

DOC COMPARATO
**PRISIONERS
OF PARADISE**

NOVEL

DOC COMPARATO
PRISONERS
OF PARADISE

NOVEL

1ª edição



São Paulo, 2014

Copyright © Doc Comparato, 2014

Publisher

Rafael Schäffer Gimenes

Production director

Adriana Fonseca Gimenes

E-book production

César Rodrigues da Mata

Cover

Samuel Rosmaninho

Cover image

@trebro-Fotolia.com

SGAE MEMBERSHIP 97738

SGAE – Site: <http://www.sgae.es>

E-mail: raraujo@sgae.com.br

Dados Internacionais de Catalogação na Publicação (CIP)
(Marcelo Diniz – CRB 13/489)

C736p

Comparato, Doc

Prisoners of paradise [livro eletrônico] / Doc Comparato -- 1. ed. -- São Paulo: Pix Editora, 2014.

Formato: ePub

Requisitos do sistema: Adobe Digital Editions

Modo de acesso: World Wide Web

ISBN 978-85-68325-16-2

1. Ficção brasileira. 2. Contos brasileiros. I. Título.

CDU 82-34

The plays here for sale are under registered copyright © by the author under The General Society of Authors and Publishers of Spain (SGAE) and also The Brazilian Society of Music and Arts (ABRAMUS). Copying the part or the entirety of these plays or using any copyrighted materials other than what the law allows may be subject to prosecution. It is not allowed to copy, reproduce, broadcast, display, stage this text or publish them on other web sites without prior written consent from the author. Under no circumstances the material can be used or published, in any way, for commercial or promotional purposes without prior authorization from the author or editor.



Pix Editora is a brand of **Schäffer Editorial Ltda.**

435 Ricardo Medina Filho Avenue
05057-100 - São Paulo - SP - Brazil
www.schaffereditorial.com/pixeditora
contato@studioschaffer.com

For the theologians of the Middle Ages, Paradise did not represent an unattainable, incorporeal world lost in the beginnings of time, nor simply some vague pious fantasy. Rather, it was a reality still present in some unknown but possibly accessible place.

-SÉRGIO BUARQUE DE HOLANDA

“God was making the world. In each part of it, he put a natural disaster: a volcano here, a hurricane there, earthquakes somewhere else. But he made one place splendidly beautiful. Saint Peter, noticing this, complained of the injustice with which the blessings of nature were distributed through the world. So God told him, “Ah, just wait until you see the people I’m going to put there!”

-POPULAR BRAZILIAN ANECDOTE, ANONYMOUS

Editor’s note: Punctuation and grammatical style in the English translation seek to follow the same invention that the author employs in his prose in Portuguese. For instance, there is not a formal indication of the dialogues. Although it is easy to identify them within the narrative text.

INDEX

PROLOGUE - MYSTERIOUS AND MENDACIOUS HAPPENINGS

CHAPTER ONE - SCRIBES, PRIESTS, AND SPIES

CHAPTER TWO - REPORT WRITTEN IN SKY-BLUE INK

CHAPTER THREE - THE HORSE THAT LOOKED INSIDE ITSELF

CHAPTER FOUR - FAMILY TIES AND KNOTS

CHAPTER FIVE - AN ALMOST PARADISIAC LESSON

CHAPTER SIX - A STROLL ACCORDING TO PROTOCOL

CHAPTER SEVEN - THE THEOLOGY OF THE FOOT-BATH

CHAPTER EIGHT - THE MALEFIC CAULDRON

CHAPTER NINE - WHAT MIRACLES ARE MADE OF

CHAPTER TEN - TWO OBSCURE ESCAPES, TWO EXTRAORDINARY PETITIONS

CHAPTER ELEVEN - DEMONS AND MONSTERS FROM THE DEEP

CHAPTER TWELVE - BETWEEN TWO WORLDS

CHAPTER THIRTEEN - THE ENIGMA OF THE BOXES

CHAPTER FOURTEEN - THE SURPRISE OF THE SEX OF THE ANGELS

CHAPTER FIFTEEN - THE TERRIBLE IDEA OF AN IMMORAL ARTIST

CHAPTER SIXTEEN - THE PRISONERS OF PARADISE

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN - THE NOCTURNAL INCONVENIENCES OF ART

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN - THE ECSTASY OF THE FLOWERS

CHAPTER NINETEEN - THE DAY THAT NEVER DAWNED

CHAPTER TWENTY - MOMENTS OF HORROR AND CARNIVAL

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE - REVENGE IN BLUE

EPILOGUE - PRISONERS OF THE PRESENT

PROLOGUE: EVENTS MYSTERIOUS AND MISREPRESENTED

Rome, The Vatican, around 1500

Air, nothing but air. The breath is born confused and chaotic in the labyrinthine whirlwind of the lungs. It reaches the larynx and throws itself against the vocal cords with no apparent discernment. Then everything takes order.

The agitated molecules of air cause the vocal cords to vibrate in perfect undulations, and the breath is transformed into crystalline sound.

Limpid musical notes of exceptional melodic precision fill the boy's mouth. Resonating soprano, they pass out between Francesco's lips in soothing song.

Then the prodigious vocal mechanism undertakes a new process yet more difficult to explain. Instead of hovering in the room and penetrating the ears of His Holiness, the song chooses a more daring and tortuous path.

According to Pope Pius III, conversing idly with the pious Abbess De Roncani, papal housekeeper, the boy's voice has the inconceivable power to pierce the frontal bone of his cranium, slicing like a blade through the blood vessels of the brain and blocking the terrible, throbbing headache that routinely assaults the Supreme Pontiff.

A strange papal theory, with little scientific content, but effective at least in practice. Francesco sings and the headache miraculously ceases.

Thus the boy Francesco has unwittingly become one of the most coveted prizes hanging on the tree of ambitions and intrigues that adorns the papal power. One has only to follow Francesco, spy on him (or make veiled observation of the boy's movements, as Friar Camilo prefers to call it) to have some indication of the disposition, humor or health of Pius III.

Prominent eyes has Francesco, and sparse eyelashes. Thin limbs, a wide thorax. A large head for his age, balanced on a skinny neck. Francesco lives apart from the other choir boys of the Vatican. He has his own musical instructor and sleeps in an isolated room in the building parallel to the papal quarters. To be always alert, ready to sing at any hour, is the reason for his existence. Nothing more.

Often before daybreak, even before the monks sing Matins, a wild-eyed guard comes running with a flaming torch to wake the boy. A groggy Francesco jumps out of bed, throws a wool cloak over his nightshirt and dashes panting after the guard. Usually he doesn't even have time to urinate. At the door of the papal chamber, a nun offers him a little tea or hot milk to warm up his throat. He stands there motionless, waiting for the tinkling of the housekeeper abbess's little bell, the signal of permission to go in and sing to the most powerful man on earth.

Just air, nothing but air. This time it happens after Compline, the prayers recited in the dead of night. The severe-looking guard arrives, the hot milk goes down his throat, the tinkling of the bell opens the door and Francesco enters the chamber.

Everything is white. Absolutely white.

Reclining against eight white pillows of different sizes, covered with a thick white mantle that drapes over the edges of the bed, face completely hidden by innumerable steaming white cloths and towels, is His Holiness. A white mass of formless volume.

The abbess, in a white habit and very pale, reverberates in affliction from the intensity of the Holy Father's headache: something never before seen or felt

by mortals.

Gently removing the cloths, she reveals the visage of Pius III. A smell of rosemary and aromatic herbs reaches Francesco's nose, while from his mouth emanate the first blade-like sounds that pierce the bones of the oval head drenched with oils.

Drenched with pain, submerged in an incessant spasm, is how Pius III feels.

Resplendent, is how the boy sees the Holy head without one strand of hair. Radiant, reiterates Francesco inwardly as he sings.

But he doesn't notice the sunken eyes, the thin colorless lips, the teeth clamped shut like a guillotine. Probably because of the distance required by protocol, the blinding reflection of the white, and the intermittent passing of the abbess with the perfumed cloths.

Charmed by his own singing, Francesco does not perceive the dense atmosphere, much less the gravity of the moment. He does not dream that this chamber is about to be eclipsed by a terrible event. As destructive as it is mysterious, this event will possess the power to change the course of history, that of men and that of the Church of God.

It would be asking too much of a young boy from Bologna, still ingenuous and pre-pubescent, called Francesco Giorgino Caletto, to demonstrate such insight. Indeed, it would be unjust, for what was to happen following the papal headache would cross the boundaries of the unimaginable.

Breathing torpidly with a thin wheeze, the pope makes a gesture, touching one side of his face with three fingers of his right hand, to signal the end of the recital.

The abbess rings the little silver bell and with a bow of pride Francesco disappears through the door.

The pain is over, thinks the abbess, knowing that she must still prepare the Holy Father's chamomile tea, put out the lamps in the corridor, inspect with two other nuns the vestments that Pius III will wear tomorrow morning, pray,

do penance, and not forget the last preparations for the papal breakfast: two soft-boiled eggs.

If everything happens as usual, the Holy Father will say that Francesco has a pure and polite nature and possesses the voice of a nightingale. He will confirm that his head feels light as a feather. That the pain, a greater and physical form of suffering, has given way to tedium, a lesser and metaphysical punishment.

Tedium is bearable, more bearable than the perpetual sense of loneliness which is his true and captive enemy. Although masked in ceremonies, masses, audiences, loneliness has oppressed him since his tender childhood, torturing his soul with fears and an extraordinary paralysis as he faces life, others and himself.

If everything happens as usual. But such is not the case.

An imagination of unknown origin takes control of the papal chamber. Like all imagination, it is far more powerful than the boy's bone-penetrating song. Besides reaching the pope's brain with much greater velocity and ease, it alone is capable of rearranging events and creating new facts, re-inventing reality as it pleases.

Or part of reality, since that night the entire Vatican heard a scream of terror coming from the papal chamber. Long, loud and most alarming.

The unseen part of reality was the milk that streamed from the abbess's breasts and from the lamp chimneys, milk that poured in profusion from the mouth of Pius III.

The whitest possible milk which, inundating the white of the blankets and pillows, incredibly stained them. The whiteness of everything was blotted out by the white of the milk.

CHAPTER ONE

SCRIBES, PRIESTS AND SPIES

Milk. It was milk. Milk spurting from all the nipples and orifices. I'd love to try some of that milk! Nice and warm.

Cardinal Giuliano Della Rovere let out a whoop of laughter. Full, exposed. Indecorous.

It was in this imaginative style that the cardinal proffered his explanation for the papal scream of terror which had echoed the previous night through the dark corridors of the Vatican. It was he who imagined the scene and recounted it now.

Actually, the cardinal was in a very good mood. Excessively fanciful. A rare thing, since Della Rovere was a priestly warrior. Or rather, a warrior with priestly tendencies, as was whispered ironically by the Roman clerics.

Crucifix in his hand and sword at his belt, Della Rovere hardly distinguished one from the other. Faith, for him, was a question of force, of order, of stern discipline. Without apology he had transformed faith into a deadly thrust of the sword.

Della Rovere had not accepted the papacy of Alexander VI, the eminent Borgia, renowned scion of the Valencian family that reigned with corrupt power and depraved carnal habits. No, the Church was not just money, treasures of silver and gold. Such power was volatile, and too fragile to be the central anchor of the Church of Christ, concluded Della Rovere as soon as Borgia took his seat on the throne of Peter.

During the interminable twelve years of Alexander VI's papacy, the cardinal lived in France, training his army and conspiring to return to Rome.

He planned and participated in various bloody battles in the name of the faith, and recounted others, never fought, with the same ardor.

Protected by the Dominicans, the religious order to which he belonged, Della Rovere believed that during his exile he had perfected himself as a person, and that his vision of men, the Church, and God was without a doubt the most accurate. In other words, whoever wasn't on his side was against the Church and therefore obviously against God. This was his faith, his truth. Free of doubts.

A jolly misconception.

If he could have heard at that moment a threadbare, illuminated madman who was bellowing to no one through the cold streets of Rome, he would have known that there are no certainties in this life, much less truths: what happens is, the mistake keeps changing places. So proclaimed the madman.

Certainty, correction, faith. Favorite words of Cardinal Della Rovere. Words insufficient to hide the overwhelming authoritarianism and lust for power that emanated boldly from his soul.

His laughter and extravagant good humor could only stem from the certainty that the scream of Pius III had been the much-awaited, audible herald of a pontifical fainting fit. Desiring the death of Pius III, the Generous, was the cardinal's obsession.

Overly benevolent, Pius III, successor of Alexander VI, had permitted the return of Della Rovere to the Vatican, palace of the popes. With the help of the Dominicans, the cardinal quickly established an almost-perfect network of spies around the pontiff. It kept track of everything, from the hormonal development of the boy Francesco to the custom of a certain abbess to do penance by whipping herself, and reached its apex by observing Pius III in his own bed--a sophistication possible thanks to a small hole made in the canopy. The view of the papal chamber was panoramic. You could see a lot, but you couldn't hear much--hence the imperfection of the network.

Della Rovere, with habitual military posture, is seated erect near the window. Since his face is partially hidden by his tangled gray beard, what marks his sixtyish countenance are his eyes: alert, dark and inquisitive.

The friars Camilo and Carlo, his faithful servants, stand motionless, waiting for the laughter to finish in order to inform the cardinal what really did happen the previous night. That is what everyone is waiting for. The confidential reports are on the table, crying out in ink the true story of the scream of terror.

Friar Camilo, in an unusual interruption brought on by the length of the cardinal's chuckling, makes a precipitous comment: many priests would consider it a heresy to imagine the Holy Father drowning in milk. I don't understand the meaning of this strange story. Is it a joke? Milk pouring from all orifices and the pope screaming? It sounds strange to me. I would like to remind the cardinal that, during all these months in which we have made veiled observation of Pius III's movements, there has never been any incident, absolutely nothing which could discredit the moral conduct of the Holy Father. A fact which, indeed, has left Your Eminence quite disappointed.

The cardinal could have imagined that instead of milk, urine, honey or butterflies had poured out of the ecclesiastical nipples and orifices. But for his infertile imagination, the biological image of milk was most convenient. Mainly because the friars' writing room, always cluttered with parchments, inkwells and long quill pens, where they met secretly to analyze the countless confidential reports and communiqués, didn't smell like an office or a library, nor even a sacristy. Curiously the writing room had a soft and persistent odor of manure.

Due to some architectural flaw, a tireless current of air punctually flowed every morning from the stables toward the writing room window. Since the air seemed to blow in only one direction, it undoubtedly purified the animals and at the same time fouled the Dominicans' room with barn-stench. Camilo and Carlo always woke up nauseated, searching in vain for a dietary explanation.

It was this smell that led his Eminence to draw a cow, fat and heavy, in his thoughts, initiating the bovine theme.

The actual idea of milk occurred in a second imaginative stage, when the Cardinal asked himself if the abbess had been present at the time of the scream. Couldn't it have been *she* who screamed? Thus the association of objects and senses formed a concrete image. Stench plus cow plus tits plus abbess equals milk. Milk. Pope. Scream.

Even diminutive fancies are capable of upsetting small minds. The cardinal confirmed the phrase that someone had breathed into his thoughts: a little creativity, a tiny bit of fantasy and the sky falls. Idiot friars, they can't stand even a drop of humor! It was just a funny story I invented!

Laughter was something fully permissible in Della Rovere's understanding. What he could not permit, under any circumstances, was Camilo's inconvenient affront to his atrophied sense of humor. Nobody could, or should, criticize any aspect of Cardinal Della Rovere's person. Especially deficient or less adequate aspects natural to the human race.

Nearly boiling over with fury, he got up, straightened his purple robe and began to walk about the writing room. Foreseeing disaster, Carlo tried to soften the cardinal by declaring something foolish about the pope: the man is a virtual river of kindness, Eminence.

And its banks are called: Blockheadedness and Stupidity! roared the cardinal, completing as he did so the geographic image that he had of the papal mind. He proceeded: Pius III is so mediocre that his non-entity borders on aberration! Perhaps the Holy Spirit wants to teach us through this that although non-entity does not appear, it is nevertheless a sign of discord!

There. The pot was boiling over. Della Rovere was now extremely angry and the trembling friars could only await curses and humiliation from the warrior.

Which were forthcoming. Between the opening of the parchments and the orders to clear the table for the reading of the secret information, the friars

heard a little of everything. From the inertia of their olfactory capacities to the smallness of their existence as compared to the grandiose manure piles of the stables.

Finally the cardinal quieted himself enough to hear Camilo's voice. The friar began to speak softly, killing Giuliano Della Rovere's anger with curiosity.

My Cardinal, something very mysterious hovers over the Vatican these last three days. Last night's scream of terror was only the visible, or rather audible, part of this enigma. We shall relate the facts as they were seen by us and the other informants. They are events apparently isolated but which, taken together, paint an extraordinary and very disturbing picture of the papacy.

Three days ago, my Cardinal, a man in a blue cloak entered the Vatican. If he came in a carriage no one saw it. He is of medium stature, his chest massive. His countenance is kept invisible. A hooded cloak covers him from head to foot, engulfing him in blue and reducing his identity to nothing.

Stop showing off with words! You act like we're in Florence! Just read the report!

My Cardinal, wouldn't it be better to read with your own eyes the revelations it contains?

Give me those parchments!

CHAPTER TWO

A REPORT WRITTEN IN SKY-BLUE INK

Angels! The Angels! Who are they, how did they come to be, what do they do, how do they look, where do they live, what are their attributes? These are the questions asked throughout the ages by men of faith. Angels are celestial and spiritual creatures. In the book of Genesis, angels appear to guide, counsel and even to punish. Remember Sodom and Gomorra! The first angel mentioned in the Bible is the one who expels Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. In the story of Abraham, angels draw near to men, no longer as enforcers of justice but as messengers. The story of Jacob is full of angels. After betraying his brother Esau and his father, Jacob goes into the desert and is visited by a strange dream, in which angels ascend to the sky by means of colored clouds in the form of a ladder. In the visions of the prophets Isaiah and Ezequiel, angels are individualized, and assume more precise figures and appearances. Seraphim have eight wings: two to hide their faces, two to cover their bodies, two to cover their feet and two to fly. Cherubim have four wings pointing upward. The first Guardian Angel is the Archangel Raphael! Another guardian angel, the Archangel Gabriel, is described in detail in the book of the prophet Daniel: a silver body, a face shining like lightning, eyes like burning torches, arms and feet like polished brass, a voice which resonates like that of a multitude. The book of Job affirms that angels were created by God before men or the stars. The Angels! These celestial creatures appeared at the same time as the light! Whether they were created before or after men is another doubt which has generated vast debate and which the learned have tried to elucidate since remotest

times. I have as yet reached no conclusion as to this controversial theme. The passages recounting the life of Christ are peopled with angels. The Archangel Gabriel announces to Mary that she will become the Holy Mother and confirms this in Joseph's dreams. The birth of Christ was announced to the shepherds by the angels, who also advised them about Herod. Christ had the presence of angels about him during his temptations in the desert. In his preachings, angels are mentioned repeatedly. On Easter morning, an angel appears to the women who went to visit the holy tomb, announcing to them that Christ had risen. Alleluia! This is the last time that angels intervene in the Gospels.

* * * * *

Just then a small, ill-advised bird flew in through one of the openings between the stones of the amphitheater and winged its way toward the domed roof.

The view from the top of the amphitheater is quite peculiar. As all the scholars have tonsured heads and wear coarse habits, one can easily imagine a string of giant pearls resting in a semicircle upon a thick, malodorous piece of wool. Uniform and brown.

Before reaching the top of the dome, the bird changed direction and, turning left, decided to fly a non-existent curve.

From this angle the view is different. One sees an isolated pearl against a black cloth background. A bald head perched behind the pulpit. The tonsure of Monsignor Filippo, the most important theologian in Christendom, giving a learned lecture on angels to the young monks of the Supreme Fifth Order of Saint Anton.

Vibrant during his much-renowned conferences, the theologian is considered by many, including Pope Pius III, to be the rarest jewel of Roman Catholic thought. A pearl of theology.

Born in Bologna to a noble and traditional family, Filippo's gaze is green and languid. His body is straight, attractive and muscular. An earnest, fearless, face.

Undoubtedly a handsome man--and chaste. All this is the result of his biological inheritance and the persevering nature of his devout mother.

His proud bearing, sweet sensitivity and love for his fellow men and God, were learned from his affected and delicate father.

But the mystic ecstasies to which he is subject, and which cause him to spend sleepless nights unveiling the complex celestial hierarchy, are of unknown origin. Or animistic, as he prefers to say.

The bird, after slicing a circle in the air, turned again and ascended toward the dome. It rose upward like an angel, not caring to understand that between it and the sky stood various tons of solid marble. The marble of the hollow vault.

Nor did it pay the slightest attention to the avalanche of words that Monsignor Filippo poured out upon his fascinated and credulous audience: the eighteen skeletal novices of the Supreme Fifth Order of Saint Anton.

* * * * *

Evil! Evil exists! The founder of your order, the venerable Saint Anton, was attacked by the Devil! In his impotent rage, the Devil ordered his beasts to attack Anton. Immediately they obeyed. The animals howled, hissed and brayed. Everywhere Anton turned, all about him, were bands of wolves, savage lions, bulls, leopards, bears! Poisonous serpents twined around his legs. Voracious eyes glittered in the shadows. Avid mouths threatened to devour him. Pointed horns were ready to gore him. Giant spiders spun webs in an attempt to bind him. And the serpents, helped by scorpions and all the crawling, clinging beasts of Hell, stung Anton's legs. The saint, firm in his faith, resisted his adversary's brand-new method of intimidation, for he could clearly see that those savage beasts were nothing more than the fictitious material of the diabolical imagination of the Evil One!

* * * * *

The little bird maintained its terrified flight in a straight line toward the ceiling, indifferent to the evil that awaited it: the marble dome.

Now it was much more frightened, for the giant pearls on the brown wool appeared, surprisingly, to be moving. They seemed alive.

It was emotion. The touching story of Saint Anton caused seven novices to break out in tears. One actually sobbed. Two cried moderately; two others were only pretending. Another dissolved in feminine whimpers. A last one just moaned without much emotion; in this case the novice was feeling feverish and had a stopped-up nose.

A few novices prayed softly, praising the intrepid act of bravery of the famous saint and founder of the Order. Many did so from admiration and joy, a few from envy.

Monsignor Filippo paused in his lecture, waiting for the novices' reactions to run their course. He liked to make an impact among students and listeners; this was his chief source of pleasure. He showed off his theological knowledge to glorify the name of the Lord and the Holy Church, as well as to satisfy his own vanity.

Filippo was just about to resume his discourse when he failed to see the little bird lost in the air of the amphitheater. A failure due to arrogance. Theatrical, he preferred to adjust one of the lace cuffs of his impeccable black cassock.

* * * * *

God did not create the Devil! An angel created by Him became a demon. The demon's name: Lucifer! Bearer of Light! Extremely proud of his beauty, he wanted to be equal to God and convinced various angels to follow him in his vanity. There was an angelic revolt. Lucifer lost the battle, was cast into darkness, and went to reign in Hell. The sixth chapter of the book of Genesis narrates that two hundred angels, led by Semjaza and Azazel, were attracted by the beauty of human women and came down to earth to join in carnal union with them. These angels taught many carnal vices to mankind. Consequently, the women conceived voracious, hairy giants. These beings ate everything they encountered. After destroying the Earth with their terrible appetites, they began to devour each other. The earth sank into total anarchy and bloodshed. Then God intervened. He sent the angel Michael,

who imprisoned the horrible giants in valleys below the Earth, where they await the Last Judgment. Another version tells us that the angels in charge of watching over the creatures of the Earth were seduced by the women. From this union resulted demons who dominate men through magic. Pride and jealousy are pointed out as the probable causes for the fall of the angels. The demons multiplied and formed their own kingdom. Today we know with certainty that there are some eight million, seven hundred and eighty-nine thousand, three hundred and twenty-seven demons, divided into six thousand, six hundred and sixty-six legions, led by seventy-seven princes. They provoke calamities and heresies. They are uniquely responsible for the various physical and moral illnesses which consume mankind. Fortunately angels are mainly benign creatures, as I mentioned. Light is their essence and for this reason they can be in various places at the same time. This detail is very important! Although they are celestial creatures they assume human form for the sake of us mortals. Another essential detail.

* * * * *

The bird proceeded in its suicidal flight. It did not even chirp. The shock seemed inevitable. The dome approached and nothing was capable of holding it back. As we know, birds do not have guardian angels.

That was when a wave of sound arose.

A generalized groan of anguish came from the throats of the eighteen novices.

It began at the precise instant when Filippo, pointing his professor's stick at an angelic figure painted on a leather panel, said: as you can all see from the illustration, the angels have wings, and therefore feathers. Also haloes of light, colored in accordance with their legions, and most of the time angels possess genital organs!

The collective murmur of the young monks, due to the simple affirmation of the existence of angelic sex organs, was most intense.

Besides being loud, the phenomenal murmur held perplexity, inconvenience, shame, naiveté, desire and stupidity, along with many other feelings, wishes and

sensations. It was a comprehensive mixture of the intentions orbiting through the minds of those eighteen novices. Such a vast burden didn't make the murmuring louder, as one might expect, but rather, more potent.

It was so powerful that the bird thought it had already crashed against the dome. For a few seconds it acquired the human capacity to experience an event through anticipation. It foresaw and felt an imaginary shock. In a brief instant it was humanized before smashing against the marble. It died an ugly death, but it had evolved on the scale of animals and souls.

* * * * *

Silence, please! Attention, novices! I should like to remind you all that we are nearing the year one thousand five hundred, and that our theological knowledge is advancing every day, every hour, every moment. That this new century begins replete with divine revelations. And if, as a scholar of the Sacred Roman College, your ears are not prepared to hear the deepest truths about God, it is better that such a scholar withdraw. To continue. Yes, the angels do possess sexual organs, my dear novices. However, these genitalia are pure and inactive. Take note! Write this down! Angels are born of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, and speak a language unknown to men. They are divided into nine hierarchies. These are: Seraphim! Red-colored angels. Cherubim! Blue-colored angels. Throne attendants! Yellow in hue.

* * * * *

Good God! What foolishness! This report is useless! Where's the Pope's scream of terror? A little bird. The murmuring of the novices. You copied down Monsignor Filippo's whole class! Just what I need. Look at this! Read it! It goes on and on. Angels and archangels. This is complete imbecility! I can't believe it!

* * * * *

Take note! Memorize! The eighth order: Archangels. Led by Raphael, chief of the warrior angels, commander of the celestial armies. His color is green, which shines in splendor from his halo. His feathers are white. In his arms he carries a child who holds a ruby-red fish. His hair is of saffron and reaches down to his feet. From his face descend seventy thousand tears every year. The following are other archangels: Nemamian, Ieialel, Aarahel, Mizrael, Ariel, Asliah, Mebahiah, Anael.

* * * * *

Seraphim are red. Throne attendants are yellow. Why not the opposite? Or purple! All in lilac! How pretty that would be! Friar Camilo! Why am I obliged to read this endless twaddle about Monsignor Filippo's angels?

My Cardinal, the strange man in the blue cloak attended the class. It was there he was seen for the first time. Please, proceed with your reading, Eminence.

* * * * *

The bird, evolved and dead, fell downward from the dome. It made neither curves nor circles in the air, chose no direction. It simply dropped in a limp bundle, its feet drawn in, its beak open and eyes closed.

A bundle of blood and feathers that fell at the feet of the man in the blue cloak. No drop of blood spotted his raiment, not even those that splattered invisibly.

The man, sole eyewitness of the fatal flight, felt sorry for the bird. But his sentiment was brief and evaporated at once. He had other things to do.

The man in the flowing blue cloak left the amphitheater and resumed his perambulations through the outbuildings of the Vatican.

He had to meet a certain person and make sure the parchment he carried tied to his back arrived safely in the proper hands. The thing was starting to be uncomfortable; the two leather thongs that held the message in place were cutting into his skin and flesh.

Passing himself off as a rich Iberian merchant, he explained to everyone that he was in the Vatican to buy a papal indulgence, or perhaps an honorific ecclesiastical title.

He wandered from room to room, leaving a bluish trail and scattering opportune gold coins.

If he spoke to a monk, he would give him a coin saying it was for alms. Information gained from a guard was worth up to two gold coins, depending on the importance of the place the man was guarding and his goodwill in letting him pass.

Miraculously all doors opened to him. The man in blue attended the masses he wanted to attend. Crossed the halls he wanted to cross. Gained access to the anterooms in which he needed to appear.

Because he was seen and noted by so many people in such widely differing places, some thought he was a victim of the confusing gift of simultaneity. As well as the enviable vice of squandering money.

He purposely let himself be seen without revealing himself. An enigma.

He was trying to be recognized accidentally by an exact person, in an apparently chance encounter.

After this encounter he would disappear, as agreed. Nevertheless for some days he would leave behind him an absent presence, the indelible blue of his cloak fluttering in the memories of the simple.

A long gallery connected the west door of the library to the entrance hall of the Map Room. Numerous prelates, ecclesiastical authorities, nobles and ordinary citizens went back and forth at all hours through this gallery. On one side there were numerous ample windows that looked out on the garden, and on the other there was an interminable sequence of doors that gave access to sought-after office rooms. There, the monks in charge dispatched and routed anguished petitions for clemency to the Holy Office.

As the afternoon waned the gallery became almost untransitable. A legion of servants drew the thick curtains shut, covering the windows. Fifteen chandeliers of fiftysix candles each were let down and carefully lighted. At the same time,

authorities of the Holy Office were finishing their thorny mission of deflecting, with laconic irony and a sea of difficulties, the petitions of the afflicted seekers of mercy.

In the great majority of cases, the petitions for clemency were filed in the archives and never seen again. Once a sentence was proclaimed, the Holy Inquisition almost never altered it. After all, the justice of the Inquisition sprang from an unattainable divine source, impossible to be revoked. With appropriate heresy, the gallery had been baptized by the common people “The Long Corridor of Cynicism”.

The man in blue had made his way across the gallery, moving toward the Map Room. He tried not to singe his cloak on the points of firelight that danced about the floor, climbed upward on the chandeliers, and shot like arrows to the ceiling. A strong smell of burning wax obliterated all other smells, even that of the sweat dripping from the servants who suspended the chandeliers.

He wasn't interested in an olfactory carnival, but rather in the sense of sight. In the sudden white vision of the abbess, who was crossing the entrance hall to the Map Room, head bowed.

Friar Camilo, following the man eleven steps behind, had no alternative: he dropped the bundle of documents he was clutching to his chest.

The parchments scattered over the floor, and the friar bent down slowly, observing their meeting. At a snail's pace, he began to gather up the documents and arrange them in random order. His attention was focused on the extraordinary encounter.

Amid sights and smells, Camilo resorted to hearing as the most appropriate sense for carrying out his task. Head bowed, he strained to hear their conversation.

Virtuous Abbess, Nobili genere natus!

Noble Sir, Post gloriam invidia sequitur!

After this exchange, the man in blue moved away from her, took three steps and, as if he were bowing, drew behind one of the majestic rose-colored pillars which support the entrance hall. The papal housekeeper looked vaguely about her and, turning in white, followed the blue cloak.

Friar Camilo continued fruitlessly gathering up his parchments, the pillar completely preventing him from overhearing more. Deprived of his principal tool of observation, Camilo craned his neck perilously to get a look at what was going on behind the column.

The friar's eyes beheld a puzzling scene. The man, now kneeling, was handing the abbess a linen handkerchief. She opened it carefully, as though removing the petals from a rose.

Suddenly the unforeseeable happens and a strange luminous flash emanates from the folds of the linen.

* * * * *

The man said: There has been an illustrious birth. The abbess answered: Envy follows after glory. Code words! It's clear as water. Code words. What did he hand her? What was hidden in the handkerchief? The description of the flashing object is not in the report!

Cardinal, it was impossible for me to get any closer. I even sprained my neck! It's still hurting.

It was a ring! It was shining. Think a little, it could only have been a ring. What did they say behind the pillar?

My Cardinal, the column referred to is a solid architectural feature of irremovable character.

You don't say, Camilo??!!

I couldn't hear very well, Cardinal. Just a few obscure words here and there. For example: the man said the word na-vi-ga-tor.

Absurd. Navigator? That doesn't make sense. Friar Camilo heard wrong. You imagined that word. The man must have said tra-der.

Please continue reading. Soon Your Eminence will be surprised by notable clarifications to all these unanswered questions.

* * * * *

The papal chamber, Pius III's bedroom, had very few ornaments.

The ample varnished floor space contained the canopied bed at the back, two large windows on the left, and a small altar next to a deep fireplace on the right-hand wall.

In truth, the bedroom was only remarkable for its the three doors covered in thick gold leaf. And for its wooden ceiling, on which were painted enormous white clouds against a jaundiced-looking firmament.

Since the clouds did not move, imprisoned by the flat, expressionless painting, they were incapable of creating any illusion. They neither formed nor suggested lion's heads, eagles or cathedrals, as do real clouds in people's minds.

To seek any purpose, any sublime sensation or esthetic pleasure in that lumpish painting was fruitless, an exercise as vague and distant as that of stubborn sages in seeking a meaning for the nebulous history of men.

The painting on the ceiling squashed the papal chamber into an uncomfortable white. The rectangles of the steaming towels, the triangles of lace edging the blankets and the curves of the draperies on the canopy lost their forms in the all-encompassing whiteness.

The bedroom seemed like a giant egg turned inside out, the shell facing inward and the yolk running down the doors in gold.

That was precisely what the boy Francesco was singing about. Eggs. Chickens. Egg yolks. One of the secular songs of the renowned composer Josquin Des Prés.

Chirping here, trilling there, cackling merrily someplace else, but always melodic. With soft and precise voice, Francesco interpreted the story of the enchanted chicken coop written by Des Prés.

The musical works of the prodigious Des Prés were appreciated by all Christendom. His compositions caused sharp religious emotion, although the composer did not express himself in liturgical language. On the contrary, he glorified nature. In his songs animals spoke and trees explained themselves.

His compositions required a fast tempo and many voices singing different texts at the same time. Since the words became incomprehensible, devoured by each

other, the listener didn't capture their real meaning, but rather received an exquisite vocal and choral impact.

Any human being who heard a composition of Des Prés imagined himself visited by the Divine. In truth, he was experiencing the intrigues of a pigsty or hearing about torpid bovine adventures. An artist, the composer Josquin Des Prés.

That night Francesco sang a passage from Praeter Rerum Seriem, originally written for six voices. Since the music had been dismembered and reduced to one voice alone in a disastrous adaptation conceived by the boy's music instructor, the song was rendered too cackling by far.

Irritated, the Holy Father contorted his face and brought the three fingers to his cheek. The Abbess perceived Pius III's impatience and rang the little bell.

Francesco withdrew unhappily. He noted that his singing had not pleased the Pope, nor vanquished the evil headache.

Then Pius III made another facial movement, a grimacing maneuver of the chin. He mumbled a yes.

The Abbess understood the order and moved close to the lighted fireplace. She didn't admire the alabaster mantelpiece, entirely sculpted in minute floral-and-fruit motif, framing the mouth of the fireplace. Forcefully, she twisted one of the clusters of grapes carved in the stone.

The turning mechanism was activated. A part of the wall beside the altar moved with a cracking sound.

The secret door opened and the man in blue entered the chamber.

His left leg was tingling and twitching, partly from the emotion of being face to face with the Holy Father, partly from having spent several cramped hours standing, walled in by the narrow sides of the cubicle behind the altar.

Taken away by the abbess at the end of the afternoon, the man in blue was led through the secret papal annexes: a maze of corridors, passageways and rooms that connected the Pontiff's chamber to camouflaged exits and entrances throughout the palace by means of an underground labyrinth.

This invisible but most useful architectural arrangement included one room where secret documents, confidential correspondence and the marvelous accounting and financial records of the papacy were kept. A sealed storeroom in which disturbing religious relics shared space with heavy trunks full of jewels and precious stones. A sort of kitchen, all tiled, where powerful poisons reposed beside scarce antidotes. And other places of indecipherable use, like a bathroom with a lascivious lead tub, large enough for two people, at its center.

The man in blue saw very little of all this, for he was taken directly to the dank, dark cubicle behind the altar. Since he abhorred closed-in places, he suffered in an anguish of cold sweat and lost all notion of time. He imagined they had forgotten him, buried him forever. Just as he was on the point of screaming, he entered an agreeable catatonic state. Though he believed he was dead, it was the sweet faintness of hunger.

When the abess squeezed the testicular stone grapes, he emerged through the opening. He hobbled out, trying to get his bearings.

Removing his hood, the man uncovered a clean-shaven face with fine features, rather incompatible with his massive, simian chest. He knelt in contrition beside the bed of Pius III.

The abess opened the linen handkerchief, bent over the bed and showed the shining object to the Holy Father: the irrefutable proof that the man in blue was the true messenger. The man who enjoyed the complete trust of the King of Portugal.

* * * * *

Disillusion, apathy, lassitude, lack of intelligence. And headaches. An excellent description of Pope Pius III.

The Holy Pontiff suffers intensely, Cardinal.

Understandable. His Holiness has very few ideas in his head. And he expresses these same ideas several times a day. Thus the headaches. It's written here! Didn't I say it? A ring! With a royal seal! The coat of arms of the King of Portugal! The man in blue is an emissary.

Read the next page, my Cardinal.

* * * * *

Gently removing the cloths, the abbess reveals the visage of Pius III. A smell of rosemary and aromatic herbs reaches Francesco's nostrils, while from his mouth emanate the first cackling sounds that pierce the bones of the Holy Father's oval head drenched with oils.

* * * * *

I already read that! The boy sang again?! Balls! I already know that Francesco crowed like a rooster!

Sorry, my Cardinal. This page of the report is out of order. If you please, here's the next page. Pray read it.

Here we are. The man handed over a parchment to the pope.... wrinkled and smelly? To the pope?

Yes, my Cardinal, the parchment exuded a bodily odor so strong that it reached the hole in the canopy. Thus we deduce that the man had been hiding the message from the King of Portugal in some concealed place on his body. Doubtless all very secret.

Stop talking, Camilo! This way it's impossible, I can't concentrate on what I'm reading.

Excuse me, Cardinal. I only want to call Your Eminence's attention to this passage of the text: the moment when His Holiness says good-bye to the man in blue. As you see, Pius III blessed the man and called him na-vi-ga-tor.

Navigator? Yes, true. But on what sea does he navigate? And where does he go?

Here is the final part of the report, Eminence.

* * * * *

The navigator, having received the papal blessing, returned to the claustrophobic cubicle. He felt relieved at having fulfilled his mission as carrier pigeon.

To travel, cross lands and seas, to wander creation and make discoveries, this was the burden of his destiny. Never before had he been immobilized up this way, sealed up in a secret room like a corpse.

Back inside the cubicle he expected to feel another crisis of anguish. Again he would be obliged to look inside himself and know terror at the emptiness. An ignoble punishment for one who had been trained to let his eyes rove carefree over the richness of the view or pit himself against the challenges of the route. After all, he was a navigator, a discoverer of geographies.

The awaited crisis didn't come. The papal blessing was a balm. An imaginary medicine against all future ills, all evils to come, that quieted him in the dark.

He fell asleep standing up, as if he were a horse, an animal incapable of looking inside itself, gloriously living in the comfort of pure instinct.

The navigator fell asleep knowing that the next morning he would be let out. Taken quickly to one of the camouflaged exits that perforated the Vatican's impenetrable protective walls, and from thence be on his way back to Lisbon.

That night the abbess did not sleep poorly; she slept hardly at all.

After leaving Pius III with the mysterious message in his hands, she went to take care of her routine administrative duties. To boil the infusion of medicinal herbs and chamomile, to inspect the vestments and see to the breakfast menu. To finalize the preparations for a new papal day.

The abbess also avoided looking inside herself. She undertook many obligations and tasks, letting herself circle unthinking through the gearworks of routine.

Unlike the navigator, if she looked inside herself she would find complete happiness. A well of love. Intact.

She did not know that the teeth of the gearworks of routine, large and grinding like those of a horse, were uniquely responsible for the premature loss of her youth and her crippling lack of dreams when she slept.

Pius III broke the seal, opened the square parchment and, with a small shudder of disgust, began to read the message.

The letter from King Dom João II of Portugal began with the usual warm salutations decreed by protocol. Then it communicated to the Holy Father that an event of enormous magnitude had occurred. Nobili genere natus.

At that point in his reading, Pius III could not find an appropriate feeling to match the announcement of such an occurrence. He still didn't know exactly what had taken place.

Royal letters stuffed with hyperbolic news were part of the minuet danced between the crowned heads of Europe and the papal miter. Generally, they communicated the discovery of important religious relics or petitioned the sanctification of unmiraculous dukes and counts admired by the royalty.

The more important missives asked for the just intervention of the Church in the complicated marriage contracts between royal houses. And the most important ones of all requested annulment of princely marriages by reason of the biological inadequacy of one of the parties.

When his reading brought him to the letter's true purport, his brain exploded. All his senses and feelings were activated at the same time in unprecedented anarchy. They burst his brain into particles and his body was overtaken by feverish convulsions.

What was written there went beyond the critical point of the unimaginable.

Arms and legs thrashed independent of his control. Skin and flesh fibrillated.

His habitual paralysis when facing anything gave way to an unbelievable motor activity, the fruit of a sinister feeling of total incapacity to respond. He could not see any possible solution to the magnitudinous questions raised by the facts described.

Five pillows fell to the varnished floor. The white blanket was kicked in a tangle to one corner of the bed. The pontiff felt himself getting lost in the maze of his thought and grasped after some saving shortcut that would make life return to

normal. If this discovery were real, from that instant forward, nothing else would again be as before. Normal.

As if hypnotized, he got out of bed and began to stumble about the chamber. He attempted to pray, ashamed at not knowing what to do. He stammered an innocuous Our-Father, hoping to calm the crazed particles that somersaulted inside his cranium.

Losing his balance, he stopped before the fireplace. A hot breath of air reached the fringes of his white woolen nightshirt. His fine skin bristled and his fragile bones warmed. The heat reinvigorated him.

Pain, in his understanding, was the best analgesic against all kinds of misfortune. His convenient headaches always brought him out of his abyss of loneliness, and had the complementary power of postponing decisions and desires. Pain was a gift. A buoyant island that floated in bas-relief on the sea of his imaginary illnesses. A truth felt and bemoaned that nobody could contest. A magic trick he had invented in his novitiate, to which he had become addicted for the rest of his life.

Besides arousing the pity of others, his pain had always been a sharp and useful tool. And it would not fail him now. It always furnished a providential postponement of any deliberation, so that others, chance, or perhaps the Divine would undertake to resolve the problem for him.

Pain. He needed some sort of pain. Fierce. Unforgettable. Like that of Christ on the cross. If Jesus Christ Himself redeemed the sin of all mankind through the magnanimous suffering of the crucifixion, Pius III could, with a less transfixing pain, sublimate or at least put off a determination regarding this unthinkable theological event.

Yes. Theological. The Portuguese discovery was not just one of pure geography, it was much more a caprice of Divine Knowledge. A matter which required the presence of that pearl of theology, Monsignor Filippo.

* * * * *

In panic! Pius III was terrified! He trembled! Moaned! But what was written in the message? What was this occurrence that was so unheard-of?

We couldn't exactly find that out, Eminence.

What?! You couldn't read it? This is serious. Very serious! Didn't you say that the hole in the canopy offers a panoramic view? Well then? Why didn't you read it?

Yes, my Cardinal, that's correct. A panoramic view. But, in the case of the reading of this document, we needed some sort of optical focus, a thing that doesn't exist. Moreover, Pius III moved about too much. He turned this way and that. He doubled over. He stood up, flexed himself, twisted in contortions. May Jesus pardon me! The Holy Father seemed to have glimpsed Evil itself. Not once did he put down the missive, Eminence.

A happening of enormous magnitude. And one I don't know about! Preposterous! What could it be, in God's name?

My Cardinal, the pope only grew calmer when Monsignor Filippo arrived. But they positioned themselves in front of the fireplace, a location very distant from the hole in the ceiling.

Monsignor Filippo was with the pope?

Yes, my Cardinal. He was.

And did he by chance read the message?

He read it. All of it.

Curses of Hell! I order that that letter be stolen and copied immediately. Do you understand? I want to know the contents before the day is over.

* * * * *

Monsignor Filippo was asleep in the library, resting on some ancient papyruses that described in Aramaic the glorious days of the founding of Christianity, when he was awakened with some difficulty by an aged monk.

Submerged in exhaustion, Filippo had just suffered a second mystical swoon due to the uninterrupted reading of the manuscript.

Monsignor Filippo's ecstasies produced no orgiastic pleasure whatsoever, contrary to what one might suppose, since an orgasm, indescribable and astonishing sensation born of the pleasure of friction, is accompanied by ecstasy. Devoid of lascivious pleasure, Filippo's ecstasies were rich in revelations of the Divine mechanism. Such moments almost always occurred when the theologian perused sacred texts, and certain words would begin to inject images into his thoughts. The visions would begin as static pictures, gradually becoming more animated and diverse. Always Biblical and impressive. Filippo would lose all track of time as everything around him slid off into infinite space. He thought he slept, but his eyes stayed open and bright as if he were awake and conscious. A paradox that typically afflicts those chosen for waking dreams.

