
Opening Extract from...

Heretics

Written by Leonardo Padura

Translated from the Spanish by Anna Kushner

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HERETICS

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the Spanish by Anna Kushner

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Once again for Lucía, the leader of the tribe

There are artists who feel secure when they enjoy freedom, but there are others who can only breathe free when they feel secure.

—Arnold Hauser

Everything is in the hands of God, except the fear of God.

—The Talmud

Whoever has reflected on these four things would have done better not coming into the world: What is above us? What is below us? What came before? What will come after? —Rabbinical maxim

HERETIC. From the Greek αἱρετικός—hairetikós—adjective derived from the noun αἵρεσις—haíresis, "division, choice," coming from the verb αἱρεϊσθσι—haireísthai, **"to choose, to divide, to prefer,"** originally to define people belonging to other schools of thought, in other words, who have certain "preferences" in that area. The term comes to be associated for the first time with those dissident Christians in the early Church in the Irenaeus, treatise of Lyon's *Adversus haereses* (*Against Heresies*, end of second century), especially against Gnostics. It probably derives from the Indo-European root *ser* with the meaning "to seize." In Hittite, the word *šaru* is found, and in Welsh *herw*, both with the meaning "booty."

According to the *Diccionario de la Real Academia de la Lengua Española*: HERETIC. (From the Provençal *eretge*). 1. Common. A person who denies any of the dogmas established by a religion. ╫2. A person who dissents or moves away from the official line of opinion followed by an institution, an organization, an academy, etc. . . . Colloquial. ***Cuba*. To describe a situation: [To be a heretic] To be very difficult, especially in political or economic aspects.**

Contents

Author's Note *xiii*

BOOK OF DANIEL 1

BOOK OF ELIAS 191

BOOK OF JUDITH 335

GENESIS 501

Acknowledgments *527*

Author's Note

Many of the episodes narrated in this book are based on exhaustive historical research and were even derived from primary sources, including *Abyss of Despair* (*Le fond de l'abîme*) by N. N. Hannover, a shocking and vivid testimony of the horrors of the slaughter of Jews in Poland between 1648 and 1653, written with such a capacity to unsettle the reader that, with the necessary cuts and edits, I decided to incorporate it into the novel, rounding it out with fictional characters. Ever since reading that text, I knew I would not be able to better describe the same explosion of horror and, less still, to imagine the depths of sadism and perversion reached in the reality that the chronicler witnessed and described shortly after.

But since this is a novel, some of the historical events have been submitted to the demands of plot development in the interest of their, I repeat, novelistic use. Perhaps the passage in which I carry out this exercise most vehemently is the one with events taking place in the 1640s, which in reality constitutes a sum of events relating to the moment, mixed with incidents from the following decade, like the excommunication of Baruch Spinoza, the pilgrimage by the supposed Messiah Sabbatai Zevi, or Menasseh ben Israel's voyage to London in which he achieved, in 1655, Cromwell and English parliament's tacit approval of the presence of Jews in England, who soon began to settle there . . .

In later passages there is a strict respect for historical chronology, with minor alterations in the biographies of some characters taken from real life. Because history, reality, and novels run on different engines.

Book of Daniel

1

Havana, 1939

It would take Daniel Kaminsky many years to grow accustomed to the exuberant sounds of a city built on the most unwieldy commotion. He had quickly discovered that everything there began and ended with yelling, everything sputtered with rust and humidity, cars moved forward amid the wheezing and banging of engines or the long beeping of horns, dogs barked with and without reason and roosters even crowed at midnight, while each vendor made himself known with a toot, a bell, a trumpet, a whistle, a rattle, a flageolet, a melody in perfect pitch, or, simply, a shriek. He had run aground in a city in which, on top of it all, each night, at nine on the dot, cannon fire roared without any declaration of war or city gates to close, and where, in good times and bad, you always, always heard music, and not just that, singing.

At the beginning of his Havana life, the boy would often try to evoke, as much as his scarcely-filled-with-memories mind would allow, the thick silences of the Jewish bourgeois neighborhood in Kraków where he had been born and lived his early days. He pursued that cold, rose-colored land of the past intuitively from the depths of his rootlessness; but when his memories, real or imagined, touched down on the firm ground of reality, he immediately reacted and tried to escape it. In the dark, silent Kraków of his infancy, too much noise could mean only two things: it was either market day or there was some imminent danger. In the final years of his Polish existence, danger grew to be more common than merchants. So fear became a constant companion.

As expected, when Daniel Kaminsky landed in the raucous city, for

a long time he would process the pounding of that explosive, resounding environment, one alarm bell after another, until, with the passing of years, he managed to understand that, in this new world, silence tended to herald only the most dangerous things. Once he overcame that phase, when he finally came to live amid the noise without hearing the noise, the way one breathes without consciousness of each breath, young Daniel discovered that he had lost his ability to appreciate the beneficent qualities of silence. But he would boast, above all, of having managed to make peace with Havana's racket, since, at the same time, he'd attained the stubborn goal of feeling like he belonged to that turbulent city where, lucky for him, he had been spit out by the wave of a curse of history or of the divine—and until the end of his days he would wonder which of these was more accurate.

