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IN THE TIME OF THE TYRANTS

CHAPTER ONE

THE DEATH AND POSTHUMOUS VENGEANCE OF HUGO SPADAFORA

"Anything--anything can be done in this country."

- Joseph Conrad, "Heart of Darkness"

On the day they were going to kill him---Friday the 13th of September, 1985--, Dr. Hugo Spadafora got up at six in the morning to do his yoga. Later, after his shower, he put on a long-sleeved striped shirt and coffee-colored trousers and had breakfast with his wife Ariadne. Then he packed a bag, a canvas sports bag, including his diary (it was book-sized, bound in vinyl, with a page for each day, the sort professionals keep for noting appointments) and some copies of the memoirs he'd published in 1980. He'd been living in San Jose, Costa Rica, and commuting to the contras' war in Nicaragua, but today he was going home for a visit to Panama.

He was then in his 46th year and fourth revolution. At 25, when other graduates of the Faculty of Medicine in Bologna, Italy, were thinking of setting up practice and getting ahead, he joined the struggle for independence in Portuguese Guinea (now Guinea-Bissau) and served two years as a guerrillero medic. Next came the bogus revolution in Panama proclaimed when the military seized power in October, 1968. Hugo opposed it at first, treated the bullet wound of a young man wounded in a shootout with soldiers, for which he spent a while in prison. Later he

joined, seduced by Omar Torrijos's populist rhetoric. For a time he was vice minister of public health. Then, in 1978, disillusioned by the corruption around him, he raised a force of volunteers and went off to Nicaragua to fight Somoza, staying on until after the fall of Managua. By 1981 he was with the Contras--a restless man, operatically handsome, haunted by compassion for the down-trodden and the lust to have a cause, to be in action.

Now he was disillusioned again, and simultaneously drawn to a new adventure. Earlier in the month he'd met with officers of the Drug Enforcement Administration in the US Embassy on Calle Primera in San Jose to give information about contra drug dealings with Panama's current dictator, General Manuel Noriega. He'd already accused Noriega publicly of being a tyrant as well as a trafficker in drugs, and in August announced his intention to return to Panama and get back into politics. As he put it to a friend, he was "going to set off a bomb." He'd fought for freedom in two foreign countries. Now he meant to do so at home. The trip he was making today was preparatory to a permanent relocation.

The route he chose was somewhat circuitous: light plane from San Jose to a rural airstrip; taxi eight miles from there to the frontier; minibus from Paso Canoa on the Panamanian side to David, the capital of Chiriqui Province; long-haul bus from David to Panama City.

This was a precaution of sorts but not an effective one: he'd gone the same way several times before. And anyway, caution wasn't his method. His brother Winston remembers him at age ten, taking a dare and jumping from the bridge over Rio La Villa, something no other boy in the town of Chitre would do. His life thereafter demonstrated the same attitude. He wasn't fearless. He simply didn't let fear affect his behavior. He left his house around nine. A little before noon he crossed into Panama.

Into Panama. The words have taken on a sinister resonance. Once a fortunate country, Panama has become a place of darkness. First, it fell among thieves. Then it came into the clutch of an interesting monster.

General Manuel Noriega was then 51, though he claimed five years younger. Short and stocky, tense of stance and gesture, his pudgy chin usually lifted pugnaciously, his corrugated cheeks often bulged in lewd smirks, he looked contemptibly clownish not truly evil, a cartoon demon or a B-movie gangster, Edward G. Robinson imitating himself. But when his features slacked in rage or hatred, and a flat glassy stare froze his small eyes, he showed what he was, one of earth's most noxious inhabitants. He was a premier trafficker in drugs and weapons with a personal fortune of perhaps a billion. He was absolute master of Panama, could have anything he chose done to anybody. And he was personally swinish as well as by proxy. While a lieutenant he raped a 13-year-old and brutally beat up her twelve-year-old brother. He was

in charge when a dissident priest, Father Hector Gallego, was tossed to his death from a helicopter in 1971. And when the adolescent son of a prominent jeweler was caught scribbling anti-regime graffiti, Noriega himself applied the electrodes to the boy's testicles and whooped with joy at each shriek and convulsion.

No one knows who his father was. His mother died a day or two after he was born. He was raised by a friend of hers, Luisa Sánchez (no kin), in a slum near the public market in Panama City. At fourteen he was seduced by an older man. So begin with a deep insecurity. His mother abandoned him, that she died makes no difference. And a desperate longing for love, hence his bisexuality, trying to buy love with sexual favors. Add self-loathing and the contempt of others, for while the weird code of Latin machismo extols the penetrator as manly no matter what he penetrates--woman, man, beast, melon, whatever--, it reviles the penetratee without mercy. Insecurity breeds an unslakable thirst for power. Self-loathing eases the guilt power-seeking brings on. Catamite and rapist in one person, each perversion balancing the other. And, finally, great strength of will and wits, or the penniless urchin scarcely survives, much less becomes the billionaire despot.

Still, he wasn't wholly disadvantaged. Like Hugo Spadafora some years after him, he attended the Instituto Nacional, Panama's best public high school. Later on, his classmates recalled his having a gift for words, and his being much less ugly than he became. He wanted to study medicine and practice psychiatry, a common ambition in the tormented, but couldn't afford it and worked as a lab assistant. Then his elder half-brother Luis Carlos, a clerk in the ministry of foreign relations, learned of a scholarship Peru was offering to its military academy. The

minister, Aquilino Boyd, agreed to let Manuel Antonio have it.

He was over the age limit the Peruvian Army established, but that was no problem. Luis Carlos falsified a birth certificate; Boyd authenticated the falsification; young Noriega went off to Los Chorrillos.

A stern place, even by soldier's standards, as Mario Vargas Llosa, who attended it, conveys in his novel La Ciudad de los Perros. The Latin American military have no real function. There follows an exaggerated emphasis on form, harsh discipline that nurtures and refines sado-masochistic tendencies. In 1960, Cadet Noriega was detained by police in Lima for raping and savagely beating a prostitute--the first sign of the Noriega the world came to know later. Also, while in Peru, he became an informant for the CIA.

On graduating, he returned to Panama and was commissioned in Panama's sole armed force, the Guardia Nacional, then somewhat between a police force and an army. In 1966, he was assigned to the 5th Military District in Chiriqui Province when the incident with the 13-year-old occurred. His commanding officer, a major named Omar Torrijos, saved him. Torrijos also made him district intelligence officer with the task of keeping an eye on the banana workers' union at United Fruit's plantations. These duties enhanced Noriega's value as a CIA "asset," and CIA connections advanced his career.

In 1968, the Guardia took power. Panama suffered invasion from within. In Chiriqui there was resistance. Noriega pacified the province, was an enthusiastic torturer of prisoners, a conscientious

terrorizer of the populace. In December, 1969, he helped the rapist's friend, Omar Torrijos (by then commandant of the Guardia and tyrant of Panama), survive a putsch. Torrijos made him his bagman and familiar fiend, referred appreciatively to him as mi gangster.