In a first impulse toward preserving reality, the theologian would make the maximum effort to concentrate on his reading and dissolve the visions that rose enveloped in fear. But nothing could overcome their whirlwind force. Sucking his mind away from the text, pictures of the sublime and the ridiculous reeled kaleidoscopic and irresistible, gathering speed.

*The pictorial materials composing the first vision would be suggested by the text itself. Then the images would escape from the writer's theme and acquire power of their own. Something decidedly very upsetting. If Filippo were reading *The Temptation of Saint Anton*, for example, in the passage that gives the malevolent description of the snakes, spiders and scorpions, the visions could easily transport the theologian on a rapid visit to Hell, where he would count with precision the number of Lucifer's phalanxes: six thousand, six hundred and sixty-six legions.*

However, the ecstatic process often chose to operate along the edges of the unpredictable. The same text might make Filippo slide down the tail of a scorpion and embark on a cyclopean journey to a lukewarm purgatory.

The direction the vision would take was always uncertain. Imponderable, and therefore always a surprise.

The theologian's difficulty consisted in trying to slow down the process.

The tunnel of images would expand without stopping until it reached gigantic proportions. He sensed it would never end, and no exit was possible.

With growing speed, the colors and contours of the visions would start to run together in a brilliant splash that was at the same time tenebrous. When his swoon reached this point, there seemed to be no going back, and the theologian would be tortured by disorientation. The tunnel had no end yet he couldn't go back to the beginning.

His restoration was always brought about by the reality he had forgotten. An accidental noise could break the spell. The creaking of a floorboard in the library, footsteps or voices would interrupt his inner gyrations.

Filippo would drop out of the tunnel, angry because he could never manage to get past that certain brilliant point beyond which, he supposed, the miraculous would be revealed. Everything would be explained, even the reasoning of God. His frustration was marked by excessive salivation, and he would swallow repeatedly.

Since the fantastic groups of images did not fix themselves in his memory, nor nourish his recollection with the totality of what had been revealed, Filippo returned unsatisfied. The theologian would fall into mental lacunae, blank spaces of oblivion where only a few disconnected visions remained. His ecstasies were inconclusive and forgettable.

The residual images were then transcribed, and others added as these jogged his memory, in a mass of writings he carried about in a locked leather valise. Filippo was thinking about transforming these transcendental notations, at the proper time, into a textbook about the workings of the Kingdom of God.

What with the study of the sacred text, the coming and going of the mystic swoon, the partial transcription of its contents, and the prayers of thanksgiving to God for the grace of the revelations, Filippo consumed numerous canonical hours and all his strength.

Two untimely mystic journeys, one upward and one downward, had left him drained and nauseous that night.

When the Monsignor stood next to Pius III before the fireplace, he felt torn apart, vaporized by an abysmal sensation of absence. He was there but at the same time he wasn't. Filippo was still deep within the amnesic spaces of the mystic tunnel.

The Supreme Pontiff's eyes were fixed on the fire. Each flickering flame, each spark that rose, ignited the corneas of Pius III. His gaze confirmed that the fire would be the protagonist of his pain.

Filippo read the letter from the King of Portugal in silence. The text perfectly described how vast the significance of the discovery was. The Monsignor was incapable of mentally digesting the logic of it all. He felt as though he had no face, no mouth or mental stomach, transfixed as he was in his state of emptiness.

Pius III interpreted Filippo's distant attitude as the sign of profound reflection. He imagined, erroneously, that the theologian was master of a blessed mental equilibrium, very fortunate in such a situation.

I swear, my soul shall be consumed by Hellfire before anyone hears word of this secret from my lips.

With these words, Filippo proffered the oath demanded by the pope. Handing the letter back to the Pontiff, he suggested that it might be well to convene a conclave of theologians to discuss the matter.

Pius III considered. The report of the King of Portugal contained only one supposition. A pontiff should never risk ridicule by gathering the sages of the Church to ponder a matter still so embryonic.

The very first thing we need, he said, is unequivocal proof of the truth of this discovery.

The pope decided that the letter should be destroyed at once, since the premature revelation of its contents could cause an uncontrollable revolution throughout Christendom.

And to carry out his words, Pius III pulled up the sleeve of his white nightshirt and placed the letter he held in his wretched hand above the flames.

Kindled by the greasy sweat of the blue-cloaked man, the missive ignited with chemical explosiveness. It flamed up in an unexpected ball of red which included the pope's hand in its destructiveness.

Screaming, Pius III slowly pulled his hand back. It came out of the fireplace covered in a Satanic black glove. The fire had clung to the pontiff's skin, cooking dermis, boiling blood and melting nerves.

The papal pain was granted in excess. He made a miscalculation.

Still mired in a sticky morass of blankness, Filippo made no move to help put out the flames, as one might expect. He didn't save the hand of the Supreme Pontiff from the infernal flames of the fireplace. Distantly he watched the fire spurt from under the pope's fingernails and burst from his pores in an atrocious symphony.

Helpless, Pius III transformed his scream. Rising anguished and intense, it grew to the level of absolute terror and was amplified in a fearful echo. It was the scream of someone who imagined himself dead, devoured by volcanic combustion.

This was the scream overheard that night. A scream that spread like fire through the corridors.

* * * * *

As Your eminence can read, the papal scream has been totally clarified.

Idiot friars! You clarified nothing! The letter was burned! Destroyed! Now we have a real mystery on our hands. And there is no panoramic hole in existence capable of revealing it. Because the secret now reposes in the heads of Pius III and Monsignor Filippo.

Also in the paths of the navigator, Eminence.

CHAPTER THREE

THE HORSE THAT LOOKED INSIDE ITSELF

Also in the paths of the navigator, Eminence.

The phrase proffered by Friar Camilo hung oscillating in the writing room as if it were a pendulum. It swung back and forth inside their heads without breaking the silence of the cardinal or the friars.

Optimistically it approached their minds.

Yes. To pursue the ocean-going paths of the man in the blue cloak was a valid option. By following his route one could, at least in theory, penetrate the nucleus of the secret contained in the letter. Undoubtedly a very fine idea.

The phrase swung away, pessimistic.

No. Della Rovere had a land army. He didn't command ships or fleets of marine vessels, or even boats that could navigate rivers and lakes. Besides, what if the navigator was still on dry land, hiding like a serpent in the bowels of the Vatican?

Two other possibilities, much more remote, implied removing the secret from the minds of Pius III and Filippo.

A most complicated operation, starting with the choice of an instrument for the violation of said minds, and open to questionable results.

If the cardinal's nature were softer, less aggressive and temperamental, the dagger of persuasion would be the ideal weapon for such a procedure.

Della Rovere could advance a series of hypnotic conversations, lubricated with wine, patience and flattery, which would definitely yield a few drops of

truth from the pope and the monsignor. Obviously, the secret wouldn't be revealed in its entirety, but a few glimmerings might appear.

Perhaps some clues would be dropped that would illuminate the heart of the matter. Then what? How to put this handful of clues together to give the secret form?

Sadly, the dagger of persuasion always proves too short. After it cuts through the tissue of abstract conversation, one cannot affirm precisely what has been lanced by its blade: the real secret, or a blister of lies.

The action of this sort of dagger is highly questionable, as it wounds rather than severs. Even if it causes a hemorrhage of revelations, the final fluid is nearly always diluted in doubts. An inseparable mixture of truths and lies.

The act of undertaking and maneuvering persuasion requires expertise, a strong dose of hypocrisy and much astuteness. Any careless move alerts the victim and aborts the attack. The success of the operation rests in perpetual subtlety, from the first sibylline words of a conversation to the final analysis of the results, always speculative and contaminated.

Thus it was not a mission for the cardinal, a man averse to daggers, accustomed as he was to fighting indelicately with a long, heavy sword. Another, much more traumatic method for observing the mind of another person is through trepanation of the brain, a surgical technique Della Rovere had heard about. According to his physician and friend, Dr. Giovanni di Vigo, the ancient Egyptians had used trepans. These instruments were very sharp saws to cut open a sort of window in the heads of the Pharaohs, through which the malevolent spirits that oppressed and sickened the Egyptian rulers could be released.

Such a procedure served to extinguish any and all sickness, from an inflamed rash to a nasty blister on the toe, or even the unbearable bloating of a belly strangled by a complicated knot in the intestines. Thus all illnesses were cured in ancient Egypt, for trepanation killed the patient along with the malady.

If Della Rovere were to submit Pius III or Filippo to a cranial trepanation, he knew he would find brains and blood. Never words, explanations or secrets--which proved the uselessness of this Egyptian procedure.

For Professor Vigo, the liver, not the brain, was the most important organ in the human body, since it was the storage place for vital fluids and possibly the place where the soul resided.

The foolish and primitive people of ancient Egypt were completely ignorant of the hepatic supremacy, just as they never guessed that a copious bleeding was the most scientific and effective treatment to vanquish the majority of bodily ills. Along with abundant enemas.

The recollection of Pharaonic medical stories told by the eminent professor caused a hint of a smile to appear behind the cardinal's tangled beard.

This smile was invisible to Carlo and Camilo, whose perplexity grew with Della Rovere's immobility. It was odd, to say the least, to see him static, elbows propped on the table, bent over the confidential report as if he hadn't finished reading the parchments.

The cardinal was always in motion; he even thought aloud and talked in his sleep. Silent and motionless, never.

Carlo and Camilo exchanged a glance. Their brief and pointed eye contact beseeched some corporal reaction from Della Rovere. Preferably, an immediate one.

The friars were familiar with the whole code of gestures and mannerisms that characterized the ineffable cardinal. They had learned to read Della Rovere's mind through simple observation of his motor activity.

An upward movement of his left hand meant deliberation. Compulsive walking in circles, affliction. The cardinal's body always translated, with precautionary timeliness and firm accuracy, the emotional quality of his imminent verbal attacks or attitudes. The friars needed no trepans or daggers, only their eyes, to decipher him--which was, after all, a precious improvement over the Egyptian technique .

Della Rovere always struck a pose before speaking. Immobile now, not so much as smiling or stroking his beard, the cardinal seemed like an Egyptian sphinx. Enigmatic, as sphinxes always were. Threatening.

The cardinal's reasoning returned to its starting point and again took the measure of Camilo's utterance: Also in the paths of the navigator, Eminence.

This man in blue must be found at any cost. There was no other solution.

His pride bristled at not having been the originator of this option, such a clear one to unveil the mystery.

But that wasn't important; he would simply appropriate the idea. Even if he had to perform trepanation on the skulls of the two Dominicans.

Della Rovere began to move. He raised his hand, twitched his fingers, and his right eyebrow sketched a crooked arch. His vital hepatic fluids boiled in speculation about an occurrence capable of transforming Pius III, the Kindly Idiot, into a torch of pain that consumed his hand.

Just then friar Marcelino, after knocking with excessive respect on the writing-room door, entered bowing and scraping, his neck shrunk back into his thorax as he mumbled endless apologies. He whispered some twenty syllables in Carlo's ear: Brother, the navigator is fleeing through the west wall of the Vatican.

At once Carlo relayed this information to the cardinal.

Triumphant, Della Rovere sprang up and proclaimed: Didn't I tell you! The navigator holds this key to the mystery! The man is still loose in the Vatican! Divine Providence is on my side! I'll catch him!

* * * * *

The city of Rome stands on extremely unstable, swampy ground. This is due to the flooding, over thousands of years, of the Tiber river, whose muddy waters have silently infiltrated the earth, leaving it damp and crumbling.

The river's appetite was usually appeased with the low-lying valleys, and very seldom did it rise up to the seven hills that pontificate over Rome.

The twins Romulus and Remus, founders of the city, did not live in the valleys but leaped from one hill to the next, carried by the mythical savage she-wolf who adopted and fed them.

Legend has it the she-wolf was so maternal that, besides providing the twins with milk to keep them from starving, she fed them with the extravagant illusion that in that muddy backwater of the river it was possible to found a city.

Not just a city. An empire. A civilization. Afterwards, another empire, another civilization. An interminable sequence of different empires and civilizations that would elevate that foul-smelling swamp to the category of the eternal. Rome the Eternal.

There is no doubt that the she-wolf, like all real mothers, had a fundamental influence on the deportment and character of the twins. And on all their deluded descendants.

The city grew upon the putrid valley which the people called the Cloaca, and evolved in an exquisite anarchy of styles across the seven hills: Palatine, Capitoline, Quirinal, Viminal, Caelian, Aventine, and Esquiline.

Surprisingly, on the opposite bank of the river Tiber there had always existed a perfect place to build a city: a high plateau of dry soil crowned by a green hill.

But neither the she-wolf, the twins, the first Etruscans to arrive, nor the Gallic, Oscan and Samnite peoples who traveled the region, nor even the ancient Romans dared to live there.

Simply because, from primordial times, this place was known to be of illustrious origin, reserved by the gods of all religions to shelter the Divine.

The Etruscan settlers baptized this eighth hill with the name Vaticanus.

In this place, the ancient Romans believed, lived the untouchable god Vaticanus, the most essential of the four hundred thirty-seven gods and semi-gods who operated in the pantheon of the empire and gave life to pagan theology.

The importance of the god Vaticanus came from the fact of his being the absolute master of the gift of words and communication. The so-called oracle of oracles. It was only by his unique power, his voice, that the other gods could understand each other and humans.

Without Vaticanus it would be impossible for Mars, god of war, to communicate to men that there would be a bloody battle, or for Cupid, god of love, to enchant a young couple, making them fall in love and procreate.

His function was so vital to the pantheon's dramaturgy that, without him, Jupiter was nothing more than a mute, heavy planet--never the temperamental ruler of the deities.

Nobles, patricians, commoners and even slaves of ancient Rome took their children to visit the mount of Vaticanus, thus insuring that their descendants would not be mute, inarticulate or stutterers. Too many visits to the hill could make children grow up blabbermouths.

The power of the god Vaticanus was so supreme that it would be improper, even offensive, to build a temple to worship him. Moreover, Vaticanus had no face or body, being the purest abstraction of word and thought.

From the name Vaticanus came the Latin word "vagitanus", which because of its similarity to the verb "augire", evolved into the verb "vagire" : to moan, scream, yell, cry, lament, or groan.

It was the god Vaticanus who provided the semantic root for the act of "vaticanation": to prophesy, predict, foresee, announce in advance, divine, foretell.

Joining together all these verbs--moan, prophesy, scream, predict, yell, foresee, cry, announce in advance, lament, divine, groan, foretell--it would be merely curious, if it were not also true, that the Vatican mount was abbreviated in the simple language of the Etruscans to "uates", a word that made its way into Latin and gave birth to our word "poet".

That person able to prophecy feelings in screams or whispers, to yell proclamations of the future, to lament our condition of insignificance, to foretell happiness and passion, to groan before useless power and foresee the destiny of the universe by simply juggling words. It is all this and much more, to be a poet.

The god Vaticanus was exterminated with the fall of ancient Roman Empire; perhaps that is why very little importance came to be given to the voices of poets and the words of poems.

As Vaticanus had no body or face, there was no burial for him when he died. Nor did he become a planet, like so many other gods. Vaticanus just grew more and more abstract until he was lost in the imponderable.

The eighth hill would have been left without an owner, but for a sad and obscure fact. On a rainy, windy night, a ragged group of starving wretches tore into the bowels of the hill. With earth and lamentations they covered the lifeless body of a poor man wrapped in a torn shroud. A fisherman named Peter.

The edification of the Church of Christ began at the moment the heart of Saint Peter was buried on the summit of the Vatican hill.

When the navigator slipped out through the secret passage in the impenetrable west wall of the papal seat, he did not have the faintest idea that he was leaving behind him a group of thirty-seven buildings, constructed stone upon stone over the course of centuries and assuming gigantic proportions along with the growing necessities and importance of the church founded upon Peter.

The Vatican was really an enormous fortress, complete and self-sufficient.

Around a central garden, always flowering and punctuated by lovely fountains, a series of solid buildings interconnected, beginning with the papal palace, His Holiness's residence. This joined the Sistine Chapel, the library, the Map Room, the guards' and sentinels' buildings, the kitchens, the stables, the Holy Office, the dungeons with their venerable niches for torture, the secret

halls and cubicles, the sheds, the countless altars, the cardinals' offices and nuns' quarters, the Sacred College, the sleeping quarters for family members and visitors, the monks' building, the servants' lodgings, the accounting and financial wing, the storerooms for food, arms, secrets, a subterranean cemetery, and more and more, on to the sordid pavilion of men's outhouses, where one hundred and twenty-two privies overflowed with the fetid sewage of the lesser prelates and upper ranks of servants.

The navigator took a deep breath. At last he was back out in the fresh air. He moved away from the wall down a rocky bank. There he found the black horse hidden under the peach trees.

The animal was rested and had been prepared for a long journey. The man petted the horse's forehead, carpeted in short hairs, and inspected its saddle and bridle. All seemed perfect, all according to plan. The leather of the saddle and bridle were of excellent quality.

He adjusted the stirrups to fit his legs, mounted and began to ride slowly, letting the animal grow accustomed to his weight and way of riding.

The navigator also adapted himself to the horse's volume, height and cadence. Both sought to unite in balanced wholeness, whereupon commands and actions would become so well integrated that the two bodies would operate as one.

After going slowly for a while, horse and horseman broke into a gentle trot. The navigator needed to get away from the dangerous wall of the Vatican and its surroundings. Not so fast that it would look like he was fleeing, nor so slow as to be considered easy prey. An idiotic strategy created by the Phoenicians and repeated by everyone, in the illusion that nobody knows it.

The man wanted to leave Rome as anonymously as he had arrived. He and his new horse. Both anonymous.

* * * * *

Della Rovere was categorical as he gave orders to the chief of the guards: Don't kill the man! I want him alive, with a tongue and mouth to speak.

Eight soldiers galloped off on their horses. The troop was under the command of captain Ritter, a Swiss of enormous size and strength, who was well acquainted with the terrain, the cruelty of a man-hunt and the pleasurable art of penetrating women.

The cardinal also ordered that the dark-brown pennant with red spots be unfurled on the east tower of the Vatican, signaling the sentinels of the principal gates of Rome to bar the passages.

The day was cold and rainy, but the clouds were high and the pennant would be seen by all the gatekeepers at the city's main exits. They would obey the order immediately, causing great inconvenience to various travelers, traders, farmers and passers-through.

Rome was not interested in the endless raising and lowering of multicolored or spotted pennants atop the Vatican. Everyone knew they were coded messages from the papacy to the city authorities. Or rather, orders. The pope was, on top of everything else, Bishop of Rome.

Once the navigator and his mount had found a comfortable point of mutual equilibrium, they galloped southward at full speed along the bank of the Tiber River. They would pass by the Tiberian Island, crossing the river at the Palatine bridge, and cutting through the Circus Maximus, would reach the Caracalla Baths and leave the city through the Gate of Metronia or, further south, through the Gate of Saint Sebastian, disappearing down the oldest road of Rome, the Via Appia. This was the route the navigator imagined, but he was not to follow it.

When Captain Ritter spied the blue cape flying along the Palatine bridge, he had no doubt he had won the battle.

The enormous plain on the south side of Rome constituted the poorest route of escape from the city. Leading into a wide ravine that embraced some of the most spectacular ruins of the ancient Roman Empire, the south always

tricked fugitives, who ended up mercilessly strangled in the crooked, traitorous Via Appia, which just now was blocked.

In Ritter's estimation, the man in blue was a foolhardy blunderer who would fall into the snare of the south's seductive amplitude and be easily captured. That was the scenario imagined by the Swiss captain in his superiority. But it was not to be followed, either.

For the captain, the safest way to flee Rome was through the city itself, on foot. Right through the center built on swampland, full of alleys, houses with wide-open doors and windows, arches, stairways, and mazes of back passages. Going through the center it was possible, indeed quite easy, to get away, because there you were in the pores of the city, and when something leaves through the pores, it evaporates.

The Swiss knew some of these pores very well. Two of his five women lived in this spongy central area of Rome. And in keeping with the fame of the Swiss people, the captain was very methodical in all things, including his women and love life.

Given his generous instinct for sex, he managed at least nine couplings a week, with two ejaculations during each. His succulent tongue slid in kisses over the women's bodies, while his beloved penis brought powerful and multiple orgasms to his partners-true she-wolves. Roman and in heat.

When the navigator reached the middle of the bridge, he noticed the uproar behind him. The horses of Ritter's troops panted, their galloping mass growing steadily closer and more threatening.

The guards' uniforms, grayish, ill-sewn and heavy, with a huge purple cross painted on the cloth, made of Ritter a sinister, roaring figure. The seams were so crude and thick that they appeared to have been basted with heavy cords. They pulled tight, especially across the groin, leaving precious little space for his stallionesque male parts.

So as not to squash his scrotum in painful and continuous pulsation against the saddle, Ritter galloped standing up in his stirrups, mounted above

his sex organs that bounced freely above the animal. A horse riding a horse.

But when he and his horse lost the so-called point of mutual equilibrium, the captain would slip, landing violently in the saddle. Then he would roar in impotent rage at the hated uniform, rain furious whiplashes on his neighing mount, and together they would merge into a frenzied, thundering mass no one dared contain.

At the end of the bridge the navigator turned to the north, revising his route and disappointing the captain. Above all, he changed his destiny. He turned toward a tragedy in the pores of the city.

* * * * *

Due to the fever of ecclesiastical construction that gripped all Europe, and aided by scandalous bribes, the marble-hunters of Rome had transformed their clandestine activity into a paying business, respected and legal. Demonstrating once again the Arabs' commercial principle, the law of supply and demand, with full mathematical rigor.

The excavation of ruins, the dismantling of pagan temples and the dismembering of the architecture of ancient Imperial Rome had gained the official seal of a new artistic movement: the school of the architect Cosma, who specialized in a style and design of mosaics made from fragments of broken marble.

In their own way, the cutters of marble despoiled the fabulous pagan relics of their own city with more violence and abandon than the sackings perpetrated by the Goths in the year 410, the Sarracens in 840 or the Normans in 1400.

Breasts from Aphrodites, garlands from Venuses, muscles from Appollos, entire ephesuses and appetizing nymphs were savaged by hammers, massacred without blame or remorse, and the shards transmuted into floor mosaics or ceiling moldings to complete the decor of a sumptuous chamber.

Other times they were taken to special crematorium ovens, where they were pulverized into a shining white dust called cement, a powder of marble.

Rome was boiling over with the murder of the statues. It was easier to pry loose a block of marble from the Temple of Isis or tear one from the ancient Roman Senate than to extract one with much sacrifice and grimy sweat from the steep mountains of Carrara. Not to mention transporting the marble to the city--exorbitant in time and cost.

The carnage began each morning with a scattered, irritating hammering that awoke the city. By afternoon, Rome was blanketed with the white smoke that belched in tufts from the chimneys of the cement ovens. Strangely, nobody seemed to smell the perfume of dying beauty that exuded from the ruined facets of the marble chips.

Suddenly not only Rome and the Vatican, but all the principates, kingdoms and duchies of Europe urgently needed new churches, cathedrals, monasteries and baptistries. An unexplainable competition took over, as if God, the Absolute, were suffering from an improbable lack of affection and demanded men build Him monumental marble edifices, set on solid foundations, surrounded by huge walls reinforced by flying buttresses and topped with outsized domes. A lack of affection known as the Gothic Style. Gothic-Baroque. Baroque.

Besides catering to the local demand, the Roman cutters began to export their disfigured merchandise to Pisa, Lucca, Salerno, Orvieto, to France for the cathedral of Aix-la-Chapelle, and to London for the construction of Westminster Abbey. From this unbridled commerce flourished the wealth of various prelates and countless Roman bishops.

When the young man with the long neck, protruding Adam's apple and penetrating eyes touched the surface of a block of marble with his fingertips, he recognized immediately that the stone had been recently torn from a ruin.

Bishop Fabrizio, an obese, sentimental and plethoric man, had spent himself with the obsession of bringing Michelangelo from Florence to Rome.

Merely from kindness and appreciation, he had paid all the artist's expenses for lodging and transport, and given him a sizable advance in gold ducats, with no obligation on the part of the sculptor.

Fabrizzi had used up all his political and ecclesiastical influence, gained over a lifetime dedicated to corruption. He had lowered himself to humiliating rounds of fawning and flattery, and presented the Medici family with the most extravagant jewels he could find, because the Medicis had contracted Michelangelo exclusively and *in perpetuum*.

After interminable journeys to Florence, Fabrizio convinced the possessive Medicis to authorize the artist's release in order to design a tomb for him.

Now, the exhausted Fabrizio sat on the covered upper porch of his palace and rapturously contemplated Michelangelo .

Inarticulate with emotion, the bishop let out short nervous giggles interspersed with small sickly burps. His enchantment was such that he perspired as if it were the height of summer, and he could barely focus on the tall young man with disproportionately large hands who stood in front of him. He idolatrized this divinity self-sculpted in flesh and blood; he worshipped a long-lined statue carved from the most delicate of rose-colored marbles, an unpleasant character with an arrogant manner and little skill at conversation.

When Michelangelo finished sculpting a work commissioned by a French cardinal, the *Pietà*, the entire world discovered that the artist possessed that rarest of gifts: the germ of beauty.

The ability to locate and decipher the beautiful wherever it might be: hidden, disguised, or even obvious, but invisible to other human beings, the beautiful was rescued from the depth of things with a simple look or touch from the sculptor.

The artist's senses exercised the supreme capacity of deconstructing the layers of a gigantic block of stone and affirming, as later demonstrated by his chisel, that in that solid mass there lived an archangel in all its splendor, the most ravishing of women or the most perfect of men.

He loved the beautiful in a way that no one ever had until then. Beauty bared itself to him in all things: in the profile of an adolescent, in the movements of the fingers of a child, in colors, in the ways of people. In the taste of a fruit. In the form of a chalice. In a piece of bread.

No beauty remained indifferent to the power of Michelangelo, for his talent could palpate it, demystified, in the confines of matter. He could awaken or resurrect whatever was most exquisite in lively or inert organisms. This gift he cultivated obstinately, with sacrifice and deliberation, and thus he was far removed from Fabrizzi's anxious obsession about the construction of his tomb.

The bishop, the artist and the block of marble were on the upper patio of the small palace, and below them unfolded a partial view of Rome and a long stretch of the Tiber River. They could hear a bustling clamor coming from the neighboring square: the booksellers.

The bishop hated these vendors, who besides being noisy, vulgarized knowledge with their heralded popularization of books. A genuine indecency. One Gutenberg, who had invented a sinful machine with moveable type for printing, was to blame.

The discourses of Cicero, the reasoning of Aristotle and Plato, the classic works of Greek theater, had become reams of paper printed in series, and with covers, that could actually be bought in the gutters. In Venice alone, there were more publishing and printing houses--one hundred and fifty--than warehouses. An immorality that challenged and conquered the manuscripts copied by hand in the *scriptoria* of convents--pure things, these, and accessible to few.

To Fabrizzi, the printing press was a whore who should be banished by law.

But since even the most iron-clad laws cannot get rid of prostitutes and never will, so the printing press had a long and sacrilegious life ahead of it.

For the bishop, the best thing was to contemplate his death. Life was changing altogether too fast for his liking. Even his mother-lode of wealth, the

marbles from the ruins and statues of ancient Rome, was running out before his eyes. The more people excavated, the less there was to find.

His preoccupation, quite logically, was to resolve the details of his departure to heaven. A journey paid for by the construction of an unforgettable tomb marking his passage through this ungrateful life, a tomb crowned by a work of the *Pietà's* sculptor. In marble, as eternal as those architects of the ancient Roman Empire had believed their works to be. And as perishable as the marble cutters' bosses and assistants had proven.

Michelangelo's eyes swept the small square. Amid the bookselling tumult they fixed on the strength of beauty in a boy's face.

For a few instants the sculptor gazed enchanted on the masculine figure, longing to mingle with that beauty and become one with it.

His desire, which would become reality as surely as a heretic oracle's curse, did not yet know that the boy was called Tommaso and that he was fated to live terror and ecstasy at the hands of the sculptor.

Fabrizzi asked the artist what lovely figure he envisioned within the quadrangular mass of marble.

The sculptor replied that his hands sensed an animal.

An animal? Dear God, what animal would be fitting to adorn the tomb of a bishop? asked Fabrizio, while inside his head all the passengers of Noah's Ark paraded cross-eyed.

A camel. Of course. The animal most often mentioned in the Gospels. A camel carried the Virgin Mary on the flight into Egypt and it was a camel that was able to pass through the eye of the needle in the sermon preached by our Most Holy Lord: "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven." A sentence which, as a matter of fact, had always caused dilemmas for theologians and problems for the clergy .

The statue of a camel. Fabrizio envisioned himself accompanied by Christ Himself, both solidified in the curving hump of the ruminant animal, going

through the vast petrous hole of a giant metaphorical needle and entering the kingdom of heaven.

The glory would have been absolute if the bishop hadn't felt the slight pressure of the sarcastic paws of irony stepping on his imagination. But it didn't hurt, and the important thing was the magnificence of the tomb's adornment. Besides, the creation of such a fabulous work of art would eradicate all doubts concerning the entry of the rich into heaven. A childish, envious superstition, since the rich enter where they choose, having the power to buy any admission ticket.

A camel. Obviously, a camel. Or perhaps a dromedary? Either way. They're very similar.

Neither one. A rodent, answered Michelangelo, walking toward the exit of the patio.

A rodent? What sort of rodent?

A giant rat, answered the sculptor. Vile, cowardly and petty. A rat who, for daring to rip this marble out of an ancient temple, destroyed a beautiful original impossible to recover. Who, because he did this, changed this marble into a lump of dead, rotten limestone, incapable of becoming something beautiful again since it already was before. Therefore, Bishop Fabrizio, I refuse your offer and do not accept your commission.

The bishop lost his voice completely. Undone, his grand obsession gave way to a suffocating discharge of long, fetid belches.

Michelangelo adjusted his emerald-green mantle, left the commission money on the balustrade of the porch and, before going off in search of the face he had seen, glanced once more over the city.

He appreciated a winged horse enveloped in a cape of peculiar blue flying along the banks of the Tiber. It was beautiful.

He detested the troop that was pursuing it. The uniforms of the guards, dyed a macabre combination of black and purple, were horrible. They seemed to embody all that was crude and ugly. One of the men bellowed savagely.

* * * * *

No one knew exactly why the horse tried to jump the Tiber River at its widest point, where there was no bridge. It might have been at the navigator's command or perhaps it was from pure animal desperation.

The fact is that the horse made a flying leap toward opposite side of the river. Propelled by its own speed, it reared as high as it could, hooves and legs swooping through thin air. It seemed as if the animal were being magically drawn upward by the swirling blue cloak

Later on, many passers-by would admit that for a few particles of time, frozen in astonished expectation, they thought the impossible had come about: a horse flying. Such was the length of the magnificent airborne leap.

Even aided by the imagination of the people, who were always looking for miracles in nature, the horse did not fly high enough, and it landed heavily on the granite wall that bordered the river.

The violent fall did not explode its swollen belly, but immediately its spine snapped. Completely disarticulated and pinned to the wall, the horse squealed in agony, thick blood gushing from its mouth. Its tongue protruded straight out, like a thorn sticky with clots of gore.

Thrown upward with the shock, the navigator whirled through emptiness. Ever supported by his cape, he sketched a blue cloud in the pallid sky of Rome, then plunged into the brown waters of the Tiber. A river that flowed quickly, full and crested as crosscurrents erupted in dirty foam.

When Captain Ritter and his troops arrived at the place of the accident, they did almost nothing. Nor could they.

Crazed in its agony, the horse rotated its head and skewered its right eye on a pointed iron spike driven into the granite of the wall and forgotten.

The spike encountered only the fine gelatinous particles that constitute vision, and tore them with such facility that the position of the horse's eye was inverted. With revolting magic it reversed the eye's natural anatomy, hiding the

cornea and iris and revealing to the world a ghastly blister swollen with blood vessels and tears. Inside the animal's brain, the blind cornea stared at nothing.

With the spike skewered through its ocular cavity and its eye turned wrong side out, the horse thrust its head even further to the right, driving the iron point into the center of its brain. Thus it did not feel the rain of stones that fell upon it.

From the pores of the city surged filthy, famished beggars of all ages and aspects. Along with them came the shower of stones.

Ritter tried to contain the multitude, but the intensity of the rocks and the size of the crowd made him give way.

They howled in joy and satisfaction, throwing rocks at the horse, already dividing it up from a distance. Proving that the mass of flesh hanging from the wall was already their property.

Finally, they attacked the horse with knives, razors, and their bare hands, tearing the equine beauty into bloody pieces of warm, gristly meat.

Almost everything was taken away. The ears, the mane, the crooked nails of the horse's shoes, its teeth and tail, a use was found for everything. They even took the rough protruding tongue.

Only the skewered, inverted eye remained untouched on the iron spike, hidden in the the animal's skull. It was solidified for a while as a posthumous monument to the first horse that ever managed to look inside itself. Until the flies ate it.

CHAPTER FOUR

FAMILY TIES AND KNOTS

The cardinal walked in circles dragging the navigator's wet cloak behind him. From the cloth, no longer blue, oozed a muddy, coagulated substance that left streaks on the floor. It looked like the bloody hide of a recently-slaughtered animal, scraped clean of flesh.

Hours after the horse's demise, when the Tiber was lower, Ritter had come across the cape wadded into a muddy bundle and thrust through an iron ring at an anchoring-place near the site of the accident. At once he had taken his find to the cardinal.

The captain was convinced that the fugitive had drowned, and asked Della Rovere's pardon for the bad luck, which alone was to blame.

The horse's flying leap had been unforeseeable. The fatal disappearance of the man into the waters, a calamity. At least the cloak had been recovered to prove Ritter's theory and bear witness to the troops' efforts.

To the cardinal, this seemed all too correct. The colors of the convenient accident were so clear and well-chosen that the picture seemed to have been painted with the express purpose of hiding another scenario, the true one.

Even though he was no artist, Della Rovere experienced an obscure sensation called *pentimento*, a type of rare desire, little known or researched. It is the nostalgic human urge to rescue the original colors, the first lines sketched by a painter on a virgin canvas--the seed of the painting, later forgotten, covered or transformed by the creator himself as an exuberant work of art evolves. A backward-looking anxiety that causes a person to try and uncover the artist's primary intentions, his deepest pictorial and creative roots, by

scraping off successive layers of paint. In short, an investigative journey to the essence of a painting.

Taking into account the due proportions, one can affirm that *pentimento* moves in the opposite direction from human memory. For if the former seeks to discover primordial intention, the latter eludes the truth through sheer trickery.

Memory nearly always suffers from the tendency to cover past actions and facts with layers of sweetened paint, in most cases nourishing the minds of individuals with the honeyed illusion of having been happier, or having enjoyed greater contentment, in the past. An absurdity which reduces happiness to a consumable spiritual commodity decreasing in supply with the passing of time.

As he paced, leaving streaks of mud behind him, Della Rovere considered Ritter's report. His memory scorned the impressions, deductions and perceptions of the captain, trying rather to fix on the factual content of each part of the accident. He searched for the detail, the covered brush-stroke, which contained the seed of truth.

Something was escaping his military perception. He sniffed the scent of falsehood, but he wasn't sure where it was coming from. There was something unconvincing in the description of the pursuit. Something orchestrated. Rehearsed.

It was sudden. The detail flashed into his mind with such violence that the cardinal threw the cloak into Ritter's face. Hanging onto the filthy cloth, Della Rovere hit him with it one. Two. Five times.

He smeared the captain's face with mud, molding the mask of shame onto Ritter's features until his arm was tired. This while shouting humiliations at the top of his lungs for the entire troop of guards to hear.

Think, you Swiss imbecile! The man was a navigator. An expert on waves, currents and whirlpools! How could he drown in the Tiber, the Lazy? How?! He even took time to get rid of the cloak, hanging it carefully on an iron ring

as a false signal of his death! The man swam like a frog. Think, fool! It was all so realistic, so well planned! He was counting on the stupidity of you and your troops. He knew that you would stand there gaping, goggle-eyed, watching the horse die in horror, instead of throwing yourselves into the river after him!

This said, the cardinal ordered Ritter and his men thrown in prison for eight days. An exaggerated punishment but one that was carried out to the letter.

Seven were Ritter's masturbations during his solitary captivity, merely to alleviate the tension and dream of his women. Two masturbations were during the daytime. In one of them, Ritter fantasized that he was making love with three women at once. But his imagination grew befuddled and his pleasure was unsatisfying.

Della Rovere ordered that under Friar Carlo's supervision, five Dominicans and Friar Marcelino take turns making veiled observation of Monsignor Filippo's every move.

Friar Camilo, a bishop, four prelates, two nun and three guards were put in charge of spying on the chambers of Pius III.

This was an arduous task, for the pope had isolated himself. He received no one, not even the choirboy Francesco. Ostensibly because of a so-called spiritual retreat that lasted eight days, the same eight days as Ritter's isolation--indeed, the only similarity the two shared.

His Holiness neither imagined nor fantasized, he only suffered. Worried. Sunk in a painful quandary: how to answer, what attitude to take regarding the urgent incomprehensibilities of the King of Portugal? The puzzle oozed between the moans from his burns.

* * * * *

Carlo never imagined that spying on Monsignor Fillippo would disrupt his existence so radically.

Filippo's daily routine was intense. At times it bordered on chaotic. Lectures, masses, prayers, studies, conferences and closed meetings with Pius III succeeded one another in cascades. The monsignor was always so confident and solicitous that Carlo began to envy him. What was the source of so much energy? Definitely Filippo was a happy man.

The monsignor hardly slept, and rested very little, spending long night hours open-eyed in the library. Then he would write copiously, putting away the manuscripts in the leather valise he carried up and down. What was he studying? How much did he know?

To accompany Filippo round the clock, the friar often had to stay up all night and began drowsing off during masses. This might have been a burden, were it not a relief for Carlo, for whom waking up was grievous.

The friar always awakened in the clutches of an intangible fear. Opening his eyes activated a deep despair for the day that was about to begin, for the people he would meet and the tasks he would undertake. A colossal early-morning burden that bathed his body in cold sweat, causing palpitations and desperate hunger. He knew this indescribable cowardice had originated at the moment of his birth.

The midwife had recounted that his mother didn't want to give birth to him, she was so terrified. She would not open her legs. They had to tie one of her feet to a beam in the bedroom, and the other to a heavy rock on the floor.

Even with the woman tied open, her genitalia dilated, four hands were needed to pull the child from his mother's womb. A long maneuver, long enough for the maternal terror to filter through the umbilical cord into the child's spirit.

The mother died soon thereafter, and he lived with the sign of fear grafted in the pit of his stomach, which clamored for a food he had never found to eat: grains of courage.

Damn the day I was born of fear, to live in fear!

Thus the friar cursed himself, believing he was the only human being ever to be afraid of life, and incapable of seeing that others' fears were artfully dissimulated, that some used bravura and heroism as shields to fend them off.

Fat Friar Carlo took a cornucopia, a curved, funneled horn capable of amplifying sound so it was audible from behind stone, and placed it against the wall of Filippo's chamber. The monsignor was putting on his vestments.

Be calm, Francesco. Serenity.

I'm so happy here!

I've told you, you must leave the Vatican.

I want to stay, Uncle! I don't want to leave! The Holy Father adores my voice.

* * * * *

Carlo had a start when he heard the word *uncle*. No one in the Vatican knew that the choirboy and monsignor Filippo were related. Uncle. Nephew. Why the secret?

The voices faded, then came back. Obviously, the boy was helping his uncle to dress.

The friar pushed the cornucopia even further into his ear.

* * * * *

Francesco, you're wrinkling the lace on my cuffs! That's no way to hold a cassock.

I'm sorry. Uncle was saying that total happiness can't be found on earth, only in heaven. That sometimes one can reach a certain serenity in this life. And that this is enough.

Yes! I did say that. Careful with the cassock. Just hand it to me, Francesco.

And that to seek serenity is a much more reasonable ambition than to seek happiness. But What does the word serenity mean? I only know my voice.

The cuffs are full of creases!

I'm sorry, Uncle.

This voice of yours will be gone someday, Francesco.

* * * * *

Carlo was surprised at the monsignor's irritation. Just because of the lace cuffs on a cassock?

At the same time, he marveled at the relationship between happiness and serenity. This advice of Filippo's about seeking serenity seemed precious in the face of the friar's anguish.

Carlo resolved then and there to forget about courage and happiness, major targets of his hunger, and to dedicate himself to ingesting high doses of serenity. Maybe by drinking more wine. Or eating more apples.

But why had their kinship been kept secret so long? Out of fear. It was obvious. Carlo, an expert on this sensation, smelled the vapors of fear that prevented the kinship from being made publicly known.

The cornucopia scraped against the stone wall, sending a strident noise into Carlo's ear. On the other side of the funnel, in the monsignor's chamber, Francesco was crying.

* * * * *

So that's it. The Holy Father no longer likes my voice. It's been over a week since he called for me. Now I understand, Uncle.

No, Francesco. It's your own body that is beginning to change. You are becoming a young man, soon your voice will deepen and there is nothing, nothing you can do about it. But that's not the reason I must demand that you go home.

Uncle is ashamed of me. You've always been! I know what I am, your bastard nephew. But I swear, Uncle, no one ever found out we're related, and they never will!

* * * * *

Like all orphans, Carlo felt the lack of his mother keenly. Even though he blamed the dead woman for his suffering, he would have preferred her alive. For many years he scorned his companions who had living mothers and slept as soundly as cats on a hearth. The solution came when he learned to venerate the Holy Virgin, becoming a devoted convert to Mary, and the scorn evaporated.

Now, listening to this conversation and perceiving that Francesco was scorned by his uncle, he was moved by the boy's crying. He did not recognize that scorn, his old ally, was familiar to him.

Carlo reasoned that if Filippo were to admit before the clergy of the Vatican that he was Francesco's uncle, the silly choirboy might destroy the myth of his noble lineage. Show his impeccable, exemplary family up as a fallacy.

That's why the secrecy, Carlo concluded. The perfect monsignor had an idiotic fear. Insignificant compared to his own morning terror.

At that instant, Carlo quit envying Filippo. He humanized him.

* * * * *

Calm down, Francesco. That's not why I insist you go home. Calm down. My dear nephew, sublime moments are approaching. Don't cry. But it happens that they often arrive surrounded by dangers and betrayals. Listen. Go back home. Go.

Pius III represents Jesus on Earth. He can do miracles. I'll just ask him one miracle, to make my voice stay as it is, as it's always been. A nightingale's voice. Like everybody says.

Popes don't work miracles, Francesco. Popes only attest to the miracles of God.

Carlo removed the cornucopia from the wall and felt compassion. An intense ache for Francesco's fear of losing his voice, the only qualification for

keeping him alive in the limbo of the chosen, the pope's elect.

Maybe his voice had been the reason why he was accepted by Filippo's family and taken to the Vatican. Perhaps he had been offered by the family as a prize to the pope. They might even be brothers. Of course, that was it! They were brothers!

Carlo sided with both of them in their fear. He swore to himself that he would not reveal Filippo's secret to anyone, least of all to Cardinal Della Rovere, the personification of all his nightmares.

Carlo's lack of courage gave way to a certain satisfaction at the idea of betraying the cardinal. Of not telling him anything, not even about the allusion to sublime moments in the whispered conversation--which seemingly obliged Filippo to disappear in haste with his brother.

Suddenly Carlo lost his appetite, and hiding the cornucopia in its box, he went off down the corridor. He had found courage without realizing it.

Monsignor Filippo left his chamber and went out toward the Sacred College. He was about to proffer another spectacular conference.

Francesco remained hidden in the chamber, crying. He waited until the bell chimed out the next canonical hour and then escaped without being noticed.

When Carlo arrived at the auditorium to copy down Filippo's lecture, he met up with his counterpart friar Camilo.

The Dominican was cross-eyed, barely able to talk. He pulled Carlo into a corner and told him breathlessly what had happened. Pius III had discovered the peephole over his canopy and ordered it blocked. Therefore it was now impossible to spy on His Holiness. Cardinal Della Rovere was furious, suspecting that someone in his confidence was a traitor. In other words, the cardinal was on the point of killing a Dominican.

Carlo feigned apprehension, but inwardly he was calm. He offered Camilo the piece of cheese he was carrying in the pocket of his habit. Lying, he said he felt nerve-wracked and nauseous with the news and could not eat a thing.

Camilo went off, the piece of cheese in his hand.

Carlo smiled inwardly and outwardly as he went in to hear Filippo's master lecture. Theme of the conference: the Earthly Paradise.