The day on which Daniel Kaminsky began to experience the worst nightmare of his life, and simultaneously to get the first hint of his privileged fate, an overwhelming ocean smell and an ungodly, almost physical silence hung over Havana in the wee hours of the morning. His uncle Joseph had woken him earlier than he usually did to send him to Hebrew school at the Israelite Center, where the boy was receiving academic and religious instruction in addition to the essential Spanish language lessons that would allow for his integration into the motley and diverse world where he would live only God knew for how long. But the day revealed itself as different when, after having imparted the Sabbath blessing and expressed his best wishes for Shavuot, his uncle broke with his usual restraint and kissed the boy on the forehead.

Uncle Joseph, also a Kaminsky and, of course also Polish, had by then taken to being called Pepe the Purseman—thanks to the masterful way he carried out his work as a maker of bags, billfolds, and purses, among other leather goods—and was always, and would be until his death, a strict follower of the precepts of the Jewish religion. As such, before letting him taste the awaited breakfast already laid out on the table, he reminded the boy that they should not merely do the customary ablutions and prayers of a very special morning, since it was God's will, blessed be, that Shavuot—the great ancient festival commemorating the giving of the Ten Commandments to the patriarch Moses, and the joyous acceptance of the Torah by the nation's founders—fell on the Sabbath. They should also offer up prayers to their God that morning, as his uncle reminded him in his speech, asking for His divine intervention

in helping them resolve in the best possible way something that seemed to have become complicated in the worst way. Although the complications may not apply to them, he added, smiling mischievously.

After almost an hour of prayers, during which Daniel thought he would faint from hunger and fatigue, Joseph Kaminsky finally signaled that his nephew could help himself to the abundant breakfast featuring warm goat's milk (which, since it was Saturday, the Roman and apostolic María Perupatto, an Italian woman chosen by his uncle as the "Sabbath goy," had left on the burning coals of their portable cooker), the square crackers called *matzot*, fruit jams, and even a fair amount of baklava dripping in honey. The feast would make the boy ask himself where his uncle found the money for such luxuries, since what Daniel Kaminsky would always remember of those days, for the rest of his long years on earth—besides the torment caused by the surrounding noise and the horrible week that followed—was the insatiable and unending hunger that nagged at him like the most loyal dog.

Filled with such a sumptuous and unusual breakfast, the boy took advantage of his constipated uncle's delayed trip to the communal bathroom of the phalanstery where they lived to go up to the building's rooftop. The tile was still wet with dew in those hours prior to sunrise and, defying all prohibitions, he dared to lean over the eaves to contemplate the panorama of Compostela and Acosta Streets, the heart of Havana's growing Jewish population. The unkempt Ministry of the Interior building, an old Catholic convent from the colonial era, remained closed under lock and key as if it were dead. Under the contiguous arcade, the so-called Arco de Belén below which Calle Acosta ran, not a single being walked. Ideal Movie Theater, the German bakery, the Polish hardware store, Moshé Pipik's restaurant (which the boy's appetite considered the world's greatest temptation)—all had their curtains drawn and darkened windows. Although many Jews lived around there, and as such, the majority of the businesses were Jewish-run and in some cases remained closed every Saturday, the reigning calm was not only due to the hour or to the fact that it was the Sabbath, Shavuot day, synagogue day, but also because at that instant, while Cubans slept the day away, the majority of the area's Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jews were picking out their best clothes and getting ready to go out with the same purpose as the Kaminskys.

The silence of the wee hours, his uncle's kiss, the unexpected breakfast, and even the happy coincidence that Shavuot fell on Saturday had

really only come to confirm Daniel Kaminsky's childish expectation of the day ahead. Because the reason for his early start was that, at Havana's port, at some point around sunrise, the arrival was expected of the passenger ship the S.S. *Saint Louis*, which had set sail from Hamburg fifteen days prior and aboard which traveled 937 Jews authorized to emigrate by the German National Socialist government. And amid the *Saint Louis*'s passengers were Dr. Isaiah Kaminsky, his wife, Esther Kellerstein, and their small daughter, Judith—in other words, little Daniel Kaminsky's father, mother, and sister.

2

Havana, 2007

From the moment he opened his eyes, even before he managed to recover his dilapidated consciousness, still soaked in the cheap rum that marked his night with Tamara—because it was Tamara, who else would it be, sleeping beside him—a treacherous feeling of defeat stabbed Mario Conde as it had been doing for far too long already. Why get up? *What could he do with his day?* the nagging feeling asked him. Conde didn't know what to say in response. Overwhelmed by the inability to answer himself, he left the bed, careful not to disturb the woman's placid dreams, as a silvery thread of drool escaped from her half-open mouth along with an almost musical snore, higher-pitched perhaps because of the secretion itself.

At the kitchen table, after drinking a cup of freshly made coffee and lighting the first of the day's cigarettes that helped him so much to regain the dubious condition of rationality, the man looked through the back door, where the first light shone of what threatened to be another hot September day. His lack of prospects was so glaring that at that moment he decided to face it the best way he knew and the only way he could: full-on and in fighting mode.

An hour and a half later, sweat pouring out of his pores, the very same Mario Conde was running around the streets of the Cerro neighborhood announcing his desperate aim like a medieval merchant. "I buy old books! Come on and sell your old books!"

