once and did not read it aloud, and that it went with him to the writing-table in the calle del Tostado and is one of the four he kept there, and that whatever she had waited a life to write him, he judged it fit to be kept and not fit to be shown, and I have honored the judgment, because a man who has told you everything else has earned the right to keep one door.

He married in the autumn of 1559, and the marriage is one of the quiet triumphs of his life and the hardest for me to render, because nothing happens in it, which is the point. Catalina arranged it, having decided her father should not end alone in a rented room; and the woman was Doña Isabel de Cifuentes y Robles, a widow of fifty-two, plain-spoken and underestimated by everyone who met her once, including, for a season, my grandfather, who took that season to understand that her plainness was not simplicity but the enormous economy of a person who

has already sorted the world into what matters and what does not and declines to waste breath on the second. She proposed the terms of their life in a speech of numbered clauses, and by the second clause my grandfather was, he said, already resigned and glad; he took the desk in her house that had been her late husband Don Francisco's, at which Don Francisco had sat the fifteen months of his marriage and said nothing she ever cared to remember, so that it was, she told him, a chair of unused capacity, and he set about using the capacity for the eight years that were left. They did not put their marriage in any document beyond the one the Church required, and this book will not either; there was tenderness in it and there was the deep ease of two people past the age of performance, and there was the day she gave him, without ceremony, the small brass bell that had been her mother's and had called three generations to the merienda, the small meal of the late afternoon, at half past four, and that is all I am permitted to say, because it is all he told me, and because he taught me which things a man tells and which he only keeps.

The household came to the calle del Tostado: Isabel, and the cook Engracia Téllez who answered every grief and every joy of that house with the same dry level word and was loved for it; and Brasil, the cat, who arrived in a basket at the kitchen door in

1558 and made himself the authority of the house on the matter of leftover chicken and would not upset the ink, though he left, once, in the wet margin of a contract of sale, the print of a single paw, and my grandfather looked at it a long moment and then filed the contract as it stood, uncorrected, into the protocol of a notary of Salamanca, where it remains to this day, the one signature in fifty years of instruments that he admitted to the record without authority; and the jasmine Isabel kept in a clay pot at the writing-room window, on her principle that scent is a fixture of a household and not a luxury of it. My grandfather, who remarked on everything, never in eight years remarked on the jasmine; and I did not understand that silence until I had written Part III of this book, and then I understood it entirely, and I have left it in his keeping, where she, I believe, knowingly or not, had placed it. She listened at the door of the Wednesdays. He met her, six times in the two years of them, going down unannounced, on the second step from the top, with the composed look of a woman who had been on her way down for a quarter of an hour; and he never once named it, and she never once explained it, and I have put her at that door in this book deliberately, because she would not put herself anywhere at all, and a woman who guards a room from the second step from the

top has earned an entry in the account she declined to appear in. And I came, on Wednesday afternoons, from the year I was twelve, because my mother Catalina climbed the stairs one October morning and told her father that Diego was teaching me arithmetic and Latin and she was teaching me what a kitchen teaches, and that a third thing was missing, and that she would send me on Wednesdays, and he would teach me, and what he taught was his affair and what I learned would be hers to see. He did not, that first Wednesday, teach me anything. He set down the contract he was drafting and said, "Pedrito. Hoy no. Hoy te cuento," today I tell you, and he began, "El gato, habiendo comido carne toda su vida, decidió hacerse vegetariano. Ése fui yo," the cat that ate meat its whole life and turned vegetarian, that was me; and I dipped the pen, twelve years old, and did not understand that I had been handed a life to keep, and kept it, Wednesday after Wednesday, for two years, and am keeping it still.

Not every Wednesday was dictation. Some he spent teaching me the trade of the hand: how to cut a quill left-oblique for a round letter, how to rule a page with a dry point, how to bend letters to a sound the way his mother had taught him on her knee in Sevilla, so that what an enslaved woman of the islands had worked out for herself against the schools of two

continents came down, at a walnut table in Salamanca, to a third generation, and I have used it all my life. His own hand was leaving him by then, the right first, the line beginning to waver where it had been forty years a small wonder of the profession, and he drank his chocolate with both hands around the cup like a man warming himself at it, and said nothing about any of that, ever, and neither did I. On the table between us stood a small white enamel case that he kept empty, and when I asked him once what it was for, he said, "Para la pluma que acabe el libro." For the pen that finishes the book. And there were evenings, reading the day's pages back to him, when I could not tell, and cannot always tell now, which sentences had come from his mouth and which from my hand; and I said so once, troubled, and he was quiet a moment, and then he said that this was not a fault of the record. It was the record.

* * *

The last Wednesday was the second of October, 1567. He dictated the close of a chapter and then said, "Pedrito. Apunta esto. El próximo capítulo es el de mi muerte. No lo voy a dictar entero. Lo dictaré hasta la palabra que falta. Esa palabra la pondrás tú, o no la pondrás. Tú decides." The next chapter is the one of my death; I will dictate it up to the word that

is missing, and that word you will supply, or you will not; you decide. And he stopped there, one word short, on purpose, and took his own pen, the good one, from beside the inkpot, and laid it in the enamel case, and closed the lid; and I was fourteen, and I did not know that the stopping was itself the last thing he had to teach me, which was that an honest account ends at the edge of what the man keeping it has the right to say, and not one word past it.

