1 **Urania**. Her parents had done her no favor; her name suggested a planet, a mineral, anything but the slender, fine-featured woman with burnished skin and large, dark, rather sad eyes who looked back at her from the mirror. Urania! What an idea for a name. Fortunately nobody called her that anymore; now it was Uri, Miss Cabral, Ms. Cabral, Dr. Cabral. As far as she could remember, after she left Santo Domingo (or Ciudad Trujillo -- when she left they had not yet restored the old name to the capital city), no one in Adrian, or Boston, or Washington, D.C., or New York had called her Urania as they did at home and at the Santo Domingo Academy, where the sisters and her classmates pronounced with absolute correctness the ridiculous name inflicted on her at birth. Was it his idea or hers? Too late to find out, my girl; your mother was in heaven and your father condemned to a living death. You’ll never know. Urania! As absurd as insulting old Santo Domingo de Guzman by calling it Ciudad Trujillo. Could that have been her father’s idea too?

She waits for the sea to become visible through the window of her room on the ninth floor of the Hotel Jaragua, and at last she sees it. The darkness fades in a few seconds and the brilliant blue of the horizon quickly intensifies, beginning the spectacle she has been anticipating since she woke at four in spite of the pill she had taken, breaking her rule against sedatives. The dark blue surface of the ocean, marked by streaks of foam, extends to a leaden sky at the remote line of the horizon, while here, at the shore, it breaks in resounding, whitecapped waves against the Sea Walk, the Malecón, where she can make out sections of the broad road through the palms and almond trees that line it. Back then, the Hotel Jaragua
faced the Malecón directly. Now it's to the side. Her memory brings back the image -- was that the day? -- of the little girl holding her father's hand as they entered the hotel restaurant so the two of them could have lunch together. They were given a table next to the window, and through the sheer lace curtains Urania could see the spacious garden and the pool with its diving boards and swimmers. In the Patio Espanol, surrounded by glazed tiles and flowerpots filled with carnations, an orchestra was playing merengues. Was that the day? "No" she says aloud. The Jaragua of those days had been torn down and replaced by this massive shocking-pink structure that had surprised her so much when she arrived in Santo Domingo three days ago.

Part 2

Were you right to come back? You'll be sorry, Urania. Wasting a week's vacation, when you never had time to visit all the cities, regions, countries you would have liked to see -- the mountain ranges and snow-covered lakes of Alaska, for instance -- returning to the island you swore you'd never set foot on again. A symptom of decline? The sentimentality of age? Curiosity, nothing more. To prove to yourself you can walk along the streets of this city that is no longer yours, travel through this foreign country and not have it provoke sadness, nostalgia, hatred, bitterness, rage in you. Or have you come to confront the ruin of your father? To learn what effect seeing him has on you, after so many years. A shudder runs the length of her body. Urania, Urania! What if after all these years you discover that behind your determined, disciplined mind, impervious to discouragement, behind the fortress admired and envied by others, you have a tender, timid, wounded, sentimental heart?

She bursts into laughter. Enough foolishness, my girl.

She puts on sneakers, slacks, a tailored blouse, and pulls back her hair. She drinks a glass of cold water and is about to turn on the television to watch CNN but changes her mind. She remains at the window, looking at the ocean, the Malecón, and then, turning her head, at the city's forest of roofs, towers, domes, belfries, and treetops. It's grown so much! When you left, in 1961, it sheltered three hundred thousand souls. More than a million now. It has filled up with neighborhoods, avenues, parks, hotels. The night before, she felt like a foreigner as she drove a rented car past the condominiums in Bella Vista, and the immense El Mirador Park, where there were as many joggers as in Central Park. When she was a girl, the city ended at the Hotel El Embajador; beyond that point, it was all farms and fields. The Country Club, where her father took her on Sundays to swim in the pool, was surrounded by open


countryside, not the asphalt, houses, and street-lights that are there now.

But the colonial city has not been modernized, and neither has Gazcue, her neighborhood. And she is absolutely certain her house has hardly changed at all. It must be the same, with its small garden, old mango tree, and the flamboyán with red flowers bending over the terrace where they used to have lunch outdoors on weekends; the sloping roof and the little balcony outside her bedroom, where she would go to wait for her cousins Lucinda and Manolita, and, during that last year, 1961, spy on the boy who rode past on his bicycle, watching her out of the comer of his eye and not daring to speak. Would it be the same inside? The Austrian clock that sounded the hours had Gothic numerals and a hunting scene. Would her father be the same? No. You’ve seen him failing in the photos sent to you every few months or years by Aunt Adelina and other relatives who continued to write even though you never answered their letters.