CHAPTER FIVE

AN ALMOST PARADISIAC LESSON

Astonished at our ingenious character, Saint Augustine exclaimed: “The inventive nature of man has generated a great and varied multitude of sciences and arts, some necessary and others not, and the excellence of this capacity clearly confirms that man is the only being on earth gifted with a creative spirit.” But I would enlarge upon the words of the saint and proclaim: there is yet more! Even when occupied with frivolous things, things superfluous or pernicious, mankind always reveals the magnitude of this gift. What variety we find in edifices, garments, agriculture, navigation, sculpture and painting! What perfection man has shown in theatrical arts and in the capture, domestication, and slaughter of wild animals! What millions of inventions mankind has made against other beings and for its own sake: consider poisons, weapons, snares, ruses, and language! How many thousand medications for its health, types of meat to digest, ways to illustrate and persuade, eloquent phrases to enjoy, verses to give pleasure, instruments and means of making music! How magnificent are the inventions of geography, arithmetic, the study of the stars and all the rest! It would be impossible to discourse on all these sciences in detail. But even the excellence of this capacity to imagine, to progress and create is minuscule when compared to the creative and inventive powers of God. On the day when Our Lord God created heaven and earth, there was as yet no grass or herb upon the land, and vegetation had not yet sprung up, because Our Lord God formed man from the dust of the earth, breathed the breath of life into his nostrils, and man became a living soul. Then Our Lord God planted a garden called Eden, also called the Garden of Delights, or Paradise, and there he placed the man he had formed. And the Lord God made to spring up from the

earth every sort of tree, pleasant to behold and bearing fruit that was good to eat. In the midst of the garden, He planted the tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, and of its fruit the man was forbidden to eat. From the earth, the Lord formed every beast of the field and every fowl of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them. And the man named them all. But among all these creatures there was no helpmate for the man. And so the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept. God removed one of the man's ribs and closed up the place with flesh. From the man's rib the Lord God formed woman. And they both were naked, the man and the woman, but were not ashamed. Take note! Copy this down! Where is this Earthly Paradise found? In a place called Terra Incognita. It is impossible to go there. Why? According to Saint Isidore, after Adam and Eve were expelled from Paradise, the Lord God closed the gates of Eden with a tongue of fire that with time solidified into a gigantic pointed rock. Insurmountable. The Lord God also allowed demons and strange beings to live all around the Terra Incognita, in order to make more difficult any return of human beings to Paradise. Take note! Copy this down! These evil beings are divided into four branches or families, those being: signs, wonders, monsters and prodigies. Through dreams, the Lord God revealed some of these beings to Saint Isidore, who described them as having their feet turned backwards, eyes in their shoulders and eight fingers on each hand. Others possess the shells of cockroaches instead of skin, and feet in place of ears. The antipodes. What is the Earthly Paradise like? Take note, memorize: the Garden of Delights, or Eden, is watered by four rivers, to nourish the great quantity of fruits, trees, and animals unknown to men, which exist only for the pleasure of the Lord God. These four mighty and crystalline rivers come together and fall in cascades near the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. They are: the Pison, which bathes all the land of Havilah, where gold is found, a very pure gold. There also is found bdellium and onyx stone. The second river is the Gihon, which waters all the land of Ethiopia. The name of the third river is Hiddekel. And the fourth river is called Euphrates. In the Holy Garden there is no evil, only good. All is calm and tranquil. It is a sea of felicity, heaven on

earth. Silence! The Earthly Paradise lives in an eternal springtime, protected by angels of all categories, who in spite of having feathers and wings, do not fly! And why do they not fly? Because their duty is to guard Paradise, and from there they go not forth.

* * * * *

Friar Carlo left the auditorium marveling at the words of Monsignor Filippo. More than that, the Dominican was excited at the probability that some day a man might discover the Earthly Paradise and recover it for Christianity. It would be glorious--absolute happiness.

It was a pity that those deformed creatures surrounded the Terra Incognita. But if a man were a saint, he would be able to discover Eden. Saints had extraordinary powers, sufficiently divine to vanquish any obstacle, even that diabolical wall of monsters.

His thoughts drifting, Carlo didn't take into account that Filippo had not admitted this possibility at any moment during his conference. On the contrary, the monsignor had actually affirmed that the Terra Incognita was impossible to reach.

What did that matter? Scholars, listeners and readers learn, hear and read what they want to, and manipulate it so they absorb only that which gives them greatest satisfaction. Thus, many professors repeat the same concepts exhaustively, and many authors tell the same stories over and over again, some of them blessed with success and popularity.

Carlo went to meet Della Rovere in the writing room. He walked like a saint himself, beatified by the vision of paradisiac felicity and committed to his new mission: to betray the cardinal by hiding Filippo's family secret.

The friar could feel the glowing weight of a saintly halo on the top of his head. His stomach, sated by a spectacular anorexia, did not growl. His thoughts, however, went round and round. He would study very hard with Filippo and devise an infallible theological strategy to destroy the abominable

apocalyptic beings blocking the entrance to Eden, as well as the false ones that cluttered his own gluttonous existence.

When Carlo sat down before Della Rovere he seemed another man, imbued as he was with the balsam of courage. The cardinal pretended not to notice the friar's newfound poise. After all, he could be the damnable traitor. Della Rovere asked what was rotten in the life of the monsignor.

Carlo didn't have time to answer, because the cardinal astutely added a fastidious and fatal comment: my dear friar, you smell like cheese--good cheese at that.

The unexpected phrase was tossed out with such sarcasm that Carlo was entirely thrown off balance. He even patted the pockets of his habit uselessly, looking for the piece of cheese that was no longer there. His heart reacted with untold palpitations and he was immediately flung over the precipice of hunger.

Unable to betray his neonatal monsters, Carlo did not contain himself; he related to the cardinal in detail all he had learned about monsignor Filippo.

Exultant with the information, Della Rovere left the writing room, going directly to an audience with Pius III. After ten days of waiting, the cardinal had managed to arrange a meeting alone with His Holiness. Doubtless it would be a great battle, one of life and death. Della Rovere was resolved to extract from the pope, once and for all, the truth about the letter from the King of Portugal which so threatened his omnipotence. If he did not, the cardinal would wage a war of unimagined proportions against the papacy.

Carlo was left alone, eaten up with fear. He forgot the sensations of courage, the euphoria of his paradisiac ambitions, the loyalty to Filippo's family and the excitement over his future life as a saint. He had repeated himself once again in cowardice, like a child that always wants to hear the same lullaby. Like an old man who only talks of death. Like a devout monk who always prays the same prayers. Like a person.

CHAPTER SIX

A STROLL ACCORDING TO PROTOCOL

The Pontiff's ceremonial schedulers communicated to Della Rovere that Pius III would receive him after luncheon.

It was established that his Holiness would leave his private chambers at the ninth canonical hour, around three in the afternoon, to meet with a committee of bishops from the Kingdom of France in the Audience Room. The route between the two buildings did not necessarily require that one pass through the Sistine Chapel, but his Holiness would make a small and gracious detour in order to walk through the chapel in the company of the cardinal.

Pius III moved with difficulty; his steps were short and careful. His body was so fragile and wasted that it had acquired a spectral aspect. The tone of his complexion was beyond pallid; it looked nearly transparent. His weak, hesitant voice suggested the final spasms of a dying man. And the extensive bandage that came down his right arm and enveloped his hand in a ball of white linen was like a tumor about to explode. The papal miter trembled loosely on the pontiff's head.

Almost a corpse, concluded the cardinal, as he knelt to kiss the ring of Pius III.

The pope blessed Della Rovere and they began the scheduled stroll, which consisted in walking through the Sistine Chapel from the altar to the eastern exit at the back.

The Sistine Chapel, their battleground, had been built a quarter-century before by Pope Sixtus IV, and was considered an architectural aberration at the time.

The chapel had the form of an enormous tunnel, very high in proportion to its narrow width. The only possible ornamentation to lend it some cheer and color were the lateral frescoes created by Botticelli, Perugino and Ghirlandaio.

After discussions and studies, it was concluded that the only place adequate for decoration in the dark and funereal interior was the walls. The domed surface of the ceiling was divided by eight windows separated by heavy beams. It was further partitioned by various protruding triangles formed by the supporting arches, and presented countless salient surfaces. So inappropriate was it deemed for ornamentation that the architects even suggested it be destroyed. The solution found to save the chapel was to paint the ceiling and splatter it with oddly opaque stars, which instead of softening the view of the dome only called more attention to its contorted design.

Della Rovere began the audience with cynicism and flattery--in other words, on the defensive to sound out his enemy.

Your Holiness seems so well disposed. They told me that your Holiness was in retreat for eight days in your chambers, and was not receiving anyone. So I prayed, I prayed steadfastly, for the retreat to be silent and illuminated by the Holy Spirit. Then I received the true report, that your Holiness's arm was infirm. Oh, my affliction! I then prayed for your Holiness's health. This bandage must inconvenience you greatly! Was it an accident involving fire?

Pius III answered the snide question with the same weapon as Della Rovere: a lie.

No, my eminent Cardinal, it was just a little fall. I tripped.

Della Rovere didn't expect that Pius III, the Generous, would have the bald-faced nerve to lie so shamelessly. It spurred the cardinal to attack without scruple.

Oh, really? I thought it was a burn.

With this disastrous comment, Della Rovere exposed himself too far, revealing that he knew what had happened and confirming himself to be the author of the indiscreet peephole above the bed. The pope had gained the upper hand. Smiling, he astutely pretended not to have heard the cardinal's remark. An excellent tactic which leaves the enemy paralyzed, stewing in his own imprudence.

I did not hear you, Eminence. What were you saying?

Knowing he was corralled, tongue-tied, unable to repeat the suicidal comment, Della Rovere decided to retreat and change the subject.

Saying. Yes, I was saying--that this chapel, Holiness, is lacking in vibrancy. Observe the dome, for example. Colorless, grayish, with only a few stars. Yet it is here, if your Holiness will permit me to remind him, that the Holy Spirit graciously acts upon the conclave of cardinals in the choice of a new Pope.

Pius III perceived that the cardinal had now committed another strategic error by branching off into theology, an area in which the pope is unequivocally the master, in accordance with all religious writings. Infallible.

The Absolute is like that, your Eminence. Simple. Infinite like the color gray and the little stars. The Sistine Chapel, with its unadorned ceiling, represents the essence of God.

The cardinal began to realize he had lost control of the conversation and of the direction the battle was taking. It would be very hard to go back to the subject of fire, the burning of the letter, the revelation of the secret. The solution was to glorify the God that he imagined and from whom he hoped to receive protection.

Holiness, God is all! Force, power! He is not mere sterile goodness, nor inconsistent mystical delirium. Here in the Sistine Chapel I find only emptiness.

With the description of his God, the cardinal laid himself bare, uncovering his true personality. The pontiff resolved to demolish him then and

there with a master stroke.

Horror vacui. That is your fear, Eminence. *Horror vacui.* A horror of the empty. And it must be a very intense and grievous form of suffering for one as insatiable as yourself, Cardinal. Because, make no mistake, to be pope is to be alone in the emptiness of God. A man forever unsatisfied cannot be pope.

Della Rovere writhed at the thrust of this blow. Pius III was telling him diplomatically that he was not fit to be pope and that the pontiff would do everything possible to obstruct his dream. An impeccable, audacious affront. Confounded, the cardinal wavered.

Strong words, Holiness. I had no idea it was so gloomy to be pope!

Ghostly only in appearance, Pius III won the battle with a facility unimaginable to Della Rovere. And to savor his victory, the pope crushed his opponent with ruthless frankness, verbalizing everything the cardinal wanted, as the whole world knew.

Eminence, your scorn for my person is notorious. The envy you have for my power is so overshadowing that you have the impudence to underestimate me! Your ambition is to be pope. A blind, unfettered ambition! So blind that it actually clouds your reason, and leaves you incapable of seeing that underneath the papal miter there exists a crown of thorns exactly like that which covers the bleeding head of Jesus. Almost dead, agonizing inside, toppled and humiliated, Della Rovere was still strong enough to throw a last dart, poisoned with sarcasm but innocuous.

Your Holiness, all is explained. At last I understand the reason for your constant headaches. It's the crown of thorns under your miter!

Pius III turned his back and went out through the east door. Della Rovere swallowed dryly and tasted blood.

Battles of words were worthless now, reasoned the cardinal. The slaughter must begin.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE THEOLOGY OF THE FOOT-BATH

The alchemy of one of the most precious wines of all time, a Saint-Poursin vintage 1478, rested immobile inside the silver goblet. The nectar formed an enormous ruby, sparkling and smooth, framed by the ring-shaped silver edge.

The fruity aroma of the perfect wine evaporated only enough for a small hint of its bouquet to waft above the silver and envelope the goblet in a cloud of freshness.

Its indivisible perfume did not mingle with the odor of the seasoned olives, the sharp smell of the goat cheese, the odorless bread, nor with the sweet exhalation of the four pears that also sat upon the well-appointed table.

The silver service disposed about the dinner table reflected the tremulous light of the eight candles in soft luminous points. The old manservant, standing beside the table, was not admiring its beauty. He was thinking about the menu to be served for dinner. He prayed that the slow-witted cook would get the temperature and flavor of the asparagus soup right, that she would roast the rabbit to the precise point of tenderness, and that the animal's liver, fried separately in oil, would be rare and to Della Rovere's liking.

For the cardinal had been explicit when he ordered that his dinner with Monsignor Filippo should be unforgettable in every sense.

Since "unforgettable" was a very broad word containing many ideas, the manservant was worried--and not without reason. After all, most things are

forgettable. To be unforgettable, a fact must hold at least a strong significance, not to say extravagant.

When the cardinal added the expression “in every sense” to the term “unforgettable”, the word acquired imponderable and dangerous edges. It wove its way between the most disparate opposites, suggesting both irreparable tragedy and sublimest blessing. It became perversely capable of joining to the unforgettable all the moments and reputation of a life, rendering them infinite in a stroke. Nominating the instant of that stroke as the most infinite part of all time. Turning the slightest error committed into a shameful sentence for the rest of one’s life, or a success attained to a passing glory. An injustice, that word “unforgettable”. High-risk in every sense.

Della Rovere stormed into his chambers like one possessed. His defeat at the pope’s hand had been scorching. Whose fault was it? The Pope’s himself, who pretended to be dead but was more alive than ever! A disguised resurrection! From whom had Pius III learned these vile techniques so typical of traitorous ambush? Unquestionably from monsignor Filippo.

The cardinal was as cold as a corpse. Icy. All twenty tips of his fingers and toes tingled as he walked in circles through the room. Finally he stopped near the table and without hesitation poked his index finger directly into the goblet of wine. The elegant molecules of the Saint-Poursin actually bubbled with the thrust of the cardinal’s finger into their intimacy. After all, they were not created to feel the rough texture of fingernails and fleshy skin, but to glide over the fine membranes of the mouth, to ripple on the tastebuds of the tongue.

The cardinal stirred up the wine, driving the particles insane. Then he removed his finger, sniffed it, wiped it on the tablecloth, replaced the goblet and declared the dinner suspended. For the time being.

Della Rovere sat down in his high-backed purple chair and ordered the manservant to prepare a very hot foot-bath with the strongest possible thermal herbs. He wanted to warm himself very quickly, but without the alcoholic effects of wine, which might diminish his reasoning. Dull his hatred.

He wanted to stay alert, calculating, and hot-blooded, without chemicals foreign to his natural and bellicose self.

Between the time of his encounter with Pius III and now--it was after Compline, about eight o'clock in the evening--Della Rovere had met in the dungeons of the Vatican with the physician Giovanni di Vigo, his best friend and a magnificent counselor for planning a quick and devastating counter-attack, the sort that forces the enemy to move and take risks.

It was not just the chill of those moldy dungeons that made the cardinal so cold. In addition to the shame of defeat, which made him tremble in his bones, he was seized by great excitement over an infallible plan designed by Vigo and himself.

Monsignor Filippo entered the cardinal's chambers along with the foot-bath brought by the manservant.

As Della Rovere carefully dipped his feet into the steaming basin, Filippo wondered at all this stage-setting. Why the extraordinary display of a cardinal's pallid feet with their crooked toenails stewing in a tangle of brownish herbs? What if the soup served at the dinner to which he had been invited had the same appearance as this turgid brew? What should he do? Refuse? Filippo felt nauseated by the cardinal and the imminent meal.

My, it's hot! How wonderful it feels, this foot-bath! My dear Monsignor, I'm quite desperate. His Holiness has formed a terrible idea of my character. Someone told him that I am envious, inept and ambitious. Pestilent! Was it by chance you, Monsignor, who breathed such infamies into his ears?

The old manservant, hidden behind the curtain, didn't know what to do. If he should put out the candles or not. What to tell the stupid cook. His problem was most serious, considering that the dinner hadn't been canceled but rather postponed. Until when? Later? After the conversation? A complication for which he, the servant, was to blame, since he hadn't had the audacity to ask the cardinal more details about the damnable postponement. Corralled in the alcove near the table, he decided to listen carefully to the talk

between the cardinal and Filippo. Maybe it would afford him some blessed hint as to what destiny he should give the fabulous meal.

Eminence! I would be incapable of such an attitude! I am a monsignor of the Church, and would never permit myself to judge the character of a cardinal. Much less to comment on it with His Holiness.

Monsignor! I am excruciatingly sorry that I have been somewhat critical of your bombastic theological ideas with respect to “flatulent” angels and Earthly Paradises “in waterfalls”.

These theories are not mine, but are found in the Holy Scriptures and the writings of saints, Eminence.

I am sorry. I already said it, Monsignor! I’m sorry. Such hot water, it almost burns. Fortunately, it is not as hot as the flames that burned the sainted hand of the Holy Father.

I don’t know what you refer to, Eminence. His Holiness tripped and fell. Really, Monsignor? Let us change the subject. My dear Filippo, I was thinking: what if I gave an unforgettable present to the Holy Father? Would he perhaps honor me with his confidence?

Hearing the term “unforgettable”, the manservant had a start, orbiting once more around the word. An unforgettable gift would be one remembered forever, impossible to erase from a life. Hence, something indelible, a mark like a scar. For the pope?

The servant quickly thought and could not imagine giving an unforgettable present to His Holiness--a man who possessed the world, a man sickly and reaching the end of his days.

Without thinking, the servant reached for the goblet of wine and swallowed three large gulps of the Saint-Poursin. Now that was life. Adorable wine. Obvious. A gift. The cardinal could present the pope with health. With a miraculous and unforgettable medicine concocted by Doctor Vigo. But no. From the tone of Della Rovere’s voice the servant perceived that the shadow of threat prowled about the supposed gift. The cardinal’s intention was something

else. Exactly the opposite of health, more and more sickness. Or death, the royal grandeur...the cardinal was going to kill the pope! Good God!

Eminence! Pius III is a river of kindness that pardons everyone. I am certain that His Holiness will honor you with his infallible trust.

Excellent, Monsignor. Then tell me, what was written in the message from the King of Portugal?

I beg your pardon, Eminence?

Well, why not, Monsignor? Tell me everything. After the unforgettable present, I'll be just like you yourself, the new confidant of the Holy Father. So it's better to get started at once. Don't you think it's logical to tell me all you know?

Again the servant heard the word *unforgettable* and gulped down more wine. Tortured to imagine himself the only living creature who could decipher the nature of the terrible gift for the pope, the old man began to sweat profusely. A violent wave of heat passed through him. He began to pant, almost suffocating, when he had the idea of grabbing a silver knife from the table, throwing the curtains open, announcing the cardinal's murderous intentions to the monsignor, and killing Della Rovere. Yes. Because he must kill the cardinal before the latter could assassinate the holiest of men.

Monsignor, I repeat my question. Isn't it logical to tell me all you know?

I would say premature, Eminence.

Monsignor! It is dangerous and risky for any human being to depend on a single person. On a single confidant. Particularly for a man as powerful as the pope.

Cardinal Della Rovere, are you perhaps insinuating that I am not a fit papal confidant?

I'm not insinuating anything, Monsignor. But I do affirm that the pope is an imperfect being in having yourself as his only counselor. To discern wisely, a man must listen to everyone and everything! From the nefarious to the benign! And it is illogical to restrict himself to the solitary voice of a Monsignor

Filippo who is idealistic, delirious and naive! Crazy! Devoid of any practical sense of life! Can't you see that with your refusal, you have just brought all my hatred on you?

Hatred. Fever. The manservant began to foam at the mouth. His mind seemed to have been invaded by the hydra of knowledge. All the near and future actions of Della Rovere, his master, became clear and exact to him. He could see everything that was going to happen. This sudden clairvoyance struck him as normal and heroic. He alone could save His Holiness from the planned murder, and for this he would have to kill.

As this contradictory megalomania invaded the manservant's soul, his skin and flesh were symptomatically disfigured by lack of oxygen. They grew livid and cyanotic, heralding his own death.

Swallowing the rest of the wine from the goblet, the old man took the knife and lurched toward the velvet curtain. He was dying, poisoned by a toxic substance that acted irreversibly on the brain. Yellowish, it had become colorless when dissolved in the wine.

He agonized, his mind unhinged as he heard the conversation echoing and reechoing like a bell inside his head.

The monsignor is the target of all my hatred! Hatred!

Eminence, your hatred is of no interest to me whatsoever. Whatsoever. My mind is fixed on God. God. And God. God is very great and very far removed from your crises of fury. Fury. Fury and envy. Envy.

Monsignor. In other words, Words. You know where God is. God. And what size He is. What a marvel! Marvel. The size of God. And Evil? Where is Evil? Evil. Above, below or beside Paradise? Paradise. Paradise.

Eminence, I fear. Fear. That evil forces are present. Now. Among us. Evil forces. Forces.

The servant threw back the curtain, his knife raised toward the cardinal, and from his mouth spewed wine, spittle, and incomprehensible words.

Wide-eyed, the cardinal and Filippo jumped. The old manservant tripped. He tried to grasp the heavy velvet curtain but fell dead in a brief, final convulsion.

Della Rovere kicked over the foot-bath and staged a singular emotional crisis: a chaotic mixture of grave accusations, deep protests of friendship, and grief. A Jeremiad.

My dear old servant! The person I most trusted in the world! He just tried to kill me! Traitor! Judas! Someone is behind this sinister conspiracy! He would have stabbed me to death! Our Father who art in Heaven, Hallowed--

One moment, Eminence! This poor man was poisoned! Observe the vomit of wine! He drank from the goblet! The poison must have rushed to his brain!

Monsignor, from my goblet? My wine poisoned? A double attempt. Explain yourself, if you please. How do you know that my old servant was poisoned from drinking my wine? And even the details of the poison? Pray withdraw from here at once! Withdraw! Because I must offer prayer in private for the soul of this poor servant whom I so trusted, who died for me. Withdraw! and listen: this attempt to murder me will not go unpunished. I shall communicate what has happened to His Holiness at once and tell him that the monsignor demonstrated a rare knowledge of the effects of certain poisons!

Filippo went out without showing any reaction or responding to the cardinal's insinuations. It was useless. Della Rovere had knelt beside the cadaver and was praying contritely.

As the manservant had feared, the dinner, although it never happened, turned out to be unforgettable. A point in time that became infinite for a reason he had never suspected, but one the cardinal knew about: his habit of clandestinely drinking his master's wine.

After a short, desultory prayer for the soul of the unfortunate old man, Della Rovere took a pear and a knife, and putting them into a silver dish,

calmly left his chambers. As if the manservant's death were something banal.

He left the candles lighted, the contorted body next to the curtain, and instead of going to meet His Holiness, descended toward the dungeons. He was about to lead in another perverse ritual, even more macabre and absurd.

The manservant no longer existed in this life, having been thrown into theological eternity or hurled into the oblivion of matter. A dilemma that plagues all living beings with unforgettable uncertainty.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE MALEFIC CAULDRON

The incandescent light of the torch cast the shifting and distorted shadows of two men against walls glossy with dampness. The men were coming down the steps with some haste, through a certain west passage that would take them to the doors of the dungeon.

Shadows shrank and disappeared against the walls as others rose, immense, until they were extinguished. The carousel of lights and shadows varied according to the curves, arches, ramps and descents of the downward-twisting corridor, which ended in an enormous subterranean room where Doctor Giovanni di Vigo realized his experiments.

Della Rovere went accompanied by the guard, whose torch illuminated the narrow stone passageway. The cardinal showed no expression, no reaction to the kaleidoscope of shadows, trying only to balance with extreme care the silver bowl that held a pear and a knife. His Eminence did not want the fruit to be bruised.

Contrary to what one might suppose, the vast space reserved by Vigo to carry out his anatomical and biological studies had nothing frightening about it. All the objects considered threatening or repulsive in appearance had been hastily removed during the afternoon. The bones, cadavers, and cutting instruments, as well as the huge medical compendia, buckets with anatomical leftovers, bowls of grease, pots of herbs, blades, embalmed fetuses, bottles containing ointments, skinned animals used in necropsies, plaster molds of certain parts of the body and maps of human entrails had been stored behind a curtain. Everything was clean, well lighted and warmed with various

luminaries and small stoves. A vast woolen rug was spread on the floor, a crucifix nailed to the wall. The scent of myrrh wafted through the air.

After much hard work, the dungeon had lost all traces of its macabre and sinister appearance, gaining an undefined, anonymous air. And odd, since in the center of the room an enormous vat of thick glass had been placed, supported at its corners by heavy moldings of beaten iron.

A fire heated the water that filled the vat up to the edges. Through the glass of the sides, its tepid mass rippled and gave off soft clouds of steam. It would have looked like a dream-machine, invented to fascinate, if behind the whole scenario there had not existed a malevolent intention that must not appear, upon pain of the ostensible miracle not coming about.

The dungeon had been prepared as the stage for a false miracle. All the efforts of the doctor's eight assistants had gone into filling the room with airs of the sublime, conducive to the miraculous, to the extraordinary. The task had almost been fulfilled.

It was true that they had succeeded in camouflaging the dungeon's sinister, malevolent atmosphere, but they had not achieved the much-desired ambiance of sublimity. They had not been able to destroy the sovereign and expressive falsity that dripped from the stones, showing itself freely in small details.

That afternoon Doctor Vigo had affirmed to the cardinal that tubs, vats and cauldrons large enough to accommodate a man were of capital importance in ancient medicine. They had three very specific utilizations.

In the first of these, a weak patient was placed in the vat until he had drunk all of a fatty broth of wild boar, previously prepared, and recovered his strength. This treatment was known as the Cauldron of Abundance.

In the second case, the human cauldron was used as an agent for resurrection. According to the Gaelic narrative of Mabinogi de Branwen, the dead were thrown into boiling water so they would rise up on the following day. This procedure met with very rare success, for even when the individual did come back to life, he would be horribly burned and die soon thereafter.

Which was a nightmare for the family, since the body would be put back into the boiling cauldron for another resuscitation and eventually end up cooked to the bones.

The third use of the cauldron was its most noble function, and sacrificial too, as if the other two weren't. Certain deposed kings and emperors, instead of being decapitated as Druid custom prescribed, were drowned in enormous tubs filled with wine. This was called the Cauldron of Inebriate Majesty.

Following these lines of reasoning, Doctor Vigo made a perspicacious association of the three medical uses of the ancient human cauldrons with the image of the Holy Grail, the chalice sanctified by Our Lord and lost long ago. The Grail overflowed with abundant pardon, miraculous resurrection and the great sacrifice perpetuated through Jesus Christ, the Son of God. This brilliant mental correlation united abundance, resurrection, sacrifice, tubs and chalices, though it failed in the proportional dimensions of the Holy Grail as compared to the man-sized cauldrons.

But that was an insignificant detail compared to the long and impeccable study which had led Doctor Giovanni di Vigo to re-introduce the giant vats as the most recent revolution in medicine. No longer as sacrificial fonts, but as real anesthetic agents.

Vigo had discovered that hot water, meaning very hot, lessened the pain of his surgeries by numbing the nerves. The patient submerged in the vat suffered much less and consequently moved about little, radically facilitating surgical procedures, both in the incision of the skin and in the suturing of veins and flesh.

An irrefutable medical advance, the only drawback being the water itself. It darkened so quickly with the patient's blood that it completely obliterated the surgeon's vision, almost always forcing him to work blind, that is, by touch. Another infinitesimal detail, compared to the humanitarian grandeur of the scientific war between Vigo and pain.

Francesco was asleep, dreaming deeply, when he was spirited away by Friar Camilo. The boy was frightened when they arrived at the dungeon. He felt even more alarmed when the friar's cold hands removed his woolen cape, leaving him dressed only in his thin white nightshirt.

But suddenly all his anxieties lifted. Cardinal Della Rovere came in lavishing kindness and pretty words, and Camilo left them alone, disappearing through a curtain.

Soon thereafter a fascinated boy and a smiling cardinal walked around the cauldron. Both were equally awe-struck. The boy at the enormity of everything, at the astonishing glass cauldron full of water and the surprise of the conversation. The man delighting in his own performance and in the perversion of the artifices chosen to seduce the boy. Both full of expectations, but for completely opposite reasons.

Eminence, does the miracle happen underwater?

Of course, Francesco! This is holy water! Think. Isn't it your wish that your voice remain beautiful and high forever, crystal-clear like a nightingale's?

Yes, Eminence. But someone told me that with time, my voice will change.

A lie, my dear boy! With a simple miracle we can stop time.

The boy's body, reflected in the glass of the cauldron, assumed bizarre contours. When Francesco moved close to it, his nose grew gigantic as his ears turned into the comical little ears of a squirrel. It could only be the fabulous magic of the holy water.

Spectacular was the cardinal's slicing of the pear, dividing it into two equal halves. A prodigy in a silver dish.

Look, Francesco! I cut the pear exactly in half. Now, with the knife, I remove the seeds. Then I put the two halves back together. And what do we have?

I don't understand, Your Eminence.

A pear without seeds, Francesco. Without future. Do you understand? We stopped time. A miracle!

With dexterity the cardinal coordinated the game of words and the balancing-act with the fruit dish. He was acting out a deceptive, ambiguous play for the boy, a circle of emotions. A circus.

I think I understood, Eminence! You are going to take out the seeds that make my voice change.

Exactly! How wise you are, Francesco! Now, into the water.

Like an acrobat, the boy climbed up the small wooden ladder leaning against the cauldron. He entered the tepid, sparkling water as if mounting on a magic carrousel, already feeling as if he were singing, transported to the pope's lap, to the abbess's embrace. Then he lowered himself deeper into the vat, leaving only his head above the water's surface. Thinking, alert. Concluding that his Uncle Filippo had tricked him, for there was a solution for the merciless deepening of his voice: the miracle proposed by Della Rovere.

The cardinal was convinced that he had achieved his triumph by manipulating the boy's naiveté with skilled craftiness and use of fantasy. Which was true. But above all, Francesco let himself be persuaded, glorying in an absorbing sentiment of revenge toward his uncle and immoderate vanity for his vocal gift. Anyone who thinks that children are made of pure innocence was probably never a child.

Eminence, how long does it take the holy water to perform the miracle?

It's not quite that simple, my son. Holy water is not a solvent, or an acid. Remember, all miracles are painful. The pain is inevitable, but the hot water will ease it a little. That is what the doctors of the miracle say.

Doctors? What doctors, Eminence?

The cardinal smiled, struck the silver bowl three times with the knife, and the thick curtain opened, giving passage to Dr. Vigo and two assistants. All surgeons.

The group was wearing the appropriate aprons of oiled leather to protect them from impertinent spurts of blood. Leather masks with almond-shaped eye-holes covered their faces from forehead to nose, having at nostril-height a holder full of rose petals, an indispensable protection against foul odors, the patient's pestilences and the flying worms that were known to appear at the most inopportune moments.

All very hygienic and effective for the doctors' safety, but of little use for the protection of the patient. For unless they underwent rapid amputations, few human beings escaped the diabolical pus that stubbornly invaded surgical incisions. Another mystery Vigo was investigating.

With the surgeons' arrival, Francesco grew frightened and began to thrash about in the cauldron. The boy had awakened to the malefic. Water overflowed and ran down the glass sides, and the masked men climbed up the ladder, positioning themselves around the edges of the cauldron.

Don't be afraid! Don't worry, Francesco. You will be the most serene person in the world. All serenity. Do you know why? You will be neither male nor female: just pure voice. Voice, Francesco!

Eminence! Eminence! They say that Monsignor Filippo is a great man of faith. They say he knows and studies miracles better than anyone in the entire clergy! Eminence, I want Monsignor Filippo to come here! I want him to be here now! Call for Monsignor Filippo. Please! The Monsignor!

He will come, my son. He will come. Don't despair, Francesco. I'll send someone to get him. Or better yet, I'll take you to him.

When, Eminence?

Afterwards. First, I will call my two Dominicans, also specialists in miracles, to pray that all goes well. Friar Carlo! Friar Camilo!

Immediately Carlo, the fat friar, and Camilo, who had been waiting in silence for Della Rovere's summons, entered the room, taciturn.

With the friars' arrival on the stage, the setting was complete and the farce proceeded toward its final scene. A numbing, depraved climax, totally different

from the laughable high points of true theatrical farces.

Pray!

At the cardinal's order, the friars knelt in front of the cauldron and started praying an interminable Latin litany.

Both prayed for everything, concentrating with difficulty, themselves prisoners of the atrocious surgery.

Camilo asked for good luck from the Most High, supplicating that the surgical procedure being performed on the boy might never happen to him. He prayed for forgiveness for sins never committed, and suggested to God that He make him forget the sight of Francesco through the glass, flailing in the water, choking and in panic. Of the surgeons' hands groping for the scrotum on the child's pubis. Of the scalpel's entry into his organs. Of the cut, the opening of the flesh, the terror on the boy's face. And the blood that pervaded the blue water designing inside the cauldron a red smear shaped like a tree. Immense and deformed. Evil.

Carlo pleaded for the impossible, trying to deafen his ears temporarily but completely with the words of the litany. Eyes shut, praying louder and louder, the fat Dominican longed to be a dog with floppy ears, big and furry, to close off his sense of hearing from the surrounding noises. From the lacerating cries and supplications of the boy. From the orders and counter-orders of the surgeons, the clinking of the surgical instruments. From the water and blood boiling in the cauldron, running down over the glass and dripping everywhere.

Carlo and Camilo prayed with confused and increasing fervor, trying to make the time run out as quickly as possible, and not oblige them to touch the boy's testicles on the silver dish. Small dead seeds, wilted, floating in sticky clots of blood.

But though they implored God to make them deaf and blind, the friars were witnesses to the sights and sounds of a disastrous surgical outcome.

An accident! A problem! What incompetence! The scalpel slipped! The boy moved! My God, how much blood! Damned scalpel! Careful! You cut off

the penis, you cut off the boy's penis! My God, you were only supposed to cut off the balls! Take him out of the water! He's fainted! It's a massive hemorrhage! We must sew up the cut immediately! It won't do any good, take the boy out of the water and bring the hot iron. Only fire will staunch the blood. So much work! Now what? How will he urinate, with no penis? If he lives. If Francesco lives. Quick, the iron! Red-hot. Listen, I wanted an unforgettable present for the pope! A *castrato*, not a sexless child's cadaver!

The litany ended. Apparently Camilo and Carlo prayed, pleaded, supplicated, implored and beseeched, but since the Most High did not seem to be present in that dungeon, the friars had forgotten the essence of all prayer: praise to God.

CHAPTER NINE

WHAT MIRACLES ARE MADE OF

Francesco did not die. Doctor Giovanni di Vigo used a hot iron to staunch the hemorrhage from the child's pubis. A commonplace procedure which, unlike the surgery, was done with expertise and precision.

The natural anatomy of the boy's sex was totally mutilated and the famous Human Anesthetic Cauldron was questioned by the assistants as to its usefulness. The invention needed some sort of improvement or adjustment yet to be developed, or else it would be forgotten forever.

To Vigo, the assistants were precipitate in questioning the validity of human cauldrons. The boy had been the first and only patient to use it. Since scientific advances are not made with one isolated test, a whole line of emasculated victims could be presupposed before the final perfection of the new technique. Quite in accordance with the scientific tradition of the sages: make many secret mistakes, get a few things noisily right.

Once Francesco's hemorrhaging was under control, a curative was made with pulverized herbs and tufts of spider-web, extremely hemostatic material and good for the formation of scar tissue. With the total destruction of the penis, it was necessary to protect somehow the slit-shaped wound full of angry blisters. It resembled a rash topped by what was left of the urethra, a tiny protuberance through which the boy would urinate.

After the surgery, Francesco remained unconscious the whole time, pale as a corpse. They wrapped his body in a sort of white linen shroud, put him on a small stretcher and carried him to Filippo's chambers.

Carlo and Camilo took the stretcher with the unconscious boy through the spiraling corridors leading from the dungeon, now uphill for them. With the complicity of the guard at the pavilion where the monsignors were housed, Francesco was left alone in Filippo's bed, Filippo himself being just then in the library in the throes of a mystic trance.

The cardinal intended for Filippo to discover in shock his nephew's emasculated body. Or were they brothers? It made little difference. The important thing was that they were closely related, blood kin.

It was vital for Della Rovere to unhinge Filippo, make him understand that nobody in the Vatican could fail to respect the cardinal's slightest caprice. Much less omit precious information that could unbalance or even jeopardize the path laid out by him to become pope.

For the cardinal was determined to sit on the throne of Peter, both for the good of the Church and the pleasure of God. Therefore, Della Rovere was forcing Filippo to hate him deeply, to wax irate at the clerical hierarchy, to become revolted even against himself, and eventually realize he was drowning in vengeful rage. Martyred.

When a martyred man attacks, he commits errors, acting under the tutelage of sentimental impulses. In this case Della Rovere expected that the monsignor's tongue would be loosened, that he would reveal all possible secrets and break the wall of silence that had been constructed around Pius III.

A brilliant, perfect strategy conceived by Vigo and Della Rovere, and impossible to contest. At least up to that point, it had shown itself infallible.

Since the cardinal knew that his servant often took nips of his wines and liqueurs, with the increasing audacity often found in old domestics, the goblet of Saint-Poursin had been poisoned with precision by one of the doctor's assistants. The cardinal had only to take the bother of courteously inviting Filippo to dine. Later, there was the bother of containing his impatience at the artificial postponement of the dinner, a waiting period that would give the manservant sufficient time to drink the poisoned wine.

The surprise had been the old man's dazzling performance at the moment of his death. No one expected him to die brandishing a silver knife; that had been the work of chance, or of the poison.

Now, Filippo would be formally accused of murder and thus cornered.

The second part of the strategy was to weaken the monsignor through his nephew's castration, which due to technical difficulties had become emasculation. Another surprise neither agreeable nor disagreeable, just meaningless before the objective of the marvelous scheme: undermine and destroy the papacy of Pius III.

Nevertheless, both Vigo and Della Rovere had forgotten a primordial element that was to destroy their plan: the feminine factor. The abbess. Woman, like a magnetic pole, pulling the desire of Man toward transcendence. The only being capable of upsetting men's plans, since only women have the power to conceive and generate men themselves and the plans they make.

* * * * *

While the friars carried the boy away, Vigo and three assistants went to remove and prepare the body of the old manservant who had been poisoned. As material and definitive proof that the cardinal had been the victim of a sinister attempt on his life, they removed and saved the cadaver's stomach and tongue. As a sign of good will, they liberated the rest of the corpse and authorized it to be buried in hallowed ground, in a cemetery well distant from the Vatican.

At that moment Della Rovere went into the anteroom of the papal chambers. Spatters of blood were distributed over the white lace trimmings of his purple cassock, and his face was hard as he demanded at the top of his lungs to be received by Pius III.

As the pyramid of hierarchies does not permit nuns to match forces against cardinals, especially those in a fit of rage, the abbess kept silent and in candid reverence allowed Della Rovere to pass. As she opened the door of the

pope's bedroom she noted that the cardinal's cassock was damp; the bottom third of it was actually quite wet. The abbess thus perceived that the spots of blood had been left to impress, while the dampness was to intrigue.

The pontiff was drowsing off when Della Rovere knelt at the edge of his bed, pulled his hand and tried to kiss his ring. Pius III instinctively jerked his hand back and Della Rovere, without asking permission, began to pour out a chaotic discourse. Exaggerated, like a hemorrhage.

For a few seconds the pope was lost, not knowing if he was dreaming or really living this scene. Very normal, since some old men, looking back on their lives, describe the act of living as a banal dream, something indistinct as a withered plant.

However, other elderly folk affirm that this long dream is not so very commonplace, since dreams themselves contain a sort of intricate dramaturgy. This imaginative thesis would make all literary people nocturnal, and dreams the oldest art form, pre-dating even the existence of man, since animals dream too, especially lions and dogs.

Although Della Rovere was describing a nightmare, his words were real and the facts described contained irrefutable proofs. The cardinal was accusing Filippo of trying to kill him, in conspiracy with a manservant. Saying that the latter, as he died, had vomited blood, wine and ample confessions over the cardinal--hence the drops of blood on his cassock. That the ignominy perpetrated gave him every right to invoke the Holy Office and order Filippo arrested.

The cardinal declared himself enormously distressed by all the occurrences of the previous day, including the unfortunate audience with His Holiness in the Sistine Chapel. A disastrous encounter which led him now to ask the pontiff's pardon in the name of God. He also asked Pius III to accept his unforgettable gift of apology, the perpetual solution for the grievous papal headaches: the freezing of the gifted voice of the boy Francesco.

There has been an illustrious birth. *Nobili genere natus!* My surgeon has discovered the source of the perfect voice: *Il castrato*. The testicles are removed and there you are: the purest singing is joined with perfect chastity. Isn't it a beauty of an experiment? I hope to receive your most holy compliments for this great advance, both in the art of music and the science of medicine.

Cardinal, has Doctor di Vigo removed Francesco's testicles?

Yes, Holiness. The child's testicles were corroding his voice. An inconvenience which has been corrected. Holiness, if you permit me to say so, God and modern medicine have necessities and solutions very different from ours. Take this example: I feel that insects are an inconvenience, which could by my error. Yet because so many fleas exist, we deduce that God must like them. Sincerely, Holiness, I don't need the thousands of fleas that hop about all over Rome, but it seems God does. Or doesn't He? Or could it be that fleas only exist to be killed by men? If that's the case, God made the fleas to be massacred. In the same way, he created Francesco's testicles to destroy his voice. An absurdity which cannot be! Thus medical science merely corrected a blunder of nature and fulfilled the will of God: to maintain a voice pure and ample for the singing of His praises.

Your reasoning is highly complex and excessively convoluted, Eminence. Nevertheless acceptable and possible. Logical.

Your Holiness is always so kind. So illuminated.

But the Cardinal uttered an expression just now.

Nobili genere natus. And I can say another one, too, Holiness. Post gloriam invidia sequitur. Envy follows after glory. A concept with which I absolutely disagree, since this affirmation comes from an old Roman saying of pagan origin. In truth, Holiness, it is God who should pursue glory! The church! The papacy! Your Holiness in person!

Thank you, cardinal. Beautiful words. I should be extremely grateful if your Eminence would not take any immediate action regarding the grave accusation you have made against Monsignor Filippo.

Of course not, Holiness. Be at peace. It is the middle of the night, and now I intend to pray and then to sleep. Only tomorrow morning will I communicate the occurrence to the Holy Office. Good night, Holiness.

The cardinal went out as he had come in, most suddenly. But his spirit was different, electrified with the nuances of his hysterical theatrics. His face was also changed, bearing now an opening in one corner of his mouth from which irony evaporated. That almost-smile full of satisfaction, revenge, a subtle mask drawn with pleasure by some bored satyr.

The abbess was cautious as she asked Pius III if he desired anything else before she withdrew. He answered yes, it was urgent he meet with Filippo. But it was she who had a meeting with the pope, a long conversation that would launch the monsignor and his nephew into an undreamed-of existential exercise.

* * * * *

A crime! An act of barbarity! What a monster! Dear Lord God, help me understand how You admit into the bosom of Your church such a degenerate prince! The cardinal deceived the boy! He destroyed his masculinity! His sex! The vital force of a pleasure that hadn't even begun! What for? Why, my Lord? Thirst for power. Caprice, vengeance! Curiosity to know the contents of a letter! It's all so petty! How is it possible, Lord? Nothing justifies such a barbarous act!

Filippo wept, pouring out his questions to God while the squalid child, wrapped in two blankets and lying on the bed, slowly regained consciousness. From time to time Francesco whispered the word *miracle*, in a voice so distant that it sounded like the tumbling of dry pebbles at the bottom of an abyss.

God, in answer to Filippo's anguish, kept absolute silence. That's always how it happens, God whispers nothing in particular, authorizes that free will be manifest and that humanity itself answer the questions addressed to Him.

A bittersweet, deathlike smell drifted through the Monsignor's chamber. Sharp and acrid, it came from the boy's coagulated blood in contact with the herbs, spider webs and linen of the bandages. It formed a potent column of air, phallic and monumental, fixed on the surface of the two blankets that were powerless to smother the strange perfume. The odor was a reminder that the irreversible had happened, a warning that immediate measures must be taken, before the new sequence of facts mapped out by Della Rovere could take place, irreversible, in the morning. At least the abbess, who was also present, thought thus.

After talking with Pius III and convincing him to take action, the abbess had left the papal chambers and hidden herself in the secret compartment next to the anteroom. There, all alone, she took off her white robes and replaced them with the thick, hooded habit of brown wool worn by the monks.

All women are born knowing that men, or most of them, suffer from the tiresome delirium that they are lords of everything in this life. Some are even capable of imagining themselves giving birth. Thus, for the abbess, disguising herself as a monk was the only means she had of effecting decisions without upsetting men.