* * *

He died at first light, at a quarter past six, on the ninth of October 1567, of the autumn's chest-catarrh in its last stage, with Doña Isabel at the bedside and Engracia in the kitchen door and Brasil at the foot of the bed, and in the last hour he did not speak, but he listened, and what he listened to, across those final seven days, my mother told me and I believe, were the sentences he had carried his whole life and never learned: Aimoré's at the path-head; Anand's on the coast road; and the Tupi proverb of a woman named Paraguaçu, met once at a garden gate, kept in the Portuguese she gave it in and never in his life translated, though this book will, the reader not being bound by his vows: *Quem planta, planta para quem colhe*. Who plants, plants for the one who reaps. They came back to him in their own tongues, and this

time, my mother said, he did not pretend to follow them; he only listened, the way the one who is leaving listens; they had called him once, on that first coast, o que ouve, the one who hears, and he died hearing what it had never been given him to understand. The narrator's voice, which had been his across those eighty-six Wednesdays, closed at a quarter past six that morning, one word short of the end. The morning did not supply the word.

And Doña Isabel, who did not weep, sat that morning at the writing-table, with the Adagia that had been his thirty years lying where it had lain since the marriage, with the four cartas in the arrangement he had built across a lifetime, and did the thing she had decided at the bedside, which belongs to the coda and to my hand now and not to his; and I, fourteen and summoned at half past nine, came up to the calle del Tostado at half past twelve and stood in the door of the writing room and did not weep, and looked at the table, the chair, the enamel case no longer empty, the cat at the window across the landing, and said the only true thing I had, "Doña Isabel. El dictado terminó la semana pasada, una palabra antes del final. Esa palabra la llevo yo ahora." The dictation ended a word before the end; that word I carry now. And she said, "Apuntado," noted, and told me the four letters would not be opened again, and

that the merienda would be served the next day at half past four, and that I was to go home to my father because my mother was waiting; and I went, carrying a word I would not set down for thirty-five years, which is the whole matter of what is left.

PART VI: THE CODA

Salamanca, 1602–1604

I TOOK UP THE CODA on the second of October, 1602, in the same high south room, at the table where the Adagia had sat, an old man of forty-nine writing the end of the account of an old man of sixty-eight, and I will not pretend the thirty-five years between were empty, though this book has room only for what they left on the table. Doña Isabel kept the room untouched through seventeen years of a second widowhood, and my mother has kept it the eighteen years since, and I have sat in it now long enough to know that a room a family refuses to change is a family still keeping an account it has not decided how to close. The world did not stand still around the room. In 1580 the crowns themselves closed an account, and Portugal came under the king of Castile, so that the two languages

of my grandfather's life, the one he kept his books in and the one his sin was made welcome in, woke one morning to a single master; and when my mother burned the engenho papers four years later, they burned under a monarch who owned the mill and the ledger alike. And in the year of the great fleet against England, when the whole city talked of the sea, this family, which had given the sea a notary for thirty years, did not speak of it at all; the merienda was served at half past four, and we did not speak of the sea. My youngest daughter, who is nine, stopped at the door of this room in the spring and asked me what I am writing, and I told her: the account of her great-grandfather. She asked if he was good. I said that he was loved. She considered this the way her grandmother Catalina would have considered it, and said that it was not what she had asked, and went down to supper; and this coda is for her question, which she is right to keep open.

Doña Isabel died in the January of 1584, and she died as she had lived, in numbered clauses, dictating her dispositions to my mother with me at the door, the household's private book balanced to the last: the kitchen to go on, my mother's to receive, mine to witness. And she had left one instruction sealed, and it was this that my mother carried out at the funeral, telling no one, arranging it beforehand as Isabel had

arranged everything: that the carta Mencía had prepared and my grandfather had kept and never read aloud should go back into the ground, but not with him. With her. With Isabel. “La cuenta se cierra así,” my mother said to me at the graveside, the account closes this way, and I did not understand it for years and now I think I do: that a wife who had shared a house with the ghost of another woman’s unsent letter for eight years and a widowhood for seventeen had decided, with the enormous plain justice that was her whole character, that the letter had waited long enough in the light, and that she would carry it down herself, and give the first sweetness back its rest, and leave my grandfather to the deep water that had no letter because it had never needed one. I have come to think it the single most merciful act in this whole account, and it was done by the woman the account almost forgot to mention, which is the account’s confession that it does not always know where its own mercy lives.

And there was the burning. In the February of 1584, by a second sealed instruction, my mother took the engenho papers from the cedar chest to the kitchen brazier and burned them, and had me stand with her, and said the one sentence she permitted herself over the flame and made me promise not to repeat, which I have kept, and which I will keep here

too, telling you only that it was neither a curse nor a prayer but a closing, and that when the last of the pages had gone she said, in her ordinary voice, “La cocina sigue,” the kitchen goes on, and set the merienda for half past four, and it was served.