By 1972 he was in the capital, a lieutenant colonel and chief of intelligence. Panamanian intelligence, while working for the CIA and running errands for Fidel Castro. That's what made Noriega unique, his cynicism, his chutzpa. And his business sense, of course. He began as Torrijos's bagman but far surpassed his patron quickly enough. The Guardia general staff was a gang of extortionists, its administration little more than a squeeze, but Noriega was Superthief. He had his nose in all sorts of rackets. In short, his range. Had he lived in Dante's time, the poet would have had to chop his ghost into nuggets and put one in every sub-pit of Hell to do Noriega's versatility justice.

In 1981 Torrijos was killed in a plane crash. Command of the Guardia passed to Florencio Florez. Who was betrayed by Ruben Paredes. Who was betrayed by Manuel Noriega. For years Noriega had lurked like a rat in the wainscoting. In August, 1983, he emerged--duped Paredes into retirement, promoted himself general, took over as Commandant, renamed the Guardia Nacional the Panama Defense Forces (PDF). Then he flew off to Washington to help Bill Casey help George Shultz pick Panama's next puppet president, the fig leaf of ersatz democracy that squeamish Uncle Sam absolutely required to hide the gross facts of military tyranny in its client state Panama.

The choice was former student of Shultz's named Nicholas Barletta. His excellent English made him marketable in the US. Meantime, his quislinghood seemed beyond question. He'd spent years as chief of economic planning dreaming up cover stories for the Guardia's looting. He lost the election in May, 1984, but that was no matter. Noriega had a goon squad at hand to break up the counting procedure and fire on those who protested while uniformed soldiers watched smiling. The body count was four dead and forty-odd wounded, but a doctored count gave Barletta a 1,700 vote victory. The president of the electoral tribunal resigned in protest, but not before the United States ambassador to Panama, Everett Briggs, had publically congratulated him on the purity of the proceedings. Meanwhile, other US friends of General Noriega's arranged for him to speak at the John F. Kennedy Institute at Harvard on the role of the new military in the defense of freedom in Central America--which, presumably, was to falsify elections and drop irksome priests out of helicopters.

That September Noriega was at the height of his power. During his long tenure as chief of intelligence he had established links to other services, many (as the CIA seems to be) states within states that follow their own agendas and pay but slender allegiance to the governments that nominally control them. He had ties to Washington and to Havana, to Israel and the PLO, and as one of the world's major criminals he was in touch with the lords of drug and arms smuggling. At all points of the ideological spectrum, in criminal and law enforcement organizations, there were powerful men who had dealt with

Manuel Noriega, who owed him favors. If you were ruthless and liked to maneuver in secret, if you thought decency weakness and had contempt for human rights, Manuel Noriega was your man.

He was still on the CIA's payroll, but far from being its pawn, he could do as he cared to. The people at Langley were no match for him. The more flagrantly he betrayed them, the more secure he became, since unmasking him would be that much more of an embarrassment. And he knew things the American people were not meant to learn of. He had become the Reagan Administration's accomplice in a criminal conspiracy.

We have all seen the movie where the kindly granny with the cute little lap dog is really a colonel in the KGB, where the distinguished philanthropist with the white mane and the continental manners is in fact the Gestapo's man in Rio. We, the audience know, but the hero doesn't. When Dr. Hugo Spadafora revealed details of contra drug dealing in the US Embassy in Costa Rica, he may have surprised the men he talked to, but at certain levels of the US Government his information wasn't news. Since 1983, when Congress had passed strictures against helping the contras' war in Nicaragua, United States support for them had proceeded illegally, with Noriega a key man in the scheme. As extra compensation, moreover, he had the gall to load cocaine on the supply planes when they flew back from Central America to Texas. US authorities found out, but they could do nothing without exposing the illegal weapons airlift. After 1984, contra supply was funded in part by the cocaine barons. The United States Government was allowing and abetting the smuggling of illegal drugs across US borders in order to pursue an illegal war, so when Hugo Spadafora "revealed" what looked to him like contra drug dealings, he was just as naive as the nudnik in the movie. The difference was that his

show had no happy ending. His "revelations" were liable to expose the arms airlift, the cocaine angle, the whole filthy business. The minute he opened his mouth, he was a corpse. All sorts of people needed him dead, and Manuel Noriega was delighted to oblige.

He was at the height of his power, and yet driven. A bottomless insecurity, a fearful self-loathing, a terrible envy. There are the motives for Noriega's delight to oblige. Spadafora was brave and could instill courage in others, was qualified both by talent and experience to mount and lead a guerrilla in Panama. Spadafora was a physician, a healer. Noriega had wished to be but missed the chance and became instead a destroyer and torturer. Spadafora was handsome. Noriega was, in the kindest term, grotesque. And Spadafora had the "daily beauty in his life" that Iago envied, the gift of health, the gift of enthusiasm, the capacity to care for things outside himself. Noriega, on the other hand . . . Noriega could have been Iago's twin.

In sum, a conquered country, a subject people, a brutal and corrupt occupying force, and a perverted tyrant with Washington's blessing, with no restraints whatsoever on the gratification of his several lusts. This was the Panama Hugo crossed into.

He had lunch in Paso Canoa, a rabbit stew with rice and potato salad at a place called "Los Mellos", a shack with tables beside it

under a metal roof set up on posts, behind the bus station a few yards from the border. The owner, Ivan Garcia, remembers. More importantly, he remembered later that month, when Panamanian authorities were maintaining that Spadafora never crossed the border, when other witnesses were intimidated. Garcia, whose friends call him "El Guapo" ("Gutsy") did honor to his nickname by coming forward. Yes, Hugo was in Panama. Hugo lunched at his cafe. Hugo ate quickly, was in a hurry to get to the capital. He was supposed to meet his wife at the airport when she flew in from San Jose, but had time give Garcia a copy of his memoirs.

At 12:15 he got on a green-and-white Toyota "Coaster" model diesel minibus of the David-Frontera line, plate number 4B-52, driven by Alexis Baules with Edwin Nuñez as his assistant. A man in dark glasses got on behind him, a chunky man with Indian features and skin the color of mahogany. This was Francisco Eliecer Gonzalez, a sergeant in the Defense Forces and an agent of the G-2. He had on dark trousers and a black sleeveless jersey and a cream-colored corduroy cap with little buckles on the sides. He knew some karate and had a violent nature and for these traits went by the nickname of "Bruce Lee."

Hugo put his bag on the rack above the bus windows and took a seat toward the front on the right hand side. He will have looked straight at Gonzalez as he leaned back, will have "made" him as G-2 the instant he saw him (all are recognizable by their inimitable loudness), but will not have felt any anxiety. He was used to being shadowed by Noriega's goons. Gonzalez sprawled in a seat on the left

one or two rows behind him. Even as he did so, the bus pulled out.

From the border to David the Interamerican Highway runs roughly southeast, two lanes of light grey pavement unwinding in long straight-aways through brush country. The land is very green at that time of the year, late in the wet season, and broken every mile or so by streams that flow southeast into the Chiriqui River: Quebrada Gapacho, Quebrada Jacu, Quebrada La Conga. The sun will have been fierce, the day hot and muggy, suffocatingly so whenever the bus stopped.

