



*The*  
VORTEX

A NOVEL

*José Eustasio Rivera*

*Translated and with an Introduction by*

JOHN CHARLES CHASTEEN

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VORTEX

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*For*

ARTURO ESCOBAR AND

JUAN CARLOS GONZÁLEZ ESPITIA,

*dear Colombian friends whose love for the  
original inspired my translation*

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# CONTENTS



Introduction:

*A Player in the Rainforest*

ix

PROLOGUE

i

PART ONE

3

PART TWO

81

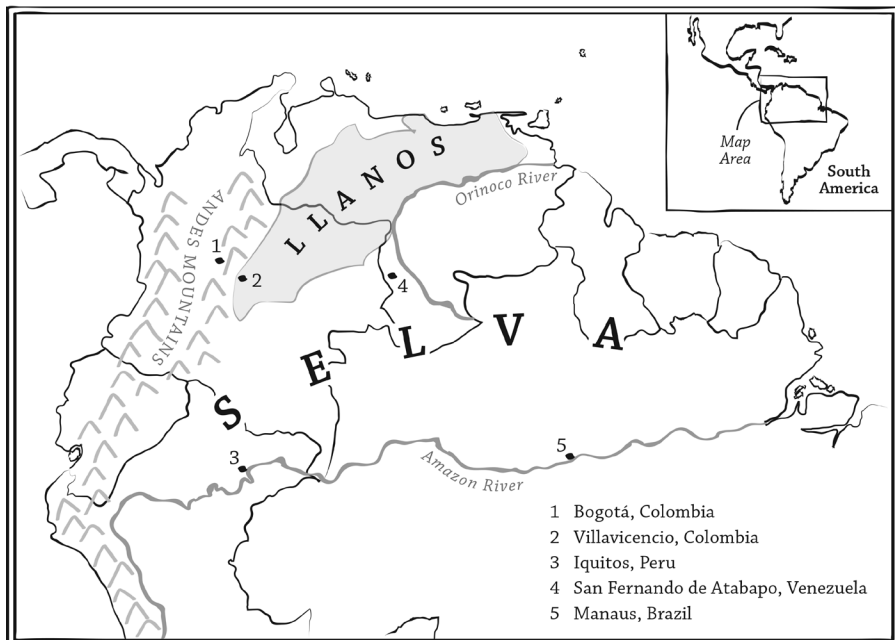
PART THREE

147

EPILOGUE

219





The setting of *The Vortex*

## INTRODUCTION



### *A Player in the Rainforest*

Arturo Cova, protagonist of *The Vortex*, is a player, skilled in the manly arts of deceitful seduction. And he is a poet, which no doubt makes him a better player but also, at least occasionally, makes him a sensitive man. Mostly, though, Arturo Cova is a fulsome fictional exemplar of a sort of masculinity (think *Don Juan Tenorio*, think *Tale of Genji*) focused on amorous conquest. Don't expect to like him at the beginning, or perhaps, ever—although that is, of course, up to you. By the end, his trials and tribulations have clearly made him a better person. Moreover, Cova is a fictional mouthpiece who denounces very real abuses of human rights, always a likable trait in my book.

Still, I rather enjoyed knowing from the outset that he is to be devoured by the jungle. That ultimate outcome is among the most famous aspects of the novel, and with good reason. Announcing Cova's doom is the chief job of the novel's framing tale, the first thing we read. A representative of the Colombian government in a remote Amazonian region supposedly presents

a manuscript left by Cova: this is the bulk of *The Vortex*. It contains sensational denunciations of conditions suffered by Colombian rubber tappers in Brazil and Peru, and it indicates that Cova has vanished forever in the rainforest.

Arturo Cova represents a well-defined Latin American social type, the young elite man of letters. His family has enough rural wealth to allow him a law degree and a life of bohemian leisure in the capital city, Bogotá. He has become markedly an urban person. He is a serial seducer and “deflowerer” of girls who are often not his social equals, but who are led to believe, whether or not he explicitly promises it, that he will marry them. During his student years, this playing around may even be the chief focus of the young player’s life. Afterward, perhaps he will gain government employment requiring little actual labor, or perhaps invest in a profitable business venture that will contribute to the modernization of his country. Or perhaps not. In the meantime, he basks in the modest prestige of his slender volume of poetry. An interest in poetry does not distinguish Cova from many other students of his generation, however. Literary pretensions proliferated, a century ago, among young elite males with the wit for it. Mastery of literary language was a key aspect of their prestige.