In her own way, she preserved this laborious male sickness. Without realizing it, she defended the longevity and superiority of women. Thus she found her way into places, resolved questions, and brought about results in so-called strictly male affairs. Which were not few in the Vatican, a male stronghold.

Packaged as a monk, walking with legs open wider, back curved and head bent down toward her chest, the abbess went into the pavilion of the monsignors without being stopped or even noticed by the guards.

When she encountered the prostrate Filippo wailing and revolted beside the choirboy, calling him Nephew, the abbess understood that the cardinal's actions were also linked to destroying the body of a family. One of the most confused and sensitive orbits in which human beings move.

Fragile and cornered, shrunken by disgrace, Filippo seemed to be suffering a martyrdom of hell. Since every human being is, in each instant, all that was and all that will be, the abbess saw in the monsignor a boy having theological nightmares and a man searching for the security of maternal arms.

Full of affection, the generous abbess held and comforted Filippo, man and boy crying the same tears.

She sat on the edge of the bed, letting the monsignor rest his head in her feminine lap. Not even realizing it, she began to stroke the back of his head, his neck and chin. Her hand felt the roughness of his unshaven beard, the warm dampness of his skin. The touch of her fingers, attracted and held by his masculine chemistry, recognized no barriers.

Miracle.

Abbess, I didn't hear. Did my nephew say something?

Yes, Monsignor. Francesco murmured the word miracle.

Miracle. That was the trick the cardinal used. What does Della Rovere understand about miracles? Miracles are made of love, Abbess. Of love! That is the raw material for miracles: love. Love of God. Love of one's neighbor. Love of nature. Love alone, Abbess.

Monsignor. Everyone supposes that good people are foolish and bad people intelligent. But I do not. I believe the exact opposite is true. Evil people are ingenuous, Monsignor. A person commits evil because he doesn't imagine what his conduct can cause to the spirit, to the life of another, he doesn't measure the consequences of his acts. He is infinitely selfish, soulless, someone who thinks only of himself. A fool. A primitive swayed by his first impulses. The difficult thing is to do good, to know how to love.

Although aware she was no longer young, the abbess had kept traces of beauty in her face. In the carriage of her body, in her eternally youthful hands. Skin like milk, black hair, warm brown eyes, she knew she was beautiful, not only from the looks she received but especially through the certainty her

mirror afforded. A faithful bride of Christ, she was pure and chaste, not by temperament but by principle, through her love of God.

As her hand stroked Filippo's face, her touch recognized the masculine features of the attractive monsignor and became a caress.

Abbess, why are your eyes closed? Why do you caress me?

Pardon, Monsignor.

Why are you holding me in your arms, Abbess?

It is only love.

Abbess, if passion is, as they say, an art people cannot dominate, I believe that love is a sentiment that one can train and direct where we wish. And we have sworn to offer it to God, to the Church.

Quite so, Monsignor. It is better we forget what happened. But did anything really happen here? I believe not. In any case, may our forgetfulness be merciful.

Merciful? But what are we talking about, Abbess? About ourselves?

About everything, Monsignor. A little of everything. His Holiness received Francesco's castration as a gift of brotherly love from the cardinal. As if it were the perfect and eternal cure for his headaches. Because of all that, forget the cardinal, the castration, the Vatican, the pope, forget love. Forget everything. And do not dream about the future. Don't imagine what may occur. Don't dream, for to dream is very risky.

Filippo drew away from the abbess and she, still seated, turned her attention to Francesco. She began to stroke the boy's face.

Not looking at the monsignor, the abbess informed him that Pius III in serene reflection had devised a plan of escape so that he, Filippo, might flee unharmed from the Vatican.

Plan of escape? What plan of escape, Abbess? I have done nothing wrong! Why must I flee the Vatican?

Just as we swore to offer our love to God, we also swore to obey the orders of our pontiff without questioning them, Monsignor.

With this affirmation, the abbess approached the edge of the abyss of silence that formed itself between them.

Before the monsignor went out to meet with Pius III, they talked a little more about the weakness and adversity that had befallen Francesco.

Their dialogue was melancholy and contained, marked by the distant eyes of the abbess and the resigned ears of the monsignor. Words smothered by thick layers of silent pause, and expressed in short, almost monosyllabic sentences. A dialogue too full of emotion to flow freely, charged as it was with imprisoned love.

CHAPTER TEN

TWO OBSCURE ESCAPES, TWO EXTRAORDINARY PETITIONS

The cardinal said: I don't accept that envy follows after glory, because this idea comes from a pagan saying. Rather, I believe that glory is pursued by God, the Church and Your Holiness. That was Della Rovere's reasoning.

Be careful, Holiness. Words always gain a vile and pernicious root when they come out of the cardinal's mouth.

It's true, the monsignor is right. But Della Rovere's observation still holds some value when he suggests that I pursue the glory of God. It could be the highest point of my papacy, Monsignor! To discover what is true and false in the letter from the King of Portugal.

If Your Holiness will permit me to say it, what the cardinal desires is to get rid of me and consequently take possession of your kind and merciful papacy.

That he has achieved, Monsignor. At least, getting rid of you. He accuses you of conspiracy, treason and murder.

That accusation is blasphemy, Holiness!

I know that, my dear Monsignor. I believe absolutely in your innocence, Filippo. Nevertheless, the cardinal professes to have so-called proof. Take care, Monsignor! When Della Rovere attacks with such fury it is because he feels certain he will be victorious. Besides that, it would be very painful and tiring for my person if I had to defend my admirable monsignor and confidant before the Holy Office. It would be a scandal! And as you know, I desire that my papacy be marked by concord and forgiveness. I need not remind you that

I made no reaction, I never even ordered an investigation of that indecent orifice found above the canopy of my bed. I discovered that someone was spying on me and controlling me: and what did I do? Nothing. I simply ordered the hole filled. I put an end to the indiscretion. No. No, Monsignor, I detest scandals. And a trial in the Supreme Court of the Holy Inquisition against my monsignor, my theologian, would be a scandal of unknown degree. It would certainly upset the entire clergy. No! It is unthinkable: the pope's confidant accused of murder!

Your Holiness, if I flee, I will be assuming guilt for the supposed attempt.

Nonsense, Monsignor. Quite the contrary. Your absence will be temporary and providential, and will give me the time I need to placate the cardinal and convince the Holy Office of your innocence.

Your Holiness should reflect further on the case.

You are very bold, Monsignor!

Forgive me, Holiness.

I have reflected, and I have made my decision. I even entertain the possibility that the cardinal's accusation may have been the work of the Holy Spirit. To solve once and for all this enigma of the King of Portugal, which consumes me.

Holiness, the questions of His Majesty Dom Joao II, King of Portugal, are extremely complex and could destabilize Christianity.

I am aware of that, Monsignor. Quite aware.

Your Holiness should call a conclave. Or better, congregate the theologians, the cardinals, and propose a reflection.

No, Monsignor! I have taken a glorious decision! The light of the Holy Spirit has gleamed through the cracks in the cardinal's phrases and brought the solution to my unrest. Do you know why, Monsignor? Your flight will not be useless. In other words, it will not be a flight, but a mission. The pious abbess has prepared everything. You will leave the Vatican in secret and embark on a journey to the ends of the earth. By divine right, and for the glory of my

papacy, I must be the first to know exactly where the Portuguese navigators went. You, Monsignor, will by my eyes and my discernment. You will evaluate and judge the true significance of this discovery. And you will bring me your response.

Forgive me, my pope. But such judgment belongs to Your Holiness, it is totally beyond my capacity. I am a simple monsignor.

The papal ring. Here it is. Take it! Why do you hesitate, Monsignor? Take my ring. By possession of the papal ring, it is established that Monsignor Filippo is the delegate of all my discernment, holiness and infallibility. May it be fulfilled thus, Amen!

Amen, Holiness.

You may withdraw, Monsignor.

Holiness! Before I go, I would ask one favor. I beg permission to take the boy Francesco with me.

What, Monsignor? The choirboy? What for? Why?

He is my nephew, Holiness.

The monsignor never informed me of this kinship.

Your Holiness never inquired.

Of course. Of course. Very well, I agree. Everything now rests on your sacred judgment. Amen.

* * * * *

With care and tenderness the abbess bore Francesco in her arms through the galleries and corridors of countless pavilions until she reached the stable where Filippo was waiting for them.

The boy was conscious and warm, but did not articulate any words, nor did he move. He only moaned, in the weak and distant lament of a dying nightingale. His feverish eyes crossed an infinity of doors and arches, his face resting against the abbess's shoulder.

A simple coffin of dark wood was resting in the wagon which stood at the back of the stable. A dejected Monsignor Filippo, hanging onto his valise, observed the coffin that hid the cadaver of the old manservant. Minus its tongue and stomach.

This same old servant, who in life gave up his stomach to wine in the perfidious ceremony engineered by the cardinal, would now in death have his funeral used as a facade for Filippo's escape. A long tongue that would spit the monsignor out of the Vatican. Life and death, tongue and stomach looping into a knot of the unforeseeable.

Only the manservant's body had permission to leave the Vatican in the wee hours of that morning. The cardinal had taken extreme measures to impede Filippo's possible escape. All the gates had been blocked and reinforced with guards. Captain Ritter had received orders to distribute armed soldiers even along the external walls of the fortress. A military apparatus capable of containing an army of infidels had been mustered, but it was still vulnerable to the abbess's unfettered imagination, which in a surge of creativity had planned the escape disguised as a funeral.

When the abbess arrived at the stable with Francesco, she noticed that the coachman was praying, terrorized at the possibility of being caught in an illegal act. Or even worse, being accused of criminal heresy for hiding a fugitive of the Holy Inquisition. A crime punishable by torture and death.

Not without reason, the coachman complained to the abbess. He had agreed to hide a thin person in his wagon, never a tall monsignor, a plump valise stuffed full of things and a pathetic-looking child who seemed paralyzed from the waist down.

The coachman, whose complaints disguised his fear, pointed to the small wagon, affirming this time quite rightly that it would be impossible to hide so many people and things in a rough open wagon.

The bells were ringing, announcing with their usual din the hour of Matins, which was around half-past three in the morning. Monks and novices,

Franciscans, Dominicans, and religious men and women of all orders were getting up to pray in their respective pavilions.

The Vatican was awakening in a chorus of endless litanies, novenas, yawns, coughs, spittings, sneezes and other natural outpourings, which joined the persistent clanging of the bells. A tumult of sound that implored God's mercy, asking that the day dawn as it always had up to now, without horrors, tinted with the blue and violet colors that decorate the sun. Everything normal thanks to Matins, prayers fundamental because they are in essence anti-apocalyptic.

Perhaps it was all these things at once: the ringing of the bells, the cross-eyed waking of the monks and the sight of the coffin. Or it may have been the sum of certain details, the cloudy and imprecise mathematics of a little of everything: a strident bell clanging out of rhythm plus the immoderate hysteria of an isolated prayer plus the spot of blood on the coffin. Particles of the general capable of awakening sleepwalkers. At any rate, something set off in Francesco an uncontrollable fit of crying, aggravated by a fruitless thrashing of his arms.

As the abbess tried to contain the boy's agitation and hold him still, Filippo suffered a mystic tingling and saw the hand of God in the circle of coincidences.

Looking steadily at the coachman, the monsignor began to discourse as solemnly as if he were in the amphitheater of the Sacred College. He declared that the body of the old manservant wasn't there by chance. That, in a manner unclear but highly creative, God had designed a propitious coincidence by the body's presence there. A trustworthy sign that the escape in the wagon must take place no matter what, under pain of the Almighty being frustrated, forbidding the new day to dawn and permitting the apocalypse to burst forth then and there.

Filippo's speech was so earnest, so full of sublime and complicated words, that his green eyes flashed sharply, the bells fell silent, and the boy was calmed.

Hypnotized by the impassioned force of the monsignor's spirit, the coachman gave in, sensing holiness in this priest. He knelt, asking for a blessing and swearing to go through anything to save Filippo, the valise and the boy.

Despite Filippo's sanctifying verve, which brought peace, the physical problem remained: how to hide everything in such a small wagon?

Wobbling and lurching, the cart was stopped by the guards at the north gate. Monsignor Filippo, wrapped in a filthy blanket, passed as its driver; inside the coffin were Francesco and the valise.

The Swiss guard recognized the validity of the authorization, and his soldiers positioned themselves around the wagon in order to inspect it. But when they got close to the coffin, a strong fermented smell penetrated their nostrils. The odor was that of rotting flesh, of a decomposing corpse, the alarming sign that whatever death inhabited that coffin had resulted from contagious and putrefying disease.

Like an imaginary plague, repulsion took over the soldiers' minds, and they fell back from the wagon, letting it pass without inspecting anything. This careless shirking of duty resulted in another punishment for the man responsible for the whole troop of guards, Captain Ritter. Once again he was jailed in solitary confinement, this time for twelve days. During which he dreamed of his women and seriously considered returning forever to his native Switzerland.

Dreams and punishments, real and true, children of a false premise: the odor had been created by the coachman, who smeared manure from different animals all over the wood of the wagon. A vulgar artifice that repels soldiers, attracts flies and occasions nausea.

Day was breaking. As the wagon made its way into Rome, the coachman finished burying the dead manservant behind the stable. In unconsecrated ground, but close to the heart of Saint Peter.

After promising the coachman a steady job in the papal servants' quarters, the abbess changed clothes and went back to her iron routine. Downcast, she went to put the final touches on the pope's breakfast: the soft-boiled eggs.

The parting of the abbess and Filippo was sparse in gestures and almost silent. In whispers she instructed the monsignor which route to take through Rome to find the palace of Bishop Fabrizzi. It was there that the ultra-secret link between Pius III and the Portuguese king was lodged: His Excellency, the Marquis Antonio dos Santos Ferreira de Castro e Souza Marrecos, Plenipotentiary Ambassador of His Imperial Highness Dom Joao II, King of Portugal.

Eyes shining with the humid gloss of tears, the abbess kissed Francesco and placed him inside the coffin. The boy had gone back to his lethargic, flaccid state, his face feverish and absent.

As the wagon left the stable, she thought she was crying from melancholy. In reality she was pouring out true love in her tears. The deepest of all emotions, because even imprisoned, true love always reaches beyond the intimacy of bodies.

* * * * *

Monsignor Filippo left the wagon on one of the tiny lost streets in the center of Rome. He loosened the horse's harness, leaving the animal practically free. He took his nephew and his valise out of the wagon and, before departing, got rid of the emblematic coffin by throwing it into the Tiber River. Both wagon and horse, he well knew, would soon disappear. They would be stolen.

It was full daylight when the monsignor crossed the booksellers' square and entered the small palace of Bishop Fabrizzi. The traveling vendors did not importune the hooded man who sweated profusely, carrying a boy in his arms and a suitcase in one hand. The booksellers, self-proclaimed masters of

popularizing the erudite, were much mistaken, seeing in that stinking and exhausted figure the personification of illiteracy.

The Marquis and Plenipotentiary Ambassador possessed the courtesy appropriate to diplomats. A vivacity marked by restless eyes, elegant gestures and cultured discourse rich in adjectives. All this buttoned up to the neck in wealth by a tunic of caramel-colored velvet with pearl buttons.

Although he did not let it show, the ambassador was impressed upon recognizing the Holy Father's ring in the palm of Filippo's hand. He ordered two Portuguese maidservants of his entourage to attend the fragile Francesco with extreme care and dedicated attention.

Not inquiring what had happened, the polished marquis supposed that the child had been the victim of some imprudent boyish accident. The well-disciplined maidservants followed the orders given and filled Francesco with a sticky but highly nutritious broth: the centuries-old Portuguese soup made from a pig's head cooked in wine.

The monsignor was taken to the room which had been made ready, where he prayed contritely, refreshed himself with a wet sponge, ate some bread with raw ham and cheese, and drank some goat's milk. He changed clothes, donning without reluctance his disguise, the garments of a vassal which had been laid out on the bed especially for him. A subtle sign from the ambassador indicating to Filippo that while he remained in Rome, every precaution would be necessary. Any carelessness could frustrate the monsignor's secret journey.

The fat Fabrizzi, short of breath and confined to his bed in a room dark except for the glimmer of silver objects, was dying amid belches and incessant speech.

From his mouth flowed in a faint voice the conventional in its maximum expression. The bishop recited popular sayings: he who sows the wind shall reap a whirlwind; well-known Latin phrases: *fas est ab hoste doceri*, it is lawful to learn even from the enemy; judiciary maxims: he who does not have justice buys it, he who has justice sells it; famous quotations: in giving we receive;

rhymed verses: April showers bring May flowers; and celebrated sayings: for commoners, bread and circuses. He emitted no original concept of his own, no idea, opinion or sentiment. He merely thought others' thoughts in a feverish, endless repetition of the commonplace. Dying, he descended through the monotonous drivel of mediocrity.

Since he was completely deranged, the bishop was not aware of what was taking place around him. He didn't know who his guests were, much less that he possessed a palace and was a prince of the Church. This made him an ideal host for the ambassador, his entourage and his activities. Secret and obscure maneuvers enveloped in pompous diplomatic solemnity.

Cloaking falsehood and sarcasm with fine manners, the ambassador declared to Filippo his grave worries as to Fabrizzi's physical and mental state. He related in passing that the health of the most amiable bishop had deteriorated following a violent shock: the refusal of the genial Michelangelo to sculpt a statue for his tomb.

The disappointment was so profound that Fabrizzi had convinced himself he would never get to heaven. At least, not in the original and far from mediocre manner he had conceived: riding on the hump of a marble camel.

As they walked on the porch of the small palace, Filippo and the ambassador exchanged other pleasantries: the mishaps of life, the condition of the day's weather. They praised the beauties of Rome visible from the agreeable upper verandah.

They heard the bustling noise of the booksellers and circled various times the enormous block of marble that occupied the middle of the covered porch. Patient and experienced, the ambassador also circled the principal subject of that conversation: how the monsignor and Francesco would escape from Rome.

When Filippo touched the marble surface of the gigantic block, he uncovered no layers, felt no ugliness nor presentiment of dead beauty as

Michelangelo had. He merely recognized that the stone was smooth and cold. The ambassador took advantage of his gesture.

A very valuable piece of marble, Monsignor. An authentic stone from an ancient pagan temple.

Unfortunately, Senhor Marquis, I understand very little of marble and architecture.

Books can easily fill that lacuna, Monsignor. This marble has been sold. It will soon be transported to Barcelona. It seems the Catalans are building a cathedral or very spacious church there.

May God be praised.

Amen! You see, Monsignor, the buyers were quite rigorous. The contract of the sale demands that an architect, or foreman, be personally responsible for the integrity of the stone until its arrival in the port of Barcelona. I believe the monsignor might be able to perform this service. Of course it would be, how shall I say, a rather unusual manner for a monsignor to travel. But the most secure, considering your mission and destination.

Once again Filippo stroked the marble. It was unthinkable to suppose that this block of stone with its impenetrable appearance should grow wings and fly with himself and Francesco to some faraway place. But that was exactly what happened. The block of stone, lifted by pulleys and ropes, became a moving mountain, going north up the coast of the Terras Itálicas. >From Genoa, it was shipped to Barcelona, center of the Catalan domain.

The inanimate stone acquired a notoriety never imagined by Michelangelo. Scorned by the artist for already having been an object of beauty, the marble took revenge. Its enormity and whiteness were admired and acclaimed by people on the roads, in villages and hamlets, wherever it passed. Traveling like an enchanted tombstone seeking rest, it crossed many lands and navigated over the Mediterranean Sea to Barcelona. Proving that even geniuses can be victims of precipitate judgment.

Filippo was to be a character in a new coincidence, this time without knowing it.

Years before, Barcelona had been the stage for the theft of a mysterious and precious object: the most coveted gem in the treasure-store of the Majorcan Jew Abraham Cresques. The ultimate hope for exorcising the barrier of demons and monsters that surrounded the unreachable land, the Terra Incógnita.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

DEMONS AND MONSTERS FROM THE DEEP

By the time the persecution of the Jews burst out ferociously in the kingdom of Aragon, Abraham Cresques was already dead. In a highly prophetic manner, the eminent Jewish sage had planned that his descendants' destiny would not be on the island of Majorca, where they had been born, much less in Barcelona, of whose court they were subjects.

In the detailed will he drew up and left in the hands of his son Jehuda, the old man alerted them of the fact that his granddaughter Leah, only seven years old, was betrothed and under obligation to marry a Jewish banker of forty-eight who lived in the city of Porto, in the north of the Kingdom of Portugal.

Stranger yet was the sudden appearance of an emissary from this banker. A clever man, full of vigor, he came accompanied by two seamstress cousins and their respective tailor husbands, who undertook the creation of the infantile damsel's trousseau and deliberated plans for the whole family's journey to attend the sumptuous wedding ceremony in Portugal.

According to the emissary, the betrothed gentleman of high finance demanded haste because time was worth gold. Moreover, he desired that the matrimonial celebration be carried out with maximum urgency; in this case, time was worth sapphires and emeralds. In other words, a ruinous amount, considering that the carnal consummation of this union would only be possible after long years of waiting until little Leah became an adolescent. Or at least until her first menstrual period.

The emissary, who apparently possessed an inexhaustible treasure-chest, was petulant, irascible and increasingly tiresome. His temperament, to sum it up, was deeply rooted in solid stubbornness.

To the whole family's astonishment, the emissary never touched on the subject of a dowry, fundamental item for the solidification of any marriage, let alone one in which the groom was a wealthy and impatient banker. Furthermore, the man did not seem to understand what was traditionally assumed to compose a young maiden's trousseau: a collection of embroideries, laces, fine and useful objects, and sets of various utensils that would provide harmony and well-being to the routine of the future home. But the man wanted nothing like that. He was interested only in fabrics and furs. He bought cloth and more cloth. Long, wide, thick pieces, for the seamstresses and tailors to baste and stitch enormous tunics, capes and mantles for the premature bride.

The extravagance was such that Abraham's brother, old Uncle Jacob, in a fairly superficial mathematical exercise, concluded that his great-niece would be wrapped up against the rigorous cold for the next seventy-nine winters.

As the work of the seamstresses and tailors was frenetic and the robes colossal, the ample arched office in Majorca, full of maps and calculations made by the late cartographer Abraham Cresques, was used as an atelier.

In Barcelona, the fabulous bridal dress was executed: a sort of blanket all in brocade, composed of various layers of different fabric superimposed one over another. Outlandish garb, obviously in bad taste, which by the superficial equations of Uncle Jacob would have easily dressed eighteen Leahs.

Due to the emissary's obstinacy, the matrimonial robes were sewn by hand, stitch by stitch, and the place chosen for this work was the office of cartography on the grounds of the royal palace that the late Abraham had also utilized. This circumstance caused significant inconvenience to Jehuda, who after heated discussions convinced some members of the court and those

responsible for the tranquillity of the royal palace of Barcelona to cede the space in the name of his father's memory.

The oddity reached its peak, becoming a puzzle, when the nuptial caravan left for the south of Portugal instead of going north to the city of Porto, as expected.

Jehuda, also a cartographer and most serene father of the bride, lost his endless patience once and for all and had a grave argument with the emissary. The latter remained calm, though he was holding a dagger. With it he sliced open Leah's capes, tunics and robes, demonstrating to the peaceable and credulous Cresques family that they had just committed a memorable robbery: the obscure and detailed Catalan atlas, an enormous feat of map-making that would now come under the guard and protection of the Portuguese Crown.

In the linings of that great mass of robes and shawls, all the gigantic maps and calculations, the revolutionary cartographic and nautical research carried out by Abraham Cresques, traveled to Sagres, a promontory on the southern coast of Portugal. An invisible but priceless treasure that included the key to the art of navigating long distances: the mathematical tables of astrolabic declination. In other words, latitude.

When the seacoast was unfamiliar, or when there was no coast in sight, latitude was the only way of determining a ship's position.

Navigators calculated the degree of latitude using the height of the Pole Star. As they advanced further south, the Pole Star would disappear, giving way to a diabolical night filled with new stars. A disgrace that confused the navigators and caused them to drown without mercy in the Sea of Darkness, on routes to the unreachable.

With the arrival of the mathematical tables calculated by Cresques, and Zacuto's *Almanach perpetuum*, the navigators began to use the sun's height as a parameter of latitude. Since morning comes on every sea, latitude could then be determined even on cloudy days. No one got lost any more, even sailing southward through the Sea of Darkness.

The importance of this knowledge was crucial for the Portuguese invasion of the oceans. Freed from the slavery of the Pole Star, Portuguese sailors began to cross the waters on the impossible north-south and south-north routes. With the numeric tables locked away behind seven keys in secret compartments located in the holds of the Lusitanian ships, they made other peoples, who could only sail where the pampered Pole Star shone, grit their teeth in envy.

Because of all this, the Infante Dom Henrique, uncle of King Dom João II and architect of all the Portuguese maritime discoveries, ran every risk, overcame the natural prejudices of his counselors, and ordered the work of Cresques stolen. The complicated plan had been elaborated in secrecy by Abraham and the Infante. Unfortunately the cartographer had died during the plan's execution, but Dom Henrique was faithful to its realization. Because of his nobility and gratitude, he welcomed all the Cresques descendants.

Sagres, a cluster of rocks jutting out into the sea, was the place chosen by the Infante to live and die. There he ordered a fortress built, and there he imagined with individuals of all creeds and political colors the unthinkable Portuguese voyages across the seas.

Dom Henrique demanded perfection in everything: in mathematics, in art, in navigation and principally in himself. The chastity of his body and his unshakable Catholic faith had never been contaminated. His celibacy, both of body and soul, was so integral that he took to his grave a perfect virginity. In spite of living surrounded by humiliated Jewish scientists, execrable Moorish intellectuals and hairy-chested, amoral adventurers who perspired remarkably, Dom Henrique died pure.

As for the inspectors responsible for the patrimony of the royal palace of Barcelona, they gave little importance to the tumultuous disappearance of the Cresques family and of those incomprehensible tables crawling with numbers. After all, it was merely the estate of a Jew from Majorca, dispensable people who should have been banned long ago.

All the inspectors agreed that the late Abraham was a lying and blasphemous sort, who drew maps without putting the city of Jerusalem, the navel of the world, in the center. Who had never sketched the celestial heavens with the Almighty and the angels above a flat, square world. Worse yet, he refused to indicate the location of Eden or of Hell, preferring to make reference in his maps to unknown lands or seas, yet to be discovered.

Thus at the end of his will Abraham Cresques wrote, venting his sorrow in a lament that resonated deeply in the spirit of his son Jehuda: *We are Jews, Jews, may Jehovah have mercy on us, the persecuted, and also on the damned, on the foolish, the insane and the poets, may Jehovah have mercy on the rejected, those different and possessed, because the powerful reject such individuals, but without them, time does not move, life does not change and nothing is transformed. Shalom.*

* * * * *

Francesco was settled in a cubical hollow in the top of the block of marble for the journey. Hidden from everyone, seeing only the sky and its different designs, the boy recuperated from the surgical atrocity.

Filippo climbed up and down the stone, assuring himself that the boy was alive, eating, and sleeping. A scar managed to form without infection, a tightly-stretched patch of shiny skin, but the boy's charm had left him. His spirit was sucked up into a child's eternal dread, free from shock or apprehension. Which could be taken as a contradiction, since one reacts to dread with heightened apprehension. Francesco, however, reacted with an undefined intimate coldness. A sad symptom indicating a frightening spiritual state: that of moral pain.

After going through swamps, mud, and the hailstorms of a torrentially wet winter not uncommon in the Terras Itálicas, they embarked, together with the block of stone, on a galleon bound for Barcelona. Expecting to cross a sea choppy with storms, they found the Mediterranean still and lake-like, bathed in a fine drizzle.

The heavy-laden Genovese galleon, a huge vessel weighing several tons and flying rounded sails, did not cut through waves nor flatten them, because they simply did not exist for her. The ship went forward like a fat bubble in a slow-moving river.

During the voyage Filippo sighted other galleons and several Venetian carraks. Each of them seemed bigger and heavier than the one before, in slow ostentation of what had always been the tonic of sailing: business and commerce, where the size of a vessel is the measure of its profit.

There were only three secrets. But three secrets very well guarded by the Portuguese Crown, being the trinity responsible for the success of its navigation. The first was the obscure ability to measure a ship's latitude in any quadrant of the ocean. The second was the conception, construction and utilization of an uncomfortable, crooked ship. Truly a seagoing contradiction. The caravel.

By cross-breeding the elephantine Arabian *cavavos*, built specifically to transport seventy horses, with the tiny boats that plied the Douro River, in the north of Portugal, carrying at most three barrels of Port wine, the caravel was born. The most improbable ship ever created by man.

Being extremely light, about one fifth the size of conventional vessels, the caravel didn't cut through the waves, it flew over them. This gave it astonishing velocity, especially when there were storms. Journeys that consumed weeks of sailing in other ships were shortened to days by the caravels.

Since the caravel used triangular sails, crooked and unbalanced, it could take advantage of all the winds. It could even sail against the wind, a nautical miracle that blessed it with the possibility of coming back from anywhere, as long as there was a breeze blowing. Preferably, a gale.

The problem was space. Or rather, the lack of it. The ship's limited draught did not permit much space below the water line, so there was nowhere to store merchandise or extra supplies. What sort of deranged commerce did the Portuguese have in mind? That was the favorite question of the

Mediterranean sailors. Ironic and critical, they did agree on one point: the caravel could be landed even on a beach at low tide. It didn't seem like a ship; it was a barely believable hallucination. An amphibious carriage.

Everything on a caravel was measured and tight. The crew, composed of a dozen men, suffered from the harsh rationing of fresh water, the sparse provisions on board and the endless seasickness resulting from the strong motion of the ship. Stories of tragic mutinies abounded. For all these reasons, on deck a perverse whip with three metal-tipped lashes reigned supreme, to placate revolts and pretend to contain an inevitable promiscuity.

Though laden with defects, the caravel was the only vessel capable of transporting merchandise much more valuable than pure-blooded Arabian horses, goods rarer than the aroma of Port wine: knowledge. The contours of lands, the direction of sea currents, the geography of the world. Imperceptible material without volume that was transported safely in the brain of a navigator. As long as he returned safe and sound, and as fast as possible, so his memory would not erase any minute detail of the geographic phenomena he had observed.

This was the business of the caravels. The most lucrative of all human businesses: knowing.

The third secret of Portuguese navigation was also revealed to Filippo. It was on the second, or perhaps the fifth, night he had been traveling on the caravel they had boarded in Barcelona.

On the fifth night or the second? A third secret? Everything happened very quickly. Or rather, it felt that way to him. His arrival in Barcelona, the delivery of the block of marble crowned by a wreath of seagulls, the formalities of the documents, the conversations with the buyers of the stone, the warm farewell of the sailors on the galleon and his immediate departure with Francesco on the caravel that lay waiting for them in the harbor. Time advanced so quickly that Filippo lost track of what was certain. Couldn't it have been on the twelfth night? The discovery of the secret.

Obviously, time didn't escape from its normal course, nor pass more quickly than usual. It was the speed of time in Filippo's memory that turned on a faster cycle. Arrhythmic and unregulated. As if his internal clock had lost one of its hands and was jerking unsteadily ahead.

Filippo hadn't entered a permanent mystic ecstasy, much less a waking dream. The process was of another sort.

He started to experience a unique sensation that went beyond the act of dreaming or losing himself in vertiginous tunnels. Overtaken by a disconcerting conjunction of existential events, the monsignor was only permitted to live leftover bits and pieces of the reality that surrounded him.

Filippo became downcast. He began to look at parts of things, slowly, from the bottom up, fishing for details while letting the whole drift away in a sea of imprecision.

Maybe it was due to being at sea for the first time. To the beating of the waves in his brain. To the tricks of the tides. Maybe it was the hypnotic line of the horizon, infinite and threatening, that produced his state. Or the wind.

The most logical explanation is that solitude, which always works thus when it invades human beings, had multiplied his interior space several times. Or at least doubled it. Elevating his most primitive instincts to the highest possible power. Fear, revulsion, desire, contradiction, his love of God. His imagination. Altering, in consequence, his notion of time.

Hence Filippo only experienced Barcelona through seeing its lights, so sharp and limpid they seemed to be made of water. Forgetting to admire the beauty of the city, its edifices and its people's qualities. It was a prodigy of civilization.

Nor did he see a ghost as he was greeted by the navigator in the blue cloak. A man who, officially, had drowned in the Tiber River and would command the caravel that would take him to the Terra Incógnita.

This massive-chested individual wrapped in exorbitant blue complained about Francesco traveling in his caravel. An inert boy with white hairless flesh

was a dangerous delight that could drive his toothless mariners mad. Therefore Francesco traveled deep in the hold of the ship, practically a prisoner.

Filippo noticed that the crew of the caravel was quite different from that of the Genovese galleon. The mariners under the blue-cloaked navigator's command didn't speak, they muttered. There was an almost brutal tension among them. Because they traveled toward the wall of demons that surrounded the unknown, they exuded scorn. An explicit anger sailing in disgust and anchored in a shallow vulgarity. Men of small souls who, seeing the boy, licked their lips in an abysmal demonstration of how far they would go without remorse.

On the caravel the sea invaded everything and everyone. With its smell, its colors and movement. The bridge undulated, the masts seemed like fish bones scratching the sky, the men's skin turned to scales and the breath they all exhaled was a salty vapor.

No barriers existed against the wind that came through the sticky, salt-encrusted timbers. It blew steadily, shaking their bones, opening invisible concavities in their aching, nauseated stomachs. When it rose, it cut their bodies into thousands of dehydrated pieces.

The further south they sailed, the more sun they encountered. A sun burning hotter and hotter, full of sparkling fire. A hateful circumference that warmed the demons, cursed beings that swam disguised as voracious fish, white and deformed. Devils with dead, gelatinous eyes that surrounded the caravel. A funeral entourage that accompanied the vessel, prophesying catastrophe and mocking the Good.

To sail by day through the Sea of Darkness is like this: extremely uncomfortable. These were the words pronounced by the Marquis and Plenipotentiary Ambassador, when the caravel made a brief stop in Lisbon.

The Tower of Belém, set into the banks of the Tejo River, was the place chosen for Filippo's encounter with the ambassador. Dinner was served in a cramped, windowless room in the heart of the fortress.

The illustrious ambassador, wearing shoes with golden buckles, had outdone himself in elegance, which contrasted sharply with the salivating noise he produced as he chewed his dinner.

Filippo, since he was only experiencing scraps of time, noticed just a few disconnected details. He noted that the arms of the candelabra were designed like the bodies of nude women. That the ambassador stuffed himself with delicate lettuce leaves and rare-cooked slices of wild boar.

I left Rome just after you did. Speaking of which, Monsignor, I bring no news whatsoever. I did not have time to receive word from the Vatican.

As the marquis interspersed his words with repeated sips of wine, he described the apprehensions of the court of Portugal regarding the portentous discovery.

After all, to whom do these lands belong? To the Portuguese, the Spanish, or the Church? A dilemma, my dear fellow. Because, Monsignor, there is the Treaty of Tordesillas, which was blessed by the Vatican. We and the Spanish divided possession of the Sea of Darkness and the new lands with an imaginary line that runs from north to south, three hundred and seventy leagues west of some little islands. This agreement averted a war between our two nations and permitted the navigator Christopher Columbus to sail as far as the Indies. But if the Indies are as immense as they say, and now belong to the Kingdom of Aragon and Castile, these new lands to the south must belong to us, the Portuguese. Even though they are within the Spanish quadrant. And whatever lands they may be.

Whatever lands they may be? Senhor Marquis! Suppose these lands belong to God?

I daresay I expressed myself badly, Monsignor Filippo. What I meant to say was, if after your journey the Monsignor concludes that this place is not what we imagine, then these lands will be ours. Which could occasion a war, an undesirable bloodbath in the Iberian Peninsula.

All lands belong to God!

Hypothetically, yes. But not in practice, admirable Monsignor.

They are God's! One day they will all return to the dominion of the Lord God!

And with God rattling in his head, his mind agitated by loneliness, Filippo traveled southward into the Sea of Darkness and its terrible nights.

Nights in the caravel were immersed in fear. Suffocating, like the crazed mariners who slept on deck, crushed together and moaning. Bathed in Filippo's prayers going through Francesco's ears. Awash with rats chewing in the perpetual sea-stench. Nights when the restless captain in blue locked himself in a secret compartment in the ship's hold to calculate numbers, manipulate quadrants and astrolabes, ascertain the direction of the ship.

One night. Was it the fifth night? Or had it been the thirteenth night of the journey? The navigator made his confession to the monsignor. He asked pardon for all his sins. For the indignities of his crew. He categorically affirmed that he was the son of a sacrilegious family. That his father, also a navigator, had taken him to Iceland, in Thule, at the northern limits of the world. That there, in Reykjavik, they had taken part in rituals of necromancy and devil-worship, all in the name of the Portuguese Crown. That through these false sorcerers he had acquired a dark, brilliant sand with amazing powers, which indicated where demons dwelt, but backwards. True as a clock it showed the direction of ships in the dark. This powder, rubbed on a fine metal needle, made it turn like an arrow toward the north, showing that to the south lived the monsters of Lucifer.

These pagan festivals in Thule had perverted his soul. He no longer loved women. He liked to hurt them before he slowly possessed them. He liked the smell of blood that foamed from their mouths when he beat them. He lashed them with whips, clawed their flesh with delight, twisted and bit their nipples. It was a dizzying pleasure that made him a lord of torment and a slave to the pain of others.

This was the navigator's secret. As aberrant as the working of the magnetic powder, as heretical as the third secret of Portuguese navigation: the use of the compass.

The man in blue prayed thirty-seven Ave-Marias and twenty-three Our-Fathers in exchange for penance. All was pardoned and forgotten by Filippo. Sins and secrets subtracted from his memory by solitude. A spiritual state that ferments within a person, leaving him unable to share emotions with another. A silent and introspective addition that multiplies the I and perverts the notion of time.

* * * * *

The caravel descended southward through the Sea of Darkness apparently unmolested by demons, at least the visible monsters. Yet the miasmas of Lucifer stared through the eyes of the fish, simmered in the fears of the crew and echoed in the skull of the monsignor. Only the navigator in blue, who dreamed of violence, seemed immune to it.

As for Francesco, besides his moral pain and his confinement, or due to both, he wasted away almost to nothing. He became a translucent fish bone.

When the caravel drew close to the unthinkable place not yet identified by the Portuguese navigators, the sea thickened. From its bowels was born a dense gray mass, as if the waters had turned to molten lead. The sky abstracted itself from the sun, giving way to a monumental gray orchid of clouds. Everything was gray. Sea and firmament completed each other in a circle, a tunnel. Endless. Without light. A ring of terror that united the caravel to infinite evil.

The gray tunnel turned. It occasioned an avalanche of waters that had no origin or destiny, only continuous presence. The visible powers of Lucifer revealed themselves from the ocean's depths in a horrendous torment that slammed the caravel against the wall of demons. Many-headed bolts of lightning sprang from nowhere and fragmented the gray tunnel into sinister, luminous parts. Everything was falling. Four men barely had time to lower the

sails, while others raced to hide below. Two were sucked into the waves. Almost nothing was left on deck. Only the navigator, who held onto the broken helm. And Filippo, who tied himself and Francesco to the mast, along with his valise.

Clusters of explosions deafened their ears, pronouncing that thunder comes from the throats of fallen angels. From their slimy spittle came lashing winds.

The caravel is breaking apart! We'll be shipwrecked!

Not yet! Pray, Monsignor! Pray! We are crossing the accursed passage, the Sea of Furies. Pray!

How much time do we have until we reach the Terra Incógnita?

Time? What difference does it make? Time has no more meaning, Monsignor. The ship is floundering, without direction or helm!

Francesco! Hang on, Francesco! Don't let go of my leg! Francesco fainted!

Open the boy's mouth! See if his gums aren't full of blood. Monsignor! Do as I tell you!

Lots! Lots of blood. But what is this? What disease is it?

It's not a disease, Monsignor. It's the scurvy. The demon of vengeance that enters the bodies of many who dare to cross this hellish sea. Pray, Monsignor. Pray, or your nephew will die with his soul condemned!

Dear God! Francesco is dying!

Filippo's numb fingers groped for an object he had hidden in his habit: the ring of Pope Pius III.

As he put the ring on his own finger, Filippo didn't think of a miracle capable of breaking the barrier of demons and saving them from a mortal shipwreck. He only imagined that, as guardian of the papal ring, he could exorcise the demon of scurvy that had taken possession of Francesco. Humble, he did not beg for the boy's life, only for his nephew's eternal salvation. And his own.

The ring did not seem to respond to the monsignor's cries. But since the purposes of God are always fulfilled in startling ways, reacting to the desires of men with unforeseen solutions, a miracle happened right under Lucifer's nose. Not a miracle, an accident.

From the top of the mast, one of the crossbeams fell down and hit Filippo on the back of his neck with a sound blow. The monsignor lost consciousness, knocked out colder than his demon-possessed nephew.

He swooned into an irremediable unconsciousness. Without seeing tunnels of light, as people dying in the human cauldrons related, or suffering the strange sensation of floating above his own body. Such situations were described by the few who returned from the portals of death and affirmed they had experienced these phenomena.

Questionable affirmations, since as we are born through the vaginal canal, life and death would naturally be filled with architectural images: tunnels, canals, doors. Stairways and bridges. Fancies typical of the dying and newborn who, having no reason to think, fill their empty existential spaces with imaginary constructions.

A discouraging supposition, for it reduces these two transcendent moments to an atrocious triviality, much worse than the tendency of false poets to equate women with flowers. Or men with animals. Preferably quadrupeds.

Filippo slept like a baby, indifferent to the furies of the tempest. Indifferently he awakened to behold the splendor of the morning that broke pure and clear as a saving Host.

I made the crossing! I managed to sail across the Sea of Darkness once more! Monsignor, wake up! Monsignor, we've arrived! Look! Look there at the big pointed rock! So strange, isn't it? Are you feeling all right? Can you get up! Take my arm, that's it! Observe those trees, that's where the unreachable lands begin. No one has ever been there. I'm going to loosen this cord and untie you from the mast. The caravel drops anchor here, as the King of Portugal ordered.

Francesco! Francesco, we've arrived. Dear God, he doesn't answer me.
Francesco, don't die!

He's dying. What are you doing, Monsignor? Where are you carrying the boy? Are you going to throw his body into the sea?

No! I shall bury Francesco in the Terra Incógnita.

CHAPTER TWELVE

BETWEEN TWO WORLDS

The abbess did not cry. She swallowed her tears, contained her emotion and, taken by an inexplicable obstinacy, left the papal chambers.

Walking firm and resolute, not altering the accelerated cadence of her steps, she crossed the central building and two lateral patios. Next to a corner of the wall, she entered the pavilion of men's latrines. The hundred and twenty-two privies that served the lesser prelates and the upper ranks of servants.

The presence of the abbess in that forbidden place was so absurd that, amid the tumult she caused, a friar thought he had been graced by a vision of the Virgin Mary.

So destructive was the passing of the abbess's white habit through the corridors impregnated with fetid vapors that the embarrassed men felt offended, and half-naked monks swore. But no one asked the reason for such an insane and sinful intrusion.

The old, half-blind monk, cleaner of the privies, the lowest of being in that malodorous hierarchy, made no sign to her. He was bent over, gathering into a wooden box the excrement of the past night. With the help of a dipper, his coarse, thick-veined, hands fished abject lumps from the bottom of the pits.

As she knelt beside the blind monk, sullyng her habit with sticky filth, the abbess broke into tears.

The monk placed his dipper in the wooden box, straightened up and, lifting his face to the roof blackened with dirt, gazed into the infinite. He

thought of eternity, and understood that the throne of Peter was empty. Pius III had just died.

The pope was eating the two boiled eggs, his first meal of the day, when he lost consciousness and curled up like a fetus. His eyes swept over the chamber that looked like an egg turned inside out and he murmured his last words amid the thickening yolks. His victorious message for humanity. A fundamental phrase that would be celebrated in books and compendia as the summation of his existence. An example for the world, to be memorized by novices, students and master through endless repetition.

That was Cardinal Della Rovere's first question when he managed to meet with the abbess: Venerable lady, what revelations did His Holiness make before his last breath? What revealing phrase did he leave us as a legacy?

For the abbess had done everything possible to obstruct the cardinal and his Dominicans from invading the papal chambers and having time to take away documents, parchments and other secrets of Pius III. After confirming that the Holy Father had died, she swallowed her grief. She did not communicate what had occurred to the Holy Office, nor to the cardinalate secretaries, as would be her obligation.

Much less did she call Doctor Vigo to reanimate the pope's inert body. Her will and desire were concentrated on a moral obligation to protect Pius III and his reign until the arrival of the new pope chosen by God.

Out of admiration and profound gratitude, she saved the chambers of her pope from the predictable rapacity of Cardinal Della Rovere. As she knelt in front of the blind monk in the pavilion of men's latrines, she transgressed the hierarchical norms of the Vatican regarding the death of a pope. She alerted the last religious body to be called in these situations: the mysterious order of the Guardians of the Throne of Saint Peter, the papal embalmers.