At Jacu, two miles from the border, was the first of several check points set up by the PDF to control immigration. Here a guard boarded the bus to check the passengers' documents. He asked Hugo to get down, treatment normally reserved for those with improper documents but which Hugo had received on previous occasions. He went into the guard post, sat down, took a newspaper from the desk there, and began reading. Gonzalez got down behind him without being asked to and paid Nuñez the 40-cent fare from Paso Canoa to there as if he had reached his destination. At that, Nuñez heard the guard say, "Go ahead, Hugo, it's all right." Spadafora got back on the bus. So did Gonzalez. As Nuñez turned to get on, he heard someone behind him in the guard post say, "The great Hugo Spadafora." When the bus started up, Nuñez whispered to Baules, "We've got Hugo Spadafora with us."

At the second check point, eight miles further on, Hugo was again asked to get down, then again allowed to continue his journey. This time Gonzalez stayed put. The bus continued another eight miles to the town of Conception, halting first at the outskirts, then at the bus stop beside the park, a short walk from the PDF cuartel--barracks, that is, and district headquarters. Here, as passengers were getting off,

Gonzalez got up and went beside Hugo and, gesturing toward the door, said, "Come with me." According to Nuñez's declaration (made after "El Guapo" Garcia had set him an example), Hugo looked at Gonzalez with a kind of laugh, as if to say, "Who are you to be making this kind of invitation?" Then Gonzalez took Hugo's bag from the rack, and saying, "Allow me," as one might to a lady or an old man, carried it off the bus. Hugo followed.

Hugo followed Gonzalez past Nuñez, who was at the bus door, then turned round and took his identity card out of his shirt pocket and showed it. "So you'll know who I am. I am Dr. Hugo Spadafora." Then he turned back to Gonzalez, who had stopped a few paces off, and said, "Give me the bag, I'll go with you."

As Hugo and Gonzalez walked toward the corner, Baules reminded Nuñez that Hugo hadn't paid. Nuñez ran after him.

"Are you staying, señor?"

"I'm being detained by this member of the Defense Forces."

"Then the driver says to please pay me the fare."

Hugo paid Nuñez one dollar twenty. When the bus pulled away, he and Gonzalez were on the corner opposite the Montero Dental Clinic by the park in Concepcion. That was the last time any civilian saw Dr. Hugo Spadafora alive.

Dr. Hugo Spadafora entered the cuartel at Concepcion at one o'clock in the afternoon or thereabouts, Friday the 13th of September,

1985. The duty officer was Lieutenant Edgar Jaramillo. Those with Spadafora were Francisco Eliecer Gonzalez, alias "Bruce Lee", and Omar Vega Miranda. Vega Miranda, too, was a PDF sergeant. He'd been on duty that day at the first check point, and the likelihood is that he followed bus 4B-52 in a PDF vehicle to back Gonzalez up in case of trouble. There was none. The openness of his surveillance and arrest no doubt calmed Hugo, suggested petty harassment, not anything grave. But when the door of the cuartel closed behind him, he was lost utterly, as if the waters of the deep had closed over his head. However, he still had seven hours or so to suffer.

Hugo Spadafora was tortured in the towns of Conception and Alanje, and near the villages of Canto Gallo, Santo Tomas, and Estero Rico, in Chiriqui Province, Republic of Panama. He was murdered in a place called Corozo that was not even a village but an agricultural station and an outpost of the PDF.

In Conception, probably, he was merely beaten. In Panama in the time of the tyrants everyone taken in custody was abused, shouted at, threatened, insulted, shoved around. Hugo had an irascible nature. He will have resisted. That will have meant more blows. Not many, however. Woe to the poor fool who damaged him before his pain could be correctly inflicted and savored by people of refinement in such matters! The autopsy done on his corpse in Costa Rica found evidence of severe and prolonged beating, but he can't have got very much of it in Conception. A poke or two in the kidney with a truncheon, a thump on the upper arm with a rifle butt, perhaps a swat on the ear with some rubber hosing, and then he was stuffed in a cell till the gourmets could gather. Which, it's likely, didn't take very long. The entertainment that followed

wasn't in promptu. It seems certain that Hugo was surveilled in Costa Rica, that the PDF was informed when he left San Jose, if not even earlier when he booked his passage.

In Alanje, ten miles further along the highway, then six miles due south on a secondary road, Hugo Spadafora's suffering may have been strictly mental/emotional. Nivaldo Madriñan was in Alanje that day, major in the Defense Forces, chief of the Department of Investigations, chief torturer to successive tyrants of Panama, the most feared man in the country after Noriega. Madriñan had an acceptable reason to be there. Alanje is his birthplace, September 13th is his birthday. It can't be established for certain that he took part in what happened to Hugo Spadafora, but it's very hard to imagine his having missed it. He'd never have forgiven himself. More to the point, he'd not have forgiven the others. Hugo passed through Alanje that afternoon in a military vehicle. If Madrinan joined him and his escort, Hugo will have experienced mental/emotional suffering. He will have known then and there that he would be tortured.

Canto Gallo and Santo Tomas and Estero Rico are tiny villages quite close to the shore. They took Hugo Spadafora from one to another, like a band of carrousters dragging the bridegroom from tavern to tavern on the last night of his bachelorhood. The land there is in rice, low fields and, toward the sea, clutches of mangrove from which the tracks emerge as from tunnels onto lovely, long, white-sand beaches breakered softly by the unsoilable Pacific. According to the

campesinos of the region, they took Hugo down to the beaches far from the houses, no doubt so that his howling wouldn't be heard. A beach party, then, a moveable fiesta, with a fresh salt breeze and warm sunlight, and the lapsing beat of gentle surf.

Who were they, these revelers? According to Winston Spadafora, Major Luis Cordoba presided. He may well have been seconded by Nivaldo Madriñan. Which is not to suggest even for an instant that Major Madriñan ceded pride of place as a dispenser of torment to anyone, but merely that, like every gallant officer of the Panama Defense Forces, he had a keen regard for martial etiquette. Chiriqui, after all, was Cordoba's province. Captain Mario del Cid was on hand, the commandant of the penal colony on Coiba Island, as fearsome a place as any on the planet. He flew over specially to join the fun. And a lieutenant named Arturo Marquinez, and a sergeant Venero Morales, and a man named Castillo and perhaps others. And General Manuel Antonio Noriega. He was physically in Paris but present in spirit. And by telephone also, according to the National Security Agency. His communications hook-up included an open satellite line--it cost \$5,000 a day--, and that afternoon (or evening if you were in Paris) the National Security Agency monitored a satellite conversation between Major Luis Cordoba and General Manuel Noriega, part of which went as follows:

CORDOBA: We have the rabid dog.

NORIEGA: And what does one do with a dog that has rabies?