In his seminal text, *The Lettered City*, Uruguayan critic Angel Rama described the process whereby elite males “inscribed” the Latin American countryside, writing it into national life and appropriating it for their own, urban purposes. *The Vortex* (1924) constitutes an outstanding example of that process, making it one of the most famous Latin American novels of the twentieth century. Often, as in *The Vortex*, Latin American writers of the early 1900s focused on regions remote from the relatively sophisticated capital cities. Across the hemisphere, their novels culminated a century-long process of literary nation building.<sup>1</sup>

*The Vortex* was the most prominent of these novels internationally. It was soon translated into French, German, Italian, Russian, and Portuguese, as well as English.<sup>2</sup> It says something about the novel’s international stature that, when Biblioteca Ayacucho began to publish its notable collection of emblematic Latin American classics in the 1970s, *The Vortex* was its fourth title, of more than a hundred. No doubt, this was partly due to the editorial influence of Angel Rama, but the novel’s lurid depictions of the “jungle” certainly contributed to its wide appeal, too, as did its action-packed plot. In addition, the sensational human rights abuses detailed in *The Vortex* are highly relevant to understanding the early twentieth-century rubber boom in Amazonia as a whole. Mario Vargas Llosa’s recent novel

*The Dream of the Celt* deals with some of the same general events as *The Vortex*.<sup>3</sup>

José Eustasio Rivera, the author of *The Vortex*, was born in 1888 in the southern Andean region of Colombia, far from Amazonia. He became acquainted with the rainforest and the rubber boom when, in 1916, after finishing his law degree in Bogotá, he joined a government commission tasked to clarify the Venezuelan-Colombian border. Rivera's function on the expedition was legal secretary, and portions of *The Vortex* were apparently written at various campsites. Rivera's brush with the rainforest was thus limited but real and reasonably extensive. *The Vortex* was published in Bogotá in 1924, to immediate acclaim—so much acclaim, in fact, that Rivera was able to arrange an English translation quickly at a time when English translations of Latin American fiction were incalculably rare. He died suddenly in 1928 while on a visit to New York, where he was arranging for the English translation and discussing movie rights.

Much like his protagonist Arturo Cova, whose biography parallels his own in obvious ways, the novelist Rivera had published a well-received book of poetry in his youth, and he aspired to infuse his prose with a poetic language and sensibility. Early drafts even had occasional meter and rhyme that he had created inadvertently. Rivera loved rarefied vocabulary, which is what most later Colombian readers seem to remember about their reading of *The Vortex* in high school. I recall that, as a new reader of Spanish in the 1970s, I found the novel very heavy going. It sent me to the dictionary more times than any other reading in my first Latin American literature course. For me, Rivera's poetic prose gave new meaning to the word "florid." The 1935 English translation, to which I had desperate recourse at the time, communicated the meaning well enough but failed to preserve Rivera's innovative style at all. For example, the 1935 translation forced the novel's quick-flowing two- to three-page sections into a conventional chapter structure.

Here, I have endeavored to preserve more of the unconventional edginess of Rivera's prose and the naturalness of his dialogue, while dialing back the floridness of his purple patches. As for the novel's mood, attitude, action, description, and characterization, it has been re-created in full. Nothing else will do because, in this novel, every detail matters. Try to skim it, and you will lose the plot almost entirely. The exposition sneaks up on you. Whenever you find yourself wondering if something can really be happening, the answer is always yes.

The true main character of *The Vortex*, far more important than Arturo Cova, is the Amazonian "jungle" itself. What does that mean?