Ever since he had left the police force, almost twenty years before, and as a saving grace taken up the very touchy but profitable exercise of

buying and selling used books, Conde had played all the roles he could in that business: from the old-fashioned method of a street vendor announcing his wares (which for a time hurt his pride so) to specifically seeking out libraries a former client or some informant noted, or even to that of knocking door-to-door on houses in el Vedado and Miramar, which, due to some characteristic that passed unremarked by others (an unkempt garden, windows with broken glass), suggested the possible existence of books and, above all, the need to sell them. Lucky for him, when he met Yoyi the Pigeon, that young man with an enormous knack for the market, a while later, and started to work with him in search of only select bibliographies for which Yoyi always had so many specific buyers, Conde started to experience a period of financial prosperity that lasted several years and allowed him to pursue, almost without constraint, activities that gave him the most satisfaction in life: reading good books and eating, drinking, listening to music, and philosophizing (talking shit, really) with his oldest and closest friends.

But his commercial activities didn't have infinite potential. For the last three or four years since stumbling upon the Montes de Oca family's fabulous library, sealed and protected by siblings Dionisio and Amalia Ferrero, he had not found another collection that extraordinary, and each request made by Yoyi's demanding buyers required a great effort to meet. The terrain, increasingly mined, had become cracked, like the earth after a long drought, and Conde had begun to live through times in which the lows were much more frequent than the highs, thus forcing him to hit the streets more frequently in this sweaty, poor man's way.

Another hour and a half later, when he had crossed part of the Cerro neighborhood and taken his shouts to the neighboring Palatino, without any result whatsoever, fatigue, laziness, and the harsh September sun forced him to shut down for the day and climb aboard a bus that came from God knew where and that miraculously stopped in front of him and carried him close to his business partner's house.

Yoyi the Pigeon, in contrast to Conde, was an entrepreneur with vision and had diversified his activities. Rare, expensive books were just one of his hobbies, he maintained, since his real interest was in more lucrative matters: the buying and selling of houses, cars, jewels, valuable objects. That young engineer who had never touched a screw or entered any job sites had long ago discovered, with a clairvoyance that always surprised Conde, that the country where they lived was far from the

paradise painted by newspapers and official speeches, and he had decided, as the most adept do, to turn misery to his advantage. His skills and intelligence enabled him to establish himself on many fronts, on the borders of what was legal, although not too far from the limits, in businesses that made him enough money to live like a prince, restaurant-hopping in designer clothing and gold jewelry, always in the company of beautiful women as they traveled in his 1957 convertible Chevy Bel Air, the car that anyone in the know considered to be the most perfect, enduring, comfortable, and elegant ride ever to come out of an American factory—and for which the young man had paid a fortune, at least in Cuban terms. Yoyi was, in effect, the prototype taken from the catalog of the New Man eked out by the reality of the moment: aloof from politics, addicted to the ostentatious enjoyment of life, bearer of a utilitarian morality.

"Son of a bitch, man, you look like shit," the young man said when Conde showed up, sweaty and with a face described so aptly semantically and scatologically.

The recent arrival merely said, "Thanks," and fell onto the springy sofa, where Yoyi, freshly showered after having spent two hours at a private gym, was whiling the time away watching a Major League Baseball game on his fifty-two-inch plasma TV.

As usual, Yoyi invited him to have lunch. The cook who worked for the young man had made cod à la Biscay, black beans and rice, plantains *en tentación*, and a salad full of several vegetables that Conde devoured hungrily and avidly, with the aid of a bottle of reserve Pesquera that Yoyi brought out of the special refrigerator where he kept his wines at the right temperature as required by the heat of the tropics.

As they drank their coffee on the terrace, Conde again felt the stab of the overwhelming frustration hounding him.

"There's no more to be had, Yoyi. People don't even have old newspapers around anymore . . ."

"Something always turns up, man. You can't lose hope," Yoyi said as he sucked, as he usually did, on the huge gold medallion with the Virgin Mary that hung on the thick chain made of the same metal over his puffed-out pectorals, like the pigeon's breast that gave him his nickname.

"So if I don't lose hope, what in the hell do I do?"

"I can sense in the air that something big is coming down," Yoyi said, and even sniffed at the warm September air. "And your pockets will fill up with pesos . . ."

Conde was aware of where those sensory premonitions of Yoyi's would lead and was ashamed of knowing that he had stopped by the young man's house to prompt them. But there was so little of his former pride left standing that, when he felt too pinched for cash, he went there with his complaints. At fifty-four years old, Conde knew he was a paradigmatic member of what years before he and his friends had deemed to be the hidden generation, those aging and defeated beings who, unable to leave their lairs, had evolved (involved, actually) into the most disappointed and fucked-up generation within the new country that was taking shape. Without the energy or the youth to recycle themselves as art vendors or the managers of foreign corporations, or at least as plumbers or bakers, their only recourse was to resist as survivors. Thus, while some subsisted on the dollars sent by their children who had gone off to anywhere in the world but there, others tried to do what they could to avoid falling into absolute poverty or jail: work as private tutors, drivers who rented out their battered cars, self-employed veterinarians or masseuses, whatever came up. But the option to make a living clawing at the walls wasn't easy and caused that stellar exhaustion, the feeling of constant uncertainty and irreversible defeat that frequently gripped the former policeman and drove him, with one rough push, against his will and desires to hit the streets looking for old books that would earn him, at least, a few pesos to survive.