* * *

But she did not burn everything, because she could not; the worst of it was not hers to burn. On the seventh of October, 1602, three weeks before I began this coda, I went to the cedar chest myself and lifted the false floor my grandfather had shown me once, in the last year, without a word, only a look; and under it was a leather pouch, and in the pouch the eight cartas de manumissão in his own tightening hand, the eight he had freed, and folded with them, in the same hand, a single sheet that was not a legal instrument at all: a list of thirteen names, and under the names the one word *engenho*, and under that, four lines I had never heard him speak and will carry now the way I carry the other word: *No me juzguen por los ocho que alcancé. No me absuelvan por ellos tampoco. Quien lleve esta cuenta después de mí, lleve a los trece en ella, siempre, sin tachar. El día que los trece salgan del libro, el libro será mentira.* Judge me not by the eight I reached; do not absolve me by them either. Whoever keeps this account after me is to keep the thirteen in

it, always, uncrossed. The day the thirteen leave the book, the book becomes a lie. So I have kept them. They ride with this coda, in his own sheet, folded where he folded it: the thirteen, with their names, which he kept when everything else of that country was ash. Inhaia is not among them, because Inhaia was the first of the eight. And here you will look for the names themselves, and I am not going to print them, and I owe you the reason, because it is not modesty and it is not forgetting. My grandfather refused once, in Goa, to draw the gods he was helping to pull down, because to draw a thing you are destroying is to steal it a second time and call the theft a rescue; and to set thirteen names in a book, for strangers to feel something about over supper, would be the same theft in a finer hand. They are not exhibits. They are kept, and whoever comes to them must come as I did, as an heir and not as an audience. The account holds them. The book does not perform them. He spent his life learning that the omission is sometimes the accusation and sometimes the mercy, and that only love can tell you which; and this once, at last, I can tell you which it is.

And that is the labor this coda leaves me, and the labor I have decided, at forty-nine, how to discharge. My grandfather stopped the account one word short of the end, on purpose, and told a boy of fourteen

that the word was his to supply or to withhold. I have carried it thirty-five years. It is a single word in Castilian, and it begins with the first letter of the alphabet, and I have known since I was fourteen what it is, and I am not going to write it. Not because I do not know it, and not because it would be false, but because he did not write it, and because an edition, a grandson, an account, is owed no more than the man himself was willing to give, and he gave everything up to that word and stopped, and the stopping was the last honest thing his hand did, and I will not be the one to make his honesty into a confession he declined to sign. The account stays open. He left it open to me, and I leave it open to you. A shut door is a lie about the dead; an open one is the only truth we are permitted to keep them in.

I wrote him a letter, that ninth of October of 1602, the thirty-fifth anniversary of his death, and placed it in the Adagia at the page where the four cartas are, and I will not reproduce it either, having learned from him which letters are read aloud and which are only kept. The packet went to León in the shipment of 1604, to the diocesan archive, to wait for whoever would open it and keep the thirteen and honor the flower and leave the word alone; and it waited, and it was found, and you are holding what it held. Cuenta cerrada con cariño, and the merienda

at half past four, and no other account opened in its place. The kitchen goes on. It always goes on. And then I sat, as he had taught me to sit, until the light went; and I want to tell you how it ended, because you have been patient, and because he taught me that patience is owed a reward and that the reward is never absolution, which is not ours to give, but is sometimes peace, which is.

* * *

The room went gold, the way that room goes gold in the late afternoon of the year, the light coming through the shutters at the angle that never favored it and no longer pretended to. My mother was in the kitchen below, and I could hear her, and Engracita after her, who is Engracia's daughter and keeps her mother's kitchen and her mother's dry level word, the pans and the low talk, the kitchen going on the way Tomasa had promised a governor's corpse it would; and the place at the left of the inkpot was empty, where Brasil had kept his watch and had been empty thirty-one years, and I looked at the empty place and understood that I had made my peace, not with what my grandfather did, which is not mine to make peace with and which I have left standing in this book unforgiven and uncrossed, the thirteen and the erased gods and the word he priced a

woman's life with; but with him, the man, my grandfather, who did those things and also carved a bad cross for a stranger over three evenings and freed the eight and kept the flower and taught a boy that a document can hold two truths without choosing, and who loved, and was loved, and could not be added up, because no one can, because the account has no column in which a man balances, and was never meant to. I had spent thirty-five years believing I had to choose between loving him and telling the truth about him, and in that gold room I understood that the choosing was the error, that the whole of what he taught me across eighty-six Wednesdays was that you keep both, the terror and the bread, on the one page, uncrossed, and you do not reconcile them, and you do not stop setting the table.

I took my supper. I went up at half past ten with the candle and set the last chapter at the right of the writing-case, in the order of the writing, the colon at the last place on the last page, the word left where he left it. I looked at the empty place by the inkpot. "La palabra queda," I said, aloud, to the empty room, the word stays; the word remains, unsaid and kept. And then I did the only thing there was left to do, the thing he did at the end of every one of those Wednesday evenings before the last, the thing the whole account had been walking toward the way the

road walked him between the mill and the bed.

He put out the candle.