Well, what did they do with Dr. Hugo Spadafora? They jabbed sharp objects under his fingernails, the blade of a knife or bamboo

slivers, something like that. Probably that was first, that was the hors d'oeuvre, though they will have been beating him all the while, and vilifying him and shouting threats and insults, and playing with him obscenely and laughing at him, making fun of his pain. That was probably first because, though the pain is exquisite (as anyone knows who's done it by mistake, jabbed something sharp under a fingernail), there's no sense of being mutilated. Run a sharp thing under a nail, and it hurts very badly, but you know it will heal up and you'll be all right. True horror is in being permanently damaged, busted up, ruined, wrecked for good. So the fingernail business was probably just foreplay.

Did they question him? No doubt they did. Not because he had secrets they wanted but to give what they were doing a semblance of sanity. No doubt they asked him what he told the DEA, whom he met with, what they looked like, and so forth, and no doubt sooner or later he told them. But none of it mattered. They tortured him to calm Noriega's envy and because they enjoyed torturing people.

At one point they stripped him naked. With appropriate tweaks and pinches, one supposes, degrading little pokes and prods and feels. Then someone took a sharp knife and made two careful, deep, symmetrical cuts, on in the inside of each of his legs, from just above the knee to the mid thigh. The point here was to disable his thigh muscles so that he couldn't close his legs and thus disturb the pleasure they meant to take of him. Of everything about Hugo Spadafora's suffering, these cuts are what trouble one most. They argue that his ordeal was nothing

special, that many others suffered similarly at the hands of Panama's tyrants. The fellow who made those cuts was no novice. He had theoretical knowledge and hands-on experience. Without them someone would have had to hold Hugo's legs, a tiresome thing in Panama's climate. And there's the added torment, the hideous helplessness, the shame of lying there splayed, naked to one's enemies. Perhaps the expertise expressed in those cuts was what so many US officials were referring to--Ambassador Briggs, Southern Command C-in-C General John Galvin--when they praised the PDF's "professionalism."

Otherwise, proceedings followed tradition. The autopsy found Spadafora's testicles monstrously swollen, the result (it seems) of prolonged bastinado. And something was jammed up his rectum, a pole of some sort. The autopsy found his rectum massively damaged. The act is commonplace, expressive of what seems a widespread pathology. Rioting inmates at the New Mexico State Prison used a broomstick on one of the guards a few years back. According to Henry S.A. Becket (The Dictionary of Espionage, Dell, 1985, p. 105), Nicolai Yezhof, architect of Stalin's bloodiest purge, was wont during a troublesome interrogation to smash the leg off a chair and use that. The act is supremely degrading. The region is richly nerved, so pain is considerable. Injury to the prostate gland provides the horror of permanent sexual impairment. And it must make cowardly perverts feel brave and manly. The mind's eye sees them grin, and one knows instantly why the concept of hell was devised. There ought to be a place for those tormentors.

Well, for Dr. Hugo Spadafora the world became an endless howl. Was a phone patch done from a vehicle radio so that his howling could be savored in Paris? There's no evidence one way or another, but one has to think yes, yes that seems likely. Why pay five thousand a day for a fancy hook-up if not to savor your enemy's howls? The mind's ear hears those howls and an answering chortle. The mind's eye, helpless, watches the tormentors, till winded by effort and pleasure they flop down on the sand beside the obscenity they are making out of a brave and cultured human being, panting, chuckling as they prod it with sticks. Then they heave themselves up and drag it to the vehicle, dump it inside and go off amid wan smiles to another spot for another round of fun.

When they were finished, spent if you like, they broke two of his ribs. This must have had some ritual meaning for them. Dr. Mauro Zuñiga got the same. Then, like honest craftsmen, they signed their work, used a needle and indelible ink to tattoo "F-8" on Hugo Spadafora's shoulder. And the sun went down as on any other evening. And the stars came out, and maybe the moon also. We could look that up, find out if the moon shone that night, and if so if it was full or half or quarter, but enough's enough. There's a limit to the shame and rage one can deal with.

But, readers, before we leave this part of our story, please permit us a word in advice, a thing we learned the hard way. We hope and suppose that your countries are civilized, but Panama, too, was a civilized country once. Don't assume your spotless land can't be taken

over, or that no nasty tyrant will ever harm you. That's what people in Panama thought, and look what happened.

Between seven and eight on the evening of Friday the 13th of September, 1985, Dr. Hugo Spadafora was brought by military vehicle to the PDF outpost at Corozo, less than a mile from the Costa Rican border. He was very badly battered but still alive. He was placed on the cement floor of the barracks. The cook in the detachment sat down astraddle on his chest and plunged a butcher knife into his throat. Dr. Spadafora made a spasmodic movement. At that the cook hurriedly sawed off his head amid sprays of blood and horripilant gurgles.

Hugo Spadafora's head was buried in the yard in front of the barracks. His headless body was put in a US Mail bag--how obtained we don't know--and loaded on the vehicle that brought it. Convoyed by another vehicle, the body was driven into Costa Rica. The border in that region runs along a road. Crossing back and forth is no problem. At a place called El Roblito the body was dumped in a ravine. On their way back the soldiers stopped at a banana packing station called Balsa and washed both vehicles.

At Corozo, soldiers heated water and scrubbed the floor. Then they got drunk. Another drinking party took place on Coiba Island, in an area called Playa Hermosa away from the penal colony where, seven years earlier, the volunteer force raised by Dr. Hugo Spadafora received training before going off to fight tyranny in Nicaragua. A plane carrying Captain Del Cid and other persons landed at the strip there, and a great celebration was held that went on until the high hours before dawn.

On Monday, September 16th, a yellow dog began whining and

scraping nervously near the spot where Hugo Spadafora's head was buried. Soldiers killed it with rifle fire. That night they dug up Hugo's head and took it we don't know where.

On the evening of Saturday the 14th of September, 1985, Guillermo Sánchez Borbón was in the newsroom of La Prensa, an independent daily established in 1980. Part of the price exacted from Omar Torrijos for Senate ratification of the Canal treaties--and the part that hurt him most to pay--was that he allow a little free speech in Panama, for instance a newspaper independent of his tyranny. In the five years since La Prensa's founding, it had had its offices wrecked by goons with crowbars, its staff beaten up, its publisher forced into exile, and its whole operation closed down from time to time. In short, it must have been doing something right. Sánchez's column was its most popular feature.

To begin with, the column was often funny. Sánchez had learned from Chaplin how funny dictators can be, and from Mandelstam's widow how much they hate being made fun of. Besides, he was a born-again Marxist; an apostate of Karl, an apostle of Groucho. Also, his column was informative. Everyone knew that if Sánchez received authentic information, he would put it in the paper. So he got things like a xerox copy of a cancelled check in five figures drawn on the Social Security Fund and payable to a party backing Nicky Barletta. And the news that a certain colonel had gold-plated fixtures in his bathroom--which by poetic license was transformed into solid a gold toilet seat. On doctor's orders Sánchez had stopped writing poetry years before, but his license was still valid. Sources supplied information, the dictatorship comedy.

The columns more or less wrote themselves.