The “jungle,” one could say for starters, is the rainforest. But there’s a big difference. The “rainforest” is benign, brimming with the biodiversity upon which the future of our planet partly depends. Above all, the rainforest is *threatened*. The “jungle,” in contrast, is *threatening*, brimming with snakes and piranhas and poisons and diseases. Furthermore, the jungle seems actively malicious. Not only can it very easily kill you, it *wants* to. Rivera’s trees are poetically plotting to avenge humanity’s decimation of the world’s forests. Rivera’s human characters struggle against the malignant jungle, which “devours” them in the end.<sup>4</sup> Rivera thus answers and adds to earlier Romantic visions of the natural world, and notably, his devouring jungle is feminine: *la selva*. Overall, Rivera’s “jungle” reflects an outmoded way of thinking about the natural world, as something to be conquered and subdued by “man.” It contrasts starkly with the modish celebration of all things “ecological” in Colombia today.

In the 1920s, the Amazonian rainforest was still home to many indigenous tribes that had maintained their own ways of life for centuries, entirely separate from the national societies of Colombia, Venezuela, Peru, Brazil, Ecuador, and Bolivia. The indigenous people figured among the most victimized workers during the Amazonian rubber boom, as Rivera makes clear. Unfortunately, though, his view of the “Indians” seems as dated today as is his view of the “jungle.” Rivera’s description of the rubber boom, overall, is quasi-ethnographic in detail, while his indigenous characters remain inscrutable Others. Rivera does recount various “superstitions” and practices, as well as one indigenous legend in detail. Given the limits of his training and experience, however, the authenticity of his ethnography is questionable.

Unquestionably believable and compelling, in comparison, is his description of visiting the rainforest itself. Get ready for water. Still today, visiting Amazonia means spending a lot of time in boats, large and small, including large riverboats, houseboats, tiny canoes, and all sorts of craft in between. The route from any place to any other place, for the characters of *The Vortex*, is discussed in terms of rivers, and if the characters are ever far from a riverbank, they are in danger. Until quite recently, deep, meandering, slow-moving rivers—large and small—were Amazonia’s only roads. This is because the South American continent has high edges and a flat, low center at the precipitation-drenched equator. As a result, water accumulates deep in the continent before finding its way to the sea through a few great river systems. The greatest of these is the Amazon River basin, which is large enough for seagoing ships to ascend a thousand miles upriver. Many of its tributary rivers are larger than the Mississippi. Even so, altogether they are

not enough to accommodate the biggest seasonal rains. Then the Amazon and its tributaries spread out of their banks to cover vast, forested floodplains for several months of the year. During this time, the aquatic life swims around roots of the enormous trees that compose the forest canopy.

Among those great trees are several whose sap contains latex, natural rubber. To get at it, people cut incisions in the bark of the tree, so that the sap dripped into cups or buckets, rather as contemporary New Englanders tapped maple sap to make syrup. The latex sap was then congealed over a smoky fire to form solid balls, roughly the size of a basketball, and exported in that form. During the 1800s, natural rubber found many uses, such as waterproofing raincoats or boots. After the 1880s, rapid urbanization led to the paving of city streets, and all street vehicles began to need rubber tires. The advent of the automobile threw street paving and rubber consumption into high gear, and in Amazonia a rubber boom began. Amazonian rubber trees had never been successfully cultivated. Collecting rubber meant finding the trees that grew naturally scattered in the rainforest and tapping them there.

Large-scale exporters from outside the region controlled the rubber trade. They had the capital, the connections, the warehouses, and the large riverboats needed to bring provisions in and take rubber out. They held their rubber tappers as virtual slaves, through debt peonage, a practice sadly common in Latin American history. Through this practice, workers became indebted when labor recruiters (*enganchadores*, from a word meaning “to hook”) signed them up with a cash advance. Afterward, unable to grow their own food or acquire it anywhere else, the workers consumed overpriced company rations that consistently cost more than the workers earned. The workers were then bound to their employer by continuing debt, unable to leave until it was paid off, which meant more or less never.

*The Vortex* was written to denounce this system as well as other abuses that are vividly described in the novel. Although the particular instances are fictional, the general phenomenon was only too prevalent. Overall, readers can consider Rivera’s fictionalized picture to be a sort of century-old prose docudrama, accurate in outline and in some, but not all, particulars. The characters who drive the plot are purely fictional inventions who existed nowhere outside the novel, but the setting and major political or economic actors, such as Carlos Arana, the Peruvian rubber baron, and Carlos Funes, the Venezuelan regional boss, are based on real individuals, and sometimes, as in those two cases, they are even identified by their real names. The massacre at San Fernando de Atabapo really happened, the Casa Arana really hired a French scientist whom it then, apparently, murdered, and so on. The

novel's protagonist seems clearly based on Rivera himself, who had direct experience in Colombia's remote southeastern regions.

