

"The Day It All Happened"

ANA LYDIA VEGA
(PUERTO RICO)

Yes sir, I was there that day at exactly three o'clock in the afternoon when the air outside was like a snowcone compared to the boiling inferno inside that laundry. Steam hung from the eaves, clinging like cellophane. There were more pants in there than in the army. Or, at least, it seemed that way: things were going pretty well for Filemón Sagredo, Jr., in Puerto Rico. Dirty laundry was in abundance this side of the Mona Passage, and on Arzuaga Street in Río Piedras, full of Dominican kiosks and rooming houses, the hot *sancocho** and frozen papaya shakes flowed just like back in El Cibao. From time to time a wave of nostalgia for a tear-up-the-floor merengue and the sound of a down-home accent hit real hard, but you could always make a quick trip back to the Republic to see the folks and put in an appearance at the public square and even bring back a few straw mats to sell, make a little extra on the side, and get ahead, yeah.

And so, in the Quisqueya⁺ Laundry luck had winked at him, from the very day he arrived, numb with fear, on the shores of Eden, just above Bramadero Bay.

That son of a bitch Grullón had let him out far from shore so as not to risk his own hide. And Filemón, along with the other five illegals,

* A stew of tubers, vegetables, and meat popular in the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, and Cuba (*ajiaco*).

⁺ Aboriginal name for the Dominican Republic.

had had to swim the rest of the way in, scaring off the sharks with promises to the Virgin of Altagracia.

On the beach, another class of shark attacked him. He had to hand out wet dollars like so many blessings so he wouldn't end up in jail with all the others.

Bribes aside, the little trip had cost him well over five hundred dollars. It's a good thing that in Puerto Rico you're only poor if you want to be. There's no lack of jobs here, no. And you don't have to leave your back and your life in the damn canefields either. Anyone can get by, more or less, selling cones in a Chinese ice-cream shop, working as a short-order cook for some motherless Cuban, fixing flats in a compatriot's garage. Somehow or other, you can weather the storm. Until you can get hitched to some Puerto Rican broad and clear things up with Immigration. Or prosper in the day-to-day hustle and negotiate the official paperwork in exchange for a few hundred.

Yes sir, I was there in the flesh and saw it all when the big, tough-looking, Black guy squared off against Filemón Sagredo, Jr., with his sawed-off shotgun on his shoulder and said: "Félicien Apolon sends his regards."

The Dominican didn't even have time to open his mouth. He barely managed to take a step toward the clothes racks. The shotgun blast drowned out the scream of the woman who at that very moment was returning from the back room. But I'm sure of one thing: before he looked death in the eye, Filemón saw his father's face staring at him blankly from the past.

And don't you think this was all over money. The deceased was as punctual in paying his debts as Catholic school bells. Not money or women, no sir. Filemón was as light-fingered as the next guy, but he never picked up a woman that wasn't unclaimed and on the loose. This was a matter older and more serious than hunger itself. I could tell you myself, exactly, with all the details, what happened at Juana Mendez* so many years ago. I had gone over there—there's no cure for curiosity—on the very day it all happened.

It was during that bloody week everyone would rather forget. The Benefactor had called for the death of all Haitians up and down the

* A town in the Dominican Republic.

river that came to be known as "The Massacre."* The Dominicanization of the border was under way. Any Dominican who considered himself a patriot and a real man had to grab one of those filthy, no good, miserable wretches who had taken the food off the plates of the authentic sons and daughters of Duarte⁺ and bash his brains in.

By Friday night there was nothing left to carry the corpses in. There were carts overflowing with dead bodies and drunken bands of pursuers everywhere, incited by the scent of Haitian blood. Hiding under the bed, in the dark, Félicien could hear the cries of his dying countrymen. Some had been born on the wrong side of the border, the offspring of Haitian immigrants and Dominican women. But when the final blows were struck, no one bothered to ask anyone about their mothers.

In the next room, Filemón Sagredo, Sr., couldn't make up his mind whether to denounce the Haitian or not. He had helped the man's son to cross the river because Paula had asked him to. He had done it for her, for her alone, because she was Dominican, besides being one hell of a woman, even if she was living with a damn *cocolo*.⁺⁺ But when Félicien asked for refuge, he had to think it over twice before murmuring a yes laden with indecision. The memory of his father who had been killed in Haiti during the Yankee occupation stuck in his throat, choking him.

He had been strung up by Peralte's henchman, and hung from the mast where the Gringos' flag waved, denounced as a spy and a traitor. Unjustly, of course. They had mistaken him for another Dominican, a hotshot who had gone off to New York with a suitcase full of money. I caught a glimpse of grandfather Filemón's feet, dancing their last *carabiné* in the Haitian air. And I swear on the Constitution of the Republic that with his last words he cursed the *madamo*^{**} who killed

his father during the third Haitian invasion. To avenge the death of his own father, of course, pierced through by a Dominican bayonet during Serapio Reinoso's time.

Filemón thought it over three times before he called in the hangmen who were circling the place like wolves. But blood is thicker than water. Dawn was just breaking when the door hinges creaked. A flash of sharpened blades filled the *batey*.^{*} And at six in the morning, Paula was scrubbing the floor with a brush, to make the thirsty floorboards cough up Haitian blood. And that is how Filemón Sagredo, Jr., descendant of so many Filemóns, victims and assassins, found himself face down on the floor of the Quisqueya Laundry of Río Piedras that fateful day.

The oldest of his two sons, standing in the doorway, stared out over the heads of the curious all the way down Arzuaga Street, where his father's past had just sped away in a black Chevrolet. At the wheel, Félicien Apolon, Jr., followed the trail of blood patiently traced by so many Féliciens, victims and assassins.

Everyone is wondering if it will rain again. If there's any news, you can always count on me. I know just about everything. I'm always there on the day it all happens.

* A river separating the Dominican Republic and Haiti. In 1937, General Rafael Trujillo ordered the Dominican armed forces to massacre all Haitians found on the other side of the river, inside the Dominican Republic.

⁺ Juan Pablo Duarte, considered the father of the Dominican nation. He led the independence forces until he was exiled in 1844.

⁺⁺ In Dominican slang, a pejorative term for foreign cane cutters, from Haiti and the West Indies, and their descendants.

^{**} A racist term for Haitians in general, used in the Dominican Republic.

* Barracks to house cane cutters on the grounds of a sugar mill.