Sánchez was under no illusions. The dictatorship was funny only when viewed from oblique angles. To regard it head-on as one was often forced to, to come upon (as R. M. Koster had, one otherwise pleasant morning, at a normally placid corner in the residential quarter where he and Sánchez lived) seven soldiers beating one boy with hoses, leaning avidly over him as he writhed on the sidewalk, jostling each other to get their blows in, would have strained even Groucho's sense of humor. And of course Sánchez got threats. And was beaten up, waylaid by hoodlums and knocked to the pavement and bloodied--hardly a feat with a bookish, plumpish, sixtyish gentleman. But he rarely knew who his sources were and so was at little risk of betraying them. He had no wife, no children, no money--nothing he could be cowed by the threat of losing. As for his life, it was in used condition. He supposed he wouldn't mind parting with it much. And finally, he was having an excellent time. It was depressing to watch the whole world heap praise on the cowardly perverts who tyrannized Panama, and what they did often moved him to shame and fury, but he liked what he was doing and knew it was right.

At seven in the evening, then, on Saturday the 14th of

September, 1985, Sánchez's phone rang in the newsroom of La Prensa. It was one of Hugo Spadafora's sisters. Hugo had left San Jose the previous morning and still hadn't arrived. Sánchez had scarcely hung up when the phone rang again. Hugo's father, Don Carmelo, was downstairs, accompanied by several members of the family. They were worried, but not overly. They supposed Hugo was being held incommunicado. They and Sánchez, decided the best thing to do was to make the news public. Franklin Bosquez, the city editor, composed a short notice: Dr. Hugo Spadafora was missing; his family was concerned. No comment was made nor any theory adventured as to what might have happened.

The next night when he came in Sánchez was handed a hysterical communiqué issued by Colonel Julio Ow Young, Chief of the G-2 since Noriega's ascension to commandant. To speak of missing persons, it blustered, and to feel concern over rash speculations made by La Prensa for political purposes, was to seek to defame the armed forces. And it went on to urge investigation of the "crime" of having published word that Hugo Spadafora had disappeared. Sánchez knew then that something terrible had happened. Ow Young's communiqué was a confession. The next day, Monday the 16th, TV Channel 6 in San Jose broadcast the news that a headless corpse found at El Roblito two days earlier had been identified as that of Dr. Hugo Spadafora.

That night Sánchez received a great many calls--people giving information, others requesting it, still others merely trying to ease their grief. He learned of Hugo's having lunched at "Los Mellos", of

his having rode on bus 4B-52, of his having been arrested by "Bruce Lee" Gonzalez, all of which was in his column the next morning. After 10:30 or so the calls subsided. Then, around eleven, the phone rang again. A voice whispered, "Corozo." Before Sánchez could ask what that meant--the word itself means a kind of palm tree--, the line went dead. The incident was repeated three nights running. Meanwhile, with the dictatorship trying to hold the untenable thesis that the crime had been done in Costa Rica, Sánchez learned more details and published them, and went on to speculate that, as Spadafora had been last seen alive outside the cuartel in Conception, inside the cuartel was where he had been murdered.

On the fourth night, the night this last speculation was published, the voice did not break off after whispering, "Corozo." "Corozo," it went on, "is a technical station and military outpost. Don't get mixed up. They didn't kill Hugo Spadafora in the lock-up at Conception, they killed him in Corozo."

Sánchez waited, hoping to hear the same from some other source. Finally, he used a method he had for dealing with stuff that smelled true but lacked confirmation: he assumed a schoolmaster's tone and assigned homework. "For homework write one sheet on what happened at Corozo." Something like that appeared in his column on September 24th. That night the mystery voice called again. The name, it said, had caused panic among Hugo's murderers.

With all this, the Procurador of the Nation--roughly the same as Solicitor General in the US--was going on radio every day begging

Sánchez to give him more leads. As if he wanted any. As if he couldn't have given "Bruce Lee" Gonzalez a grilling if he even half cared to make an investigation. He was a large, soft, doughy man named Calvo, nicknamed "Mamallena" - "Fill-me-up", after a large, soft, doughy variety of pastry. He did not in the least want to know more about the murder, but pretending he did was a way to rattle cages. On the 25th Sánchez's column recommended that he retrace Hugo's route as Sánchez had been given it by two terrified campesinos brought to the phone by someone calling from Chiriqui--Conception-Alanje-etccetera, the Stations of the Cross in Hugo's Calvary--, with a warning to take care on the beach at Estero Rico, and a hope that he might finish the trip alive, and best wishes for heart-to-heart chats with the natives, and the suggestion that, for desert, he eat a corozo.

The US Embassy, for its part, swallowed hard at the murder, then put out the tale that it had been ordered by PDF Chief of Staff Roberto Diaz, next in line to Noriega, the colonel of the gold-plated bathroom fixtures. Despite his penchant for conspicuous consumption, Diaz was supposed to be a leftish, so the disinformation had a double prong: protect Washington's favorite and wound an unpalatable potential successor. The only drawback was no one believed it. Noriega's apologists knew he ran the country, whether he was on its soil or not. Insiders among them were, besides, aware that Diaz had been shocked by the murder and terrified by the direction Noriega was taking, that he'd tried to put a palace coup together, and that all the way from Paris Noriega had quashed it. As for Noriega's opponents . . .

In those days Koster and Sánchez were in the habit of lunching two or three times a month with a man from the embassy--let's call him Phil--who may or may not have been the CIA station chief. On the 25th the three were at "Windows", a swank restaurant atop the Bank of Boston Building owned by one of Noriega's gun- and drug-running protégés. In due course Phil floated the US line. With a certain embarrassment, for he was a clever man, a wit and a linguist, and no less an ironist than the others at the table. Diaz, he said, may have done Spadafora's murder. Why? To discredit Noriega. To Phil's personal credit, he took the reaction manfully. Both his companions began to hoot wildly:

Discredit your Aunt Eulalia! Noriega didn't need anyone to discredit him! He did a terrific job all by himself!

Meanwhile, the country too was reacting. With horror, as well might any country, but Panama felt a special repugnance. Its first hero, Balboa, discoverer of the Pacific, had been unjustly beheaded in 1519, an atrocity Panamanians learn in grade school to abhor and that stands in chilling contrast to most of Panama's subsequent history. Till 1968 the land never knew tyranny. Till Noriega Panama's tyrants practiced restraint, murdered only those they felt they had to, and went about it as discretely as they could. Now, it seemed, a recessive gene for demonic cruelty was reasserting itself, changing Panama's character utterly. The old confidence that Panama was different, would never be like its tormented neighbors--that trust was fading. Everywhere there was a sense of foreboding, even among those who from greed or cowardice or love of ease deceived themselves about the regime that ruled them, endowing it with spurious virtues.

Hugo Spadafora had been a hero to many, especially to those who,

like him, were fooled by Torrijos, who believed in Panama's "revolution." Even those who thought Hugo wrongheaded admired his courage and idealism. No details were given out of his torture, but the photo of his headless corpse lying naked and tagged on a mortuary table sickened everyone who saw it. And filled them with terror, a reaction that Noriega surely intended. Killing Hugo wasn't just amusement. It had its political purpose, intimidation. If that could be done to Hugo Spadafora, no one who opposed Noriega was safe. But more than terror the crime brought disgust and anger. Noriega was schooling his countrymen in toughness, and though their graduation was still some years off, from all parts of the republic voices joined those of Hugo's family in calling for the creation of a special commission to investigate the crime and bring its authors to justice.