When Della Rovere arrived at the chambers of Pius III, he was taken aback. The guardian monks, old men chosen from various orders, had already blocked the entrance to the papal bedroom, sealing doors and passages, locking

the trunks of documents and parchments, and were preparing the cadaver of the Holy Father for the funeral ceremony.

Contrary to what one might expect, the cardinal was not enraged with the blockade mounted by the abbess. He was charmed with the nun's courage and fidelity to the pope even after his death. Qualities that the warrior Della Rovere demanded from those he commanded on the field of battle, but which are useless in palaces, wherever they may be.

In palaces, wars for power are so hypocritical that the most convenient thing is not to be faithful to anyone. Since today's sinuous enemy can metamorphose into tomorrow's man of influence, it is best not to have enemies. The ideal is to pretend that battles do not exist, and the most opportune is to deny courage and fidelity. To make these qualities of character the exception is the height of good sense.

In palatial wars, courage is easily transformed into daring, and in the end becomes disrespect, grave indiscipline, insolence. Loyalty is confused with naiveté, giving rise to the worst danger of all: loss of the instinct for self-preservation. Because in the corridors of power, one does not die by the thrust of the sword, in pools of blood; one falls into disgrace. The important thing is to know how to change sides at the right moment. Thus reasoned a large part of the college of cardinals.

And they, faithful in carrying out the palatial maxims, had abandoned Pius III to his own luck long ago.

After the formal case against Filippo was brought before the Holy Office, and after his unacceptable flight, the pope had once again withdrawn into isolation. But this time without the firm theological protection of the monsignor, which permitted Della Rovere such ample freedom of action that he, without timidity or scruple but within his rights, simply employed simony, the Law of Simon, and herded all the cardinals into his control.

The writings of Saint Luke describe how the apostles Peter and John, arriving in a village, were importuned by a wicked sorcerer called Simon. That

the foolish man proposed to buy the powers the apostles manifested, recognizing that they came from the Holy Spirit. A furious Saint Peter answered: May you perish and your money with you, for thinking you could buy the gifts of God!

In this way, simony came to mean all buying and selling of spiritual gifts, sacraments, ordinations, and consecrations, as well as ecclesiastical charges or distinctions, especially papal ones.

Since simony itself was not considered a sin, but merely a financial reinforcement of the true will of the Holy Spirit, it was decided, before the death of Pius III and the conclave of the cardinals, that Della Rovere would be the next pope, as long as he did not die before his elevation. Because Della Rovere devastated his fortune, dismembered his army and took out expensive loans with well-known bankers, all for the purchase of the cardinals' ethereal loyalty.

Years later the Law of Simon would be banned from the Vatican and proclaimed sinful by the Church of Christ. At which point various human activities, indeed almost all of them, began to adopt simony, either covertly or explicitly. A fact which only confirms again the fabulous attraction that sin holds for the spirit of mankind.

Despite the intrigues of Carlo and Camilo, the revolt staged by certain prelates, and the certainty that he would be pope, in truth Della Rovere admired the abbess's innocuous action. Upon being prevented from entering the papal chambers by the monks, the cardinal withdrew, leaving the nun to reign like a widow in the anteroom. He merely asked, not bothering to hide his cynicism: What did His Holiness say just before he died?

He said, I'm cold.

Truly an exquisite, engravable phrase, Abbess, since we're in the middle of winter.

* * * * *

The caravel dropped anchor in a cove near the gigantic granite rock. In this cove the crew found fresh water, ate, and began the work of repairing the ship damaged by the Sea of Furies and the Wall of Demons.

The navigator in blue and his men did not have authority to go beyond the mountain that marked the entrance to the Terra Incógnita. Their mission was only to put the monsignor ashore, wait for him as long as needed, and then sail back to Lisbon.

Filippo had his valise tied to his back, his nephew in his arms and water up to his waist as he waded through the shallows surrounding the mountain, a strange black rock that looked like a pillar supporting the sky. No. The mountain looked like a cone. A cone that poked into the air and skewered the infinite blue.

Take note! Copy this down! According to Saint Isidore, after Adam and Eve were expelled from Paradise, the Lord God closed the gates of Eden with a tongue of fire that with time solidified into a gigantic pointed rock. Insurmountable.

Filippo's eyes roamed over the mountain thinking of his theological training and the shape of the rock: conical, resembling an enormous loaf of bread set in the earth more than it did a tongue.

The monsignor knew that he should be praying for Francesco's soul, but he could not manage to concentrate his thoughts sufficiently to do so. His mind was not whirling or circling round, it was sliding from one plane to another, concentrated on observing shapes and forms. The conical mountain, the straight line of the ocean, the vertical trees, and the curves of a beach he could see in the distance and toward which he was moving.

There was no doubt that there, on the other side of the mountain, the colors had acquired very precise forms in which to reveal themselves. The green was fixed so strongly on the surface of the waters that it drowned one's vision. This overwhelming algebra of form and color was also changeable. Precise yet changeable, because an instant later the same green was in the tops of the trees,

and the waters were blue. White. Luminous. Through infinitesimal particles of time, a color took eternal possession of a form, bestowing perfection and precision on it. Immediately afterward, the color dissolved from this material, giving way to another just as intense, correct and ideal as the first. Everything was transmuted and nothing was altered in that bay edged with beaches. Everything moved yet nothing had motion in the colossal forest that embraced the sea. Because within it lived the splendor of the perpetual procreation of nature. The creativity of God.

Certainly it was in this place that God experimented with the fixation of colors and forms in all matter. Without obligation to the laws of nature, He went on infinitely redefining animals and objects, perhaps seeking the most pleasurable interpretation, since they all were perfect.

There were so many colors and forms that Filippo was dazzled even by some moving blue specks that flew--butterflies! Sands made from marble powder. Lilac birds with bronze heads. Animals never before seen, unimagined plants. Everything grandiose yet tranquil, tepid. Springlike. Comfortable. Silent.

The monsignor laid Francesco on the warm sands, untied the valise from his back and opened his robe. He felt hot. It was an odd, abnormal heat, for this was the month of January, and nature was supposed to chastise the body with cold.

Then he heard a sound like a trumpet. Not strident, muted. Hoarse. And hundreds of small green birds that had borrowed their hue from the trees took flight. A wave of chirping and twittering made the monsignor catch sight of the beings of Good. The benign ones who forgive everything, having been born without original sin.

Memorize! In the Holy Garden there is no evil, only good. All is calm and tranquil. It is a sea of felicity, heaven on earth. Silence! The Earthly Paradise lives in an eternal springtime, protected by angels of all categories, who in spite of having feathers and wings, do not fly! And why do they not fly? Because

their duty is to guard Paradise, and from there they go not forth. The angels are divided into nine hierarchies. These are: Seraphim! Red-colored angels. Cherubim! Blue-colored angels. Throne attendants! Yellow in hue.

Because the angels were engraved on his mind, or because he was captured by their real and magical presence, Filippo comprehended that he was living a revolutionary adventure in the impenetrably deep things of God. Seraphim, cherubim and throne attendants appeared from among the trees, from the sands and the waters. Each of them reflected a color. Colored skins that mingled with the colors of the feathers on their hairless bodies. Slanting, oriental eyes. Women's hair, straight and black, falling to their shoulders. Shining.

Unquestioningly the monsignor entered this new universe. Not only was it more extraordinary than that evoked in his mystical trances, or that suggested in the Scriptures. It was a place far stranger than he could possibly have imagined.

Filippo placed the ring of Pius III in the palm of his hand and extended his arm. He wanted to demonstrate to the angels that he had authorization to be there.

Glory! *Gloria in Terris!* Lord! I am the chosen one! *Deo Gratias!* The one marked by God to reveal His Garden! I have found the Earthly Paradise!

Filippo wept, visited, as he imagined himself, by the grace and magnificence of the Divine. And the angels stomped their feet, raising a fine pink dust from the warm sand. In rhythmic cadence, emitting measured sounds in unison, they approached him timidly, with curiosity.

Filippo knelt and closed his eyes in a sign of respect. Then a seraph, a red-colored angel, drew close to the agonizing body of Francesco and expressed pity in indecipherable, happy noises.

Seraph! Magnificent angel! I know that the language you speak is incomprehensible to humans. See this ring! I am the representative of His

Holiness, Pope Pius III, I too am a servant of the Lord! Splendorous angel! I beg that with your celestial powers you restore life to my nephew Francesco!

A few more angels knelt and extended their hands, imitating his gesture. They smiled with such childishness that Filippo almost thought they were mocking him. But it could not be. It must be their purity. It was.

Throne-attendants and cherubim pointed to a tree, a very strange-looking palm tree, tufted and crooked. From it, they brought some large, heavy green fruits. As if molding a face, they made some holes in these balls that looked much like human heads without features. From the holes they poured water. Pure.

There was also an animal, spherical and hairy. The hair was brown and they divided the animal's body as if it were an immense nut. It had no blood. The inside of the creature was hollow and carpeted with white flesh. Pure.

The seraph held Francesco's head while two other angels dripped water from the fruit into the boy's mouth and placed the soft white meat against his tongue.

The liquid and the meat were absorbed by Francesco's wounded, bleeding membranes. The paste of the marvelous mixture was sucked in by the boy's body with such voracity that it immediately disappeared. Francesco opened his swollen eyes. He awoke pure.

Francesco, you're alive! A miracle! Drink more, more. More. It is the water of life. A miracle!

The monsignor prayed in gratitude and rejoicing, recognizing that because they were free from sin, the angels were children of original innocence.

* * * * *

White smoke wafted in plumes from the chimney of the Sistine Chapel, a sign that a new pope had been chosen by the cardinals. The rest of the clergy did not yet know who had been elected.

Over the centuries, a joyous energy has always surged at this moment in the hearts of priests, nuns and lay people, for the throne of Peter is no longer empty. But this time, instead of joy, a feeling of strangeness settled like dust.

Never had a papal election happened with such speed. The decision that could take days, weeks, or even months to be finalized occurred in the course of a morning. In a very few hours. The exact time needed for the cardinals to enter the Sistine Chapel, attend mass, pray for the guidance of the Holy Spirit and proclaim the new pope. Out loud. For they didn't even vote in writing or in secret, they simply yelled Della Rovere's name. That was all.

Before declaring what name he would adopt as he sat to reign upon the throne, Della Rovere went to a lateral gallery off the main chapel. There, tailors and artisans would bedeck the cardinal with a new linen robe and dress him with vestments of white silk embroidered in rubies and emeralds. They would adjust the papal robes to fit his body with fine gold thread, perfume his flesh with special fragrances and then withdraw. Alone, the cardinal would then place the miter on his own head. Because no one could crown a pope, they crowned themselves. Thus Della Rovere would enter as a cardinal through one door and leave, consecrated as pope, through the other. Meanwhile, the smoke would be drawing glorious white plumes through the skies of Rome.

Della Rovere felt a vast pleasure at being respectfully undressed by the attendants. His face was radiant and his features opened in a victorious smile, mirror of a satisfied spirit.

Since no one could, or should, see a naked pope, except under very special circumstances, the attendants covered the cardinal with a fine shawl and led him to a heated cubicle while the papal vestments were adjusted.

What happened next was sudden and frightening. One of the walls of the cubicle was pushed back with rasping squeak and the old blind monk, the cleaner of privies, materialized before the cardinal.

Voraciously enjoying the sensation of being pope, Della Rovere took a few instants to come down from his state of supreme satisfaction and recognize

that facing him were two monks of the mysterious order of the Guardians of the Throne of Saint Peter. The embalmers.

Both aged, blind, and frail, the personification of humility and the unqualifiable humiliation of cleaning others' filth from the privies, they stood there motionless. Eyes lost in unending darkness, hands trembling. One of them was carrying a broken sandal, the other held a walking staff, battered and scarred.

Do you accept to wear the sandals of Peter, the fisherman?

Do you accept to carry the staff of Paul, the preacher?

Hearing these question, Della Rovere understood that there was, indeed, a ceremony to anoint the new pope. Terrible. Painful and sublime. An unexpected equation that united eternity with the act of cleaning outhouses. A consecration that went beyond the buying of votes, beyond corruption, the law of simony and everything else. Those two old men were guardians of the most disturbing relics in the universe. The powerful objects that had transformed human history forever were in the hands of the two beings most destitute of power that he could have encountered. An incongruency without answers, and a hard lesson for a new pope.

But above all, the ceremony was the vital and definite proof that, in spite of all the plans, interferences and conspiracies of men, the choice of the pope was still God's. Because emanations of the insoluble human condition reverberated from the old men's hands.

Do you accept to wear the sandals of the fisherman?

Do you accept to carry the staff of the preacher?

Now I see clearly what it means to be pope! My God! Why have You allowed me to arrive at this point? I don't deserve to be pope. I'm a hypocrite. An unworthy trickster. Can't anyone see that I'm not fit to be pope?

The sandals of the fisherman, will you wear them?

The staff of Paul, will you raise it up?

I'm not a servant of God! I am the slave of malice! An inferior being! I pretended to respect the hierarchy of the Church, I kissed the hands of the powerful with misgiving, but I kissed them! I scorned other people's ideas and even faith itself. I never gave thanks for the bread I ate day after day, nor cried for love! Answer me, blind monks, do I deserve to be pope? I tortured men needlessly. Because everything and everyone seems as nothing before my abominable ambition! The sandal is so worn and old, the staff so battered. How can a person like me guard such sublime and delicate objects?

Della Rovere made his confession spontaneously. From the middle of his navel, from the depths of his spirit, the words poured. As did the tears, sincere and merciless, that ran down his face. Releasing guilt, repentance, and the most destructive of sensations: the notion of human insignificance.

Please, Jesus, don't let me suffer any more. Show everyone that my election was a dark mistake. Turn back the clock!

At that moment the monks turned their backs on the cardinal and began to return down the black corridor that had opened behind the wall of the cubicle. With them they took the sandal and staff.

Della Rovere shuddered, and from the same place where the glimpse of insignificance had come, his navel, there came another notion. Stunning and victorious. Unconquerable. The revelation that in this life, the unforgivable can only be forgiven by the one who commits it. Even institutional pardon, coming from whoever grants it, priests, judges, saints or sorcerers, never works. Only the person who practiced the unforgivable is capable of generating his own pardon. Thus the cardinal forgave himself.

Stop! Wait!

The monks came back and the cardinal kissed the sandal and shed tears upon the staff.

Yes. I will be pope! With all the evil I possess! God! Squeeze drop by drop from me all that which I am, all that does not serve Thy divine purposes. Grant that thorough these veins my blood may no longer flow, but that of him

chosen by Thy heavenly will! Make of me what Thou wilt, Lord! But I pray Thee, I supplicate Thee, make of me a true and unforgettable pope!

Consecrated Holy Father in the secret ceremony, Della Rovere left the cubicle and went back to the ritual of the vestments. When the priests handed him the miter to crown himself, his eyes were lowered. He observed the miter in parts, piece by piece. This was not, as many imagined, because he was impressed or intimidated by the flashing power of the diamonds. It was for another reason. The cardinal saw a crown of thorns in place of the miter, exactly as Pius III had warned.

* * * * *

Monsignor Filippo opened his valise, took out his notebook and wrote.

I have just discovered the Earthly Paradise. I know that this fact is more than an honor, it must be considered a sign of my sanctification. But an enormous theological dilemma arises: from now on, will saints be necessary for humanity? Since Eden exists, my being actually here inside it, what reason is there for the existence of the saints? What will happen to the ceremony of canonization? And the sacraments? Masses? Because if God has opened the doors of Paradise, all theology, all human existence, everything must undergo the profoundest re-thinking. What is the true significance of the opening of the doors of Eden? That God has forgiven us for the original sin? That consequently he has freed men from the guilt of sin? Are all men, and all sins, forgiven? May any human being enter here and enjoy Paradise? Why? What happened? If the Day of Judgment hasn't yet arrived, how have I entered into this holy place? Questions and more questions, all without answer. I will visit and investigate inch by inch the Garden of the Lord and will seek careful solutions for all these indagations and puzzles. One last note: even exulting in the knowledge that I have been blessed by Divine grace, my heart is saddened as I see that there is no more reason or foundation for the existence of the Vatican, of the clergy, of religious orders or the pope. The Earthly Paradise has supplanted them, and this argument is irrefutable. Amen.

* * * * *

Della Rovere climbed into the golden litter and was taken by eight pages in effusive parade through the Sistine Chapel. The cardinals knelt in reverence as they received the first blessings of the new Holy Father.

Della Rovere's face still bore a smile, not as victorious or radiant as that which appeared at the moment of his election. It was a smile of formality.

Like an irritating bee, the memory of Pius III, his kindness, loneliness and debility, stubbornly buzzed through the cardinal's mind.

Pius III had held his hand in the fire because of some great and terrible threat. What could it have been? The death of the Church! How could it have escaped me? The most apocalyptic of deaths! Now I understand the magnitude of the suffering that afflicted him. His isolation, his horror. Pius III aspired to glory through believing himself the last pope! That means I shall never attain glory. My papacy will never be recognized in the history of men or of God! Filippo! The monsignor. He holds the key to this mystery. Where could Filippo have gone? What was it he discovered that can destroy the Church? A new creed? An idea? yes. A new idea. Ideas are the most accursed weapons that I know, because they are the most destructive. How can you vanquish an idea? I don't know. No one knows. I only know that I will be capable of anything. I will declare all the wars I need, but Filippo shall not destroy the Church of Christ! Nor my papacy.

The litter stopped and was lowered in front of the altar. Silence fell throughout the Sistine Chapel. Della Rovere ascended three steps and before sitting on the throne placed beside the altar proclaimed: I shall reign under the name of Julius II. Amen.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE ENIGMA OF THE BOXES

And what is the little silver bell used for, Abbess?

To interrupt meetings, initiate greetings, mark the end or beginning of when we are eating. To divide time, which is fleeting, Your Holiness.

The venerable abbess is so accomplished. And expressing herself in rhymes, no less! Meetings, greetings, fleeting, it actually sounds like the bell echoing.

Its uses bear repeating, Holiness.

Another word that rhymes. Repeating. Why does the Abbess speak in verses?

To liven up the conversation. Since I am sure that Your Holiness knows perfectly well what the duties of a papal housekeeper are.

The abbess had never expected to be summoned for an audience with Julius II. She knew that her future after the death of Pius III would be exile. It was obvious that the new Holy Father would divest her of her charge and transfer her to some convent of nuns far distant from the Vatican. Preferably somewhere poor and forgotten.

As she knew the vindictive character of Cardinal Della Rovere, a brutal isolation would be the punishment chosen for her faithfulness in serving the deceased pope. Resigned, she anticipated moments of great loneliness and all-engulfing silence, which already resonated in her spirit. But these did not wound her, they merely rankled her pride and amplified her memories of Filippo.

The abbess was almost right in her reasoning and suppositions. What she hadn't taken into account was that the mind of Della Rovere no longer operated like that of an ambitious cardinal. His spirit now turned in the complex and rarefied papal orbit. A frontier as distant from men as it was from God, halfway between the human and the divine. Between heaven and earth. A limbo of exorbitant power where presumably the state of dissatisfaction does not exist, since every desire of a pope is immediately fulfilled. A treacherous orbit which fails to recognize that dissatisfaction is the perennial and intrinsic state of every human being. A fact which permits many powerful men to try in vain to placate their desires with unnecessary wars and massacres.

Convinced that she had nothing to lose, the abbess thought she was matching wits with a bellicose and sarcastic man who had summoned her in order to humiliate her through a ludicrous conversation about the uses of a simple silver bell. But the meeting would reveal itself much more surprising, and her punishment far heavier.

Consumed by a petty hatred for the ridiculous silver object, and carried away by suicidal fatalism, the abbess mocked the questions of Julius II by answering in poor rhymes. Trying to demonstrate to the pope, in a language he understood well, that she was still alive despite being wounded, that she missed Filippo, and was aware she would be exiled.

Abbess! Contain yourself. I do not need your irony in order to reign.

Forgive me, Holiness.

Contrary to what everyone imagines, I need your help, Abbess.

When Julius II declared to the world that he needed the abbess's aid for the glory of his papacy, the entire Vatican was shaken by yet another spasm.

The spasms suffered by the clergy were so numerous, caused by such varied motives, and occurred in such a short span of time, that even the pope's great friend Doctor Vigo suspected that Julius II was being poisoned by some frenetic toxic substance falling from the skies.

From the moment he took his seat on the throne of Peter, Julius II had not ceased to astound the world with unexpected orders and unthinkable deliberations. His physical activity was so excessive that in addition to the friars Carlo and Camilo, another eight prelates were pressed into duty to write up the papal decrees. Uninterrupted and profuse. Produced in the corridors, pavilions, anterooms, salons, chapels, everywhere and at any hour. Julius II walked without ceremony through the entire Vatican, pouring out laws on Christendom.

On the same day he was consecrated, he decided to redecorate the papal chambers, principally the numbing, lifeless ceiling. He summoned architects, painters, artists and ordered much more: the construction of the biggest church in the world, Saint Peter's Basilica, sprawling over a colossal square that in turn was embraced by pilasters such as the world had never seen. Orders that must be fulfilled without reservation or question, immediately.

Julius II never asked how much it would cost to do this or that, he only asked how long it would take. How much time? When he was told the time necessary to bring about what he demanded, he would divide the temporal figure in half, closing the subject and establishing the date for completion.

In the first few weeks of his reign, Julius II rebuilt the papal army and made it the most feared terrestrial force on the Italian Peninsula.

Letters to kingdoms, principates, and duchies were incessantly dispatched, demanding reverence, riches, and total obedience from the crowned heads, but principally making it clear to all that he, Julius II, was now reigning.

Surrounded by his bustling assistants, the pope was inspecting the progress of work on his chambers when he informed those present that he needed the help of the pious abbess. Carlo and Camilo exchanged a dumbfounded glance.

A little silver bell. It seems to me a fabulous resource, Abbess. In fact, everything you have explained to me is immensely valuable. It is clear I cannot

dispense with your services. The abbess knows the entire papal routine and has always been so careful with every detail.

Thank you, Holiness.

The Abbess will from now on exercise the function of Papal Counselor-Governess. This is a new honorific charge I have just created. Write down this decree, Friar Carlo! The abbess will constantly instruct the other nuns as to the best manner of serving me. But you can't touch anything! Especially my food. My meals will be the responsibility of the Dominican friars under the supervision of Doctor Vigo. The venerable abbess will work in the anteroom as my counselor and under no circumstance is to enter the papal bedchamber. May it be fulfilled thus!

The abbess thought of kneeling, but she was already on her knees. So she curved over still more, crushed by the weight of the unexpected decree. Sensing the voluminous punishment hidden in it, but so confused with the unexpected nomination that she did not yet realize the magnitude of her sentence.

Camilo! Take down another document. I feel so generous. This one is for the Holy Office. May it be made public that the Pope Julius II, in magnanimous pardon, withdraws the grave accusations that weigh upon Monsignor Filippo, the theologian. That the Holy Father absolves said prelate from any crime, pronouncing him an innocent man and permitting his return to the Vatican. May it be fulfilled thus! What do you think of these two decrees, Abbess?

I think Your Holiness is a river of kindness.

Never utter that phrase again, Abbess! I am not a river, nor an ocean, nor a forest or anything else! Pope Pius III, the kindly idiot, is dead and buried! And I hate, do you all hear me, I hate these figurative expressions, apparently succulent and sweetened with flattery, but whose content is comparable to an empty barrel of wine! These phrases mean nothing to me, because I consider

myself a practical person. And now you may all retire. The abbess, Carlo and Camilo, stay here.

As six workers, five prelates, two cardinals, four painters and three assistants left the chamber in silent reverence, there escaped from the eyes of Julius II a glance of attraction produced by the abbess's beauty.

All in white, humbly kneeling, exuding freshness, in her person was condensed an intangible, feminine magnetism . Apparently pliant and passive, yet in truth dynamic, operative. An outwardly soft woman toward whom Julius II felt admiration divided by portions of hatred and scraps of revenge. Because her will was unbent even as she bowed before him.

Counselor-Governess! I desire to visit the room where secret documents are kept.

The abbess twisted the stone clusters of grapes that adorned the fireplace, the wall turned, and they went into the passageway. Crossing the dark cubicle and then a narrow corridor, they entered a room filled with boxes covered in velvet of different colors.

Where is the ring of Pius III? The papal seal, Abbess?

The ring was buried with Pope Pius III, Holiness.

That's a lie! Vigo had the cadaver exhumed, and found a falsification hanging on the rotten finger of Pius III! Carlo, bring me the ring box! Abbess, open it and see what's inside.

It is empty, Holiness.

Empty. What a pity, the true seal of Pius III has disappeared! Where is the correspondence between the deceased pope and the King of Portugal?

In the box of parchments, Holiness.

Is this the box?

Yes, Holiness.

Empty. Another empty box. I believe these documents were burned. Why, Abbess?

I don't know, Holiness.

Pious Abbess, I admit I've lost the trail of Monsignor Filippo. Where has he journeyed? Where is Francesco? And the navigator? On what seas is he sailing?

If you permit me, Holiness, I can give you a suggestion. Why not write a letter to the King of Portugal? Only he is now able to answer your questions, since this matter was a private subject between the said king and the deceased pope.

How did I not think of this before? What a beautiful suggestion! Camilo, read the message from the King of Portugal!

Unfortunately there has been no message from the Portuguese Crown, Holiness. His majesty, King Dom João II, is in a state of profound grief and has closed himself up in a tower. After the death of his only son in a tragic horseback riding accident, the king has practically isolated the Kingdom of Portugal from the rest of the world as a sign of mourning.

I can't imagine why, just now I'm thinking of my friend Vigo. A brilliant physician. A specialist in cutting off protuberances from the human body. Testicles, penises, tits, breasts. Why am I thinking of him? Now tell me, Abbess, what did Monsignor Filippo go after? The Holy Grail? Noah's Ark? The crown of thorns of Jesus? Is he going to come back with an angel in a cage? What new idea was revealed to Filippo?

I don't know, Holiness. I don't know.

When you do know, tell me. Or better, when Filippo comes back, do not fail to communicate the fact to me. The abbess is dismissed. Be ready to serve me. Tomorrow, from the second canonical hour onwards.

Nauseated, the abbess stumbled out through the underground maze of secret rooms and passages. Recognizing that her punishment would be working for the glory of Julius II. A tormented life that would make her prisoner of the papal anteroom and a lure for Filippo.

A devastating punishment that poisons the destiny of those who are obliged to work without calling or pleasure in an activity they detest. To serve

a cause they inwardly reject. A divergence between body and soul that devours life and condemns them to an internal banishment. Undoubtedly a suffering more cruel than that experienced by a true exile, and as full of apathy and frustration as the contents of an empty box.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE SURPRISE OF THE SEX OF THE ANGELS

Hallelujah! Never have I felt so close to God. The angels guided us to a clearing in the middle of an unbelievable green forest. A sort of womb between two hills, where there is a stream and a small cave which serves to shelter us at night.

The sides of the forest form verdant, hirsute walls that shelter us from the sun and the showers of the Lord, from the daily rains, copious and heavy, which replenish nature and refresh our bodies. These rains always occur in the afternoon, and they terminate punctually with the appearance of a magic rainbow that makes a circle about the sunset. To be more exact, an indescribable solar ceremony.

Silvery flowers and grandiose fruits thrust outward from the treetops, adorning our clearing with a crown of splendor.

In Paradise nature is exuberant and at the same time peaceful. Birds of every color fly through the sky overhead, tracing beauty in the air. Butterflies appear from the cracks in the cave, weaving colorful skeins of silk to charm the eyes.

There are animals everywhere, winged, aquatic, and terrestrial, creatures never before seen by me nor, I believe, by any other human. Most of them are docile, incapable of hurting or frightening us. I have not seen horses, dromedaries, cows, bulls or wolves, although I observed a true army of small golden monkeys that leap from tree to tree with joyful clamor.

I have never heard a threatening growl or roar, thus wild beasts do not exist in Paradise. The noises I hear are the long whistles and constant trilling of the birds that sing the glories of God.

The nights are warm. The wind is not strong, and a breeze perfumed with flowers penetrates our nostrils with its delicious fragrance. From the sparkling nocturnal firmament, stars draw close and illuminate the forest with their twinkling rays.

As for the angels, I have discovered that they are not divided into only nine hierarchies as all the theologians calculated. In addition to the principal ones, seraphim, red in color; cherubim, blue; and throne attendants, yellow; I affirm the existence of countless other angelic legions and troops to be classified and catalogued.

I must clarify that light does not emanate from the bodies of angels, nor luminous rays. It is certain that their skin is somewhat brilliant, but not luminous. Moreover, I attest that I found opaque archangels, which will complicate considerably any future classification.

The coloration of the angels is not total. Contrary to what is supposed, the colors are mixed and distributed in various designs over their bodies. One observes colored bands on their arms and legs, while on their chests and backs are found somewhat disturbing circular pigmentations.

As I already knew, the angels of Paradise do not possess wings, but this does not mean that they do not possess feathers. One notes residual feathers, or small feathers, in their earlobes and fixed to their heels. In other cases, tufts of feathers cover the heads of the superior seraphim, or are used to adorn their genital organs. From which we may draw two conclusions.

First, the haloes are not composed of light as we thought, but rather of feathers originating from their former wings.

Second, the normal genitalia of the beings of the Lord reach a remarkable degree of development. In other words, mature. Despite being inactive and pure, the angelic penises bounce and swing in the air, exhibited without the slightest feeling of shame. Even the angelic children, as yet without possible classification, touch their own sex organs in front of female cherubim without embarrassment.

The freedom of the paradisiac state gives to the angels, archangels and female seraphim such uninhibited liberty in their nakedness that this behavior can only be

the work of original innocence and a sublime integrity.

Breasts, vulvas and buttocks, young and old but certainly immaculate, parade without bashfulness on the paths of the Lord, demonstrating that sin only exists in the minds of those expelled from Paradise.

Because of all this, I began to lower my eyes, keeping my eyelids well down as a sign of respect and contrition, because I am a sinner, a child of Original Sin. So as not to allow my nephew, whose recuperation was miraculous, to be suffocated by their carnal splendor, I have forbidden Francesco to open his eyes when in the presence of a celestial being.

It was revealed to me that the chief of the celestial hosts of this part of Paradise is not the prince Raphael, as proclaimed by the prophets in their writings. The greatest archangel, who leads all the other angels of Paradise, is not green in color, nor does he carry a child with a ruby-colored fish in his arms. Much less do seventy thousand tears roll down his face every year.

The new description is as follows: he is purple in color, sprinkled with black and red dots, and he carries a very crudely fashioned bow and arrow, a primitive sign of mankind's later violence. From his face drips acrid-smelling perspiration, a sure indication of the angels' efforts to humanize themselves for my sake, and the entourage accompanying this celestial prince respectfully call him Tuabetán.

Tuabetán. Memorize this name! Tuabetán designates his auxiliary archangels by the following names: Tupiá, Acatu, Catubuí, Bubuí, Piubá, Brorió, Piabita and Araritu. Thus they are very different from the he names recorded in the Holy Scriptures: Nemamiah, Leiale, Aarahel, Mizrael, Ariel, Asaliah, Mebahiah and Anauel.

I ask : why should I want to re-catalogue and establish a new classification for the angels? There is no reason whatsoever. God has opened the doors of Paradise and that is that. We should accept the Garden of the Lord as it is presented, without questioning or investigative classifying. Eden was created by Him and our duty is to respect His Work.

Hallelujah! All the observations present in this report should be forgotten. They are useless and dispensable. I ask God's pardon for trying to analyze and describe Paradise and His subjects. Who am I to understand the Almighty's reasoning?

Forgive me, Lord. Forgive me, Tuabetán. I shall go as the Scriptures command, to enjoy the Earthly Eden, the Supreme Garden.

* * * * *

Just air, nothing but air.

As Filippo sat writing near a small bonfire, Francesco was overtaken by a comforting sensation that soothed his moral pain. It happened in the middle of the clearing, as he glimpsed the moon.

It looked so close to him, as if it were reaching out, that the boy was moved to ecstasy. From the edges of the heavenly body he felt elusive threads gently drawing out his breath.

Invisible fingers of moonlight drew a song from within his soul. Limpid musical notes of exceptional melodic precision emerged from his mouth, circling through the clearing and carrying across the paradisiac amplitude. In air, nothing but air.

It hasn't changed at all. It's just the same, Uncle. Perfect.

Here everything is perfect, Francesco.

I'm talking about my voice. His Holiness, Pope Pius III, would be happy if he heard it again.

Perhaps, Francesco. Perhaps His Holiness would be very happy to know that the Scriptures and the Bible were not mistaken, that the Earthly Paradise does exist. But it is more probable that His Holiness would be surprised. After all, what will we need a pope for? The prince Raphael, I mean the archangel Tuabetán, commander of the celestial host, will be the new head of the Church. He is an angel and is far closer to the ways of God. Christianity will no longer need the Church as an institution, just Paradise.

And the Vatican? Aren't we ever going back there?

Don't interrupt me, Francesco, because I have an enormous theological problem on my hands and I don't know how to announce it to the world! Follow my reasoning. What is the significance of the discovery of Paradise? That God has freed us from the guilt of original sin? Can any human being enter here and enjoy Eden? Why? What happened? Will there not be any Final Judgment after all?

Maybe God changed His mind.

No, Francesco! God doesn't just change His mind! Everything is much deeper than you imagine. Think! Men, women and children will no longer need to earn their daily bread by the sweat of their brows, for in the Garden of the Lord there is no work. It is not necessary to plant, food is given by God! Will humanity be prepared to live that way? The transformations that will occur in the history of men and of theology are so destructive and irreversible that history itself will no longer exist! Is such a thing possible? The death of history!

I'm going to sing some more. It's better. Because if Uncle keeps thinking about these complicated things, he'll get a headache just like pope Pius III.

Enough singing! You are still very weak. Eat the white meat and drink the holy water.

What are these foods the angels offer us? Animals or fruits? The meat is white like cooked fish, but it doesn't taste anything like fish. Some of the fruits are covered with cowhide and others with fish scales. I don't understand, Uncle. Are the fruits animals? Are the fish fruit?

It's a different world. It is Eden, Francesco. It reveals a new marvel to us every instant.

Why doesn't Uncle ask the angels which is meat and which is fruit?

It's no use. I already explained. They express themselves in an indecipherable language.

They talk in grunts. Piubá, acatu, bubruí, pabítá. Tuabetán!

Don't be irreverent, Francesco! All the languages of the world are made of grunts, and are very poor in comparison to the complexity of the universe! The angels probably possess another form of communication. Occult, unknown, but much more precise and rich than any mechanical system of grunts used by humanity.

Uncle said you begged for them to heal me and they restored me with the white flesh. Somehow they understood your request.

Of course! It could be. The hypothesis exists. Where are they?

The angels? They went to see the Virgin, or Christ, or to see God. That was what Uncle said. You also explained that they never sleep.

I said no such thing, Francesco. I explained to you that at night the angels gather about the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. That's all. And please, don't be disrespectful of the name of the Virgin, nor the Person of Jesus Christ, because they do not live in Paradise. They live in the cosmos! The heavens! In eternity!

I'm sorry, Uncle.

But this hypothesis is very interesting. The angels communicate with humans by thoughts. That would explain everything.

By thoughts. How is that, Uncle?

It's just an hypothesis.

Hypothesis. Thoughts. I had a thought! Even with my eyes closed, I could tell there are men angels and women angels. And I don't have anything. What is my sex now?

Francesco, I have pondered much upon this act of evil, and I have not reached any conclusion. Since there exists the hypothesis of mental communication between us and the angels, perhaps they can do something. Some miracle that would reconstitute your genitalia. But I ask myself: what will we need sex for, if we are in the Garden of the Lord?

Pursing the corners of his mouth in uncertainty, Filippo went into the cave burdened by hypotheses and theories. And full of hopes, like an

insomniac seeking sleep.

Francesco went back to admiring the moon, and sang once again. He sang for a long while. Except that this time, he was watched by glittering and persistent eyes. Small, restless eyes that blinked and multiplied around the edge of the clearing. A sinister cloud of fireflies that grew and grew.

Little by little the boy lowered the intensity of his song. He began to sweat like Tuabetán and to sing out of tune as he heard grunts rising and falling.

Feeling suddenly unprotected and quite afraid, Francesco started to walk slowly toward the cave, sensing that any sudden movement on his part could unleash the fury of those eyes. Could those malicious glances be from fallen angels?

Terror seized the boy, and he ran, screaming for help and calling the monsignor. When he got to the entrance of the cave, Francesco stopped short, witnessing a singular spectacle.

Inebriated by the boy's singing, various angels had positioned themselves upon the rocks that constituted the mouth of the cave. There, beneath the moon's diffused clarity, in the light filtered by the green of the leaves, archangels possessed female seraphim, a throne attendant sodomized a young female angel, and Tuabetán himself penetrated with vigorous delight the vagina of a panting adolescent cherub.

When the monsignor came out of the cave to save Francesco, he was dumbfounded. A sensational revelation had been granted them: the genital organs of the angels were not inactive at all!

Later Filippo would write:

The sensations of pleasure of the male and female angels produce more intense and breathless sounds of enjoyment than those of human beings. Their acts of coitus are so sober and multiple that the practice of sex among the celestial beings can only be understood as the carnal exercise of virtue, and therefore the total annulment of the peccant essence of the sexual act.

I declare that in Paradise sin does not exist and that the celestial beings live in the eternal circle of forgiveness. A magic nucleus that nullifies guilt through the redemption of remorse, and cancels the obscene through the supremacy of delight. Hallelujah!

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE TERRIBLE IDEA OF AN IMMORAL ARTIST

When Camilo and Carlo entered the papal chamber, they were met with an extraordinary sight.

Julius II wore a confused look on his face and seemed to have lost all his dignity. The pope had opened all the windows and let the thick morning fog invade his bedroom, coating his face and the walls with dampness.

Carlo, the fat friar, thought of praying, while Camilo pondered calling Doctor Vigo. Neither managed to consolidate his thought into action: they stood there gaping at the absurdity before them.

The powerful Julius II, wrapped in a woolen blanket, seated on a wooden stool, and absorbed by the condensation of moisture, had been transformed into the figure of an old man sliding into decrepitude. Maybe worse: into that of a madman allowing himself to die of cold, since from the tip of his nose a drop of dirty water hung, lacking the strength to drip.

He sat chilled and trembling as the fog became a diffuse film charged with something sinister and impalpable. Destructive.

Good morning, Holiness.

Did Your Holiness sleep well?

Wouldn't it be more convenient to close the windows, Holiness? The morning is so chilly.

It's damp, Camilo.

You're right. It's practically raining, Carlo.

Nobody touch the windows!

Of course not, Holiness. If that is your wish.

Listen. I woke up very early and noticed this white mist rubbing its muzzle against the window pane. I opened the window and let it in. The wretched fog insinuated itself into every nook and cranny, it ran across the floor, crept up the wall and came to get me! Then it wrapped itself around me like a serpent. I waited. Gradually it went to sleep and now it's dying in an invisible pool of little drops.

What a threatening fog, Your Holiness.

Could it be a bad omen, Holy Father?

No! Omens, of course not! That's all we need, a pope who presages things! Do I perchance resemble a hysterical, menstruating churchwoman?

No, Holiness!

Julius II had had neither presentiment nor divine warning. The pope was merely using the fog to exercise his reason. And since, of all the mind's mechanisms, the least common is reasoning, the Holy Father was seeking an instinctive answer for the oppressive anguish that Filippo's mysterious journey was causing him. A greater threat to his papacy than anyone could see, yet he was convinced it was real.

Using only emotion, that most active of yeasts for the mind, Julius II had found the solution for annihilating Filippo.

An innocuous, fragile fog dies at my feet. But everything could have happened in another way. The damp chill could have entered through the pores of my skin, infiltrated my bones, risen through my marrow until it reached my lungs and become a thick violent phlegm that would cut off my breath!

That is why I believe, Holiness, that it would be better if we closed the windows.

Don't go near that window, Camilo! The fog instructed me! I shall wait no longer, I shall kill this new idea that Monsignor Filippo discovered before it

destroys my papacy like a viper! I have come to a decision.

Forgive me Holiness. The fog, Monsignor Filippo, the new idea, your sage attitude, the viper and all the rest. Taken together, they make no sense.

Everything makes sense, Carlo!

Holiness, in no way do I wish to upset or destroy the crystalline reasoning of my Holy Father. Yet I too must confess that the essence of your reasoning escapes my grasp. I am lost.

Moronic friars! The two of you get more identically stupid every day! I don't even know which of you is which. You talk alike and think the same things. The only difference is that Carlo is fat. Can't anyone else see that Filippo will bring death to the Church? I am sure that he will bring to Christianity a fog made of tiny, invisible, infiltrating drops. The most dangerous thing that exists: an idea!

Monsignor Filippo had an idea? Did he discover some new creed? Holiness, how does one fight against an idea?

That's what I just discovered, stupid friars! There is only one way! Ideas against ideas. Only an idea is capable of destroying another idea. By the grace of God I'm the owner of the winning idea!

If Your Holiness doesn't know what Filippo's idea is, how can you affirm that you possess the winning idea?

The most perfect idea can only be expressed through art, Camilo.

* * * * *

Early one afternoon in the small village of Caprese, near Arezzo, an odd-looking stranger appeared.

Wrapped in a heavy black cape and riding a mud-caked black horse, the man looked like some night bird that had arrived early. Since he wore an enormous sword hanging from his belt, some villagers thought he might be a knight-errant of low birth. He was neither.

The stranger easily found Franco's inn, for it was the only inn the village had. He asked for wine, ordered that his horse be well cared for, and after thirstily gulping down a pitcher full of Arezzo wine, went to bed.

Gifted with a sharp sense of observation, Rossella, Franco's attractive wife, declared that the man was passing through on his way to a funeral. Hence the man's hurry, tiredness, and choice of mourning clothes. Her hypothesis seemed so fitting that it became everyone's certainty. At once Rossella's words, though mistaken, put to rest the villagers' speculations as to the origin and destination of the horseman in black. By nightfall the subject was dropped.

But it came up again a few hours later.

When the man woke up, famished, and was served roast mutton, Franco noticed a mark burned into the back of the stranger's neck: a star with seven points. An alarming cabalistic sign which emanated sacrilege.

Convinced the stranger was a wizard, Franco grew paralyzed. He didn't know if he should throw the man out of his inn, or run to warn the ecclesiastical authorities that there was a black-clad demon in the village. The wizard approached him and grabbed his arm.

Franco! I am not who you think I am.

I'm not in the habit of judging my guests. Actually, I don't think anything, sir. Thank heavens, my wife thinks for me.

Where is she?

My dear Rossella went to aid Signora Buonarroti, who is having a baby.

How lucky Rossella is! She will be the midwife of a noble birth.

The Buonarroti are not nobles. In spite of having spread the lie that they are descendants of the counts of Canossa, lords of all the lands of Arezzo.

Do you know what day today is, Franco?

A March night in the year 1475.

Wrong. A very special and auspicious night under the sign of Pisces. At this moment the planet Mercury, followed by Venus, is entering the house of Jupiter and designing a perfect horoscope in the cosmos.

Let go of my arm, please! What sort of talk is this? I understand nothing of these matters.

Yes, you do! You are an astrologer like me, and you know perfectly well that a man of talent is to be born.

Not a man of talent, my dear guest. Because talent is a quality under the power of certain men. Tonight a genius is born, one who places all others under the power of his talent.

When Rossella returned to the inn, she found Franco and the man in black completely drunk, commemorating the invisible writings of the stars. Michelangelo Buonarroti had just been born.

Decades later, troops of pope Julius II, under the command of Captain Ritter, were crossing the region of Arezzo in search of Michelangelo, when they came upon two old lepers.

Both ragged and putrefying, considered damned souls by the people, they had spent countless years as prisoners of the Holy Inquisition, which had left them forgotten in the foulest of dungeons.

They never confessed that they were wizards or astrologers, even when they were accused by Rossella, the wife of one of them.

Now freed, they were wandering uncertainly toward the Valley of Lepers through the fields of Arezzo, a cursed place belonging to the present Countess of Canossa. She was a bad-tempered old woman, who even owned a ruined inn in Caprese, and was legally married to one of the heirs of the noble Canossa family. This marriage had been formalized after the ecclesiastic suit brought against Franco and the man in black. A marriage marked by rejoicing, which transformed Rossella into a countess, or better, into the true witch of Caprese.

* * * * *

Captain Ritter and his troops arrived at the west gate of the Vatican, bringing Michelangelo, three assistants and Tommaso, the sculptor's friend.

Michelangelo was surprised as he went inside the citadel. He knew about the construction of the Basilica of Saint Peter and the remarkable square, but his eyes had never beheld such a grandiose project. Everything was so monumental and gigantic that it seemed as if God Himself had been the architect of that vastness. Everything done in His image. Marvelous. Magnificent.

Possessing the germ of beauty, Michelangelo captured the beautiful through a physical sensation, an emotion without rules that sent a current tingling through his body. The sculptor was not merely awestruck with the magnitude of the construction, he saw the beautiful written in code in minuscule details. In the tiny colored stones of an unfinished mosaic, in the particles of dust floating through the air, in the circular edge of a pillar lying horizontal on the ground.