After drinking coffee, smoking a couple of cigarettes, and talking about life, Yoyi emitted a yawn that could have shaken the whole building and told Conde that the time had arrived for a siesta, the only decent activity that any Havana man who was proud of being so could engage in at that hour and in that heat.

"Don't worry, I'm leaving . . ."

"You're not going anywhere, *man*," he said, emphasizing this pet word of his in particular. "Grab the cot that's in the garage and take it to the bedroom. I had the air conditioner turned on a while ago . . . Naps are sacred . . . I have to go out later, I'll take you home."

Conde, who had nothing better to do, obeyed the Pigeon. Although he was about twenty years older than the young man, he tended to trust Yoyi's wisdom on life. It was true that after that cod and the Pesquera he had drunk, a nap imposed itself like a command dictated by the tropical geographic fatalism and its best Iberian legacy.

Three hours later, in the shining Chevy convertible that Yoyi proudly

drove down Havana's potholed streets, the two men were headed to Conde's neighborhood. Shortly before arriving at the former policeman's house, Conde asked Yoyi to stop.

"Drop me off at the corner, there's something I need to deal with there . . ."

Yoyi the Pigeon smiled and started to pull the car over to the curb.

"In front of Bar of the Hopeless?" Yoyi asked, knowing the needs and weaknesses of Conde and his soul.

"Around there."

"Do you still have money?"

"More or less. The funds for book purchasing." Conde repeated the formula and, to take his leave, held out his hand to the young man, who firmly shook it. "Thanks for lunch, the nap, and the boost."

"Look, man, take this anyway, so you can get a leg up." From behind the Chevy's wheel, the young man counted several bills from the stack he had taken out of his pocket and handed some to Conde. "A little advance on the good business deal I'm sensing."

Conde looked at Yoyi and, without too much thought, took the money. It wasn't the first time that something similar had happened, and ever since the young man had started to talk about a good business opportunity he sensed, Conde had known that would mark their goodbye. And he also knew that, even though the relationship between them had been born from a commercial connection to which each brought his own skills, Yoyi truly valued him. Because of this, his pride didn't feel any more damaged than it already was by accepting some bills that would give him some breathing room.

"You know something, Yoyi? You are the nicest son of a bitch in Cuba."

Yoyi smiled as he stroked the enormous gold medal on his breastbone.

"Don't go around saying that, man . . . If they find out I'm also a nice guy, I'll lose my reputation. See you!" And he drove off in the silent Bel Air. The car moved forward as if it were king of the road. Or the world.

Mario Conde looked at the heartbreaking scene before him and noticed sharply how what he saw painfully brought down his pitiful mood. That corner had been part of the heart of his neighborhood and now it looked like an oozing pimple. Overcome by perverse nostalgia, he remembered when he was a boy, and his grandfather Rufino taught him the art of training fighting cocks and tried to impart a sentimental education adequate for surviving in a world that looked very much like a

cockfighting arena. He found himself this afternoon at that exact spot where his education had taken place, and from there he could see the constant to-and-fro of the neighborhood's well-known bus terminal where his father had worked for years. But, with the bus lines now out of service, the building was rotting like a battered parking lot in its death throes. Meanwhile, Conchita's food joint, Porfirio's sugarcane-juice counter, Pancho Mentira and the Albino's *frita* stands, Nenita's hardware store, Wildo and Chilo's barbershops, the bus stop cafeteria, Miguel's chicken place, Nardo and Manolo's bodega, Lefty's cafeteria, the Chinese shop, the furniture store, the shoe store, the two auto body shops with their tires and car-washing areas, the billiards hall, La Ceiba bakery with the way it smelled like life itself . . . all of that had also disappeared, as if swallowed whole by a tsunami or something even worse, and the image of it all survived by only a small margin in the stubborn minds of guys like Conde. Now, flanked by streets full of holes and broken sidewalks, one of the service station buildings had started operating as a cafeteria where junk was sold in CUCs, the dodgy Cuban national currency. There was nothing at the other service station, and in the place that used to be Nardo and Manolo's bodega—made over so many times that the original had been both diminished and given a new life—protected from possible robbery by pirates and corsairs by a fence of corrugated steel screws, there was a tiny bar facing Calzada that served as the local alcohol and nicotine dispensing center, baptized by Conde as the Bar of the Hopeless. It was there, and not at the CUC-charging cafeteria, where the neighborhood's drunks drank their cheap rum any time of day or night, without so much as an ice cube, while standing or sitting on the sticky floor, fighting with stray dogs for their spots.

Conde edged his way around some dark puddles and crossed Calzada. He approached the prison fence erected over the new bar. His thirst for alcohol that afternoon wasn't the worst he'd felt, but he needed to quench it. And Gandinga the bartender, "Gandi" to the regulars, was there to receive him.