Hugo's family. What an example they set. With dignity, with calm, with faith in the future, above all with imagination they voiced their call: Justice for Hugo. There, one feels, was the difference between the murdered man and his murderer, a family whose love and support reached beyond death, the difference between health and sickness, decency and evil, civilization and barbarism. The family is still Panama's basic social unit. Despite the upheaval wrought by years of tyranny Panama has still not reached the stage where the solitary individual is forced to seek substitutes in political movements or business corporations or secular religions foisted by the state. In the aftermath of what might easily have been a devastating tragedy, the hideous slaughter of its most gifted member, the Spadafora family showed how sound and resilient the institution of the family can be.

And what a service they did their countrymen, furnishing them

means of expression where, hitherto, most had been mute. They began on the 23rd with a day-long fast outside the United Nations office in Panama City. On the 24th they formally petitioned the puppet legislature to vote the special commission into existence, and Winston began a hunger strike that lasted nineteen days and ended only with the archbishop's intercession. And there were masses and marches, events that thousands participated in. The human chain, for instance, forged in the capital on October 25th, from the Papal Nunciature (where Guido and Carmenza Spadafora had chained themselves) to the presidential palace. It stretched three miles through all kinds of neighborhoods, along palm-lined Avenida Balboa by the bay, in and out of narrow streets in the old city, and people of all classes joined it, calling out to others to join also. No police were about. None were needed. In all the afternoon there was no incident, only thousands of Panamanians, serious and yet light hearted, joining hands together for justice. And, in December, the 300 kilometer walk from Chitre, where Hugo was born, to Panama City. It began on the 16th, the family and certain friends, but when they reached the Canal on Christmas Eve, their number had grown to over a thousand, and thirty thousand more came out to meet them, packing the Bridge of the Americas and its approaches.

Long before Christmas the country's reaction, animated by the Spadafora family's campaign, had produced decisive political consequences. Toward the end of September, with the cry for justice rising, Colonel Diaz decided, not without reason, that since the murder had happened while he was in charge, he might end up being blamed for it. He suggested that Noriega arrest Cordoba. When Noriega, who was still outside Panama, refused, Diaz urged him at least to arrest some sergeants

and privates, the ones who'd actually cut Hugo's head off. Later on they might be spirited from the country, but their arrest would at least ease the pressure. All this was gone into very gingerly, with no hint that Diaz thought Noriega was involved. Again Noriega refused, and at that Diaz began, very gingerly indeed, to put a coup together. He approached Lieutenant Colonels Marcos Justines and Elias Castillo and ordered two companies of the "2000" Battalion from Fuerte Cimarron east of the capital to PDF Headquarters.

Almost at once Noriega called him. What were all the troop movements about? In case of street demonstrations, Diaz improvised, scared stiff at his boss's transatlantic omniscience. And when Justines and Castillo developed cold feet, Diaz panicked and built himself a scapegoat. He called two dozen or so civilian politicians, starting with puppet vice president Erick Delvalle, and told them Nicky Barletta was using the Spadafora case in an attempt to dump General Noriega.

Events gave the story much credibility. On September 24th Barletta had flown to New York to give a speech at the UN. While he

was there, a journalist asked him about the special investigating commission the Spadaforas were demanding, and Barletta said he meant to name one. The crime's grossness, it seems, exceeded his quislinghood's limits, or hearing so many people call him "Señor Presidente" bemused him into thinking he had power. Whatever the case, his rebellion couldn't be countenanced. Noriega had returned to Panama. Within hours of his remark, Barletta was summoned home also. When his plane pulled up at the gate at Torrijos Airport on the morning of Friday, September 27th, ground personnel noticed "F-8" scrawled on one of its windows. Barletta was escorted directly to PDF headquarters and closeted with Noriega and Diaz. In the fourteen hours that followed they forced him by threat to resign the office they had given him by fraud eleven months earlier.

Vice President Delvalle made no objection. He put on the trappings of office just stripped from Barletta as avidly as ever a dog lapped vomit, nor was any dog ever more reverent of its master. As soon as he was sworn in as puppet president, Delvalle went on foot the half mile from the palace to PDF headquarters, grinning houndishly all the way, to fawn publically on Manuel Noriega, and for thirty months thereafter he grinned and fawned--begged, retrieved, rolled over, heeled on cue--as the ring of evil tightened on his country and his countrymen were ever more harshly oppressed, till at length he was no longer useful and Noriega thrust him out as he had Barletta.

Hugo Spadafora was taking vengeance, however, though no one noticed at the time. So long as Noriega remained Washington's

favorite, he might as well have been in Eden. But Barletta the fig leaf was also the forbidden fruit. Of every tree Noriega might freely eat--murder whom he cared to, torture to his heart's ease--, but he must not touch Nicky. George Shultz and Bill Casey had picked him. The United States of America had lied grossly in the matter of his supposed election. So when Noriega tossed Nicky out, he began to fall from grace with Washington.

Unfortunately, this was not always clear to Noriega. On December 17 he received a visit from Admiral John Poindexter, President Reagan's national security adviser, who asked him to consider the possibility of restoring Barletta to office and thought it would be useful for him to send certain officers abroad, presumably Cordoba, Madriñan, and Del Cid, until the furor over Spadafora subsided. Simultaneously, a meeting was going on in the Executive Office Building next door to the White House between Mr. Constantine Menges, a member of the National Security Council staff, and three representatives of the Panamanian Government, lobbyists whom Noriega had hired to help bridge the rift between him and Washington, and Menges was reading them the riot act. Noriega would have to make changes in the Defense Forces. For starters, he had to replace the officers involved in the murder of Hugo Spadafora. He had, besides, to stop dealing with the Cubans. And he had to hold free elections at once, or recount the '84 votes and install Arnulfo Arias, the actual victor (and, incidentally, the president deposed in 1968 when the military seized power). In short, there were two distinct US positions. It was as if the United States had two different governments.

Which, in fact, it did. One government, the insiders, knew about the arms airlift and the Medellin connection and, no doubt, all manner of

other unsavory dealings in which Noriega was its accomplice, and hence refrained from jumping on him too heavily, lest he be unavailable next time, lest (Perish the thought!) he blab. The other government saw him as, purely and simply, an S.O.B., and not necessarily Uncle Sam's either, what with dealing with Castro and purging Barletta the fig leaf. Small wonder Noriega was confused, nor could he be blamed for paying scant attention to the US officials who treated him harshly and heeding instead those who used kid gloves. This sending of two different signals, the inevitable consequence of a policy designed primarily to dodge the Congress and deceive the American people, continued for at least two years and was the principle cause of the United States's inability to secure its national interest with regard to getting Noriega out of Panama and restoring the isthmus to friendly hands.