He perceived that everyone there believed he was working for God, and saw the Almighty in everything. Since human beings always imagine the Divine as having human characteristics, euphorically declaring they are made in His very image, the inanimate circular edge of the pillar seemed to proclaim that God was essentially curved. Indeed, like the humans, it believed itself absolutely right.

The abbess was ordered to present herself, with her little silver bell, in the Sistine Chapel and supervise Michelangelo's entry there according to strictest protocol. His Holiness demanded an audience alone with the artist, without his assistants, friends or anyone else accompanying him.

As Julius II walked through the south gallery that connected his chambers to the Chapel, Friar Carlo read him a brief report about the sculptor.

Michelangelo Buonarroti was born in Caprese. His parents claimed to be descendants of the counts of Canossa, but this lineage has never been confirmed. His mother died when he was only six. His father, Ludovico, obliged him to study as much as possible, but the boy thought only about drawing. The father, a very severe man, tried in vain to cure this vice through

whippings and punishments. At fourteen, Michelangelo ran away from home and became apprentice to the painter Domico Ghirlandaio. Three months later he was expelled from the painter's studio. It seems the boy was making copies of the master's paintings, aging his falsifications with smoke, and selling them secretly.

I love that part! What character! Go on, Carlo.

Holiness, the copies were so perfect that they came to be worth more than the originals. After this small scandal that shamed the Buonarroti family, the young painter joined the atelier of Lorenzo, the Magnificent, situated in the gardens of the Medicis, where he began to dedicate himself to sculpture.

Enough! I already know the rest of the story. He sculpted the *Pietà* and was proclaimed a genius.

Holiness, I have the obligation to communicate that Michelangelo performs acts that are against nature. He is immoral! He goes to bed with a young boy as if he were female!

He is not a young boy, Carlo. He is a man called Tommaso who wears a thick mustache on his face.

Forgive me, Holiness, I don't quite understand you.

You understand perfectly! The lover is called Tommaso and Michelangelo brought him along to the Vatican. It's written in Captain Ritter's report.

What brashness! Michelangelo is a madman, Holiness!

Mad. Madness. How curious. If God created this spiritual state, madness, it must be good for something.

Michelangelo put on his emerald-green cape and stood at the door of the Sistine Chapel waiting to hear a little bell ring so he could enter. Nothing rang, and in his impatience the sculptor began compulsively re-arranging his cloak. His arrogance and innate princely bearing were being corroded, disarmed by an oaken door.

The whole papal entourage withdrew and Julius II sat alone on his throne. Instead of ordering the abess to ring the little bell, the Holy Father kept silent

as if he were hypnotized by a new fog.

Abbess, call Doctor Vigo!

But putting off the audience with Michelangelo, Julius II unleashed in the sculptor's spirit a hemorrhage of small irritations, a reaction typical of those whose pride is wounded. Since it was impossible to kick the door or yell like a child, the genius attacked his own flesh, chewing off various fingernails.

As soon as Vigo came into the Chapel, the pope formulated a question defined by the sages as unanswerable.

What is madness?

Holiness, madness is chaos.

Is that all, Vigo? And why do they say that most artists are mad?

If Your Holiness will permit me, I believe that madness precedes art. Thus, they would be practically neighboring stages in the cycle of creativity.

What cycle is that?

Holiness, think about it. Madness precedes art. Art precedes science. Science precedes truth. Truth is God! And God always precedes madness, because it is He who permits chaos. It is thus that the cycle of creativity turns. Madness, art, science, truth, God. Madness again. And the cycle repeats itself infinitely and beyond in the spiral of creativity.

Well, well. Doctor Vigo, if I understand correctly, art is more important than the truth.

Nothing is more important than the truth, for truth is God, Holiness. However, art can call forth much more emotion in human beings than truth, and even surpass it. That is a truth in itself.

Vigo! That means that only art can conquer reality.

As absurd as it seems, Holiness. Art will always be more eternal than fleeting reality. Yes, you can affirm without hesitation that only art can conquer the real.

What would happen if Christianity had to choose between worshipping an authentic seraph in a cage, or worshipping the painting of an angel that

emanates the Divine through art?

It is almost certain that mankind would butcher and eat the real angel with their own hands, and idolatrize the painting instead of the truth.

Perfect. That was just what I suspected. Filippo can reveal to the world whatever he wants, because my army shall be the art of Michelangelo. You may withdraw, Vigo.

The abbess, who had listened to the whole conversation, did not judge the doctor's illustrious theories. She merely paid attention. In spite of concluding that some parts of the physician's reasoning were coherent, she knew that Vigo's mental processes always sprang from premises destitute of love: the disdain he felt for others. An abysmal capacity to underestimate human beings and scorn affection, with all its potential to transform and regenerate. For the abbess, affection was the sign that always witnessed to mankind being made in the image of God.

Have Michelangelo come in, Abbess. Then convoke the theologians, because I shall define for the clergy the mechanism of the cycle of creativity.

Silver against silver. The striking of the tiny metal pendulum against the bell's sides reverberated stridently and became a tinkling noise, propelling Michelangelo through the oaken door and into the Chapel, where he knelt.

The abbess withdrew. Julius II got up and started walking in circles around the marble floor.

Michelangelo, my dear and esteemed son, they say you are nothing more than an immoral. Is that true?

I am a servant of the Lord. A sculptor, Holiness.

There you are! Everyone forgets that artists are the only persons permitted to have their own moral code! After all, they are so close to madness. So peculiar, the world of artists, my son. Please, get up and look at the ceiling. See? I so greatly need your art, your dreams and ideas! What do I care about your conduct? Look up! The ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. Opaque. Gray with

some little stars. Dead! Therefore I want you to use all your imagination and cover this bare vault with your genius!

Holiness, I am not a painter.

You have studied painting and have been drawing like no one else since your tenderest age. Is that a deviation or a gift, my son?

There are extraordinary painters working in the Vatican. Raphael and Bramante are two of them.

Listen to this passage of verse: "I see in your ravishing face that which I can hardly narrate in this life, I burn with love for your body, for nothing else in this world seduces me." Not bad writing, my son. You are its author, are you not? Dedicated to Tommaso. You know, my dear Michelangelo, I am looking for an artist, not a painter. Do you understand why I chose you? You are a born painter, a splendid sculptor, and a poet as well. How can you possess so many talents at the same time? But be careful with the verses, my son. They are quite explicit. Now, for some reason the priests of the Holy Inquisition have acquired the strange habit of reading your poems. Be careful, Michelangelo. Please be careful. Sodomy is punished with the death of the Sodomites. But in this case you can count on my protection. Will you accept my charge to paint the ceiling?

What kind of painting does Your Holiness wish for this thing you call a ceiling?

The kind that transforms all sentiments into colors, that reflects the aspirations of each and every human being throughout the ages! I want to feel in the immobile painting the continuous activity of God! I want light, energy and the Eternal! Do you know why? Only art can overcome reality. That's why I demand that the dream of your painting go beyond the senses! Those who stand here shouldn't feel they are captured by an illusion of the Divine! No! I demand more! I want this Chapel to be transformed into a sanctuary of certainty! Certainty that it is only here one can find the complete presence of God! That only here, His absolute power will permit itself to be revealed in

splendorous glory! Can you do it, son? Will you be able to do it? I think you will. Deo Gratias.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE WAR OF IMAGININGS

An arduous task, to draw the Lord's Garden. Eden seemed infinite, without boundaries, but there were edges, due to the sea. There were none of the fabulous edifices imagined by the prophets: the ruby vaults, the suspended palaces, the walls of silver. Yet they did exist. They were projected in the pupils of the monsignor by the spectrum of the sun's colors, by the natural beauty that eternalized opulent constructions. Until a cloud erased them, or rather, dissolved the visions into mountains, valleys and colored plateaus.

Filippo had marked various immutable geographic features on the map he was drawing. The problem consisted in locating them in relation to the whole.

An essential detail, for in Eden the cardinal points, from West to South, were irrelevant. Because everything orbited about a radiant, Biblical center. A secret place where God had caused to exist the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

Anxiously he sought it. A leaf. A scrap of bark. The tiniest piece of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil would be sufficient to change the world. To demonstrate to the universe the place where everything had had its beginning.

That morning an extraordinary fact occurred.

Seven cherubim descended through the trees into the clearing. They carried bows and arrows, and their bodies were a dazzling blue. Filippo and Francesco were taken by them to the top of a hot granite mass which sparkled with diamonds.

At the top of Eden, they were surrounded by several legions of angels who screamed unintelligible cries. They sang, stamped their feet and twirled around, arms open. They were staging an incongruent ceremony.

Tuabetán, covered in a cape of white feathers, offered the monsignor a sticky yellowish liquid that bubbled in an earthen cup.

Venerable Tuabetán! May the Lord be with you! My humblest thanks for this paradisiac nectar, celestial mixture of aromatic fruits and animals.

Uncle! Don't drink that broth! It stinks!

In the Garden of the Lord everything is miraculous, Francesco.

After drinking all of the liquid, a yellow film crystallized Filippo's lips into a courteous smile.

Beloved Tuabetán! I have so many questions and inquiries in my mind! Seeing that from up here we can contemplate the whole expanse of Paradise, please tell me, where is the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil hidden?

Due to his reaction to the nectar, to the heat, or both, the monsignor perceived that the white feathers were not wrapped about Tuabetán, but were growing outward from his body. The sweat had disappeared from his face as well. From Tuabetán's eyes tears were falling. Innumerable, uncountable, as if there were seventy thousand of them.

Tuabetán pointed a finger toward the heavens.

Lifting up his face, Filippo noticed that the sun and the moon were simultaneously present in the firmament. There wasn't an eclipse, it was just a banal cosmic chance: the parallelism of the two heavenly bodies.

Nevertheless the monsignor and the angels observed a confusing phenomenon. In one half of Eden it was day, in the other half night.

A sudden wind whirled over the mountain, catching them all by surprise. The blowing of the wind made Tuabetán's feathers flutter, describing an indecipherable sign in the emptiness.

They were being captured by the mystery of concomitance.

* * * * *

As the Greek philosophers demonstrated movement by walking, Michelangelo proved that one should not confuse the man with his work, since day by day he became more intractable and unpredictable, a far cry from his genial former self.

He never sat on the throne of Peter, but without a doubt he reigned in the Vatican. He invaded the Sistine Chapel with all his caprices, and managed the unthinkable: he forbade everyone, even Julius II, to enter his place of work.

Friar Camilo! If anyone sets foot in here, there won't be any frescos. I detest people spying on my work!

Friar Carlo! These paints are useless! They are of the worst possible quality! Throw them all out. In the river! I demand the most perfect pigments, in the brightest colors that exist!

Destroy those scaffolds! Set fire to the wood, it's rotten! Build new ones! Of pine.

Although no one perceived it, Michelangelo was fomenting disharmony all around him because he was experiencing a crisis.

His hands fumbled as he designed the sketches for the paintings. He could not contrive to give movement to what was static, nor color to any feelings, nor truth to his art. At the end of each day he burned everything he had sketched.

His mind numb and foggy, he was eaten up by a devastating sensation, a fictitious terror: the fear of losing his imagination.

He could not find any idea or theme to give life to that ceiling. The germ of beauty which had seemed an inexhaustible fountain of creative abundance had hidden itself behind an opaque wall. Gradually his imagination was reduced to a miserable mental morass containing only dissatisfaction and a rosary of complaints. Foolish quarrels with others, with things.

That night an extraordinary fact occurred.

As he went into the Chapel, he discovered someone else occupying his domain. Instead of bellowing and waking up the world, he remained quiet, having stumbled on something novel and intriguing: clandestinely, Doctor Vigo was lecturing to five assistants.

They say he climbs the scaffolding and perches up there near the ceiling. He dabbles in the paints, draws until he's tired and then burns the sketches. It is remarked that he gets himself as dirty as a pig. Is that normal, Doctor Vigo?

It's the so-called crisis of imagination. Some artists contort themselves and scream. Others foam at the mouth. Michelangelo is having these attacks because he is squeezing his imagination and nothing comes out.

Doctor Vigo, from where do artists get their fantastic visions?

Many theories exist. The most curious one is written in the scrolls of the ancient Persians. It holds that artists have the ability to rob the imaginings of others' minds.

What is the scientific basis for this theory, venerable master?

It is so coherent and simple that it could be the correct one. Just think: if the flesh of men is nourished by the bloody flesh of animals, what stops the mind of an artist from assimilating the mental states of other people?

Without being seen, Michelangelo drew back and left the Chapel. His spirit, still confused, could not absorb Vigo's words completely. Proud to know that he was the theme of a scientific debate, he grew calmer.

When he reached the courtyard, he stopped. Motionless, he stood like a block of marble waiting for an inspired sculptor of minds, letting the light rain caress his face and the cold congeal his movements.

He inhaled deeply, wishing to swallow some mental state, dream or vision that might be floating in the night air. Forgotten in space. Lost between madness and art, but which would break his creative impasse.

As he closed his eyes, he had the revelation that the painting of the ceiling would only gain the strength of beauty if the figures, besides suggesting

movement, demonstrated that they were under the impact of a unique wind. A sudden and intense blowing. The breath of God.

Subject to such a wind, they would express the most fabulous theme ever idealized: the synthesis of man. >From the birth of humanity to its total disappearance. From the Earthly Paradise to the Final Judgment.

In that instant Michelangelo was captured by the mystery of concomitance.

* * * * *

The wind carried off Tuabetán's feathers. His flaccid body, tanned by the sun, presented itself to the eyes of the boy.

Observe, Francesco! He is thinking. Something is about to happen. Tuabetán is going to indicate the location of the Tree!

Tuabetán danced and spread his arms wide. He seemed to be separating the sun from the moon, the light from the darkness, water from fire.

Taken by a sudden courage, Francesco advanced in the direction of Tuabetán and pulled up his tunic. His genitalia showed a rose-colored scar, wrinkled and undefined.

Pull your clothes down, Francesco! It's not time for the miracle yet. Don't be in a hurry!

Tuabetán, look! Look closer! Look!

Tuabetán stopped dancing. As a serious expression descended over his face, he raised his right arm and pointed with his index finger toward the boy's pubis.

All the angels stopped, paralyzed. They no longer danced or stamped their feet, but stared in perplexity at the disturbing sight.

Francesco also raised his arm and, with his index finger held stiff, asked Tuabetán to give life to his non-existent sex.

Their fingers came close, almost touching.

At that moment, the arrows began to rain down on them. Rough, whistling, and terrifying.

Filippo believed he was witnessing an ambush of fallen angels and sensed a divine punishment.

* * * * *

After Vigo and his assistants left the Chapel, Michelangelo invaded the place. He sketched without stopping. In a frenzy he conceived various scenes that would adorn the ceiling. He imagined God, with open arms, separating light from darkness, dry land from waters. A God like a patriarch, with a severe expression.

First he sketched the painting that would represent the moment of man's creation. An Old Man with translucent, flaccid skin rides on the cosmic winds. At His side, celestial beings glance about in perplexity, while His index finger almost touches that of the one who represents all humanity. The first man to be created. A young man with firm muscles, his genitalia almost non-existent. Boyish and delicate, disappearing between his legs. Inert and useless, since in the beginning God imagined that Adam would reign alone in Paradise.

* * * * *

Filippo understood that Tuabetán had given him the nectar to protect him, for not one arrow pierced him. Cursed arrows, shot by a phalanx of fallen angels. Diabolical creatures, their bodies covered with black stripes, who ascended the steep wall of granite. An artifice of Lucifer to try to destroy the celestial ceremony at the top of Eden and impede the revelation of the place where the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil flourished.

Two of the bigger archangels and two male seraphim, with brilliant, hungry eyes, grasped Francesco by the arms and took the boy away. He screamed.

Uncle! Save me! The angels are seizing me! They're taking me somewhere!

Obey the angels! They are helping you! Go in peace! It must be the miracle! Yes, it's time for the miracle, Francesco!

Being sons of innocence, the angels did not defend themselves, but ran over the granite and fled down a slope that protected them from the arrows.

It was not the most propitious moment, but just then Filippo felt himself sucked into a mystic trance.

In the whirlwind of spiraling visions, the monsignor saw the prophets Jeremiah and Zachariah, David, and some saintly women. For the first time in his life, he was captured by profane images. Naked muses and sibyls kissed his body.

Being shaken by one shoulder, Filippo woke from the trance and saw he was surrounded by three female angels. They seemed to be throne attendants, since from their bodies shone a yellow as intense as bronze.

Sainted creatures! Divine female spirits! Pray explain to me. What do you wish of me? No! Not this! Dear Lord, these female angels want to throw me off the cliff! Why?! They want to kill me! Help!

Filippo did not stop thrashing and pleading. As they dragged him to the edge of one of the enormous cracks in the granite mass, the female throne attendants seemed bent on watching a priest fly over the precipice of an abyss.

One of the sainted feminine creatures grasped the monsignor's head and forced him to look downward. Then he saw the top of a tree. Distant, forgotten at the bottom of the cliff.

A tree of common appearance, yet he recognized its contours from his mystic journeys. Its leaves and branches radiated an indescribable attraction. An invisible phenomenon that annihilated his fear and elevated his soul.

The tree grew at the edge of a small emerald-green lake, and was reflected in its waters. Resplendent, satiny. Filippo lifted his face painted in the water. It was like a meticulous design embroidered on a cape forgotten on a marble floor.

* * * * *

Before going back to his room, Michelangelo dropped his emerald-green cape on the floor of the Chapel and drew the prophets Jeremiah and Zachariah. Also some naked muses. He sketched sylphids and men. Male and female saints. Figures either turning away from God or moving close to Him. Alternating rapturous expressions with puzzled ones.

Images of men and women disheveled, as if they were running across the frescoes. Exhibiting perfect bodies permeated with mature sexuality, showing no traces of childishness or superfluity. Adam was no longer alone in Paradise; Eve existed now. God had changed his mind.

Michelangelo had already conceived the painting of Adam and Eve in a primal state of bliss, surrounded by the Orchard of God. She swallows pieces of love from the forbidden fruit that distribute themselves through her body. In the full breasts, the rosy nipples, in her rounded hips, the perfect contour of her buttocks. In her neck resting against the top of a masculine thigh. In her face almost touching Adam's sex organs. Virile, large and fecund. A composition of bodies that detonates with hidden complicity. An aesthetic connection full of multiple meanings progressing over his body. Over his open legs that seem to support the world, up his concave abdomen, across his ample chest. Along Adam's open arms that are shaking a branch of the Tree. A twisting movement that demands strength, but is insufficient to break the wood and let the nectar of the understanding of existence drip out.

Both seduced. Cradled under the boughs of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Of all the desires, frustrations and unknowns. A small, ordinary tree dominated by a serpent with a woman's head. Bestiality and humanity curled around the bark of the Tree, shining in a deep bronze yellow. Creating sin, and covering with shame the sexuality of mankind. Infecting love with animality, instinct with morality, the natural with perversion. The serpent that blighted human affections and left them to be analyzed by doctors, philosophized by sages, legislated by theologians and satirized by poets.

* * * * *

When Michelangelo transformed into art everything that Filippo had experienced, the mystery of concomitance was completed. The link between the two minds that had journeyed through the same unreality became perpetual.

While the artist saluted inspiration for having invented his art, the monsignor gave thanks to heaven for having discovered the essence of life, the place of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

Both were exhausted and happy, each feeling himself the protagonist of unique and heroic actions, in spite of being apparently different.

Yet not so different. In Latin, as in Aramaic, the words to invent and to discover are synonymous. Indeed, the ancients gave little importance to these words, offspring of the concept that man, being primitive, does not invent or discover anything. He is only adept to practice, with great difficulty, the act of recalling what has been forgotten. Since in eternity, everything already exists.

This explanation had also been given by Doctor Vigo, just moments before Michelangelo's return to the Chapel.

The theory came from one of the books of the Cabala, and could be read in the seventh volume, the ninety-fifth digression of the chapter dedicated to Profuse Simultaneity. A most dangerous thought which drastically robs discoverers, inventors and artists, the so-called benefactors of humanity, of their merit.

The war of imaginings that erupted between Filippo and Michelangelo would generate a complex and tempestuous trail of events. The first consequence would take place a few nights later, during an impulsive inspection of the ceiling frescoes that Julius II decided to make. The secret reports he had received used a single word to describe the work of Michelangelo: obscene.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE NOCTURNAL INCONVENIENCES OF ART

Do you think he's here?

I doubt it, Holiness. He is probably sleeping. It's the middle of the night. Hold the light up higher, Carlo. I can't see where I'm going! You should have brought torches instead of lanterns.

Watch your head, Holy Father. The beams of these scaffolds are very sharp on the ends.

The Sistine Chapel has turned into a pigsty! Smears of paint everywhere. Look at the marble floor! It's all spotted.

Michelangelo wants it that way. He even forbade that anyone clean the floor, Holiness. For several nights he watched, hidden up in the scaffolding, to be certain that not a living soul would dare to come and peek at his work. He even chased away the bats!

Holy Father, if it weren't for the perforations we bored in the lateral walls, even the writing of our secret reports would be impossible.

Be quiet, Camilo!

Pardon me, Holiness.

Michelangelo is so unpredictable. Are you sure he really isn't up there somewhere?

Not absolutely sure, Holiness. It is difficult to control Michelangelo's comings and goings.

I can't trust anyone!

I don't really understand why Your Holiness desires to view the frescoes without the artist's tutelage.

Carlo, listen! I want to judge the painting with my own eyes, free from any sort of interference. Be it Michelangelo's explanations or the unfortunate opinions of two useless friars! I'm going to resolve this mystery once and for all! Michelangelo, my dear son! Are you perhaps sleeping up there on the scaffolding? Are you?

I heard a noise, Camilo.

The echo of the Holy Father's voice, Carlo.

My son! Why do you keep postponing my visit to the Chapel? Why do you keep me away from your art? Tonight I couldn't sleep. Do you know what was to blame? Curiosity, Michelangelo!

If Your Holiness will permit me to interrupt, I don't believe he's there. The volume of your magnificent voice was sufficient to wake even the angels.

What are you waiting for? Hold the light up to the ladder. We're going up. Up the scaffolding! Very good, Holiness.

Holy Father! The wooden railing is not firm. It is not trustworthy. Please, take my hand.

I prefer the unsteady railing to your trembling hand, Carlo.

This way, Holiness. Now we just go up this ramp and we'll be at the ceiling.

This must have cost a fortune! It's a pyramid built of pure pine wood. What a complicated scaffold, the construction is labyrinthine.

It was designed by Michelangelo himself, Holiness.

Throw some light on this painting, Carlo! Here! Come on! what's this?

Well. It appears to be a naked back, Holiness.

It looks to me like buttocks! An upturned pair of buttocks! Do they belong to some female saint? My God! Where was my mind when I hired this pervert?

If we walk a little further we'll see the principal frescoes, Holy Father. Just up here.

No! Turn around! Hold the light up there! Come on! Lift the lantern higher! What do you see there, Camilo?

Holiness. I presume these well-developed genitalia must belong to Adam.

It's possible, from the size. No, from the width and thickness it looks more like Abraham's equipment! Wasn't it Abraham who got four hundred women pregnant? Judging by the volume of the testicles, it can only be Abraham's sex organs.

Shall we proceed, Holiness?

Dear God! What should I do? Why did I let myself be deceived? Everyone warned me that artists and creators are part of a cursed race! How I hate these people!

Be careful! Your Holiness must walk very cautiously on these scaffolds, or they'll collapse!

Camilo! Carlo! Go down and wake up doctor Vigo. Now! I want him to prepare for an urgent surgical operation. I demand that Michelangelo be castrated immediately!

* * * * *

The abbess was instructing four nuns on the preparations for the first papal meal of the day.

Two of the doctor's assistants took turns supervising the skimming of the goat's-milk curds, guaranteed the freshness and authenticity of the Sicilian herbs that were sprinkled on the bread, tasted the mixture of sliced peaches and marrow jelly to verify the proper sweetness. In keeping with the palate and orders of Julius II, the abbess touched nothing.

The sudden entrance of Friar Carlo in the culinary precinct, his desperation as he begged one of the assistants to go and advise Doctor Vigo to

prepare for the imminent castration of an immoral, alerted the abbess's senses. She perceived that the immoral in danger could only be Michelangelo.

Still writhing from the horror she had witnessed when helping the boy Francesco after his emasculation, the abbess resolved to act by warning Michelangelo. To prevent the same evil from being repeated, no matter upon whom.

Whirling in her white habit, she went to the storage shelves and grabbed the oldest, dustiest bottle she could find. In it was some dark, pickled condiment, a substance of nauseating appearance, brown scraps of mushroom curdled in balsamic vinegar. Then, in the very midst of the disturbance that had formed in the papal kitchens, she poured part of the bottle's contents over the tray containing the holy breakfast.

The reaction was as immediate as she had hoped. Accused of overreaching her authority, transgressing her limits, and even plotting a dire papal diarrhea, the abbess was expelled from the place.

After asking humblest pardon of the assistants for her lack of attention, she took it upon herself, in penance, to incinerate the contaminated food and left with the tray, her head lowered. She was lying.

A phantasm disguised as a monk materialized in Michelangelo's room.

She did not need to knock on the door, since she used a secret entrance next to the small altar. The figure of a mysterious hooded monk, appearing from nowhere and bearing a tray awash in vinegar, should have caused surprise, at the least. Not to say alarm.

On the contrary, it was neither the artist nor Tommaso who was shocked, it was the abbess who stood frozen.

From Michelangelo's throat came sighs and moans. The whole bed was breathless. Sweat exuded the perfume of love transmitted in waves between the two male bodies. Their flesh fibrillated in tingling spasms of pleasure that seemed to generate a strange kind of heat. A warmth forming a tent over the bed, pulsating in the ardor of their embraces, crackling from their tensed,

intertwined muscles and exploding exuberantly in ecstasy. In a long final kiss, in a white substance that dripped from the pointed nakedness of the two men. In a combustion of energy never imagined by the abbess.

As if petrified by an aberrant poison, she was unable to close her eyes, to disintegrate the sight of that intimate and hypnotizing moment between the artist and his lover. Locked in place, she was assailed by a sequence of contradictory feelings.

She felt longing for Filippo, then discouragement, and finally aversion for the whole situation. Gradually she moved from repulsion to envy, and ultimately was charmed by an attraction. The feelings dislocated themselves in her mind without stopping, as if she were traveling through the spiral of creativity. A tangle of sentiments that hurt and gave pleasure at the same time, as with a girl who becomes a woman.

Monk! What are you doing, standing there? Go away! Get out!

I brought your breakfast, Signor Michelangelo. I thought you might want something to eat before your meeting. The Holy Father and Doctor Vigo are awaiting you for an important conversation. I believe it will be in the Sistine Chapel.

At once Michelangelo deciphered the message. Leaping out of bed, he pulled on his nightshirt, wrapped himself in a mantle and left the room without uttering a single word, not even one of thanks.

The abbess thought she had fulfilled her mission of alerting Michelangelo about the macabre conspiracy that was being invisibly sculpted around him. A warning that would give the artist sufficient time to elaborate a defense. Perhaps a moving discourse. A plea for clemency. A counter-attack, or his escape. Because once Julius II entrusted Michelangelo's fate to the hands of Vigo, nobody would be able to save him. The doctor would execute the surgery for the glory of science, without mercy or question.

The abbess was completely wrong. As always happens with mortals, she was deceived by life. By the arrogance of humans, who think they are capable

of controlling their own steps just because they possess a will, a purpose. Untrue.

Proclaiming himself a rational being, man thinks in absolute terms of going to a given place or taking a certain attitude. In the great majority of cases, with the passing of time, this principal and initially very clear motive shows itself to be a mere pretext.

Then it is destiny's turn to undo the deception and reveal to an individual the true reason for his action: the essence of why. Then, humiliated, the person sees that he didn't go to the market in the square to buy vegetables. He went to get married. To start a new life, move to a new city. To infringe the law. Become a cynic. To prostitute his daughter, or perhaps to die.

The abbess never realized that it was not she who saved Michelangelo from the surgical practices of the doctor. It was Vigo himself who, fascinated by the frescoes, averted the artist's castration.

Because the true purpose of the abbess's nocturnal visit to Michelangelo's room was another. She went there to meet Tommaso.

Through the folds of her hood, she saw a square face adorned by a mustache. A seductive face of crushing masculine beauty. A full-lipped, captivating smile. Honey-colored eyes accomplished in the art of pleasure. A firm body, its flesh marked by the contours of animality, instinctive and voluptuous.

Give me that tray, monk! I'm hungry!

The abbess left the tray on the bed and went out. She was running away from that man, from his acrid sweat, his stale breath and the fermentations kindled by his eyes. Much more powerful corrosions than those produced by a simple balsamic vinegar. She was running away from herself.

* * * * *

Vigo! I decree that he will suffer the fires of hell forever! Just look at how much indecency he has spread over the ceiling of the most holy of Chapels!

A very just sentence, Holiness. But as for temporal suffering, I do not believe castration would be the best punishment.

No? Why not?

Because Michelangelo, like all of us, dresses in capes and tunics. No one will notice he has been punished, Holiness. He will not serve as an example for other artists.

You're right, Vigo. We need a scar he cannot disguise or hide. It must be painfully displayed, a meaningful lesson for the world. The most exemplary thing would be to have him drawn and quartered, head to foot. Not one piece of flesh would be left to tell the story of this madman!

That would be quite a radical proceeding, Holy Father. In any case, it would be a pity for the ceiling frescoes to remain unfinished. The most perfect vision of God through art would be a failure, arrested midway. It's a desolating thought, melancholy. Has Your Holiness imagined what would be the judgment of the sages upon your papacy?

What are you trying to insinuate?

One can always put out a painter's eyes, Holiness. Or amputate the hands of a sculptor. But these solutions seem totally ineffective to me. One must not forget that Herod ordered all the boy babies of Judea killed, but with or without the butchery, Jesus Christ lived nevertheless.

I don't see exactly what you mean by that, Vigo, but I think I understand your words.

Good, Holiness. Because if this Michelangelo is exterminated, another will be born. And possibly he will encounter a new pope who will contract him to execute his art on a ceiling.

In other words, I have no alternative, and am obliged to draw back. That is, accept Michelangelo's artistic delirium.

At times the lack of an alternative makes the minds of men amazingly clear, Holiness. I advise that the Holy Father marshal all his serenity, and

permit that the cycle of creativity complete itself. Madness, art, science, truth. God.

You are a good friend. I really don't need a counselor who always says yes to agree with me and no to disagree. My shadow does that even better.

Look who is climbing up the scaffolding, Holy Father! Michelangelo in person! It's as if he imagined our conversation in a dream!

Will Your Holiness allow me to join you up there?

Of course the Holy Father will allow it, Michelangelo. Pope Julius II is in excellent humor. We were admiring your art. Such beauty! Such colors, images! What wondrous painting!

I am much honored and thank you for your praise, venerable Doctor Vigo. I should be even more honored if His Holiness would express some opinion about my work.

I am very apprehensive, Michelangelo.

Forgive me, Holiness. I don't understand. Why apprehensive?

For your health, my son. You are barefoot and covered only in a mantle. Such imprudence! As cold as it is, and with this penetrating humidity, you should have dressed more warmly. Be more careful next time. May God bless you!

Amen, Holy Father.

I'm getting so forgetful, Vigo. Perhaps I should take those herbal infusions for the memory. What was the observation I made as to the frescoes?

Hour Holiness called attention to the proportions of the bodies. You were making a comment about the size of the genitalia.

Exactly. Michelangelo, my son, be more careful when you are painting nudes. This is not a censure, much less a criticism, merely something inconvenient but inevitable which must be noted. In general, human beings are so hypocritical! They recount barbarities in the confessional, and are prudes in public. If they hear a swearword they blush, not recognizing in coarseness the lowest and crudest expression of reality. If they see, for example, a simple

pubic hair, they conjure up a non-existent pornography and fall over in a moral faint.

Your Holiness is quite right to alert Michelangelo about hypocrisy. Nevertheless the Holy Father must recognize that for an artist, nothing that is human seems strange.

I agree, Vigo. I merely do not wish Michelangelo to be accused of being a heretic, or pernicious.

What does the Holy Father suggest I do?

I order that the ladies' orifices, divine work of rare dexterity, be covered with grape leaves! Paint some mantles, shawls, veils on them!

But these feminine figures are in Paradise! In the Lord's Eden, Holiness!

Don't invent problems, Michelangelo, find solutions! As for the men and their respective, er--. Their penises! Make them incapable of great performance!

Holiness, as your physician, I advise you to remain calm and beg that you preserve your holy serenity.

Hell with them, Vigo! With each new day, I feel less convinced that calm and serenity are desirable states! I'm sure they're unnatural!

Holiness! I am only fulfilling my obligation by producing the beauty I see in the human body.

Well, you're seeing too much! And while we're on the subject of seeing, I don't want to see any circumcised Jewish cock swinging about on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel! Do you understand, Michelangelo?

Holiness, Jesus Christ was a Jew!

That doesn't matter, Vigo! I think it's ugly, that round tip always exposed. It makes me shudder.

Holiness! I'm very sorry. I shall continue to paint the ceiling with the naked bodies in movement, expressing their feelings through color. Do you know why?

Michelangelo! What an outrage! I am the Pope! How dare you disobey me?

Do you know why? Because if, to the eyes of the world, the paintings become flesh, the hearts of men will see the soul! The transcendental substance that must exist in this Chapel! Isn't that what Your Holiness seeks?

Holy Father! What Michelangelo just said is fundamental for the Sistine Chapel to become the temple of Certainty, the heart of the Sublime! I beg Your Holiness to overlook any verbal insolence committed, and to permit that the painting proceed as it was conceived.

All right, all right, Vigo. I overlook and permit everything! Damned be the hour I ordered you awakened. The problem is, with the passing of time, old friends become as convincing as the itch of lice in a fox's fur. Let's go down before I change my mind. I need your help. Give me your hand, Vigo. The railing is loose.

What about me, Holiness? Does my work continue? Can I paint the Flood and Noah's Ark?

Yes, keep giving wings to your imagination, my son, to our work of art! This was a very productive night. I believe we have found magnificent pictorial solutions. Both you and I had great ideas. May God bless us!

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE ECSTASY OF THE FLOWERS

God has chastened Paradise. Monstrous clouds laid hold of the skies and lashed the earth with diluvial rains for an immeasurable length of time.

As I had foreseen, when God opened the doors of Eden, for some reason yet unknown to me, He was surprised by the entrance of a lost phalanx of devils with black-striped bodies who attacked the angels. They had arrows, stones, and the diabolical desire to take possession of Paradise. God sent the rain with the intention of showing that entry to His Garden will be granted only to human beings. Never to demons.

The three female angels, the throne attendants, never wanted to kill me as I at first thought. They did not try to throw me over the precipice. The celestial creatures were indicating to me the location of the Tree.

I will be eternally grateful to these three throne attendants. It was they who saved me from the ambush of demons and guided me to this refuge.

Here I am sheltered from the chastisement of the rain and from all evils. The angels keep watch at the entrance of the cave, always smiling with childish and affectionate joy. Day and night they take turns at their post, not letting me go out and bringing me food and aromatic infusions for my nourishment.

In the first days, when I asked about Francesco, they repeated my words in chorus. Francesco? Where is my nephew? What has Tuabetán done with him? What about the miracle?

I discovered, fascinated, that by the simple act of repeating my questions, they tamed my anxiety. They transformed my alarm over Francesco's disappearance into

a twinge of fear, and from that into an uneasy discomfort which was finally reduced to a simple worry.

By constantly imitating me, they made me reflect that, if Francesco was under the care of Tuabetán, the greatest archangel, he must be practically at the right hand of God. Therefore, any preoccupation on my part was illogical and unbecoming, and my mind entered a state of curiosity tinged with envy.

I have stopped keeping track of time, for marking days and nights on one of the walls of rock was useless. In Paradise one lives at God's disposition, in complete liberty, and one sleeps a great deal. I believe that this reaction is due to the celestial infusions served by the throne attendants. Moreover, of what use is time? I have no work nor obligations. When I grow hungry I eat some fruit. I sleep when drowsiness overtakes me, indifferent as to whether there is light or darkness outside. Here I feel free from threats, I can rest profoundly wherever the body decrees, and delight in an irresistible laziness.

For this reason I cannot say precisely how long I have been in this cave guarded by the three female angels. I know that I am going out now, for the rain has ceased. I looked out the entrance and saw that no destruction has taken place. On the contrary, nature has grown in every direction with the deluge. The leaves have become gigantic and the air is the purest possible. Almost ether.

Alarmed, I register before leaving in the direction of the Tree that the three throne attendants have disappeared.

What can be happening? I shudder and wonder again as to Francesco's whereabouts.

* * * * *

After descending the steep wall of rock with much difficulty, I arrived at the bottom of the crack in the granite. There, not only do the Tree and the lake exist, but I found the place much more spectacular than I ever dreamed.

Supported by a colossal stone arch, an enormous passage divides the rock, opening before my eyes a sort of window on the world. I saw the other side of

everything, the other side of Eden.

The landscape was so majestic and the horizon so distant that it seemed like a city square without limits. I had the certainty that I was in the Basilica of the Lord. In a cathedral never beheld, never imagined by mankind. A construction impossible to build or reproduce, even summoning the talents of all the architects of the world.

Dwarfed by the vastness of everything, dazzled by the intense light that exploded through the passage, I wept. I prayed.

Embraced by the notion of the immeasurable as I beheld this indefinable center of Paradise, I approached the Tree in contrition. It is as simple and pure as an altar.

I was intercepted by a female cherub. Her girlish body, resplendent in blue, caused me such confusion that I knelt. She was the guardian of the Tree.

I felt my knees crushing something: feathers. Well-known white feathers. The celestial feathers of Tuabetán. Angelic adornment that was scattered by the wind which swept over the mass of granite. Was it a cosmic breath? The wind that made the feathers garnish the roots of the Tree with white dots as if they were pieces of the Host. Others floated in the lake, like spots of purity.

Suddenly I realized that Tuabetán's feathers could not be there. The natural thing would be their decomposition, given the time that had passed and the deluge. Why had this organic event not taken place?

Because of the lake. Hence its emerald-green shine. How could I, a professor of this subject, forget the prophetic geography of Eden? The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil is connected by its roots to the mighty rivers that nourish the Garden of the Lord. That lake could only be the Fountain of Life!

The beautiful cherub rested on her haunches before me. First she caressed me, then she tore off my robe.

Probably she wanted us to bathe in the Water of Life. No matter how much I explained, the cherub did not understand that contact with this Fountain has been

forbidden to humans ever since Biblical times. A logical prohibition, since God granted man immortality through the soul.

Lost in conclusions, I was finally undressed by the female cherub. From her mouth surged kisses. Kisses that covered my body and stabbed my flesh with pleasure. Angelic caresses that made my muscles tense, expanding me inside and out.

My pupils lost their clarity of focus, my eyelids trembled and my chest heaved. No matter how I begged, the cherub proceeded with her caresses. I prayed to God, begging that my vow of chastity be preserved. But the prayer had no will, no fervor. The oration was made without faith. Its weak intensity left the words incomplete, and then inconsistent. My lips mumbled Ave-Marias, but my soul was not in the petition, it was in the face of the angel. In the lushness of her breasts, her rose-colored nipples, her rounded hips, the perfect contour of her buttocks. In her girlish scent, that of a female exuding delight.

She caused me to lie down. Twisting my neck, I saw the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. I understood why God opened the door of Paradise. The Tree of Original Sin no longer bore malign fruit, but rather small white flowers.

Everything took on meaning. The Tree was dead, without fruit, as it was described in the Bible. Or better, limited to an eternal, fruitless flowering.

Steeped in the inextinguishable paradisiac springtime, the small and abundant white flowers could only be the sign of Divine Pardon. Subtle, soft and secret, sufficient to prove that God has freed us from all the guilt of sin.

The angel wrapped herself around my body like a serpent, enveloped me in spasms. I grew inside her. Subjugated, stunned, feeling everything vibrate around me and wanting more. More of her. To live inside her. As if we were two halves of a shell at the moment of a pearl's conception. Having no other reason to exist but the meeting and joining of our flesh into one substance. Organic union that perpetuated the ephemeral in a bursting ecstasy of pleasure. Apparently without return. Incapacitating the command of the mind, making it impossible to recall what we had been, what we were, or what we might wish to be. Vacuum of bliss guided by an inebriating forgetfulness so vast that I forgot even myself.

In the first moments, I thought I had violated the secret of God, the law of divine origin that prohibits men from having carnal union with angels. Since I could not change what had happened, I repeated the ecstasy twice. Without praying or weeping in repentance, discovering to my awe that in Paradise, pleasure is the only reality that exists.

I lost my fear of God because I understood that these divine laws had been revoked. I recognized that the prohibitions in my spirit no longer exist. This novelty flowed through me like a fountain of life, indifferent to theological grammar and to the act of sinning. Indifferent even to the idea of sin, cruel seed that can no longer germinate in Eden. It allowed my body to mold itself to that of the angel, setting free my imprisoned love.

I walked to the Tree and, head bowed, gathered many white flowers.

Now I am in the cave. The cherub is at my side as I write. I feel an indescribable necessity to caress her all the time. A passion to be together such as I have never felt.

I cannot write more. Tuabetán in person has appeared at the entrance of the refuge and is bringing in his hands Francesco's tunic, which is spotted in blood. I have passed from a state of tenderness to one of the most complete affliction.

I must go with him.

How brief is the fury of love.

* * * * *

Tuabetán took me to Francesco. In the first instant I did not recognize him. I could not believe what I saw.

What happened to Francesco was so inconceivable that I entered into a trance.

Awestruck, I was obliged to recognize that my nephew embodied the unprecedented.

* * * * *

I dreamed I was back in the Vatican. Lost, I could not find the door of the chambers of Pope Pius III, and I saw myself in the pavilion of latrines. An old blind monk pointed his finger at me as if accusing me of something. He exhaled his stinking breath in my face. I drew back, tripped, and fell into a filthy pool of waste. The monk rubbed a putrefying rat against my face. Rotten. As I vomited blue seeds, he cried out incomprehensible words. His spittle was white and sticky.

The nightmare was revealing. I can tarry no longer. I must vanquish my laziness and leave this idyllic life.

My duty is to go back to the Vatican and present my discoveries to Pope Pius III.

I tremble just to think of the consequences of these revelations.

* * * * *

The navigator has become hirsute, and his skin has acquired a brownish color due to the effects of the ardent sun.

He and what is left of the crew walk about naked. They speak little, and their eyes are caked with a purulent secretion.

I cannot tell them that Paradise is found on the other side of the enormous conical mountain, and that therein is no sickness, only jubilee and pleasure.

Perhaps they would not believe it. Or worse, in all likelihood, they would want to stay there forever. I feel selfish, but I have an obligation to the Holy Father.

The navigator told me he had to kill four sailors. Two went mad, and two others tried to foment mutiny among the rest of the crew. Embarrassed, I absolved his soul without necessity. All sins will be redeemed with the announcement of the discovery of Paradise.

I demanded that the caravel set sail in the middle of the night. I ordered that in the hold of the ship a small cubicle be erected for Francesco. He must travel in isolation from everyone. Not even the navigator will have authority to go near my nephew.

No one can see or talk with Francesco, at least in his present state.

* * * * *

The journey back through the Sea of Darkness is going smoothly and quickly. We have not met with squalls, storms or tempests.

The crew is stupefied. They do not understand the disappearance of the barrier of demons that should surround the Terra Incognita.

Silently, I give thanks to God. I understand that after the opening of Eden, the demons were thrown once again, this time forever, into the center of the earth. Into hell.

The navigator comments with much respect that I seem like another man. Unable to define it, he says he notices a profound transformation in my spirit.

In response I only smile. He would never understand that Francesco and I are the embodiment of the germ of transformation. With my discovery, the world is already another. Now only for us, but shortly for all humanity.

I think of my cherub, my body expands both inside and out.

The ink I use to make these annotations is running out little by little. I economize as much as possible, registering only the essential.

* * * * *

The colors are no longer vibrant nor intense and the horizon does not glisten. The atmosphere is dense, weighted by clouds and melancholies. When we approach a coastline, I can sight small, common-looking buildings of stone.

Nature is shy and graceless, a far cry from the exuberance and splendor of Paradise. The caravel is sailing through the Mediterranean Sea in the direction of the Terras Itálicas.

I feel cold.

I ask the navigator how I can cross Rome in secret with Francesco. How can we enter the Vatican covertly?

In answer, he hands me a sealed parchment which is almost falling apart.

* * * * *

Following the instructions on the parchment, we were disembarked in a rocky cove on the west coast of the Terras Itálicas. I was careful to wrap Francesco in blankets and a piece of sailcloth from the ship. He looked like a ragged indigent, but we could not run any risks. No one must see his body. Only the pope.

I found the mute hermit as instructed. Upon recognizing the ring of Pius III that shone in the palm of my hand, he put us into a wagon and took us to Rome. We were left in the house of the Cresques family.

The Cresques asked me nothing, and accepted Francesco, putting him in the cellar of their house without the slightest reluctance or curiosity.

The family dedicates itself to the buying and selling of printed books, and, because they edit texts at the Church's orders, they have access to certain parts of the Vatican. We are to enter covertly through the library.