Two stiff drinks and two long hours later, after showering and even applying German cologne that had been a gift from Aymara, Tamara's twin sister, Conde went back out. In a small bowl next to the kitchen's open trapdoor, he had left food for Garbage II, who, despite having turned ten already, persisted in his inherited predilection for living like a stray dog, one never renounced by his father, the noble and deceased

Garbage I. For himself, however, he hadn't prepared a thing: like almost every night, Josefina, his friend Carlos's mother, had invited him over for dinner and, in that case, it was best to have the maximum amount of space available in his stomach. With the two bottles of rum that, thanks to Yoyi's generosity, he had been able to buy at the Bar of the Hopeless, he boarded the bus and, despite the heat, the promiscuous behavior, the auditory and moral violence of reggaeton, and the reigning feeling of suffocation, the prospect of a better night led him to realize that he was again feeling acceptably calm, almost outside the world in which he found so much dissatisfaction and received so many blows.

Spending the night with his old friends at the house of Skinny Carlos, who had long since ceased to be skinny, was, for Mario Conde, the best way to end the day. The second best way was when, by mutual agreement, he and Tamara decided to spend the night together, watching some of Conde's favorite movies—something like *Chinatown*, *Cinema Paradiso*, or *The Maltese Falcon*, or Ettore Scola's ever squalid and moving *We All Loved Each Other So Much*, with that Stefania Sandrelli, who could awaken your cannibal instincts—and then ending the day with a roll in the hay that was slower and less feverish each time, but always deeply satisfying. Those small revelations amounted to the best he had to show for a life that, with all the years and blows accumulated, had lost all ambitions except those related to mere survival in its basest form. Because he had given up, he had even shed the dream of one day writing a novel in which he told a story—squalid and moving, naturally—like the ones written by Salinger, that son of a bitch who had to be about to die already, surely without publishing even one more miserable little story.

It was only in the realm of those worlds stubbornly maintained at the margins of real time, and around the borders of which Conde and his friends had raised the highest walls to keep out invading barbarians, where friendly and permanent universes existed that none of them, despite how much they changed physically or mentally, wanted to or attempted to renounce: the worlds with which they identified and where they felt like wax statues, nearly immune to the disasters and ills of their environment.

Skinny Carlos, Rabbit, and Red Candito were already talking on the porch. For a few months already, Carlos had had a new electric wheelchair that was battery-operated. The device had been brought from the

Great Beyond by the ever faithful and attentive Dulcita, Skinny's most loyal ex-girlfriend, exceedingly loyal since she became a widow a year earlier and started doubling the frequency of her trips from Miami and lengthening her stays on the island for an obvious reason, although she wouldn't publicly say so.

"Have you seen what time it is, you animal?" was Skinny's greeting as he set his automatic chair in motion to approach Conde and grab the bag where, he well knew, was the necessary fuel to get the evening going.

"Don't fuck with me, you brute, it's eight thirty . . . What's up, Rabbit? How's it going, Red?" he said, shaking his other friends' hands.

"Fucked-up, but happy," Rabbit replied.

"Same as this guy," Candito said, using his chin to point at Rabbit, "but no complaints. Because when I think of complaining, I pray a little."

Conde smiled. Ever since Candito had abandoned the frenetic activities to which he devoted himself for years—head of a clandestine bar, maker of shoes with stolen materials, administrator of an illegal gas depot—and had converted to Protestantism (Conde never really knew which denomination), that *mulato* of once saffron-colored hair now turned white with the snows of time, as the saying goes, tended to solve his problems by handing them over to God.

"One of these days, I'm going to ask you to baptize me, Red," Conde said. "The problem is that I'm so fucked that I'm going to have to spend all day praying after."

Carlos returned to the porch with his automatic chair and a tray on his inert legs where three glasses full of rum and one of lemonade clinked. As he distributed the drinks—the lemonade, of course, was Candito's—he explained, "My old lady is finishing up with the food."

"So what's Josefina going to hit us with today?" Rabbit wanted to know.

"She says things are bad and that she was lacking inspiration."

"Get ready!" Conde warned, imagining what was coming.

"Since it's so hot," Carlos began, "she's going to start with a chickpea soup, with chorizo, blood sausage, some chunks of pork and potatoes . . . The main dish she's making is baked snapper, but it's not that big, about ten pounds. And, of course, rice, but with vegetables, for easy digestion, she says. She already prepared the avocado salad, beans, turnips, and tomatoes."

"So what's for dessert?" Rabbit was drooling like a rabid dog.

"The same as usual: guava peels with white cheese. You see how she lacked inspiration?"

"Dammit, Skinny, is that woman a wizard?" asked Candito, whose great capacity for belief, even in the intangible, appeared to have been exceeded.

"Didn't you know?" Conde cried out and lowered his glass of rum. "Don't play dumb, Candito, don't play dumb!"

"Mario Conde?"

As soon as the question came from the behemoth with a ponytail, Conde started to do the count in his head: it had been years since he had cheated on anyone, his book business had always been as clean as business could be, he only owed Yoyi money . . . and it had been too long since he'd stopped being a policeman for someone to come after him now in revenge. When he added the hopeful as opposed to aggressive tone of the question to his calculations, along with the man's facial expression, he was a little more confident that the stranger, at least, didn't seem to have come with the intention to kill him or beat him up.

"Yes . . ."