But no matter what signals were sent him, Noriega's fall from grace was never reversed. Like participants in a marriage going sour, he and Washington kissed and made up a number of times, but neither really meant it, and each reconciliation was briefer than the one before, till in the end both parties simply stopped trying. So on Friday the 27th of September, 1985, Manuel Noriega's easy days were over. He still had years to strut and bluster, but never again was it going to be much fun.

That same day every G-2 agent received Sánchez's picture and orders to arrest him dead or alive. He was getting close to the truth. The evening before he'd told Koster, "If they find me without my head, look for it in Noriega's desk drawer." On his way home from lunch, a neighbor stopped him on the corner. The G-2 were waiting in his apartment. At that moment a taxi came by, and Sánchez stopped it. That afternoon he took refuge with the papal nuncio.

The nuncio, Monseñor Jose Sebastian Laboa, was a Spanish Basque Sánchez's age--that is, about sixty--who had been in Panama nearly a year. A day or two after taking his post, on the urging of a Panamanian layman (a man recommended by previous Vatican legates) he had said some kind words about General Noriega, whom the layman had described as a man of peace. The next morning in La Prensa he received both barrels of Sánchez's scorn, complete with wordplay on his surname: "Boa Lauds Viper," or "Boa to Rattler: `I Love You,'"--that sort of thing. By noon churchmen in Panama had apprised him of Noriega's true nature, and that evening he went to La Prensa to tell Sánchez he'd made a mistake and had no hard feelings. From then on the two were friendly. On September 27, after the Venezuelan Ambassador was unable because of illness to take a call, Sánchez asked his niece to contact Laboa. It was traditional for Latin American countries to grant the hunted refuge in their embassies. Would the Vatican do likewise? "Por supuesto!" replied Monseñor Laboa, and Guillermo Sánchez thus became the first (but not last) of Laboa's such guests.

The nunciatura was on the corner of Avenida Balboa and Via Italia, at the edge of Panama City's Paitilla Point sector, a two-storey building with an ample front garden, the whole enclosed by a high wall. The ground floor had the embassy's offices, a large reception room, a dining room, the pantry and kitchen, and quarters for the nuns who ran Laboa's household. Above were the nuncio's rooms and other bedrooms, one occupied by the nuncio's deputy, a library-study, and a broad terrace. The furnishings downstairs were rich but formal-- elegant, heavy, stiff, Spanish-colonial. Everything above was simple and Spartan, the rooms almost empty, therefore wide and airy. Sánchez's room was on the

building's east side. His window showed only high-rises and a sliver of street. The terrace, however, on which he could stroll after dark, gave on Via Italia, and from the library he could see the city and the hazy green cordillera beyond it.

Sánchez's bed was hard, but that helped his lumbago. He could not write his column, but he had never made a fetish of work. When guests came, he was obliged to stay in his room, for no one but his niece knew where he was hiding, but when they left Laboa brought him the new rumors. By then Sánchez was a great connoisseur of the genre, what with all the anonymous tips he received, and could tell a rumor's provenance and reliability without the slightest pause for reflection, the way a great hitter can distinguish pitches by picking up the spin on the ball. He was often forced to spoil Laboa's pleasure over what seemed to the priest a juicy tidbit, sighing that it was surely a plant from Havana, or a fabrication designed by the CIA, but Laboa never complained at these disabusings, or grew stingy in relating new tales. And the nunciatura's austerity stopped at mealtime. Laboa's housekeeper, Madre Angelina, had lived most of her life in Panama but had never lost her native touch for pasta.

Madre Angelina was some years older than Laboa and Sánchez, small and round and lively, with an Italian's love of conspiracy and intrigue. She delighted in helping Sánchez hide out, would have delighted in it under almost any circumstances, but took a special pleasure in that his only "crime" was telling the truth and his persecutor Manuel Noriega. She knew Noriega of old and hated him genially, having been attached to the Chiriqui diocese when Noriega was commanding in the Province. "Oh, that `Pineapple Face'!" she would exclaim on recounting one of his

villainies to Sánchez, bunching her fingers together and shaking them in the air below her chin. Then she'd collect herself, recall her religion, and heap her protégé's plate with more lasagna.

Sánchez stayed two weeks and gained twelve pounds. Morning and afternoon he read Saint Augustine, first the Confessions, then The City of God, works he'd been yearning for years to reread without ever finding the necessary leisure. When representatives of the Inter-American Press Association worked out his emergence from hiding, obtaining guarantees from Chief of Staff Diaz that he wouldn't be taken without due process of law, he wasn't exactly sad to leave, but if, when he dies, he's allowed to design his own paradise, it will be a great deal like the nunciatura.

With Sánchez in hiding, out of touch with his sources, and his column absent from the paper, the Spadafora case dropped somewhat from public view. The government forbade all mention of it in the media it controlled, which included all television stations, and on October 11th, the seventeenth anniversary of the military's taking power, organized a march "for peace and against sedition," and of "apology to the Defense Forces." Yes, you read correctly. Apology to the murderers. Peace, though they were waging war on the people. From that day anyone who spoke against Noriega and his uniformed goons was branded as "seditious." In their minds, they and Panama were coterminous. The march had a good turnout. Public employees were ordered to take part on pain of being fired, and roll was taken before the thing started. The murder case, however, would not go away.

Before taking refuge with the nuncio, Sánchez had received a document with a wealth of detail about the crime, essentially the story told above in these pages. It was vouched for by a person of great moral

authority, but Sánchez preferred to wait for some confirmation before publishing its contents. These he copied at once, then he burned the original. In normal circumstances he would have turned the document over to the authorities, but circumstances in Panama weren't normal, and hadn't been for years. Far from wishing to establish the truth, the authorities knew it only too well and wished to hide it.

Two months went by. Sánchez spent half of the first in Laboa's care. Thereafter he was back at La Prensa, but nothing new about the murder surfaced. The torrents of November came, the great downpours that precede Panama's dry season. The national holidays came and went with sullen high school students refusing to parade past Delvalle, turning their backs on the reviewing stand, and puppet minister of education Manuel Solis Palma spitefully ordering them expelled en masse. Finally, on November 25th, Sánchez received confirmation of the document's contents and no longer had need or right to keep the terrible story to himself. He put it in his column the next day, first pruning details and certain touches that seemed liable to betray his source's identity--which Sánchez still doesn't know--to someone familiar with the PDF. In the years since he wrote that column he has received other confirmations. The surest, however, came almost at once. The Defense Forces took the packing plant at Balsa apart piece by piece and carried it away. Then they leveled the ground with bulldozers. It was as if the place had never existed. Soon afterward Corozo received the same treatment.

On December 18th Sánchez was called before a prosecutor and questioned for several hours. The whole thing turned on Balsa and Corozo. What the Ministry of Justice wished to know was who had told Sánchez about those places. Sánchez had no trouble guessing why and was

happy he could say truthfully he didn't know, and that he'd burned the document's original. That same afternoon "Mamallena" Calvo declared the case officially closed. The investigation, he said, couldn't continue because no one knew who had murdered Hugo Spadafora.