We were under the charge of a fat old woman called Leah, a forgotten maiden aunt who takes care of the domestic work. According to her, the Cresques are originally from Barcelona. Later they took up residence in the Kingdom of Portugal because of an ill-starred marriage that was never realized.

The old woman said she was living proof of the disgrace that fell upon this farcical marriage arranged by her grandfather. That not one member of her clan thought about her, the bride, a girl of only eight at the time. That, to remain united, families end up devouring at least one member. Making a bad comparison, she affirmed this tradition was as old as the custom of bees in killing the drone so as to dedicate themselves to the hive.

I asked what reasons had brought the Cresques family to Rome and caused them to become a secret link between the papacy and the Kingdom of Portugal. She blushed and did not answer.

She explained that old age had reduced her memory, that her chronology was confused, and for this reason she lived in a vague, twilight state bounded by diffuse but lukewarm unhappiness. That the vagueness was less painful than the memory of the despair she suffered, the lost illusions, and the outrages perpetrated for the good of the family of which she was the victim.

Unable to contain myself, I replied that in a very short time, the world would wake up without the power of patriarchs, the arrogance of victory, the despair of success or the fear of failure. That all the appetites of humanity would be satisfied and that covetousness would become a legend. I predicted the end of bloody persecutions through the loss of ardor in disputes. The forgetting of past injuries. The desire for vengeance would end, and fear for approaching dangers dissolve. I proclaimed that the boil of vagueness would be lanced by the points of the star of universal happiness.

Again old Leah blushed. Then she lifted her eyes with a mysterious and intriguing expression, that of someone who has tried every technique of destiny to find happiness. As she took her leave, she was still more enigmatic. Shalom, she said, as if she were a Jewess.

That night, I received a message from the abbess. The sad letter communicated to me the death of Pius III, and informed me that Della Rovere was the new pope, and that the germ of beauty, through Michelangelo and his art, was deciphering God for the world in such a precise and unique form that it surpassed theology.

I memorized the letter and then destroyed it. Now I know that the pope, having allied himself to the germ of beauty, thinks he can annihilate me. A foolish mistake. Nothing conquers reality, the reality of the discovery of Paradise. Francesco and I are witnesses to this. We are the germs of transformation, or rather, we possess a box full of petals of the flowers from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Certainly much lighter than the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, but much more concrete and true than the fanciful paintings plastered over it.

It is useless to continue writing. This time I do not stop for lack of ink. In the Cresques house there are inkwells, maps and parchments everywhere. But it is time to act. In a very short time I will be face to face with Julius II. I must prepare Francesco for the encounter.

Since in Paradise we do not need writing, living in the service of God through the grammar of His Garden, I will burn all my annotations.

The angels do not know how to read.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE DAY THAT NEVER DAWNED

The sun's rays had not yet touched Rome and the Vatican. The tenuous pearly mantle that precedes the first luminous particles and heralds the dawn was just nudging over the edge of the horizon.

As the monks finished their anti-apocalyptic prayers, twenty-two laborers dismantled part of the scaffolding mounted in the center of the Sistine Chapel. Eleven servants, who complained incessantly of the laborers, cleaned and distributed chairs throughout the sanctuary, chairs which danced to the measure of the iron hierarchy ordered by the prelate responsible for the ceremony.

Torches and lanterns glimmered on all sides, furnishing a weak and tremulous light, far different from the potent rays of the sun, which would mark the great moment: the presentation, to a very select audience, of Michelangelo's principal frescos, which now covered that impossible ceiling.

The sun's rays will come in through the windows and reveal in detail the splendor of the frescos. I want it to be like an awakening. An awakening, let's see--

Unique and marvelous, Holiness.

I can finish my sentences quite well, Carlo. A unique and marvelous awakening. At last humanity, humbled in admiration, will be enabled to glimpse perfection.

If you permit me, Holy Father. Artists become very nervous and fearful when their works are presented.

What do you mean by that?

That Michelangelo prefers not to be present during the ceremony, Holiness.

Nonsense! It will be a great occasion. I demand that Michelangelo be present. Tell him it's not an invitation but a summons.

None of those invited failed to attend. The nine cardinals, twelve bishops, three theologians, the representatives of the monsignors of the Holy Inquisition, Doctor Vigo and his assistants, the secretary friars of His Holiness, Carlo and Camilo, and so many other priests and monks that the air in the Chapel acquired grew stale and rancid long before the rising of the sun. Michelangelo was the last to be seated. He hid his nervousness behind the rigid elegance of his emerald-green cape.

As protocol demanded, everyone waited for Julius II, for the light of day, for the dazzling revelation. In spite of a few yawns, the audience was impatient, so anxious that no one noticed the entrance of a hooded monk who climbed up the carcass of the dismantled scaffolding and disappeared.

Everything seemed to be ready. Eight vassals, holding long wooden poles, came in and positioned themselves directly below the eight high windows bordering the domed ceiling. They would open the curtains and free the light of a new dawn within the Chapel.

Outside, on the edges of the horizon, the rays of light were already rosy. Soon they would be a pale yellow, turning to gold and concentrating in luminous beams without nuances. At that point they would have permission to enter the Chapel, unwittingly altering the hierarchy by coming in after His Holiness.

The abbess rang the little silver bell and announced the entrance of an exceptionally happy Pope Julius II, proud and brimming over with the evident superiority typical of arrogance.

With a brief echoing shuffle, the audience knelt, respectfully received the papal blessing, and waited patiently for the most powerful man on earth to

take his seat on the throne of Peter. The audience returned to its seats assuming that the spectacle of lights and images would begin as planned.

From its opening moments, the ceremony took an unexpected turn, proving once again that no one should trust in the presumable.

Open the curtains!

The eight vassals pulled their wooden poles, the thick material that covered the windows was drawn back, and a few shafts of sunlight came in, pale and without warmth.

Holiness, I took the liberty of arranging a surprise.

What sort of surprise, Abbess?

A canticle to accompany the presentation of the paintings, Holy Father. To elevate our souls as we view the frescoes, with their vision of Paradise and the moment of the Creation of Man.

A good idea, Abbess. May it be fulfilled thus.

The little bell tinkled and a voice broke forth, a song that resonated in soprano through the ambiance. Limpid musical notes that came from the mouth of a tiny hooded figure at the back of the Chapel.

The sublime was on the point of becoming material. As the song was carried in waves through the air, the rays of the sun gained intensity and descended in sheets through the windows.

The joining of luminous and sonorous emanations was so overwhelming that three cardinals stopped coughing, a vassal wept a few tears, and two dreamy monks considered themselves in heaven.

The song grew in brilliance and united with the figures painted on the ceiling in an unprecedented spectacle. Shadows were transformed into opaque spots, then reflected diverse colors which in turn melted together, gradually delineating a human face, a back, the detail of a hand. Segments of men and women which, stimulated by the light, encouraged by the voice, joined and gave form to a figure. Not just to a figure, to a scene with beings of flesh and blood. So real that the ceiling seemed to tremble with the perspective of their

movement. With all the emotions and sensations of humankind pulsating through the colors and shimmering over the silhouettes in a beauty never before witnessed. An unbelievable wonder which, caressed by the rays of sunlight and spurred by the musical notes, surpassed the texture of paint and captured the sublime.

Stop! Stop everything! Close the curtains, I don't want to see anything else!

Julius II screamed these words with such fury that many thought the ceiling had fallen under the weight of so much beauty. The dawning of the day was extinguished so abruptly by the coordinated actions of the vassals that not one pupil managed to adjust immediately. Every eye was lost between light and darkness, oscillating in a limbo at once blind and glaring.

The audience could not see anything, but it could hear. No longer was there melodious song, only the steps of Julius II striding firmly on the marble.

That singing! I know that voice!

Guided by an implacable hatred, the Holy Father crossed the shadowy Chapel, found the small hooded figure, and grabbed it by the neck.

What bad taste, this surprise! Francesco, the *castrato*, is back! Singing!

Of those present, few realized what was happening. The entire audience rose, as protocol demanded, and silently watched Julius II drag the figure by its neck over to one corner of the Chapel, where four lanterns burned.

Answer me! Where is your uncle? Go on, talk! Take off that hood! Tell me, where is monsignor Filippo?

Francesco not only removed his hood, he undressed completely. As he let fall the heavy woolen cape he was wearing, the boy did not merely set off a predictable murmur of surprise through the audience, he initiated the unheard-of.

His body extravagance incarnate, Francesco managed to surpass the sensation of novelty that the figures on the ceiling produced in those present. Not with the same grace, but by a far-fetched exoticism bordering on the

grotesque. In due proportion with Michelangelo's work, the boy also gave substance to a new variety of beauty, an art perhaps absurd yet certainly never before witnessed. But, unlike the paintings, his body did not depend on a perspective traced by an artist to be real; it was palpable.

Francesco's flesh and skin were imbued in azure, an intense sky blue which caused a series of discordant feelings to run through the audience. From his earlobes, belly and ankles dangled feathers of yellow, lilac and black, which in a subtle way suggested that his body had acquired the capacity to move upward, that is, to fly.

Blue! The boy is entirely blue! And covered with feathers! What does it signify?

He is no longer a boy, Holiness! The cherubim adopted Francesco. That is why they have adorned his body in azure.

Monsignor Filippo, holding a box, descended from the scaffolds as he answered Julius II. His voice was powerful and contained a ferocity which, far from what one might suppose, was not the fruit of vengeance. It was born of the conviction of one who knew he had visited the impenetrable realms of God.

Blue? Cherubim? Does he fly, too?

I have been in the Earthly Paradise, Holiness! I have made a new classification of angels and touched the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil! With the ring of pope Pius III, the Kindly, I crossed the portals of the Terra Incógnita and discovered the Garden of the Lord!

And I was thinking that the illustrious monsignor was going to bring me a new theory for Christianity! Some sinister revelation that would threaten my papacy! How ridiculous! A monsignor of the Church presents himself to his pope after the great discovery, with his nephew sodomized and painted blue! It's the limit!

The cherubim were extremely kind to Francesco.

I don't doubt it, Monsignor. The boy is even growing little breasts.

Your Holiness defends himself with sarcasm and the most cynical humor because he knows all the consequences of my discovery.

Which is a farce! Paradise is here! Open the curtains!

The sun's rays, which for some time had been forbidden to enter the Chapel, once again penetrated the enclosure. They seemed furious with the wait, for a hot, reddish radiance exploded over the frescoes, so instantaneous and vibrant that the figures didn't just make the ceiling tremble. On receiving such luminosity, the paintings lost their perspective of movement, their capacity to stir sensations, their emotional fascination. They throbbed in an unfathomable orbit of splendor approaching the ecstatic.

The eyes of sylphids, the male and female saints, the shoulders of Adam, the breast of Eve, the face of God no longer moved. Static, their beauty began to translate with precision the chaotic bewilderment that had overtaken the atmosphere. A perplexity that changes clarity into a confused project and reduces living to a mistaken hope.

Very few grasped this amazing threshold of beauty. It was as unattainable as understanding the true mechanism of light.

Look, Monsignor. The ceiling. Art in its most glorious expression! A generation of men will pass away, then another and another. All future generations will pass through here, ever submitted to an unforgettable state of soul. Incapable of being defined! Because this art combines in a unique instant the most sublime aesthetic emotion with the most elevated mystic meaning! This is God! God!

You are talking of a mere painting, Holiness. Of a representation worth nothing! It is only an ostentation of your reign as pope. My Paradise is real! Alive! I was in Eden and lived the scenes painted on this ceiling! I affirm out loud for all to hear: anyone can go there!

Unrecognized and forgotten, not receiving one word of praise or applause, Michelangelo was cut to the quick. His vanity smarted. It was true that Julius II defended his painting, but the pope was incapable of citing his name. The

audience didn't even look at the ceiling, they only paid attention to that stupid argument and glanced in admiration at a nude boy painted blue.

The artist had the urge to yell, to scramble up the remaining scaffolds and destroy the frescoes. That audience didn't deserve his art. Strangled by an abominable disdain for the whole scene, he realized that he had nothing more to do there.

As he contemptuously left the Chapel, Michelangelo swirled his emerald-green cape in scorn. Even so, no one noticed him. Only when he crossed the exit portals was he inundated by a sense of failure so caustic and painful that the artist felt a wound open in his spirit. It hurt unbearably. It was moral pain, the same pain Francesco experienced after his emasculation.

Known as narcissistic afflictions, these wounds are deforming and shameful. Michelangelo left the Vatican immediately. He bought the first horse he found and rode off toward the marble mountains of Carrara, swearing to isolate himself there forever.

He advised no one of his departure, not even his lover Tommaso. After all, when a person is massacred by a disorder of the soul, the best thing is simply to disappear. Something like letting yourself be buried alive, an example suffered but never followed by the truly wicked.

With the quick shy glance of an angel, the abbess smiled and saw Filippo open the box and throw a handful of petals onto the marble.

The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil no longer bears fruit, only flowers. Touch these petals. They are genuine, Holiness! Original Sin is abolished forever! There is no more sin, nor guilt! There will be no Final Judgment! All humanity is liberated!

They were exactly the words the pope dreaded. The theory able to change the direction of the history of mankind, of the Church of Christ.

With the discovery of Paradise, the history of man has now lost its meaning, Holy Father. That is, if it still has, or ever did have a meaning. Because in Paradise there is only love, pleasure and ecstasy! Without conflicts,

wars or powers! There, property does not exist. Nor possessions! Nor work! Nor limits!

The audience did not know how to behave or which side to take. The discussion was developing so quickly that the disconcerting revelations of the monsignor could not be organized in their minds. Their thoughts were shaken, the established concepts destroyed, creating a hollow vacuum in every head and paralyzing them in an uncomfortable, yet pleasurable emptiness. Comforting and threatening.

This is pure barbarity! This Paradise of yours is the end of the world! Who, for the love of God, believes that man will someday be prepared to live in utopia? It's impossible! Without limits, man will lose all control of himself and destroy everything around him!

The Creator has abolished limits and opened the Doors of Paradise, Holiness. Listen, He has invited all to enter!

Delirious! Monsignor Filippo is delirious! Soon he'll be explaining what God was doing before He created mankind!

Just then a miserable impulse was born in one of the hollowed-out heads of the audience. A strange seed that disseminated itself like toadstools after a rain, and became an action. A bishop, a prince of the Church, bent over and picked up one of the petals. Then he kissed it and began to cry.

Perhaps if the bishop had laughed instead of crying, everything might have happened differently. Because laughter, in spite of what people believe, is not always a sign of rejoicing or satisfaction. Considered one of the most lethal arms of the dramaturgist, it disintegrates truths by exposing the ridiculousness of certainty. Hence the expression "to die of laughter."

Tears are a regenerating agent precisely because they suggest the idea of death, or loss. Containing some form of an ending, they kindle in minds the need for a new beginning, a new birth full of hope and free of criticism. When made public, both the effect of laughter and that of tears are highly dangerous, for they are paradoxical. The former because it punctures euphoria; the latter,

because it consecrates lies. Which was what happened. By weeping instead of laughing, the bishop ended all doubts as to the existence of Paradise. With his tears, he created a rebirth among the audience. He caused an incalculable impetus in the hollow heads, and the audience reacted by accepting Filippo's truths. Very normal, since crowds and audiences always behave like newly-hatched ducklings. They recognize their mother in the first thing that moves, and follow it, no matter what it is.

However, in a universe of empty-headed people, the conclusion to everything stopped being inconcludable and started being Paradise. A relief.

Who pardons sins in Paradise?

In Eden there is no sin, only forgiveness.

Only forgiveness? How childish! The monsignor is confusing justice with impunity. Is Paradise the land of impunity?

Monsignor Filippo, if you please, tell us a little about Paradise.

Silence, Abbess! From this moment, Monsignor Filippo is forbidden to speak. He is to be taken to the dungeons and interrogated by the theologians of the Holy Office. May it be fulfilled thus!

In Paradise there is no hierarchy, Holy Father. Papal decrees are not needed, for everything comes from God through the generosity of nature. There, men need not plant, it is unnecessary to cultivate the earth. The only work is gathering the food.

Close the curtains! The ceremony is canceled!

The light of that dawn stopped shining in the Sistine Chapel, this time for good. After drawing the curtains shut, the vassals dropped their long poles and lost themselves in the tumult that formed about Filippo. The pope no longer reigned. Prelates threw themselves to the ground in search of a miraculous petal, exultant monks, freed from the obligation of their anti-apocalyptic prayers, shouted in emotion, and various bishops ran to touch Francesco. The audience had found a new god.

How lovely! Are these flowers miraculous? There is no sin in Paradise, only forgiveness. I will go there to live in the company of the angels! What are the seraphim like? Do female angels exist? They are most exquisite. In Eden the face of evil does not appear. There is no chastity, only love! The angels love each other! Yes, even the angels join in love!

Carlo, whose fear was manifested in even the most trivial situations, was filled with courage and ordered the guards to retire. Or rather, he instigated them to disorder, affirming that they were henceforth dismissed forever.

Doctor Vigo and his assistants, with a conspiratorial and enigmatic attitude, left the Chapel taking two of the petals for further study and analysis.

Though dispirited, Vigo was not convinced that his theory about the spiral of creativity had just suffered a collapse. But it had been seriously challenged, since reality, in this case that of the existence of Eden, showed itself a much more potent catalyst than art. An aberration that dismantled the spiral and caused it to become finite. Without future, let alone eternity.

The abbess tried to cross the sea of people that surged around Filippo. She wanted to congratulate him on his discovery of Eden. Perhaps she might embrace him, but she well knew that such an act was not permitted between those who had taken religious vows. She thought of Francesco, who must be frightened and needing help.

Much to the contrary, Francesco was exultant. Adored like an angel, he unexpectedly began to play the part, and seemed to be walking on clouds. Theatrical, he moved very little. Pretending to be a statue, he allowed curious eyes to mark the details of his blue body, his non-existent sex and colored feathers.

Cynical as a hyena, he smiled timidly as if he personified one of the spheres of celestial purity. Not only a gifted singer, but a born actor as well, the boy. So convincing in his representation that it would have been impossible for even the most discerning person to suspect the dimensions of the mystery that Francesco still held inside himself. A cruel and gigantic secret, so evil that it

would generate a sordid nightmare in the destinies of the people who surrounded and fawned upon him.

Suffocated amid the tumult, the abbess was astonished by a kiss smacking upon her face. A kiss given her by Camilo in the name of happiness and of the new order that had just dawned upon the world. Of the new life that arose without rules or enemies, only brotherhood, love and pleasure.

A simple kiss, a sign of affection not represented on the ceiling, detonated within the abbess an understanding of the new universal order. Unipolar organization unhindered by questioning. Free of conflicts between good and bad, right and wrong, heretic and sanctified, a child's primer where only Paradise existed, or everything Paradise signified.

Humanity's new order occasioned a disorder in the abbess. Suddenly she saw she was freed from her marriage to Christ. And, like every woman recently divorced from a complacent divine matrimony, lost. Threatened, moreover, with the amplitude of her new liberty and smothered by the sudden notion of herself.

Accustomed to belong so little to herself, she would now be responsible even for her own happiness, for the full management of her wishes and wants. A task so simple, yet also so complex, like the act of kissing Filippo. Kissing a man on the mouth. Loving him for real, giving herself. Having seen how far she could go, the abbess was shocked into unconsciousness. She fainted in fear.

Before retiring in defeat, Julius II, supposing that this collective insubordination would be restricted to the Chapel, screamed a threat to those present.

Paradise on Earth is as stupid an illusion as thinking death can be conquered, monsignor Filippo!

Filippo saw no death in Paradise, only life and pleasure!

Quiet, Camilo! If monsignor Filippo didn't see death in Paradise it's because he lacked vision. Don't worry, I'll find a way to send death there.

CHAPTER TWENTY

MOMENTS OF HORROR AND CARNIVAL

The Plenipotentiary Ambassador of the Kingdom of Portugal, the marquis who had engineered monsignor Filippo's flight and journey across the Sea of Darkness, had returned to the Terras Itálicas on yet another mission.

Hidden in the false bottom of a small wine keg, the first secret messages from the new king of Portugal to pope Julius II arrived in Rome.

Of course, the little barrel did not contain any wine. It was inhabited by a colony of venomous scorpions from the north of Africa. A clever ruse developed by eminent Portuguese sages to preserve the invulnerability of the information that could only be read by the Holy Father.

As could only be expected, the hare-brained wine keg brought nothing but problems for the marquis.

Besides having to feed the poisonous scorpions every night, running the risk of being mortally bitten, the ambassador had to carry the ridiculous wooden cylinder under his arm everywhere he went. Which would have been merely inconvenient, if many hadn't mistaken the distinguished nobleman for an inveterate drunkard.

The ambassador did not lose his naturalness or elegance, much less his patrician bearing, as he walked through the long gallery in the Vatican joining the library to the Map Room, the so-called Long Corridor of Cynicism. In spite of the intriguing barrel he clasped to his side, what most called attention to his person was his heavily charged countenance.

Tinged with a grayish pallor, his features had acquired a worried air, culminating in a wrinkled frown across his brow.

A man trained not to let any emotion appear, to remain unaltered even when faced with the most outrageous occurrences, from the eschatological derangements of royalty to the decadent customs of certain civilizations, the ambassador was greatly disturbed with the scenes he witnessed as he crossed the city of Rome.

Contrary to the wishes of the papacy, the news of the discovery of Paradise did not die with the convulsion of joy that burst forth in the midst of the Sistine Chapel. That had been only the foretaste to a sequence of events which escaped the Vatican's control and contaminated the citizens of Rome with the speed of a tornado.

At first, behaving like any other news, the announcement of the opening of Eden's portals jarred against the incredulity of the old and the natural derision of the young. But when the merchants began to get rid of their merchandise, and the prostitutes started thinking seriously of giving up their profession, the Roman people woke up to the shock of change.

If the right to possessions no longer existed, nor guilt, nor the act of sinning, and if all earthly authority had been abolished, how was the world to function? It wouldn't be the world any more, at least not the way it had been. The Earth could actually come to be this Paradise discovered by an anonymous monsignor, but for the time being it was nothing. Or rather, it was a rowdy, unrecognizable place.

In spite of not knowing what the routine of their new life would be, the Roman people went out into the streets wild with joy.

An exultant crowd invaded the squares, yelling with boundless enthusiasm even though they weren't sure why. Perhaps they sang with happiness because they imagined themselves in a dreamlike fable. At any rate, no one could explain why eternal salvation was no longer an individual matter belonging to the sphere of free will, the so-called choice of the individual between his

conscience and God. Much less did they understand the celestial innovation of permitting an entire people, in other words all humanity, unrestricted acceptance in the Earthly Paradise. Such examples of divine pardon were rare, even in the stories of the Bible.

Overtaken by a sense of oddity with the crumbling of the wall of original sin, the people decided to transform the abstract illusion into living reality, and began to revel in an endless carnival.

Everyone danced, beat on drums, blew trumpets and fornicated, making Rome the stage for a profane, frenetic orgy. It was a collective hallucination that saluted history by regressing to the times of paganism.

The sight of this primitive ritual, carnival, distressed the ambassador greatly. Indeed, the scorpions in his wine keg behaved with more dignity and less noise than that mob graced by the sublime. After all, if humans had stopped being servants of God to become guests in His Garden, at least they should show a bit more decorum and composure.

However, the worried frown that creased the marquis's brow came from the confirmation that several families had left Rome abruptly.

Traveling in wagons, on the backs of donkeys, on foot or however they could, all proclaimed that they were on their way to the Kingdom of Portugal and that from there they would embark in caravels to the Promised Land, the Earthly Paradise. The size of this exodus made the Lusitanian diplomat's face pale. He had a fleeting vision of his homeland being overrun and sacked by a mob of lunatics looking for the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

Finally the rosy color returned to the pallid cheeks of the marquis. As he listened attentively to the words of the priest who officially represented the pope, he felt hopeful. Perhaps the disproportional exodus could be stanchd.

After many inquiries, the ambassador reached the Long Corridor of Cynicism and was approached by a frail, blind monk. An old man who stank as if he were in the habit of cleaning privies, he declared himself a member of the little-known Order of the Guardians of the Throne of Saint Peter.

Doubtless there was some misunderstanding, yet the monk transmitted some magnetism, for the diplomat was calmed.

Senhor Ambassador, if you will permit me to ask, what is your reason for soliciting an audience with His Holiness?

As protocol demands, I have come to inform the Holy Father that the crown of the Kingdom of Portugal has a new owner. The new monarch has been proclaimed with the name of Dom Manuel the Fortunate.

Senhor Ambassador, I hear someone laughing. Please, since I cannot see anything, would you mind looking out a window to see what is happening in the garden?

Certainly. I see what looks like a boy, costumed and painted all in blue, running around one of the fruit trees, venerable monk.

What else, Senhor Marquis?

There is a man. A young man with a thick mustache, playing with the exotic boy in the garden. They are laughing in merriment. They seem to be staging a pantomime, both are wearing small masks.

The man is called Tommaso. He is the favorite friend of the artist Michelangelo. Please, Senhor Ambassador, could you tell me what else you observed as you walked through the Vatican?

First of all, that the gates are open and unguarded.

The papal troops deserted. There is no more army, Senhor Ambassador. Captain Ritter is living in the stables with his three women and nine children, and promotes constant bacchanals.

I noted that the construction of the Basilica of Saint Peter and the colossal square full of columns was halted. It was completely empty, venerable monk. Were the works canceled, or merely postponed?

Interrupted. The workers, foremen and architects disappeared. Some are on their way to Eden, others gave themselves over to their deepest desires. In any case, they say that in Paradise there exists a cathedral made of unimaginable stone columns and bounded by a square such as no one has ever

seen. Everything there seems to have infinite dimensions. Why waste an absurd amount of time constructing another cathedral and a new square, if everything has already been built by God, through nature, in Eden?

Venerable monk, when will I be able to meet with His Holiness?

Immediately, Senhor Ambassador. Please, follow me.

The marquis, holding his wine keg and a torch, accompanied the blind monk through a narrow, labyrinthine corridor that wound endlessly downward through the bowels of the Vatican, in a sort of stifled plunge to the foundations of the papal palace.

Please, Senhor Ambassador, don't be intimidated by the darkness and damp. My religious order only tries to protect pope Julius II from disorderly ruffians.

When the marquis smelled an unbearable stench of feces and saw he was surrounded by various blind monks, he perceived that he had fallen into a trap.

The more the marquis screamed and insisted he was there on a vital diplomatic mission, the more the monks attacked him.

They tore his clothes, bruised his body and knocked him unconscious. Then they broke open the wine keg in search of the hypothetical weapon that would be used to kill the Holy Father.

For that was what the old blind men were expecting. Someone in disguise, even feigning to be an ambassador, who would try to assassinate Julius II, thus consecrating the victory of the discovery of Paradise, destroying the throne of Peter, and leaving the Holy Church without a head.

What the monks did not expect was the silent fury of the scorpions. Victims of their own blindness, they were quickly bitten by the poisonous stings of the creatures that swarmed from the broken wine keg.

In a mismatched and fearful combat, the monks grew panicked at their own impotence. They were unable to see the enemy phalanxes that crawled up their habits, penetrated where they pleased and stung with apoplectic pain as they lashed their malefic tails.

Hearing shouts, Doctor Vigo and three assistants who were busy in the neighboring dungeon ran to the small room and were met with the absurd battle.

Blood dripped from the bodies of the old monks, and each in his own way fought to free himself from the pestilent bites. Some squeezed together, trying to squash the creatures, others tore off their robes to get rid of the scorpions hidden in their habits. In desperation, some held the flame of the only torch against their naked bodies, hoping to burn the scorpions. The hapless fire repelled the demons, but seared their flesh into a coat of bloody blisters that spread over their backs, their white skin.

At the back of the satanic room that smelled of burning fat, Vigo saw a man forgotten in one of the corners. It was the marquis, his face cut, lying in a pool of coagulated blood, but conscious.

Who are you? No doubt the traitor who started this disgrace, letting loose scorpions!

No! I am the Ambassador of the Kingdom of Portugal and the only man able to save Christianity and the papacy of Julius II!

And how do you intend to perform this miracle, Senhor Ambassador?

Get me out of here! Please, take me away from these blind monks, and I will prove what I am saying.

Aided by two assistants, the marquis was taken to Vigo's dungeon to be interrogated.

In spite of having just experienced a scene of terror worthy of the Apocalypse, he was obliged to suffer an even greater shock when he saw what was hanging from the ceiling of the dungeon.

At first he thought they were bodies, As he looked more closely he realized they were countless suspended hangers, bearing robes and vestments.

A true arsenal of flying habits that all shared the peculiarity of being caked with blood at the height of the genital organs. Deformed and fetid spots. Red, yellowish, pus-caked, and altogether repulsive. Green.

Malignant sculptures that not only decorated that ceiling with unknown terror, but defied explanation.

Could it be a new artistic experiment, fruit of the extraordinary geniality of Michelangelo?

* * * * *

Although radiant with Filippo's triumphal return, the abbess had not adapted to the new lack of solemnity and discipline which now reigned in the Vatican. The disorder was such that her happiness began to suffer pangs of irritation and moments of doubt.

The disorganization and irresponsibility had grown extreme. When the reserves of water and stores of food reached minimum levels, no priest or nun seemed to care.

If Julius II was no longer in command, having disappeared into an opportune spiritual retreat in the secret annexes of the Vatican, no one else had dared to sit on the throne of Peter. Nor had anyone dared to contest Filippo, who proclaimed in fiery discourse the death of earthly authority, be it of whatever kind.

The monsignor lived in a state of perpetual beatitude. Tireless, his green eyes flashing brighter every instant, Filippo received interminable groups of clergy and lay people who came running to the Sistine Chapel. All wanted to hear about the marvels of the Earthly Paradise described by the only man who had been there. And get instructions about the new world order. Unfortunately for those who loved art, no one looked at the paintings on the ceiling, because the windows remained always covered.

The movement of people never stopped, day and night, and the masked revelers from the carnival of Rome invaded the galleries and halls beside the chapel with their promiscuity.

The monsignor, with absolute devotion to total freedom and infinite pardon as dictated by the laws of Eden, cared nothing for these carnal excesses,

and concentrated his energies on divulging the paradisiac theses.

Little by little the abbess lost her initial joy. A veil of discouragement clouded her eyes, and she seemed to lose the warmth from her body, proving once again that no spiritual state ages one as fast as happiness.

Her extremities grew numb in an irrepressible tingling, and try as she might, she was unable to find the right moment to confess her love to Filippo.

Listening to the monsignor proclaim before a numerous audience that in Eden there was no religious life, only a vibrant spiritual life, the abbess felt a sudden rage. Probably in reaction to a dilacerating feeling of frustration, she posed a loud and impetuous question.

She asked Filippo about the quality of his sentimental life. She demanded a definitive clarification as to the desires, anxieties and amorous truths of the theologian. He replied sincerely and without hesitation.

Yes, I love a creature of the Lord. A cherub, one of the daughters of Tuabetán, the greatest archangel. The most wonderful female I have ever met. I swore I would be eternally faithful, whatever happens. Every time I think of her my eyes lose their focus, my heart palpitates, and my breath grows short! I pray to God, asking that I might have the pleasure of seeing her again as soon as possible! To kiss her again, embrace her and conceive a child with her! That is what I most desire in my future life in Eden! To live forever with my cherub!

Part of the audience started to cheer, while others wept, moved by Filippo's pungent amorous discourse.

The abbess's dry eyes swept over the place as if she were looking for something lost. A piece of affection or a scrap of love. Perhaps an invisible slice of the opulent passion that Filippo's young angel possessed to abundance. A crumb of the plenitude of kisses that the other would receive from Filippo would be enough. Anything would be bearable and just, even the monsignor's immediate death. But never the public confession of that visceral and perfect attraction which destroyed the nun's desire to love. Ending once and for all her

hopes of living a great passion and hurling her existence into the most abject emotional penury.

The abbess left the Chapel, not waiting for the glorious culmination of Filippo's response.

Eyes shining, the monsignor implored everyone to exchange an embrace as proof of fervent brotherly love, and showed the audience a blue feather. It had come from the halo of his angel, and he wore it hanging about his neck as proof of an irrevocable matrimonial commitment.

Not knowing where to go, or what to do to recuperate her inner balance, the abbess resolved to occupy herself as women wisely do at such times, with some repetitive action, mechanical and friendly, like sewing, embroidery or knitting. The nun thought of polishing the little silver bell until it shined like the moon.

As she crossed the feminine pavilion on the way to her rooms and the little bell, she happened upon a brutal scene.

Two drunken masked men, laughing uproariously, were trying to rape a defenseless maidservant.

In panic, the woman fought back as best she could. Her fear was such that she had not noticed that they were not going to penetrate her with their own penises, but rather with an enormous stick, a wooden phallus.

The abbess shouted.

One of the aggressors turned to face her, and she recognized below the mask that seductive face she had seen in Michelangelo's room. In a flash she remembered his cruel, full-lipped smile, the honey-colored eyes accomplished in the arts of pleasure and perversion. It was the vicious presence of the same libertine.

What's going on, Signor Tommaso? Let go of the girl and leave this pavilion at once!

Surprised at being recognized, the puzzled Tommaso drew back, arrested in shame.

Taking advantage of the rapists' hesitation, the maidservant seized the moment and pulled off the second man's mask. It was Camilo.

The abbess was as stupefied as she was frightened. Because without exchanging a word, only a quick glance of complicity, Tommaso and Camilo took off their masks, dropped the wooden phallus, and left the maidservant trembling on the ground. Without hesitation they began to walk toward the abbess.

Knowing she had to escape as fast as possible, the abbess flew down the corridor. Sensing that it would be impossible to reach her rooms in safety, she ran behind the main altar, turned the handle set in the base of a column and disappeared through a secret trap door.

Feeling protected in that skein of subterranean galleries, she wept in rage. In hatred for Filippo, Tommaso, Camilo, for men and rapists. For all those who were born to make women unhappy. Her hatred included even Jesus Christ, the son of God, who in a way had permitted the opening of the gates of Paradise, managing only to kindle more problems and incongruencies rather than bringing solutions and peace to mankind.

Surrounded by absolute darkness and feeling her way along the walls, she stepped carefully on the damp, slippery floor. She was walking without direction, lost in time.

Attracted by a distant sound, she thought she must be near one of the exits of the secret labyrinth, and walked faster. Much the opposite. The corridor grew brighter little by little until it opened onto a silent, torchlit hall. An aberrant dungeon, a sort of suspended cemetery of strangled robes. In fact, the same baffling place that a short while earlier had been visited by the marquis.

Finding no logical explanation for what she saw, the abbess swept a pathetic glance over the countless robes and habits hanging from the ceiling. When she saw the corpse of Captain Ritter swinging back and forth, she felt

no pity whatsoever, only surprise at the casualness of her hatred. Ritter was a truly detestable man.

The abbess felt no disgust as she faced the decomposing body, nor did she have time to react to having discovered an obvious murder. Unexpectedly and with practiced skill, someone clapped a hand over her mouth and blindfolded her, before she could even turn around. She only gagged.

* * * * *

Expect anything of yourself!

The phrase that was now constantly muttered by Vigo clarified certain aspects of the pathology that was devouring Julius II.

Similar to that species of parasitic roundworm which, no matter how many times you pull off a piece, always restores itself by growing at the other end, the papal crisis seemed to have no ending or peace. However, it presented well-defined phases.

After going through a short period of total denial, in which he actually refuted the physical existence of the Bible and the organic existence of Filippo, the pope began to have childish temper tantrums directed against everyone and everything.

Thus the sequence of demented behaviors that most men follow when suffering a disgrace or a grave illness was fulfilled. First, he refused to believe in the collapse of his reign, then he blamed God for everything that happened, after which he plotted impossible ways of taking revenge, and finally he despaired in bottomless fear.

Distancing himself more and more from his certainties and convictions, he began to suffer from incurable headaches. He stopped insulting humanity, but entered a phase of self-aggression, punishing his own body.

Due to a vengeful tactic of fate, he became what he most despised: a hesitant old man, without vigor, mired in a wretched paralysis as he faced life.

Like a heavy, corpulent replica of the late Pius III, the Kindly, the person whom Julius II so disdained. Hence the doctor's illuminating quote: Expect anything from yourself, and consequently from others too. And pray it won't be the worst.

As the marquis knelt at the edge of the papal bed, Doctor Vigo removed the cold compresses from the pontiff's temples. The medical procedure had cooled the blood and reduced the fever of the Holy Father, leaving him sufficiently energetic to receive the ambassador from the Kingdom of Portugal in audience.

Holiness, the marquis desires to receive your blessing!

I don't want anyone to see me like this, Vigo. Decrepit, trembling. Send him away. I already told you! Out! And tell him to enjoy himself. The world is delirious! It's a carnival!

The Ambassador brings a message from the new King of Portugal, Holiness.

Vigo, don't insist. Everything has lost meaning and importance. Even words are useless. They say that the angels can read our thoughts. Earthly power doesn't exist any more, especially for the privileged.

My pope, I beg for a little of your holy attention!

It's true, I'm so absent-minded these days. I haven't even asked how your scientific experiments are coming in the dungeon of the strangled robes, Vigo. That place looked extraordinary to me.

Before long I shall present my conclusions for the glory of your magnificent papacy. But for now, I ask humbly that Your Holiness listen to a few passages from the letter of the King of Portugal. Senhor Marquis, please, read the message.

* * * * *

E seendo Afonso Lopez nosso piloto em huu daqueles navjos pequenos per mandado do capitam por seer home vyvo e deestro per jssso meteose loguo no esquife

a somdar o porto dentro e tomou em huua almaadia dous daqueles homees da terra mancebos e de boos corpos. e huu deles trazia huu arco e bj ou bij seetas e na praya amdavam mujtos cõ seus arcos e seetas e nom lhe aprouvetaram./ trouveos logo ja de noute ao capitam omde foram recebidos com muito prazer e festa./ a feiçam deles he seerem pardos maneira de avermelhados de boos rrostros e boos narizes bem feitos. - andam nuus sem nhuuua cubertura. nem estimam nhuuua coussa cobrir nem mostrar suas vergonhas. e estam acerqua disso com tamta jnocemcia como teem em mostrar o rrostro./ traziam ambos os beicos de baixo furados e metidos por eles senhos osos de oso bramco de compridam de huua maaõ travessa e de grosura de huu fuso de algodam e agudos na pôta coma furador. metenos pela parte de dentro do beçio e o que lhe fica amtre o beço e os dentes he feito coma rroque de enxadrez. e em tal maeira o trazem aly emcaxado que lhes nom da paixã nem lhes torva a fala nem comer nem beber./ os cabelos seus sam coredios e andava trosqujados de trosquya alta mais que de sobre pemtem de boa gramdura e rrapados ataa per cjma das orelhas. e huu deles trazia per baixo da solapa de fonte a fonte pera detras huua maneeira de cabeleira de penas de ave amarela que seria de compridam de huu couto. muy basta e muy carada que lhe cobria o toutuco e as orelhas. a qual amdava pegada nos cabelos pena e pena com huua comfeiçam branda coma cera e nõ no era. de maneira que amdava a cabeleira muy rredomda e muy basta e muy jgual que no fazia mjngoia mais lavajem pera a levantar.

* * * * *

Stop reading! I don't understand a thing! What does this message mean, Senhor Ambassador? Is this letter perchance in code? Or have my ears suddenly gone mad?

Neither. This is a report that His Majesty, the King of Portugal, received from a maritime expedition which journeyed to the Terra Incógnita. The caravels were anchored in practically the same spot where monsignor Filippo says he encountered Paradise, Holiness.

So what, Senhor Marquis? I didn't understand a word you read. Explain, if you please!

Holy Father, the author of this report is called Pero Vaz de Caminha. He acted as a scribe for the navigators on this expedition. Senhor Caminha, although he is a very astute person, is not well educated. Therefore the letter I have just read is not written in Latin, as would be more civilized, but in Portuguese. In a confused rendition of the Portuguese language, filled with errors. For this reason the ears of Your Holiness did not understand a word that was read.

What's the point of an ambassador reading an incomprehensible text to a pontiff, Senhor Marquis?

Because I will have the honor of translating it for my Holy Father. Perhaps also of discoursing more fully on some passage, detail or linguistic flourish that only could be clarified out loud. A nuance impossible to transmit in written translation, even the most perfect one we might produce.

Interesting! Continue, Senhor Marquis, read a little more of these chirping sounds you call a language. Then give me a summary of the whole thing. Please, proceed.

* * * * *

Aly falavã e traziam mujtos arcos e contjnhas daquelas ja detas e rresgatavã por qualqr cousa. em tal maneira que trouveram daly pera as naaos mujtos arcos e seetas e comtas e entam tornouse o capitam aaquem do rrio e logo acodira mujtos aa beira dele aly verjees galantes ppimtados de preto e vermelho e quartejados asy pelos corpos como pelas pernas. que çerto pareciam asy bem. / tambem andavam antre eles iij ou b molheres mocas asy nuas que nom pareciam mal. antre as quaaes amdava huua com huua coxa do giolho ataa a quadril e a nadeqa toda tjnta daquela tintura preta e o al. todo da sua propria cor. outra trazia anbolos giolhos cõ as curvas asy timtas e tambem os colos dos pees. e suas vergonhas tam nuas e com tamta jnocencia descubertas que nõ avia hy nhuua vergonha.

* * * * *

Holy Father! According to this report, the seraphim, cherubim and throne attendants described by monsignor Filippo do not exist. At the location in question, aborigines were found. Barbarians who walk about naked, with their shameful parts uncovered and their bodies painted or adorned with feathers.

How picturesque! The celestial creatures described by monsignor Filippo belong to a yet-undiscovered species of chickens, is that it?

In spite of their excessive use of feathers, the beings in question are human. It seems to be a primitive community, but not innocent. Their warriors use bows and arrows. They have mastered the art of wounding, they know pain, and they are capable of killing.

Dear God, what nefarious people! And the Tree? What did Senhor Caminha write about the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil? Read, Marquis, read!

* * * * *

Traz al lomgo do mar em algumas partes grandes bareiras delas vermelhas e delas bramcas e a terra per cima toda chaa e mujto chea de grandes arvoredos. / de pomta e pomta he toda praya parma mujto chaa e mujto fremosa. / pelo sartaaos nos paraceo do mar mujto grande porque a estender olhos nō podiamos veer se ño terra e arvoredos u nos parecia muy longa terra. / neela ataa agora ño podemos saber que aja ouro nem prata nem nhuuua cousa de metal nem de fero. nem lho vjmos.

* * * * *

Actually, the tree is a bush, Holiness. The trunk is reddish and its branches are full of small white flowers. A useless and undistinguished plant that shames the botanical kingdom. The natives call the tree Brasilis or Brazil, something like that.

What a blessed letter, Senhor Marquis! You mean to say that instead of Paradise, they discovered this Terra Brasilis?

If Your Holiness wishes to call the place by that name, it shall be called thus.

May I interrupt, Holiness?

Please, illustrious Vigo. Speak.

Holy Father, I am very sorry to disappoint you, but the report of the Portuguese maritime expedition, no matter how truthful it is, or seems, is insufficient to destroy the certainty of the existence of the Earthly Paradise proclaimed by Filippo.

Correct, Vigo. I shall never win this war with only the message of the King of Portugal. But without this scientific and geographic certainty, I wouldn't have a way to win one miserable battle. Starting today, the horizon is another. My struggle has acquired an amplitude as infinite as the spiral of creativity. The strategy is no longer restricted to the simple destruction of Paradise, my friends. The triumph of my victory will be the total destruction of humanity's dream of Eden. In other words, the extermination of the idea of Paradise on earth.

* * * * *

Bound, gagged and blindfolded, she could have experienced mute despair, but that was not the case.

Even knowing that she had been captured for having had the audacity to discover a forbidden dungeon, where the body of a murdered man swung from the ceiling together with ghostly, defiled habits, the nun did not feel intimidated. On the contrary, in her spirit a refined form of haughtiness arose, a sense of her own dignity. The pride of valor.

Having lost her dream of passion and the desire to love Filippo, she lost her fear as well. Without anguish, the abbess concluded that since love

eliminates fear, and fear eliminates love, the two could destroy each other without leaving a trace.

Filled with renewed courage, she heard the rattling of chains sliding over cogwheels as Ritter's body was lowered. She even caught a whiff of fetid air passing through the room, but she neither moved nor breathed faster.

Freed from the shadow of fear, she waited patiently for someone to take off the gag and blindfold. She opened her eyes slowly and confirmed the presence of Vigo, the presumable murderer, standing next to the captain's corpse.

How strange, to encounter a nun poking about through the subterranean passages of the Vatican. Is the pious abbess fulfilling some promise?

Nor did I expect to encounter the physician of the Holy Father watching over the murdered body of Captain Ritter.

If the abbess were a man, she would certainly be a poet. You lack neither the courage to be aggressive nor the tongue to be impertinent.

It is not my wish to offend you or show you any lack of respect, Doctor. I would like to know the reason why I have been detained.

For your own good, Abbess.

Forgive me, Doctor, I fail to see where the gentility of your gesture is to be found. In the gag, perhaps?