The man had risen from one of the old and poorly painted chairs that Conde had on the porch of his house and that, despite their sorry state, the former policeman had chained together and to a column in order to make difficult any attempt to move them from their place. In the shadows, only broken by a streetlight—the last lightbulb Conde placed on his porch had been switched to some other lamp one night when, too drunk to think about lightbulbs, he had forgotten to change it back—he was able to form his first impression of the stranger's appearance. He was a tall man, maybe six foot two, over forty years old, and of a weight that was proportional to his height. His hair, thinning in the front, was pulled back at the nape of his neck in an overcompensating ponytail that also balanced out his large nose. When Conde was closer to him and managed to notice the pink paleness of his skin and the quality of his clothing, business casual, he was able to assume this was someone who had come from an ocean away. Any of the seven seas.

"Pleased to meet you. Elias Kaminsky," the foreigner said. He tried to smile and held out his right hand to Conde.

Convinced by the heat and softness of that huge hand wrapped

around his that this was not a possible aggressor, the former policeman set his rusty mental computer going to try to imagine the reason that, at almost midnight, the foreigner was waiting for him on the dark porch of his house. Was Yoyi right and now here he was in front of him, a rare-book seeker? He looked like it, he concluded, and made his best not-interested-in-business face, as the Pigeon's commercial wisdom advised.

"You said your name was . . . ?" Conde tried to clear his mind; fortunately for him it was not too clouded by alcohol, thanks to the culinary shock old Josefina delivered.

"Elias, Elias Kaminsky . . . Listen, I'm sorry I was waiting for you here . . . and at this late hour . . . Look . . ." The man, who spoke a very neutral Spanish, tried to smile, apparently embarrassed by the situation, and decided the smartest thing was to throw his best card on the table. "I'm a friend of your friend Andrés, the doctor, the one who lives in Miami . . ."

With those words, any of Conde's remaining tension disappeared as if by magic. He had to be an old-book seeker sent by his friend. Did Yoyi know something and that was why he was saying he had a feeling?

"Yes, of course, he said something . . ." Conde lied, as he hadn't heard anything from Andrés in two or three months.

"Oh good. Well, your friend sends his best and"—he searched in the pocket of his also business casual shirt (by Guess, Conde managed to see)—"and he wrote you this letter."

Conde took the envelope. It had been years since he'd received a letter from Andrés and he was impatient to read it. Some extraordinary reason must have pushed his friend to sit down and write, since, as a prophylactic against the artful creeping of nostalgia, once established in Miami, the doctor had decided to maintain a careful relationship with a past that was too stirring and thus a danger to his present health. Only twice per year did he break his silence and indulge in homesickness: on the night of Carlos's birthday and on December 31, when he called Skinny's house, knowing that his friends would be gathered there, drinking rum and counting losses, including his own, which had happened twenty years before when, as the bolero warns, Andrés left to never return. Although he did say goodbye.

"Your friend Andrés worked in the geriatric home where my parents spent many years, until they died," the man spoke again when he saw

how Conde was bending the envelope and putting it away in his small pocket. "He had a special relationship with them. My mother, who died a few months ago . . ."

"I'm sorry."

"Thank you . . . My mother was Cuban and my father was Polish, but he lived in Cuba for twenty years, until they left in 1958." Something in Elias Kaminsky's emotional memory made him smile vaguely. "Although he only lived in Cuba for those twenty years, he said he was Jewish in origin, Polish-German by birth, and because of his parents, legally an American citizen, and that the rest of him was Cuban. Because in truth he was more Cuban than anything else. On the black-bean-and-yuca-with-*mojo*-eating team, he always said . . ."

"Then, he was my kind of guy . . . Shall we sit?" Conde pointed at the chairs and, with one of his keys, unlocked the chains that united the seats like a marriage that forced them to live together, and then tried to arrange the chairs in a way that was more conducive to a conversation. His curiosity to know the reason for which the man sought him out had erased another part of the slump that had been dogging him for weeks.

"Thank you," Elias Kaminsky said as he got comfortable. "But I'm not going to bother you much. Look at the time . . ."

"So why did you come to see me?"

Kaminsky took out a packet of Camels and offered one to Conde, who politely turned it down. Only in the event of a nuclear catastrophe or under threat of death would he smoke one of those perfumed, sweetish pieces of shit. Conde, besides being a member of the Black Bean Eating Party, was also a nicotine patriot and he demonstrated this by lighting up one of his catastrophic, black-tobacco, filterless Criollos.

"I suppose Andrés explains in his letter . . . I'm a painter, I was born in Miami, and now I live in New York. My parents couldn't stand the cold so I had to leave them in Florida. They had an apartment in the nursing home where they met Andrés. Despite their origins, this is the first time I've been to Cuba and . . . Look, the story is a little long. Would you let me invite you to breakfast at my hotel tomorrow so we can discuss things? Andrés told me that you were the best possible person to help me learn something about a story that has to do with my parents . . . Of course, I would pay you for your work, as if I wouldn't . . ."

As Elias Kaminsky talked, Conde felt his internal alarms, dimmed

until recently, start to light up one by one. If Andrés had dared to send him that man, who didn't seem to be seeking rare books, there must be a serious reason. But before having coffee with that stranger, and well before telling him he didn't have the time or energy to get involved in his story, there were things he had to know. But . . . the guy had said he would pay him, right? How much? The financial penury hounding him the last few months made him take in the information gluttonously. In any case, the best thing, as always, was to start from the beginning.

"Would you excuse me if I read this letter?"