Note that I say "regions," in the plural. Besides the Amazonian rainforest, a second Colombian region—thus far unmentioned—figures centrally in the novel. This is the llanos, or Orinoco River plain, which drains to the sea through Venezuela rather than Brazil. This is Orinoquia, rather than Amazonia. Rivera made an extended visit to the llanos as a young man, and some of his most polished descriptive passages may have been written at that time. The llanos are a land of open vistas, not extensive forests, a land of *llanero* cowboys and cattle drives, although still a land of great rivers that spread out of their banks for months during the rainy season. Very unlike North American cowboys, however, dismounted llaneros feel quite at home in a canoe. Orinoquia is mostly in Venezuela, and the reader will notice that Colombian llaneros and Venezuelan llaneros mix easily with each other. Llanero lifeways and speech and music have much in common on both sides of the border.

That observation raises the last topic that requires consideration here, the meaning of nationality in the novel. Rivera meant to condemn, above all, the exploitation of Colombian nationals by nationals of other countries, although he also highlights the "collaboration" of bad Colombians. His nationalism is clear enough. However, once his characters enter the rainforest, the reader will often not have a clear idea of whether they are in Colombia, Venezuela, Peru, or Brazil at a given moment. National boundaries had little meaning in this sparsely populated, densely forested land. The indigenous people of the rainforest considered themselves "nationals" of their own tribes. They responded little, or not at all, to invocations of Colombian, Venezuelan, Peruvian, or Brazilian nationalism. No government had a strong administrative, judicial, or military presence in Amazonia or Orinoquia. Those attributes of nationality were manifested in a very few towns—such as Iquitos (Peru) and Manaus (Brazil)—dotting a vast area of rainforest. The economic boom attracted people into Amazonia from all sides, producing a motley mix of nationalities in the rubber camps.

Race mixture was common, as well, and it is even more difficult to "see" in the text than is nationality. Several characters are called *mulato*, and one, *catire* (a similar, but lighter, mix). However, the reader would do well to imagine that a minority of characters in this novel (mostly outsiders to Orinoquia or Amazonia) are purely of European descent. A slight degree of race mixture in these regions passes without comment, even by urban outsiders.

In sum, beyond its famous poetic descriptions and its indubitable storytelling verve, *The Vortex* offers a sweeping and accurate view of dramatic events in the Colombian backlands (and beyond), circa 1900–1920. First you’ll see the faux official memo from the author Rivera, reading the mysterious, found manuscript into the official record. Then the protagonist Cova begins his story. He has fled Bogotá with a young woman he has succeeded in seducing, and the direction that they have taken is toward Casanare, a fabled territory in the wild and woolly llanos.

*Buen viaje!*

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NOTES

1. Outstanding contributions to this hemispheric body of literature include *Doña Barbara* by Rómulo Gallegos (1929, Venezuela) and *Don Segundo Sombra* by Ricardo Güiraldes (1926, Argentina). Brazil’s major writers Graciliano Ramos, José Lins do Rego, Jorge Amado, and Euclides da Cunha also contributed. Elsewhere in Latin America, post-1910 novels of the Mexican Revolution likewise explored on-the-ground realities, usually regionally. In Peru and Ecuador, *indigenista* novels, focusing on the lives of indigenous people, were part of the same search for national authenticity and inclusiveness. A complete listing would go on for pages.

2. English translation by E. K. James, 1935.

3. *El sueño del celta* (2010).

4. A similarly overpowering and enveloping “jungle” appears in the short stories of Horacio Quiroga, *Cuentos de amor, de locura y de muerte* (1917).



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## PROLOGUE



### TO THE MINISTER OF FOREIGN RELATIONS:

In accordance with your instructions, please find enclosed herewith my transcription of a manuscript (forwarded to the Ministry of Foreign Relations by the Consul of Colombia in Manaus) by the recently disappeared poet Arturo Cova.