Part 3

She drops into an armchair. The rising sun penetrates to the center of the city; the dome of the National Palace and its pale ocher walls sparkle gently under a curve of blue. Go now, soon the heat will be unbearable. She closes her eyes, overcome by a rare inertia, for she is accustomed to always being active and not wasting time in what, since her return to Dominican soil, has occupied her day and night: remembering. "This daughter of mine is always working, she even repeats her lessons when she's asleep" That's what Senator Agustín Cabral, Minister Cabral, Egghead Cabral used to say about you when he boasted to his friends about the girl who won all the prizes, the student the sisters always held up as an example. Did he boast to the Chief about Urania's scholarly achievements? "I'd like so much for you to know her, she has won the Prize for Excellence every year since she enrolled at Santo Domingo. It would make her so happy to meet you and shake your hand. Urania prays every night for God to protect that iron health of yours. And for Dona Julia and Dona María as well. Do us this honor. The most loyal of your dogs asks, begs, implores you. You can't refuse: receive her. Excellency! Chief!"

Do you despise him? Do you hate him? Still? "Not anymore," she says aloud. You wouldn't have come back if the rancor were still sizzling, the wound still bleeding, the deception still crushing her, poisoning her, the way it did in your youth, when studying and working became an obsessive defense against remembering. Back then you did hate him. With every atom of your being, with all the thought and feeling your body could hold. You wanted him to suffer misfortunes, diseases, accidents. God granted your wish, Urania. Or rather, the devil did. Isn't it enough that the cerebral hemorrhage brought him a living death? A sweet revenge that he has spent the last ten years in a wheelchair, not walking or
talking, depending on a nurse to eat, lie down, dress, undress, trim his nails, shave, urinate, defecate? Do you feel avenged? "No."

Part 4

She drinks a second glass of water and goes out. It's seven in the morning. On the ground floor of the Jaragua she is assaulted by the noise, that atmosphere, familiar by now, of voices, motors, radios blaring at full volume, merengues, salsas, danzones, boleros, rock, rap, all jumbled together, assailing one another and assailing her with their shrill clamor. Animated chaos, the profound need in what was once your people, Urania, to stupefy themselves into not thinking and, perhaps, not even feeling. An explosion of savage life, immune to the tide of modernization. Something in Dominicans clings to this prerational, magical form: this appetite for noise. ("For noise, not music.")

She doesn't remember a commotion like this in the street when she was a girl and Santo Domingo was called Ciudad Trujillo. Perhaps it didn't exist back then: perhaps, thirty-five years ago, when the city was three or four times smaller, provincial, isolated, made wary by fear and servility, its soul shrinking in terrified reverence for the Chief, the Generalissimo, the Benefactor, the Father of the New Nation, His Excellency Dr. Rafael Leonidas Trujillo Molina, it was quieter and less frenetic. Today, all the clamor of life -- car engines, cassettes, records, radios, horns, barks, growls, human voices -- seems to resound at top volume, producing vocal, mechanical, digital, or animal noise at maximum capacity (dogs bark louder, birds chirp with more enthusiasm). And New York is famous for being noisy! Never, in the ten years she has spent in Manhattan, have her ears been subjected to anything like the brutal, cacophonous symphony in which she has been immersed for the past three days.

The sun burns the silvery tops of towering palms, the broken sidewalk with so many holes it looks bombed, the mountains of trash that some women with scarves tied around their heads sweep up and correct in inadequate bags. "Haitians." They're silent now, but yesterday they were whispering among themselves in Creole. A little farther on, she sees two barefoot, half-naked Haitian men sitting on boxes under dozens of vividly colored paintings displayed on the wall of a building. It's true, the city, perhaps the country, has filled with Haitians. Back then, it didn't happen. Isn't that what Senator Agustín Cabral said? "You can say what you like about the Chief. History, at least, will recognize that he has created a modern country and put the Haitians in their place. Great ills demand great remedies!" The Chief found a small country barbarized by wars among the caudillos, a country without law and order, impoverished, losing its identity, invaded by its starving, ferocious neighbors. They waded across the Masacre River and came to steal goods, animals, houses, they took the jobs of our agricultural workers,
perverted our Catholic religion with their diabolical witchcraft, violated our women, ruined our Western, Hispanic culture, language, and customs, imposed their African savagery on us. The Chief cut the Gordian knot: "Enough!" Great ills demand great remedies! He not only justified the massacre of Haitians in 1937; he considered it a great accomplishment of the regime. Didn't he save the Republic from being prostituted a second time by that marauding neighbor? What do five, ten, twenty thousand Haitians matter when it's a question of saving an entire people?

*Copyright © 2000 Mario Vargas Llosa*
*Translation Copyright © 2000 Edith Grossman*
*Reprinted with permission.*