"Of course. I would be dying to read it."

Conde smiled. He opened the door to his house and the first thing he saw was Garbage II lying on the sofa, in the precise spot left open by various piles of books. The dog, rude and sleeping, didn't even move his tail when Conde turned on the light and tore open the envelope.

Miami, September 2, 2007

Condemned:

The end of year phone call is a long way away, but this couldn't wait. I heard from Dulcita, who came back from Cuba a few days ago, that you're all well, with less hair and more fat. The bearer of this letter IS NOT my friend. His parents ALMOST were, two super-cool old folks, especially the father, the Polish Cuban. This gentleman is a painter; he sells pretty well by the looks of it and inherited some things ($) from his parents. I THINK he's a good guy. Not like you or me, but more or less.

What he's going to ask of you is complicated, I don't think that even you can solve it, but try, because even I am intrigued by this story. Besides, it's the kind that you like, you'll see.

Incidentally, I told him that you charge one hundred dollars per day for your work, plus expenses. I learned that from a Chandler novel you lent me a shitload of years ago. The one that had a guy who talked like Hemingway's characters, you know the one?

Sending hugs for ALL OF YOU. I know that next week is Rabbit's birthday. Please wish him a happy one on my behalf. Elias also has a gift for him from me and some medicines that José should take, besides.

With love and squalor, your brother ALWAYS,

Andrés.

P.S. Oh, tell Elias that he must tell you the story of the Orestes Miñoso photo . . .

Conde could not help his eyes getting misty. He lied to himself immodestly that with all the fatigue and frustration logged, plus the heat and surrounding humidity, his eyes got irritated. In that letter, which hardly said anything, Andrés said it all, with those silences and emphases of his, typed out in all caps. The fact that he remembered Rabbit's birthday several days beforehand betrayed him: if he didn't write, it was because he didn't want to or couldn't, since he preferred not to run the risk of falling apart. Andrés, across the physical distance, was still too close and, by the looks of it, would always be so. The tribe to which he belonged for many years was inalienable, *PER SAECULA SAECULORUM*, all caps.

Conde left the letter on the defunct Russian TV set that he hadn't made up his mind to throw out and, feeling the weight of nostalgia that added to his most exposed and dogged frustrations, he told himself that the best way to bear that unexpected conversation was to soak it in alcohol. From the bottle of cheap rum he had in reserve, he poured two good doses in two glasses. Only then did he gain full consciousness of his situation: That man would pay him one hundred dollars per day to find out something? He almost felt woozy. In the falling-apart, poor world in which Conde lived, one hundred dollars was a fortune. What if he worked five days? The wooziness got stronger, and to keep it at bay he took a swig directly from the bottle. With the glasses in hand and his mind overflowing with financial plans, he went back to the porch.

"Do you dare?" he asked Elias Kaminsky, holding out the glass, which the man accepted while murmuring his thanks. "It's cheap rum . . . the kind I drink."

"It's not bad," the foreigner said after cautiously tasting it. "Is it Haitian?" he asked, as if he were a taster, and immediately took out another Camel and lit it.

Conde took a long drink and acted as if he were savoring that catastrophic crap.

"Yes, it must be Haitian . . . Well, if you want, we can talk tomorrow at your hotel and you'll tell me all the details . . ." Conde began, trying to hide his anxiousness to know. "But tell me now what it is that you think I can help you find out."

"I already told you, it's a long story. It has a lot to do with the life of my father, Daniel Kaminsky . . . For starters, let's say that I'm on the trail of a painting, according to all information, a Rembrandt."

Conde couldn't help but smile. A Rembrandt, in Cuba? Years ago, when he was a policeman, the existence of a Matisse had led him to get caught up in a painful story of passion and hate. And the Matisse had ended up being more false than a hooker's promise . . . or that of a policeman. But the mention of a possible painting by the Dutch master was something too compelling for Conde's curiosity, which was all the more amped up, perhaps because of the chemical reaction between that horrific rum that appeared to be Haitian and the promise of a solid payment.

"So, a Rembrandt . . . What's that whole story and what does it have to do with your father?" he egged on the foreigner, and added statements to convince him: "At this hour there's barely any heat . . . and I have the rest of the bottle of rum."

Kaminsky emptied his drink and held the glass out to Conde.

"Count the rum in your expenses . . ."

"What I'm going to count is a lightbulb for the lamp. It's better if we can see each other's faces well, don't you think?"

While he looked for the lightbulb, searched for a chair to climb up on, placed the bulb in the socket, and at last turned on the light, Conde was thinking that, in reality, he was hopeless. Why in the hell was he pushing that man to tell him his father's story if he probably wouldn't be able to help him find anything? *Is this what you've come to, Mario Conde?* he asked himself. He preferred, for now, not to make any attempt to respond to that question.

When Conde returned to his chair, Elias Kaminsky took a photograph out of the extraordinary pocket of his business-casual shirt and held it out to him.

"The key to everything could be this photo."