I have left the writer's style intact, even including an occasional grammatical infelicity, limiting my editorial interventions to an explanation of the regional vocabulary that occasionally appears.

If I may be permitted to express my own opinion in the matter, I believe that this book should *not* be published without independent confirmation of its denunciations concerning the conditions suffered by Colombian rubber tappers in the Amazonian territories of neighboring republics.

Should you decide in favor of immediate publication, however, please remit any additional information at your disposal to me immediately so that it may be appended to this manuscript by way of epilogue.

Your obedient servant,

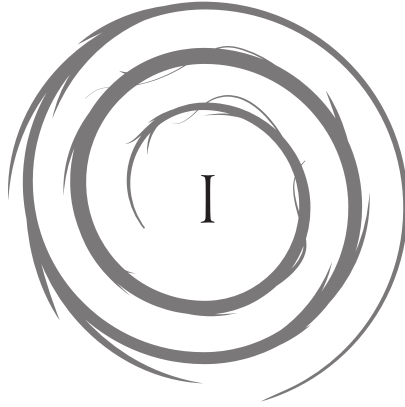
*José Eustasio Rivera*

Those who expected brilliant things of me, who forgot me as soon as my misfortunes began, who remembered me afterward only to puzzle at my failure—let them know that it was my destiny to be swept away, across the *llanos* to the jungle beyond, to wander like the wind, and die away leaving nothing of substance, only noise and desolation, behind.

—EXCERPT FROM A LETTER WRITTEN BY ARTURO COVA

## Part One

---



BEFORE I FELT FOR ANY WOMAN, I lost my heart to a sensation. Call it Intensity. No fainting sensitivities, no tender looks and confidences for me. More than a lover, I was always the *subjugator*. My lips did not know how to plead. And yet, I still believed in the ideal of love, still wanted the divine gift of spiritual fire to spread over my body like flames over tinder.

When Alicia's eyes worked their unfortunate magic on me, I had almost given up hope. My arms, grown tired of liberty, had reached out to many women—seeking to be enchained—but no one guessed my secret dreams, nor disturbed the silence in my heart.

Alicia required little effort. She gave herself without hesitation, all for the love she hoped to find in *me*. She was not thinking about marriage, even after her family conspired to fix everything, with the help of the priest, by force if need be. She revealed their plans to me, saying that she would never marry, that she would not stand in the way of my future happiness.

Then, when her family cast her out and the judge informed my lawyer that I would be going to jail for ravishment, I went to Alicia's hiding place and declared my resolve not to abandon her.

"My future is yours. Promise me your love, and we'll escape together to somewhere far from Bogotá."

And we were off to the Casanare territory.

.....

That night, the first in Casanare, my confidant was *Insomnia*.

Through the mosquito netting, in the limitless heavens, I watched the winking stars. The palms under which we camped stopped their rustling, and an infinite silence floated in the air, making it thicker and bluer. Beside my string hammock, Alicia slept, breathing heavily, in her narrow cot.

"What have you done?" I thought. "What of your future, your dreams of glory, and the beginnings of your literary success? And what about this young woman, whom you sacrifice to your desire? Idiot! Once your desire is satisfied, what good is the body that you have acquired at such a high price? Because Alicia's spirit has never really belonged to you. Even now, when you can feel the heat and murmur of her breathing at your shoulder, you remain as far away from her spiritually as from that constellation sliding toward the horizon over there."

I felt less emboldened now, not because I feared to confront the consequences of my actions, but rather because after the intensity of love and possession comes something else. I was already bored with Alicia.

The hair-raising stories about Casanare did not frighten me. My instincts impelled me to defy the dangers of the wild frontier. I was certain that I would survive to tell the tale and later, amid the civilized comforts of some city as yet unknown to me, look back on the dangers of Casanare with nostalgia. Alicia, on the other hand, weighed on me like an iron shackle around my ankle. She had left Bogotá in a great upset and demonstrated her complete uselessness the first day on the road. Why couldn't she be a little tougher and more capable? She had never ridden a horse and could not even stand to be in the direct sun very long. She kept dismounting and saying that she preferred to walk, obliging me to do the same.