The abbess imagines that I must have ordered the captain and the monks who wore these robes killed, do you not? Nothing in the world could be further than the truth. I tried desperately to save the lives of these people, abbess. Observe, for example, the body of Ritter. Full of pustules, bleeding sores and boils. And the filthy robes? Look at the ceiling! Spotted with pus. This whole picture, venerable abbess, is part of a most frightening pattern, because there is only one possible explanation for these deaths. These people died from a devastating contagious disease. That is my diagnosis. A new and unique illness. A malign plague, abbess.

As if it were a punishment from God, due to the excesses committed by mankind after the discovery of Paradise, Doctor?

The true sage never identifies divine punishment with the spreading of disease. He prefers to recognize in a plague the height of his own ignorance. God gives us everything, abbess, even the darkness to be illuminated.

That's very intriguing, Doctor Vigo. I've only encountered this plague in your dungeon. Rome and the rest of the Vatican are living in peace.

Don't be deceived, pious lady. This is a very capricious plague which appears in the intimate parts of the body and is hidden under the clothes. Or rather, from pure shame, the contaminated hide the disease, which germinates in their sex organs until being transmitted in the instant of pleasure.

I never heard of such an infirmity, where suffering results from desire.

You will hear of it tomorrow! The Holy Father will go to one of the gates of the Vatican and there will exhibit Ritter's three women. Naked, chained in heavy irons and dying of indecent hemorrhages. Friar Carlo presenting a rotteness that is eating away his face like a swarm of bees, and more, more, more women! Dirty young ones, naked old ones, some attractive and others less so. All infected, begging His Holiness for mercy and Jesus for protection! In this way Julius II will show the new plague to the world. I see that the majority of the habits hanging from this ceiling belong to those of the masculine sex, doctor. What is the reason for blaming women for this plague?

The idea that women were born for the disgrace of men is, in general, quite well accepted by the people, Abbess.

Especially if it is said they are dirty inside. Isn't that what men imagine, Doctor?

Since I do not know the true origin of this plague, I must utilize women to frighten the populace.

Does this disease have a name?

My friend, the doctor and poet Ghirolamo Fracastoro de Verona, wrote a poem, one passage of which describes complaints very like the symptoms of

this new infirmity.

*A shepherd suffered just to watch
Horrendous boils form in his crotch.
Many a night he spent awake,
This dreadful ill his name did take.
And Syphilis it was.*

Therefore I have baptized the plague syphilis. Syphilis.

I don't need to hear any more. I will pray for the souls of those poor women. Good night, Doctor.

As I said at the beginning of this conversation, the abbess was detained for her own good. I want to know if your body is diseased or not. I demand to examine you. Your habit, your flesh, inside and out. Now!

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

REVENGE IN BLUE

Julius II spent a sleepless night, just like Syphilis in Fracastoro's poem.

Plagued with restlessness and surrounded by collaborators, His Holiness tried to organize the sequence of events that would be utilized to annihilate monsignor Filippo, the false Eden, and all that had resulted from it, once and for all.

The attack would be composed of three fundamental moves.

The formal presentation of the new plague to the people of Rome would begin with the ringing of the bells. Their clamor would accompany the sinister, naked parade of pustulous women. Either before or after this, Vigo would give an inflamed scientific discourse connecting the discovery of Eden to the plague and the chastisement of God. Or would it be the other way around? It didn't matter. The important thing would be the pope's appearance at the end, graciously pardoning carnival revelers, fornicators and the diseased.

The pardon would not take place in the Sistine Chapel. There, the Holy Father would pronounce Filippo's prison sentence, right after the reading of the report about the existence of the Terra Brasilis, identified as Eden by the monsignor's demented geography.

The third event of the strategy would function much like a triumphal ode. As a symbol of the majestic and artistic rebirth of his own Pontificate, Julius II would sign a public petition calling for Michelangelo to return to the Vatican and complete his painting of the frescoes in the Sistine Chapel.

The dilemma which did not allow the night to pass in silence, nor the pope to rest before the threefold battle, was the incessant search for the order

of events that would cause the greatest impact on Christianity and the worst destruction to the paradisiac theories.

Vigo and his assistants, the monks of the Order of Guardians of the Throne of Peter, a small but faithful battalion of troops, members of the Holy Inquisition and the seven cardinals allied to the pope reached no conclusion about the ideal sequence of happenings. This was due to their scorn for fiction. They knew nothing of the wonderful fundamentals of drama set forth by Aristotle in his *Poetica*.

An art of quasi-falsehood that reproduces the imperfections of life, dramaturgy can lead masses to revolt, or to fall asleep, depending on the talent of who directs its rules.

In this case, what would be the most advantageous evolution of scenes for the exaltation of the pontifical power? To pardon the diseased sinners, punish Filippo, and then declare the glory of art? Or to begin with Julius II in the scene of art's triumph, then have him pardon the sick world and, moved to tears, chastise Filippo at the people's request? One must never forget that it is mandatory for something surprising to happen in the final scene, to give the ending grandeur. God Himself, being perfect even in dramaturgy, will finish the last chapter of the Book of Humanity, the End of Time, with an apotheosis of fire and transcendence, the Apocalypse.

Quiet, everyone! Listen! Can't you hear it?

To what sound does the Holy Father refer?

Laughter, Vigo. And an irritating caroling. A boy dyed blue, running through the corridors. Francesco, the false angel! I'll start with him, with the *castrato*. I will punish this aberration that torments me night and day! Afterward, with my whip, I shall flog monsignor Filippo before ordering him locked in the dungeons. I swear to fulfill whatever sequence of events your Eminences determine. Be they at the gates of Rome, in the garden of the Vatican or in Hell! But first I will teach those two cretins an exemplary lesson!

Holy Father, the pontifical protocol does not advise the pope to attack a sheep from his fold!

To hell with etiquette and convention! Everyone knows that Jesus gave a good thrashing to some idle moneychangers.

Resolute but crazed, as if seized by an inner depravity, Julius II marched warrior-like toward the Sistine Chapel.

He would fight man to man with Filippo. To take revenge. To drain his hatred by lashing the whip against the monsignor's back. To do justice with his own hands in the name of God. All these reasons, and others, passed through the pope's feverish mind. But he didn't think about the dramaturgy of existence with its absurd, far-from Aristotelian laws. About the crowning blow of the unexpected, for example. Nor the imponderable human factor that would reduce that day to a fatal event for the history of various human beings, starting with himself and his own reign.

* * * * *

It was a rare and antique recipe, a culinary secret kept for generations by the abbess's family.

The elaboration of the dish began with gathering roses, preferably the fullest and most sweet-smelling, and then crushing the petals with small pieces of partridge hearts, very well cooked. Afterwards, one added egg yolks, the purest oil, pepper and salt, all the while pouring in small amounts of fine, well-aged wine.

After beating flour into the mixture, one obtained a fine, light batter which, baked in a slow oven, would become a golden cake, the famous Loaf of Roses of Venus.

Immediately after the gynecological examination realized by Vigo, the abbess had come to a final decision: she would leave the Vatican and the religious life forever.

Upon confirming that the nun was virgin and free from the remotest sign of syphilis, the doctor admitted his mistake, begged her pardon and liberated her with studied sympathy.

The abbess trembled as she communicated to the other nuns that she would travel to some very distant place, although she was not going to Paradise or any other miraculous locale. She intended to let herself be guided by the only truth that seemed trustworthy in her soul, the pulsing of her affections. She would try to live free of the dogmas of institutions and to have as a guide the counsel of her instincts as a woman.

Somehow she seemed to embody the desire of the other nuns present, since they all remained silent.

To commemorate her departure, she resolved to prepare the luncheon for that day herself, a fact interpreted by some nuns as a sort of Last Supper. In truth, she was doing homage to the Feminine Pavilion, which would be graced with the exotic flavor of the Loaf of Roses of Venus.

As she walked through the garden to gather the plumpest and sweetest-smelling rose blossoms, she saw the troop of guards surround the Sistine Chapel and Julius II position himself with stateliness at the principal entrance.

They were about to butcher Filippo and Francesco, she sensed.

The pope twisted his neck and saw the abbess in the middle of the garden. Their eyes met. He was holding a brown leather whip, and she, roses.

Julius II was ready to destroy and kill, but from his pupils an emanation of love and forgiveness flashed toward the abbess.

She could not return it. Even certain as she was of the regenerating force of affection, and ready for freedom, the look she gave him was crystallized with hate.

That same afternoon the abbess left, never to return. She went off toward the unknown, and was happy in the Kingdom of Denmark.

* * * * *

When the principal door was thrown violently open, the boy ran, scrambled up the scaffolds and leaned over to observe who was coming into the Chapel. On identifying the pompous figure of Julius II, holding a whip, he began to laugh. His laughter was cynical, with a bitter adult rancor.

Holiness, my nephew is quite euphoric over our definitive return to Paradise. He never stops laughing! Francesco, get down from there! Stop that giggling! Come and compliment the Holy Father. Come down from the scaffolding.

I fear that there will be no Paradise for many, Monsignor.

What does the Holy Father mean?

Nothing in particular, and everything at the same time. Isn't the monsignor afraid of carrying this plague called syphilis to the cherubim?

The angels have no diseases, Holiness! Every human being who arrives sick in Paradise is miraculously cured!

Really, Monsignor! Can it be? Because this disease is contagious. The doctors have concluded that it is spread by the copulating of a man with an unclean woman, or a man with another man, equally unclean and perverted. The most intriguing thing is that the appearance of the pustules, eruptions of the skin, ulcers of the penis, vaginal boils, carbuncles, the decomposition of flesh and customs, in other words, the outbreak of syphilis, coincided with the monsignor's arrival after his visit to the famous Eden. What a curious and lascivious coincidence of dates, wouldn't you say?

That's a lie! A diabolic distortion of medical science, Holy Father! It is obvious that the origin of syphilis was invented by Doctor Vigo to defame my reputation and destroy the concept of the Holy Garden of the Lord!

At that moment Francesco's laughter grew stronger and echoed in a hysterical cackling through the sanctuary.

Profound and interminable, the diabolical laugh began the revelation of Francesco's best-kept secret, his blind desire for revenge.

Laughter at the retaliation that could never erase from his memory the vivid picture of a cardinal drowning a defenseless boy. Of a lying monsignor who rejected his own nephew. Of a world which, by admiring to excess the voice of a child, destroyed all the rest of him, including his character.

It is true, Uncle! Believe it! The Holy Father is not lying. Doctor Vigo imagined an evil and unknowingly discovered the egg of syphilis. The seraphim, cherubim, archangels and angels of Paradise have these sores spread over their sex organs and their legs.

Hold your tongue, Francesco! I saw no such thing!

Uncle didn't notice because you only slept with the same cherub all the time. The male angels I stayed with had these purple spots on their bodies. I discovered that the creatures of the Lord paint their bodies to hide the syphilitic sores.

How wonderful! I don't even need to use the whip! The boy confessed! The monsignor's angels were the first syphilitics on earth!

Paradise is another world, Holiness! What is sickness for us may have another meaning for the celestial beings!

What meaning? Tell me, Monsignor. What meaning? What Paradise is this in which the angels are carriers of a macabre sickness that devastates humanity? Are they really angels? Or demons? Perhaps the monsignor has discovered Hell! Who would be able to answer me? Francesco, my ingenuous cherub, what did your uncle discover, after all?

My uncle? I don't know, Holy Father. But I discovered something.

And what did you discover, my son?

How easy it was, Holiness. First I slept with Signor Tommaso, then he slept with one of the captain's women, then one of them went to fornicate with a guard who made love with a monk, and the monk let himself be penetrated by various other men, and on and on without stopping. Because of all that I discovered how simple it was. It was almost spontaneous, Holiness. To mark your glorious papacy forever by the arrival of syphilis!

The *castrato* is taking revenge on me and wants to destroy my whole reign in the eyes of history!

A Syphilitic Papacy, Holy Father!

Diabolical! Both of them! Born to destroy the Church! But the infallible Holy Spirit made me pope! They didn't count on that. Neither of them. Not the crazed theologian, nor the sodomite brat!

Even if you have me killed, the Terra Incógnita will continue to be an eternal Paradise.

That land is no longer unknown, Monsignor. A Portuguese navigator called Pedro Alvares Cabral journeyed there, and he didn't find the slightest vestige of Eden. He confirmed only the existence of an ordinary tree called *Brasilis*, which doesn't even bear fruit.

Brasilis! That's where Paradise is! *Brasilis* is Eden!

Never, Monsignor! I shall never permit the existence of another Paradise except the ceiling of this Chapel! And I shall erase the illusion of an earthly paradise for the next five hundred years! I shall demonstrate how the fate of thousands of people is insignificant in the face of art.

For five hundred years? What do you mean, Holy Father?

Vigo, with his prodigious mind, convinced me to include a series of deliberations in my message to the King of Portugal. They are decisions with far-reaching action, like an interminable poison, or a perpetual laxative, and they were accepted by the marquis, the ambassador, in the name of the Portuguese Crown. Thus I determined that seeds will be sent to the Terra *Brasilis*! Human seeds! Terrible people! The worst dregs of the kingdom! An easy thing to find in Portugal. The most disgraced subjects, worthless and miserable. The murderers, the violent, the debauched. I suggested that the rule of power in this new land be given to the most corrupt and unjust nobles. Vigo imagined how the Terra *Brasilis* can be transformed into the kingdom of pillage and impunity! It is established that the people who will live there, and

all their descendants, will have no love for the place and that nothing will be left, absolutely nothing, of what could have been, should have been a Paradise!

In that instant, Francesco lifted his arms, arched his legs and bent over backwards, propelling his body in a leap.

Smiling at the ceiling painted by Michelangelo, the boy threw himself from the scaffolding convinced that he would never float in air or flutter through space as did the angels portrayed in the frescoes.

His fall was willed and calculated with precision.

During the trajectory he lost his fragile blue-tinted aspect, his childish thoughts, his lost intentions, his secret hatreds and his capacity to dream of a future. The magic universe of a boy with the voice of a nightingale disappeared, becoming only a lifeless clump of tendons, liquids, bones and gelatinous tissue as it fell heavily upon Julius II.

The impact as the two bodies met was severe. Francesco died immediately of a broken neck.

As the pope fell backward, injured and apoplectic, his braided leather whip snaked, abandoned, across the marble floor stained with blue-tinted blood.

EPILOGUE

PRISONERS OF THE PRESENT

Michelangelo's eyes swept over the papal chamber.

Underneath various layers of blankets and cloths soaked in unguents lay pope Julius II. His breath was short, and his nostrils inhaled a white cloud of vapor that came from a steaming basin. The atmosphere was redolent of eucalyptus.

Vigo, his assistants, and various prelates circulated around the pontiff's bed with cautious, silent steps so as not to disturb what appeared to be a very peaceful sleep. However, this was not the case and they all knew it. His Holiness was dying of an uncontrollable internal hemorrhage. Blood seeped from his broken ribs, flooded his entrails and suffocated his chest.

The pope's body was bloating into a sinister fatness, or as Vigo said, a fearful voluminous increase that would grow until the brutal whelping of the embryo of death. From one minute to the next.

Vigo also declared to Michelangelo that this story of the boy Francesco throwing himself from the scaffolding onto the pontiff was false. He said it was a lie that Rome had been convulsed by the chaos of paradisiac debauchery.

The tragedy had been different, and much more heroic. In the name of official history, the doctor confirmed that Julius II had been attacked by a troop of sacrilegious ruffians, had fought bravely and had vanquished monsignor Filippo, the supreme commander of the syphilitics. That the theologian had shown himself an abject coward, because on realizing his defeat, he dealt a traitor's blow to the Holy Father's chest with a heavy iron crucifix, causing the endless internal hemorrhages. That Francesco, shamed to

witness such an unworthy act on his uncle's part, had hanged himself with a braided leather whip, like a little Judas.

Ever since his return to the Vatican, Michelangelo had heard of nothing but disgraces, dramas and disappointments. All purported by Vigo as historical truth.

Untrue facts and fictionalized versions that did not penetrate the artist's spirit at all. Michelangelo pretended to listen attentively to the words that entered his ears, but their sound dissolved before touching the surface of his mind. All because he was on the point of plunging once more into the effervescence of the germ of beauty.

He didn't have the strength to withstand the macabre reality surrounding him, in which a pope was dying, his belly pregnant with blood; a blue-painted boy was rotting, his neck broken; and countless syphilitic priests, women, and men screamed in pain from the dungeons. But the shock of encountering Tommaso, his beloved Tommaso of another time, sharing a cell with the friars Carlo and Camilo, all three moaning and rotting in horror, their bodies infested with filthy maggots, petrified the artist.

It was all so insupportable that his lips paled, his mouth was speechless, and his eyes wandered about, lost. Blind, deaf and mute, Michelangelo defended himself from the attack of the intolerable by allowing the germ of beauty to flourish, and began to imagine and design the beautiful in his thoughts. Confirming once again that only the unreal can conquer reality.

Before leaving, he glanced once more about the papal chamber. His mind was charmed with the particles of steam orbiting through the enclosed space. A minor detail that illuminated his face like a furnace. Its fire seemed to have the power of consuming the terror everyone was experiencing but did not know how to express. Relieved, he felt he had found the elixir to rid himself of the crazed horror that stalked the Vatican, the world and his own soul. He discovered that he could surmount the unbearable if he managed to give artistic form to terror.

Michelangelo went into the Sistine Chapel. As always, he let his emerald-green cape slide to the floor. The wall behind the altar was still there. Smooth, yellowed, opaque, waiting for his talent. For the painting of the Final Judgment, the pictorial response to all the terrors of humanity.

Running his fingertips over the wall's smooth surface, he closed his eyes and imagined men, women, and children, nude, levitating through a cloud-filled sky. Some dropped toward hell, others ascended to heaven. All were tracing ample movements with their arms, manifesting unmistakable surprise at the unexpected sentences of God. Their figures clustered together like grapes in niches of cloud distributed over the painting. Grasping at air, because they were embracing the white of the clouds. Hordes of people wheeling through space like the foolish, minuscule particles of steam in the papal chamber. Everything chaotic and full of motion, as required by the insignificance of the human condition.

Next he visualized shame in their eyes, and their faces contorted in terror. Desperate figures, clutching one another, trying to climb up the clouds, but always slipping downward. Bodies in continuous free fall, tripping in the air, losing their grip on the sky and dropping farther from the Light, from God. Wrinkled, contorted bodies that eventually fell into the Valley of Death, or Hell, a foul slough placed at the bottom of the painting.

Michelangelo was awakened from his creative trance by the clanking of heavy iron chains against the marble floor, and groans.

Vigo came into the Chapel accompanied by assistants. Each of them held an iron chain, attached to a syphilitic prisoner's shackled feet.

Monsignor Filippo, badly injured from the torture he had endured from the Inquisition, approached separately, chained by an iron collar. He could not walk, but crawled on all fours like a dog. His heels were split open, their cartilage exposed.

What, besides the Apocalypse, can transform day into night, or light into darkness? Poetry. Literature, painting. Art, my dear Michelangelo. Only the

imagination is capable of causing man to forget his perpetual dissatisfaction and transport him through time. A person need only read Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy* to know the Hell or Heaven he will deserve after his eventual death.

Doctor Vigo, if you please, what are you trying to tell me?

Many say that affection improves the character of human beings, but I don't believe in this hypothesis. As I said, I only trust in the Spiral of Creativity with its infinite movements: madness, art, science, truth, and God. Therefore I brought these sinners to be punished by art. Art is something so complete that it can also punish. These diseased fornicators will serve as living models for the painting of the Final Judgment.

I'm very sorry, Doctor Vigo! I never use live models in my work. Or dead ones.

This is an order from the Holy Office, Michelangelo. A determination not to be questioned! One of the Inquisition's magnificent sentences was to make the monsignor and his followers prisoners of the present. Filippo will be a prisoner of the painting of the Final Judgment by having his face portrayed on this wall. Here! Fixed, immobile, static, proclaiming every instant to whoever passes the meaning of the panic of the Present! Do you know what the message of the Prisoner of the Present is, Michelangelo?

No, Doctor Vigo, I do not. I don't understand what you're saying.

But you will! Monsignor Filippo himself will verbalize the lesson he has learned. Come, Filippo, repeat out loud for Michelangelo to hear. What is the message of the Prisoner of the Present?

The Earth will never be a Paradise!

Very good, Monsignor. Go on.

Miracles are made of pain and tears.

Excellent, Filippo. Continue.

The cherubim are not blue. The seraphim are not red. The angels do not possess any power whatsoever. They are dreamers who cause evil to men. They

are useless beings, created to distract and amuse the Almighty. They are the artists of heaven. Without any power. The artists of Heaven.

Do you understand now? Get to work, Michelangelo.

The artist locked himself in the Sistine Chapel for a week. He worked day and night, drawing and projecting the principal sketches for the painting. As everyone expected, he forbade any living soul to enter the place. With the exception of the syphilitic sinners and of monsignor Filippo, who were obliged to take part in the creative process.

Michelangelo seemed to work with the very fibers of his heart. Extraordinary traces took form in the sketches, to the flavor of the purest artistic expression of terror, and the horror of confirming that art can indeed punish men and the artist that creates it. For Michelangelo worked with revulsion at himself and the syphilitics he was portraying, all because he had not had the courage to refuse Vigo's impositions and defy the people who had caused Tommaso to rot.

All the intrinsic terror of the finitude of existence surged forth in the designs, which would be eternal. It was the fear of death, the same terror that had gathered into monsignor Filippo's glistening eyes.

Sinister eyes that nuzzled the back of Michelangelo's neck as he worked, sending an indecipherable message. They whispered that the unheard-of had occurred between the two men. A dispute between souls which underlined the difference between art and madness, the war of minds in which they had engaged.

And like all wars, full of insanity. Especially the imaginings that were detonated with the discovery of the Terra Brasilis and the painting of the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. An equation of deliriums which had the power to curse an entire continent for five hundred years, justify the existence of angels with the spread of syphilis through the world, and to confirm the importance of art through the banality of life.

On the seventh day, tired as a divinity, Michelangelo came to the end of his conception of the painting of the Final Judgment. As he left the Chapel he did not look back, not even to thank the syphilitics for their company. His neck ached so painfully that he refused to listen to the bells which were announcing the death of pope Julius II to Rome and the world.

Intending to force Michelangelo to appear at the papal obsequies, Vigo went looking for the artist all over the Vatican.

When the doctor entered the Sistine Chapel, night had fallen. The altar was illuminated, and its light was reflected on the wall where the design of the Final Judgment had been conceived.

Black marks outlined bodies, formed clouds, and portrayed the syphilitic faces imprisoned in the painting. Vigo easily discovered Filippo's face drawn at the bottom of the wall, in the middle of Hell. Instead of smiling, the doctor shuddered, and stood frozen.

At that moment, the entire world and Vigo with it were captured by the mystery of the imagination, by the terrible creation of an artist.

Engulfed by the sensations of illusion and reality at once, a state of spirit that only imaginings can produce, the doctor saw beside the monsignor's face that of Julius II, and further on, his own. All of them prisoners of the Present, and condemned to be art forever.

THE END

AUTHOR'S FINAL NOTES

The War of Imaginings, although based on real historical facts, is an entirely fictional work. It deals with secret and unusual occurrences that surrounded the year 1500.

The research of the theme began some time ago with my reading of the book *Vision of Paradise*, by Sergio Buarque de Holanda (Ed. Nacional, São Paulo, 1985).

This book was revealing in every sense. Besides immersing me in the historical roots of Brazil, it was through this work that I uncovered an inexhaustible bibliography about European thought regarding the maritime discoveries made toward the end of the fifteenth century.

The investigations of the origin of syphilis and the surgical techniques used for the castration of ephobos came from reading Richard Gordon's book, *The Alarming History of Medicine* (published by Sinclair Stevenson Limited, London, 1993).

An ostensibly touristic visit to Rome in January of 1996 was the detonator that fixed the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel as a counterpoint to the Paradisium Brasiliis.

As to the actual historical facts and the events fictionalized in the book, I should clarify the following: syphilis did arrive in Europe around 1496-1500, coinciding with the maritime discoveries and leading the scholars to affirm that this disease had its origins on the American continent; Pius III was pope for a mere ten days in October of 1500 and Julius II for several years, from 1503 to 1513; deliberately, I do not define in the text any given date for the two

papacies, but rather place them at about 1500, that is, a few short years before they would have occurred; influenced by current historians who always refer to the chronology of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries as “probable”, since in that era time was not measured with precision (the distortion and confusion over dates was so great that pope Gregory XIII was obliged to reformulate the universal calendar in 1582), I chose to commit the small crime of altering by a few years certain historical facts, like the discovery of Brazil, the building of the Basilica of Saint Peter and the painting of the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel; as for the kings of Portugal, I do not mention Dom João II, although in the second part of the book I relate that the king of Portugal is going through a profound and mute depression, thus referring to Dom João II, who was no longer reigning at that point; on the other hand, the fashion of the *castrati* began precisely in 1500; the passages from the letter of Pero Vaz de Caminha which I reproduced were transcribed from an original copy microfilmed and granted by the Biblioteca Nacional do Rio de Janeiro; and finally, regarding the angels, I am not sure if, in that era, they appeared or behaved as described in the book, but at any rate, humanity suffered a great loss with the visual extinction of these wonderful beings, the so-called “artists of heaven” who lived in an eternal springtime.

Rio de Janeiro, September 1997

D.C.

This book was first published in Brazil (A Guerra Das Imaginações. Rio de Janeiro: Ed. Rocco, 1997.), then have the followings international editions.

La Guerra Delle Immaginazioni. Rome, Italy, 2002.

Von Der Entdckun Des Paradieses. Frankfurt, Germany: Ed. Eichborn, 2000.

La Guerra De Las Imaginaciones. Buenos Aires, Argentina: Ed. Planeta, 1999.

La Guerra De Las Imaginaciones. Mexico,D.F.: Ed. Planeta, 1998.

A Guerra Das Imaginações. Lisbon, Portugal: Ed. Pergaminho, 1998.

La Guerra De Las Imaginaciones. Madrid, Spain: Ed. Planeta, 1998.

Curriculum Vitae

Doc Comparato

(Luiz Felipe Loureiro Comparato
Rio de Janeiro, 1949)

Contacts:

doccomparato@hotmail.com

www.facebook.com/doccomparatodigital

I. BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY: Luiz Felipe Loureiro Comparato - known as Doc Comparato - was born in Rio de Janeiro, November 3, 1949. A medical doctor with a specialty in cardiology at 22, Comparato won a fellowship from the British Council at the National Heart Hospital in London in the late 1970s. Returning to Brazil, he left medicine to dedicate himself fulltime to screen, stage and TV work. Since then, he has written over fifteen plays that have been published and produced in Brazil, Latin America and Europe (Spain, Italy, France, England, and Germany, in translation), several novels and children's books and a prizewinning collection of short stories. One of the founders of TV Globo's Creative Center (*Centro de Criação*) in 1986, Doc's prodigious accomplishments as a creator, author and collaborating author of innumerable series and miniseries since 1978 for Globo, Record and TV networks in Latin America and Europe have won him a number of international prizes. Among the series and miniseries for TV Globo that he has authored or co-authored: *A Justiceira* (1997/1998); *O Tempo E O Vento* (1985); and *Lampião E Maria Bonita* (1982, the first Latin American miniseries and the first Globo TV series).

A truly international figure, Comparato has lived for extended periods outside of Brazil, engaging in innovative media projects in England, Portugal,

Spain, Italy, Germany, Cuba, Mexico and Argentina and has traveled often throughout Latin America and Europe working as a professor, script consultant, Creative Adviser, and Script Doctor. In 1987, he worked with Gabriel García Márquez on a miniseries, *Me Alquillo Para Soñar/Rent Dreams* in Cuba - produced on TV-E, in Madrid in 1990 - and with Russian script writer Alexander Chlepianov in Moscow. From 2002 to 2003 he lived in Barcelona where he worked as a scriptwriter, as well as creative director for Prodigius Audiovisuals (Producer of European TV-movies) and also director of DEA Planeta (De Agostini Planeta Corporation, with headquarters in London) for the development of miniseries and European audiovisual projects. He was also Consultant for the European Script Foundation - Pilot Project (with headquarters in Amsterdam). His Spanish/Catalan script credits include *Hospital* (Tv Antena 3/Madrid /1997) and *Arnau* (Miniseries/Barcelona/1994).

Comparato has also worked occasionally as an actor, but his thespian talents are most often applied in the courses and seminars he teaches on script writing. His two books on writing screenplays - *Roteiro, arte da televisão* (1983) and *Da Criação Ao Roteiro* (1995) - have gone through several editions and languages and remain important pedagogical references today. A frequent lecturer and professor in Latin America and Europe, he continues to give seminars, courses and lectures worldwide. Doc now lives in Rio de Janeiro.

- **Please see following complete CV for details on Comparato's extensive travels, publications and international work.**

DOC COMPARATO COMPLETE CV

II. MAJOR AWARDS, HONORS, DISTINCTIONS:

National Awards (Brazil)

APCA/ Association of Art Critics of São Paulo. Best new author, TV, 1982.

SNT (Serviço Nacional de Teatro) honorable mention, *Estudo sobre portas e janelas (Beijo da louca)*, 1980.

SNT (Serviço Nacional de Teatro) honorable mention, *Novíssimo Testamento (Pléides)*, 1979.

Concurso de Contos do Paraná, Short story prize, 1978.

International Awards

FyMTI. Buenos Aires. Festival y Mercado de TV-ficción Internacional. International Achievement Award for Contribution to TV Fiction. 2012.

LALIFF (11th Annual Los Angeles Latino International Film Festival) – Best Film Script, *Corazón de la tierra*. 2007.

Ana Magnani Award for best stage production, *Nostradamus* – Italy. 2003.

DAAD - Deutsch Academic Art Development - Teaching Fellowship, Munich Film School, 2002.

Academy of Catalan Literature - Best script, *Arnau* - Barcelona, Spain. 1995. (adapted as a novel in 1994 (Barcelona: Proa) by Doc Comparato and Xesc Barceló.

El Coral Negro - Cuba - Best miniseries, adapted from Erico Veríssimo's novel, *O Tempo e o Vento*. 1986.

Best original script, children and adolescent category - *Cangaceiro Trapalhão*, Tomar Film Festival - Portugal. 1985.

Prague Television Festival. *Malu Mulher*, Regina Duarte received the best actress award for episode, *Parada Obrigatória*, scripted by DC, 1984.

New York Film and Television Festival, gold award, best original script for TV miniseries. (TV Globo Production *Lampião e Maria Bonita*). 1982.

III. PUBLICATIONS AND PRODUCTIONS: (For information on available sites for e-books, please see: www.doccomparato.com.br)

PLAYS, MOST RECENT EDITIONS:

Portuguese:

Plêiades (ou Pequenas Cirurgias para Aracnídeos)

O Beijo da Louca

O Despertar dos Desatinados

Nostradamus (O Prisioneiro do Futuro)

Miguelangelo (O Prisioneiro do Presente)

O Círculo das Luzes (O Prisioneiro do Passado)

Sempre (Ou, o Caso da Moça de Gargantilha ou na Intimidade das Coisas)

Jamais (Calabar, um elogio à Traição; ou, Na Posse das Coisas)

Eterno (Ou, Xanadu, no Limite da Criatividade; ou, No Inalcançável das Coisas)

A Incrível Viagem. (children's theatre) Rio de Janeiro, Brazil: Ebal, 1984.

As Tias: Tragicomédia Em Dois Atos, with Aguinaldo Silva. Rio de Janeiro: Ed. Achiamé, 1981.

In English: (Pix Editora, E-Books)

Rain Forest (O Despertar dos Desatinados, from Trilogia do Amanhã)

Nostradamus (from *Trilogia do Tempo*)

The Secret Days of Orson Welles in Brazil (*Eterno* from *Trilogia da Imaginação*)

MAJOR PRODUCTIONS, PLAYS:

Nadistas e Tudistas (Rio de Janeiro / 2014/ Teatro Ipanema)

Lição Nº 18 (Rio de Janeiro / 2010 / Teatro Poeira)

Nostradamus (São Paulo / 1985/86/ Award: Best play,1986 São Paulo Producer's APETESC) (Rio de Janeiro / 1999 / Teatro Centro Cultural Banco do Brasil/CCBB / Italy, 2003 /Ana Magnani Award for best stage production) Roma / Italy, 2003 /Ana Magnani Award for best stage production.

O Círculo das Luzes (Rio de Janeiro / 2002 / Maison de France)

Miguelangelo (Rio de Janeiro / 2001/ Teatro Carlos Gomes)

A Incrível Viagem (First produced in São Paulo and Rio / 1984 / produced throughtout Brazil)

O Beijo Da Louca (Rio de Janeiro / 1981 / Teatro Vila Lobos)

OTHER PUBLICATIONS: Fiction and Didactic

Fiction:

A Guerra Das Imaginações. Rio de Janeiro: Ed. Rocco, 1997.

Translations/International editions:

La Guerra Delle Immaginazioni. Rome, Italy, 2002.

Von Der Entdckun Des Paradieses. Frankfurt, Germany: Ed. Eichborn, 2000.

La Guerra De Las Imaginaciones. Buenos Aires, Argentina: Ed. Planeta, 1998.

La Guerra De Las Imaginaciones. Mexico, D.F.: Ed. Planeta, 1998.

A Guerra Das Imaginações. Lisbon, Portugal: Ed. Pergaminho, 1998.

La Guerra De Las Imaginaciones. Madrid, Spain: Ed. Planeta, 1998.

Padre Cícero, with Aguinaldo Silva and Regina Braga. (Based on TV Globo miniseries). Rio de Janeiro: Ed. Record, 1984.

O Calo, O mundo encantado de uma gorda, Esses alucinantes termos médicos, Verão tijucano, O homem que perdeu o humor, Hada e o 'H', A História da pestana.

Crônicas/Short stories in *O Melhor da Crônica Brasileira 2*. Luis Calvalcante Proença. Rio de Janeiro: José Olympio, 1981.

Sangue, Papéis e Lágrimas. Rio de Janeiro: Ed. Codecri, 1979. (Short stories)

Didactic:

Roteiro, arte da televisão. Rio de Janeiro: Ed. Nórdica, 1983.

Translations/International editions:

El Guió: art i técnica d'escriure per al cinema i la televisió. Barcelona: Generalitat de Catalunya. Institut Català de Noves Professions ; [Bellaterra] : Universitat Autònoma de Bellaterra, 1989

El Guión. Barcelona, Spain: Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, 1983.

El Guion. Madrid, Spain: Instituto Oficial de Radio y Televisión, 1983, 1999.

El Guión. Buenos Aires, Argentina: Garay Ediciones, 1983.

El Guión. Mexico, D.F.: Planeta (2nd edition), 2000.

El Guión. Buenos Aires: Oficial Publicación del Cbc, 1997.

Da Criação Ao Roteiro. Rio de Janeiro: Ed. Rocco, 1995.

Da Criação ao Roteiro. São Paulo: Summus Editorial, 2009.

Translations/International editions:

Da Criação Ao Guião. Lisbon, Portugal: Ed. Pergaminho, 1992.

De La Creación Al Guión. Madrid: Instituto Oficial Radiotelevisión, 1988, 2008.

De La Creación Al Guión. Buenos Aires : La Crujía Ediciones, 2005
Testimony/Depoimento, Doc Comparato and others. *Tv Ao Vivo Depoimentos*.
São Paulo: Ed. Brasiliense, 1988.

Published screen/miniseries scripts:

Me Alquilo Para Soñar. Bogotá, Colombia : Editorial Voluntad, 1995.

Me Alugo Para Sonhar. Niterói, Rio de Janeiro: Ed. Casa Jorge Editorial, 1997.

Me Alquilo Para Soñar . Madrid,Spain: Ollero E Ramos Editores, Spain, 1997.

Arnau, Els Dies Secrets, with Xesc Barceló. Barcelona, Spain: Ed. Proa, Spain, 1994.

Childrens' Books:

A Incrível Viagem. (play) Rio de Janeiro, Brazil: Ebal, 1984.

Nadistas E Tudistas. Rio de Janeiro, Brazil: Ebal, 1984. (Re-edited, Editora Leitura, 2013).

E-Books

In 2013/2014, are released in digital format www.facebook.com/doccomparatodigital published by Simplíssimo the following e-books: *Pleiades*, *O Despertar dos Desatinados*, "O Beijo da Louca", *O Círculo das Luzes*, *Nostradamus*, *Michelangelo*, *Eterno*, *Jamais* and *Sempre* (theater plays in Portuguese). Follows: *De La Creación al Guión* (didactic book in spanish).

IV. CINEMA (Screenplays):

El Corazon de la Tierra (Spain/Madrid) 2007 - Antonio Cuadri, Director

Piège (Paris/France) 1993 - Jorge Marrecos, Director

Encontros Imperfeitos (Lisbon/Portugal)1991 - Jorge Marrecos, Director
(unfinished film, Alexander script written with Chlepianov)

O Trapalhão na Arca de Noé (Brazil) 1985 - Daniel Filho, Director

O Cangaceiro Trapalhão (Brazil) 1985 - Daniel Filho, Director

O Bom Burguês (Brazil) 1979 - Oswaldo Caldeira, Director

Bonitinha mas Ordinária (Brazil) 1981 - Braz Chediak, Director

O Beijo no Asfalto (Brazil) 1981 - Bruno Barreto, Director

V. SUMMARY: WORK IN TELEVISION, TV GLOBO, AUTHOR OR CO-AUTHOR

A. SERIALS:

Plantão de Polícia: (Creator and Author)

22/06/1979 - *Crime do Vidigal*

06/07/1979 - *Vampiros Tropicais*

27/07/1979 - *A Voz do Além*

24/08/1979 - *Vermelho 23*

31/08/1979 - *O Enigma da Pensão do Reno*

28/09/1979 - *Balão Apagado*

19/10/1979 - *Despedida de Solteiro*

30/04/1980 - *O Cavaleiro do Apocalipse*

28/05/1980 - *Nos Porões da Liberdade*

25/06/1980 - *O Arqui-inimigo*

09/07/1980 - *O Acordo*

16/07/1980 - *A Doceira de Bangu*

01/10/1980 - *O Venerável Azul Turquesa*

15/10/1980 - *Pega*

10/12/1980 - *Caixa de Surpresas*

17/12/1980 - *Camisa de Força*

05/05/1981 - *Trem Noturno*

04/06/1981 - *Sangue, Calçada e Milk-Shake*
11/06/1981 - *O Caminho das Estrelas - I*
18/06/1981 - *O Caminho das Estrelas - II*
25/06/1981 - *O Caminho das Estrelas - III*
03/07/1981 - *O Caminho das Estrelas - IV*
13/08/1981 - *Olho da Morte*
03/09/1981 - *O Herdeiro*

Malu Mulher: (Author)

11/08/1980 - *Parada Obrigatória*

Retrato de Mulher: (Creator and Author)

16/12/92 - *Era uma Vez... Leila*
18/05/93 - *Era uma Vez... Madalena*

A Justiceira: (Creator and Author)

09/04/1997 - *Preço da Vida*
16/04/1997 - *Cinzas no Planalto*
17/04/1997 - *Bala no Trem de Prata*
23/04/1997 - *O Filho da Madona*
30/04/1997 - *O Navio Luminoso*
07/05/1997 - *Viagem ao Inferno*
14/05/1997 - *Eternos Diamantes*
21/05/1997 - *Mesmo que Seja Eu*
28/05/1997 - *Filha Única*
04/06/1997 - *Criador e Criatura*
11/06/1997 - *Balas Perdidas*
18/06/1997 - *Trem de Prata*
02/07/1997 - *Viver por Viver*

***Mulher:* (Author)**

22/04/1998 - *Fator Humano*
21/10/1998 - *De Braços Abertos*
11/11/1998 - *O Néctar da Vida*
13/04/1999 - *Vícios e Virtudes*
01/06/1999 - *Perfume do Amor*
27/07/1999 - *Lindo Maravilhoso*
07/09/1999 - *A Bela Adormecida*
14/09/1999 - *Sabotagem*
09/11/1999 - *O Segredo*

B. MINISERIES: (Author and Creator):

26/04/1982 - *Lampião e Maria Bonita*
10/01/1983 - *Bandidos da Falange*
09/04/1984 - *Padre Cícero*
22/04/1985 - *O Tempo e o Vento*
24/06/1990 - *A,E,I,O... Urca*

C. OTHER TV WORK, (Globo):

***Caso Especial.* TV Movies: (Author)**

10/05/1978 - *E Agora, Marco?*
02/01/1981 - *Os Amores de Castro Alves*

***Quarta Nobre.* TV Movies: (Creator and Author)**

06/04/1983 - *A Dama das Camélias*
27/04/1983 - *O Inspetor Geral*
25/05/1983 - *A Pata do Macaco*
08/06/1983 - *Damas, Valete e Crime*
31/08/1983 - *Morte no Paraíso*
05/10/1983 - *A Vida Secreta de Berenice*

26/10/1983 - *Do Outro Lado do Túnel*
02/07/1998 - *Brasil 500 Anos* (Daily updates)
Brasil 500 Anos: (Author)

D. ACTING CREDITS (Globo):

Miniseries:

1984 - *Padre Cícero* - (Macedo)
1990 - *A,E,I,O... Urca* - (The Jew Jacob)
1998 - *Labarinto* - (Himself)

Telenovela

1985 - *A Gata Comeu* - (Himself)

Quarta Nobre

1983 - *A Dama das Camélias* - (guy with the clapperboard)

VI. SUMMARY: OTHER TV WORK, BRAZIL, INTERNATIONAL BRAZIL

2008/2009: TV Record - *Os Mutantes*
2007: TV Record - *Caminhos do Coração*
2004: TV SBT - Creative Consultant

INTERNATIONAL

1997: TV Antena 3/Spain - *Hospital* - Miniseries
1996: T.V. R.T.P./Portugal - *Na Paz Dos Anjos* - Coordinator for the soap opera
1996: Catalan TV/Spain - *Poble Nou* - Miniseries Script Adviser
1995: TV R.T.P./Portugal - *Visita De Natal* - TV movie
1994: Catalan TV/Spain - *Arnau* - Miniseries with Xesc Barceló
1994: TV R.T.P./Portugal - *Véspera De Natal* - TV movie
1993: TV R.T.P./Portugal *Procura-Se* - Miniseries - Script Adviser

1990: TV R.T.P/Portugal - *Histórias Que O Diabo Gosta* - Serials
1990: Catalan TV/Spain - *Locos Por La Tele* - Script Adviser
1990: TV-E/Spain - *Me Alquillo Para Soñar*, in collaboration with Gabriel García Márquez

MAJOR CONSULTANTSHIPS

2004: Creative Consultant for SBT Television channel (SBT – São Paulo – Brazil)
2002-2003: Creative Director for Prodigius Audiovisuals (Producer of European TV- movies).
2002-2003: Director of DEA Planeta (De Agostini Planeta Corporation, with headquarters in London) for the development of miniseries and European audiovisual projects.
2002-2003: Consultant for the European Script Foundation - Pilot Project (with headquarters in Amsterdam).
1994: Creative Adviser, TVI (Portugal).
1992: Creative Adviser, SIC (Portugal).

VII. SELECTED TALKS AND SEMINARS:

2014: Doctor script of eight international screenplay DreamAgo program, Switzerland, Europe.
2014: Opening Post-Graduation course, “Character, dramaturgy and screenwriting,” International School of Film and Television (EICTV) of San Antonio de los Baños, Cuba.
2008: “From the creation to the screenplay,” lecture, Brazilian Academy of Literature (Academia Brasileira de Letras), Rio de Janeiro.
2008: seminar, "Guión y Creatividad," Medellin for the XII International TV Encounter.
2002: Workshop seminars, RAI Television, Rome, Italy.
2001/2002: Professor, Screenplay. Berlin Film School, Berlin, Germany.

1994: Founding Coordinator and Professor, MFA Script writing . Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona.

1984: Professor, screenplay. Casa das Artes Laranjeiras (CAL), Rio de Janeiro.
Comparato will administer a seminar

Addenda:

Upcoming seminar series, Sponsored by the Festival y Mercado de TV - Ficción Internacional, Buenos Aires, August 26 - 31, 2013. (<https://eventioz.com.ar/events/script-doctoring-a-cargo-de-doc-comparato>)

An excerpt from the program publicity, taken from the Spanish newspaper *El País*, that describes Comparato's contribution to Television in the following manner:

An expert in Television, with the extraordinary capacity to produce and theorize within the most difficult means of mass communication. He distinguished himself by putting into practice modern and original concepts that reverberated in immediate innovations in television culture. Doc Comparato's acute vision has earned him a place as one of the most respected men of Television, enhanced by the advantage of his knowledge of Latin-American spectators that few possess. The workshops, conferences and debates that he provides always leave the participants with a need of making better television the following day. He is one of the most important Latin-American dramatists alive.

Recommend, in Portuguese: In the following interview site - Webwritersbrasil - Doc Comparato offers an informal but incisive overview of his work and ideas. Interviewed by Alexandre Gennari and Felipe Moreno:

<http://webwritersbrasil.wordpress.com/a-arte-do-roteiro/entrevistas-2/doccomparato/>

NOTE: All specified dates in this CV are listed as Date/Month/Year