It was a recent copy of an old print. The photograph's initial sepia had turned gray and you could see the irregular borders of the original photo. In the frame was a woman, between twenty and thirty years old, clothed in a dark dress and seated in an armchair with brocade cloth and a high back. Next to the woman, a boy, about five years old, standing, with one hand on the woman's lap, was looking at the camera. By the clothing and hairstyles, Conde assumed that the image had been

taken sometime in the 1920s or '30s. Already alerted to the subject, after observing the people, Conde concentrated on the small painting hung behind them, above a small table where a vase with white flowers rested. The painting was, perhaps, fifteen by ten inches, based on its relation to the woman's head. Conde moved the photo, trying to shine better light on it so he could study the framed print: it was the bust of a man, with his hair flowing over his scalp and down to his shoulders, and a sparse, unkempt beard. Something indefinable was transmitted from that image, especially from the gaze, halfway between lost and melancholic, coming from the subject's eyes, and Conde asked himself if it was a portrait of a man or a representation of the Christ figure, quite close to one he must have seen in one or more books with reproductions of Rembrandt's paintings . . . A Rembrandt Christ in the home of Jews?

"Is this portrait by Rembrandt?" he asked, still looking at the photo.

"The woman is my grandmother, the boy is my father. They're in the house where they lived in Kraków . . . and the painting has been authenticated as a Rembrandt. You can see it better with a magnifying glass . . ."

From the pocket of his button-down shirt now came the magnifying glass, and Conde looked at the reproduction with it as he asked, "And what does that Rembrandt have to do with Cuba?"

"It was in Cuba. Later, it left here. And four months ago, it appeared in a London auction house to be sold . . . It came out on the market with an initial price of one million two hundred thousand dollars, since rather than being a finished work, it appears to have been something like a study, one of the many Rembrandt made for his great Christ figures when he was working on a version of *Pilgrims at Emmaus*, the 1648 one. Do you know anything about the subject?"

Conde finished his rum and looked at the photo again through the magnifying glass, and couldn't help but ask himself how many problems Rembrandt—whose life was pretty fucked-up according to what he had read—could have taken care of with that million dollars.

"I know very little," he admitted. "I've seen prints of this painting . . . but if memory serves me, in *Pilgrims*, Christ is looking up, isn't he?"

"That's right . . . The thing is that this Christ figure appears to have come into my father's family in 1648. But my grandparents, Jews who were fleeing the Nazis, brought it to Cuba in 1939 . . . It was like their insurance policy. And the painting remained in Cuba. But they didn't. Somebody made off with the Rembrandt . . . And a few months ago

someone else, perhaps believing the time was right, began to try to sell it. That seller gets in touch with the auction house through an e-mail address based in Los Angeles. They have a certificate of authenticity dated in Berlin, 1928, and another certificate of purchase, authenticated by a notary here in Havana, dated 1940 . . . at the exact moment my grandparents and aunt were in a concentration camp in Holland. But thanks to this photo, which my father kept his entire life, I've stopped the auction, since the whole subject of artwork stolen from Jews before and after the war is a very sensitive one. I'll be honest with you when I tell you that I'm not interested in recovering the painting because of whatever value it could have, although that's not negligible . . . What I do want to know, and the reason I'm here, talking to you, is what happened to that painting—which was a family heirloom—and to the person who had it here in Cuba. Where was it hiding until now? . . . I don't know if at this point it would be possible to find out anything, but I want to try . . . and for that, I need your help."

Conde had stopped looking at the photo and was watching his visitor, intrigued by his words. Had he misheard or did he say that he wasn't too interested in the million-something that the piece was worth? His mind, already on overdrive, had started seeking the ways to jump into this seemingly extraordinary story that had crossed his path. But, at that moment, he hadn't the foggiest idea: he only knew that he needed to find out more.

"So what did your father tell you about that painting's arrival in Cuba?"

"He didn't tell me much about that because the only thing he knew was that his parents were bringing it on the *Saint Louis*."

"The famous ship that arrived in Havana full of Jews?"

"That one . . . Regarding the painting, my father did tell me a lot. About the person who had it here in Cuba, less so . . ."

Conde smiled. Were the fatigue, the rum, and his bad mood making him more stupid, or was this his natural state?

"The truth is that I don't understand very much . . . or understand anything," he admitted as he returned the magnifying glass to his interlocutor.

"What I want is for you to help me find out the truth, so that I can also understand . . . Look, right now I'm exhausted, and I'd like to have a clear head to talk about this story. But to convince you to listen to me

tomorrow, if we can, in fact, see each other tomorrow, I just want to share a secret with you . . . My parents left Cuba in 1958. Not in '59 or in '60, when almost all the Jews and people with money left here, fleeing from what they knew would be a communist government. I am certain that my parents' departure in 1958, which was quite sudden, had something to do with that Rembrandt. And since the painting showed up again for the auction, I'm convinced that the relationship between my father and the painting and his departure from Cuba have a connection that could have been very complicated . . ."

"Why very complicated?" Conde asked, already convinced of his mental anemia.

"Because if what I think happened, happened, my father may have done something very serious."

Conde felt he was about to explode. Elias Kaminsky was either the worst storyteller who ever existed or he was a certified moron. Despite his painting, his one hundred dollars per day, and his business casual clothing.

"Are you going to tell me once and for all what happened and the truth that is worrying you?"

The behemoth took up his glass again and knocked back the rum Conde had served him . . . He looked at his interrogator and finally said,"It's not that easy to say you think your father, whom you always saw that way, as a father . . . could have been the same person who slit someone's neck."