I was amazingly patient with her. There we were, supposedly fugitives, ambling along at a snail's pace, leading our mounts as if on a Sunday stroll, unable to get off the road to avoid meeting the occasional travelers coming in the other direction. Most were simple country people who stopped to

ask me, with concerned expressions and hat in hand, why the young lady was crying.

Several times I tried with a rope to pull down the telegraph wire that ran along the road, but I gave up the attempt, possibly because of a vague desire to be captured. At least that way I would be free of Alicia and would recover the liberty of spirit that physical detention cannot take away. Arriving in sight of the town of Cáqueza, which lay squarely in our path, we stopped to await the cover of darkness. The authorities there might have been informed of our flight. Skirting the town, we slipped into the sugarcane fields that flanked the river, our nags munching noisily on the cane without pausing in their stride. It was harvest time, and we approached a sugar mill that was working all night. Taking shelter under a makeshift canopy of palm fronds, we listened to the groaning of the wooden grinders crushing cane. Shadows passed across the flickering glow of the fire that reduced the sap to cane syrup: first, the large shadow of the oxen that walked a circular path to drive the machinery, then, the small shadow of the little boy who followed behind, prodding the oxen with a pointed stick to keep them moving. Some women were preparing a meal, and they gave Alicia an infusion of herbs with medicinal properties.

We stayed with them for a week.

.....

Meanwhile, I paid one of the sugar workers to bring me news from Bogotá, and the news was disturbing. My flight with Alicia had created a great scandal, and the story was on everyone's lips. The whisperings of my personal enemies fanned the flames, and the newspapers took advantage of the public's prurient interest. I had sent a letter to a friend requesting his help, and his reply was discouraging indeed. It concluded: "If you return, you'll surely be arrested. Casanare is now your only refuge, I'm afraid. Who will look for a man like you in a place like that?"

That same afternoon, Alicia warned me that the owner of the mill considered us suspicious. His wife had asked Alicia whether we were brother and sister, man and wife, or perhaps merely friends, and she said that if we happened to be counterfeiters, "there being nothing wrong with that, in view of the present regime," she would like to see a sample. So we left the next day before dawn.

"Don't you think, Alicia, that we may really have no reason to flee? Wouldn't it be better to return to Bogotá?"

“Now I’m *sure* you’re tired of me!” she wailed. “Why did you bring me, then? It was *your* idea! Get out of here! Go to Casanare by yourself, and leave me alone!”

She started sobbing again.

And again I felt sorry for her. By now she had revealed to me the whole sad story. While still quite young, she had fallen in love with her cousin, an inconsequential boy not much older than herself, and they secretly swore to be married one day. Her mother and father had other ideas, however. They intended to marry her to a rich old landowner who was not to Alicia’s taste in the slightest. Then I appeared on the scene, and the aging suitor, fearing the new competition, redoubled his suit. The value and frequency of his gifts increased and, with the help of Alicia’s enraptured family, he seemed about to attain the prize. That is when Alicia, seeking to escape at all cost, hurled herself into my arms. But the danger had not passed, because the old landowner still wanted to marry her, it seemed, in spite of everything.

“I *won’t* go back,” she insisted, jumping off her horse. “Leave me! I don’t want anything from you. I’ll walk along this road and ask everyone for charity before I accept anything from you. Bastard!”

And she sat down in the grass. Having lived long enough, I knew better than to reason with a woman in that state, so I remained firmly mute while she sat pulling grass up convulsively by the fistful.

“Alicia, this only proves that you never loved me.”

“Never!”

She looked away as she complained bitterly about my shameless deceptions.

“Do you think I didn’t see you looking at that girl back there? Oh, you’re the sly one! And telling me that we had to stay there for days because *I* wasn’t well. If that’s now, what will later be like? Get out of here! I won’t go anywhere at all with you, much less to Casanare!”

Her reproaches made me blush, tongue-tied, but her jealousy was agreeable to my pride, and it set me free. I had the impulse to jump off my horse to give her a farewell embrace. It couldn’t be my fault, after all, if *she* sent me away.

As I was dismounting to improvise a good-bye, we saw a man come galloping down the hill toward us. Alicia clutched my arm in fright.

The man dismounted a short distance away and approached, hat in hand.

“Permit me a word, sir.”

“Me?” I answered with an energetic voice.

“Yes, if you please,” and throwing a corner of his poncho over his shoulder, he extended a hand holding a piece of paper. “My godfather sends you this notification.”

“Who is your godfather?”

“The judge and mayor of Caqueza.”

“This isn’t for me,” I said, returning the document to him without having read it.

“You aren’t the ones who were at the sugar mill, then?”

“Absolutely not. I’m the new intendant of Villavicencio, which is where I’m headed now, with my wife.”

The man hesitated, unsure of what to say.

“I thought that you were counterfeiters,” he managed. “They sent word about you from the sugar mill, but my godfather is at his ranch, because he only comes to the town hall on market days, and keeps the office locked up other days. There were a couple of telegrams, too, and since I’m the main deputy now . . .”

Without allowing him further time for explanations, I ordered him to hold my wife’s horse so that she could mount. Alicia concealed her face so that the stranger would not notice her pallor. He watched us ride away without uttering a word, but he then climbed on his worthless mare to follow us. Soon he was alongside of us, smiling.

“If you please, sir, sign the notification so that my godfather will see that it was served and I did what I’m supposed to do. You can sign as intendant of Villavicencio.”

“Do you have a pen?”

“No, but we’ll get one up ahead. It’s that . . . if you don’t sign, I’ll end up in jail.”

“How so?” I inquired, without slowing down.

“God willing you’ll help me, sir, if you’re really an authority. I’ve had the misfortune that I’m accused of stealing a cow, and I was brought to Caqueza to face charges, but my godfather let me be on house arrest, and since I had no house, that meant anywhere in town, and then he needed a deputy, so he honored me with the position. My name is Pepe Morillo Nieto, but they call me Pipa.”

The talkative fellow offered to carry some of my baggage on his nag and, when I obliged him, continued to ride beside me, relating his tale of woe.

“I don’t have money for a decent poncho and haven’t worn shoes for a while. And the hat on my head is more than two years old. It’s from Casanare.”



Alicia fixed her startled eyes on the man.

“Have you lived in Casanare?”

“Yes ma’am, I have. I know the llanos and I know the rubber fields of Amazonia, as well. Plenty of tigers and snakes I’ve killed, too, with God’s help.”

Just then we met some muleteers with their train of mules, and Pipa spoke to them.

“Do you have a pencil to lend, there? It’s for a signature.”

“We don’t carry pencils,” said the men.

As we rode on, I addressed Pipa under my breath.

“Don’t mention Casanare in front of my wife.” And, in a normal voice: “Come with us, then, and later you can inform me of matters relating to the Intendencia.”

Pipa was overjoyed. He became Alicia’s personal attendant for the rest of the day, ingratiating himself with his loquacity, and camped with us not far from Villavicencio. But that night he sneaked away with my horse and saddle.

.....

A reddish glow interrupted my remembrance. It was old Rafo, don Rafael, blowing on the embers of the fire. In Casanare, travelers let a fire burn all night near their hammocks to fend off tigers and other nocturnal threats. Old Rafo knelt before the fire and bowed down, as if before a divinity, to enliven it with his breath. Silence still reigned in the melancholy solitude of the llanos, and a sense of the infinite descended on my spirit from the wide and starry skies.

Memories filled my mind again, the enigma of my relationship with Alicia, my decision to begin a new life so different from the old, a life that would surely consume what remained of my youth and dreams. Alicia must have those same thoughts, I reflected, which gave me reason for both remorse and comfort. Like me, she was a seed borne by the wind, ignorant and fearful of where she might come to ground.

She was so passionate and mercurial in her reactions. Sometimes the fatality of her situation triumphed over timidity, and she acted decisively. Most other times, however, she’d rather have swallowed poison to escape the position in which her family, her rich old suitor, and I had placed her. Still in Bogotá, she had reproached me for demanding her love. She may not love me the way I wanted, but what of it? Wasn’t I the man who had rescued her from inexperience only to leave her in disgrace? How could