1986 was officially declared the "Year of Peace - Security Without War" by order of General of Forces Manuel Noriega. All over Panama signs with that slogan blossomed, often embossed with a ring of five stars, the general's insignia, and little white doves flapping bravely zenithward. Sánchez stopped calling Noriega "Bokassa" and referred to him instead as "the Peace Pigeon" and went on writing about Spadafora's murder and other abuses. And on February 7th, the Fourth Superior Court in Chiriqui formally absolved, declared free of guilt all members of the Defense Forces whom Sánchez and others had cited as having taken part in Spadafora's arrest--the very men whose interrogation by an independent tribunal could unravel the tangle and lead to the crime's material and intellectual authors. On the 18th Sánchez was brought before another prosecutor, Ana Belfon, a person entirely Noriega's instrument, and told to his horror that he was being sued for calumny by Omar Vega Miranda and two others.

Sánchez's horror needs some explaining to people who reside in civilized countries. Since Noriega's ascension to command, Panama had enacted a new calumny law that, if not unique, was at least unusual. Anyone accused in a civil suit could be put behind bars for five years of preventive detention. Five years on an accusation, no trial required. As it happened, the columns mentioned by Sánchez's accusers in their suit were those of the 11th, 13th, 17th, and 21st of September, 1985. When the first two appeared, Hugo Spadafora was alive and well in Costa Rica.

The third made no mention of Sánchez's accusers. The fourth was imaginary. September 21, 1985, was a Saturday, and on Saturdays Sánchez's column did not appear. That would have been enough to have the action thrown out, but Sánchez was living in Panama in the time of the tyrants. As soon as he signed his deposition he went directly to La Modelo Prison.

Oh, La Modelo! Who could see you and ever forget? Even from the outside the place is depressing, fortresslike, a city block square, with twenty-foot walls and little turrets with gun slots. And inside . . .

Galleries like zoo pavilions run the whole length and breadth of the prison. In them are penned hundreds and hundreds of men reduced to the minimum human expression in filth, in stench, in misery, in despair. Sánchez was put in the basement with the most wretched, a plumpish, bookish gentleman of sixty-one, holding his trousers up with one hand (for his belt had been taken), holding the other out a little in front of him, peering with bifocals through the gloom.

As soon as he entered, eight or ten men surrounded him. Then one of them came closer, stuck his face almost against Sánchez's, and studied him with an ethnologist's care. When satisfied, he asked whom Sánchez had murdered. Everyone in the cell had murdered someone.

At that, a man who'd been reading a newspaper lifted his gaze and said, "He's Sánchez Borbón. He writes 'En Pocas Palabras,' I read it whenever I get the chance."

Sánchez saw that the paper he had was that day's La Prensa, but seeing it, hearing his column referred to in educated and intelligent tones, only heightened the unrealness of the gallery, of its pale yellow bulb burning high up near the ceiling, of the thin light that seeped from

a window almost that high.

"He's in for political reasons," the reader continued. "He gives it to the government, to Noriega especially."

Then another, a black man with finely sculpted features, began questioning Sánchez--not with hostile intent, it seemed, from plain curiosity. For what political cause was he in prison? What attacks? What particular cases?

"For none in particular," Sánchez answered, "for all in general." But then a man who'd come in from a neighboring cell and seated himself on the floor near the questioner looked up at Sánchez with great interest and malignity.

"Maybe for the Spadafora case," he sneered.

That satisfied the black man, who got up and went out, but the sneerer continued: "You killed Spadafora, didn't you?"

"Certainly not!" said Sánchez, but for some reason this enraged the sneerer.

"Tell the truth! You killed him! Did you or didn't you? Don't lie to me! I don't like being lied to!"

You know very well who killed him," broke in the reader. The Defense Forces killed him. This man is a journalist."

All the while the ethnologist had kept gazing at Sánchez, and saying from time to time, "What a sweet mouth you have."

Then another came up, a man in a cap, and began explaining his extraordinary sexual gifts that were mainly going to waste now with his caging. Another offered Sánchez the services of his personal catamite, and grew furious when Sánchez refused the offer. Across the aisle was

La Galera de los Locos (the Gallery of the Madmen)--as if Sánchez's cellmates didn't qualify--, where crazies sang and begged and shouted insults. Ceaselessly. Other prisoners taunted them to see their lunacies, or had them commit perversions for a piece of bread or cigarette in reward.

A bearded man saluted Sánchez and told him his story. He'd spent seven and a half years on Coiba Island, for though everyone agreed he was crazy, and thus not responsible for the murder he'd done, the state mental hospital refused to take him on the ground that his madness exceeded the place's norms. Then a man who lay reclined in an improvised hammock related the hellish existence in La Modelo, and went on, with the others agreeing, that Coiba was better, for though you had to work hard every day, at least you felt like a man, like a human being. In the labor of clearing ground, of planting and harvesting, inmates regained their dignity a little. There was always the risk of being shot "while escaping," or of abuse by the guards, who were all sadists, but it was better than the slow agony of the galleries.

Then the ethnologist swore he would rape Sánchez as soon as night fell. "Not you, me." protested the man with the cap. A furious squabble ensued between the two, and was joined by the man whose catamite Sánchez had refused. Just as quickly then the squabble subsided, and the question was resolved by the flip of a coin. The ethnologist won, and thereby considered he could dispose as he wished with Sánchez, after the requisite softening up, but then the bearded man leaned in and warned him, "Whoever messes with the old guy dies."

The beard drew Sánchez apart, told him not to worry. He showed Sánchez a knife he had under his sleeve. "Later we'll go upstairs," he

said to Sánchez, as if assuring Sánchez that there he'd be safe, but behind him the newspaper reader was making faces warning Sánchez not to believe a word.

Sánchez stood there blinking, disoriented. A guard came in and beat on the bars with his nightstick, his face contorted in rage and pallid in madness beyond anything Sánchez had seen among the prisoners. "What'll you do if they rape you?" the guard screamed at Sánchez. Sánchez looked at him in silence. The guard went out.

Then Sánchez's self-styled protector, whom Sánchez didn't know whether to trust or not (but who, he learned later, was used by the prison guards for their filthiest errands), rummaged in a corner of his cell and in his pockets, and at once there appeared four or five little straws and a small paper plate and on it a mound of cocaine, which his cellmates partook of in quick snorts. It was the first time Sánchez had witnessed that sort of ritual. Later he learned what it signified in La Modelo. It was a preparation for a gang rape.

The ethnologist snorted and smiled and shook himself doglike. Then he looked up and screamed that it soon would be dark. He made as if to rush at Sánchez but was held back by the asylum's reject and stood raging in his grasp screaming threats and obscenities. Across the aisle, the madmen squeaked and threw excrement. Oh, La Modelo!

Meanwhile, a campaign was being waged on Sánchez behalf. Radio Mundial and other independent stations organized a network throughout the country to mobilize calls for his release, and friends were calling people of influence outside Panama. Monseñor Laboa called the Vatican. Koster, who had been active for twenty years in Democratic Party politics in the United States suddenly found out why and called everyone he knew

in Washington. He also called Pho at the embassy, where calls were coming in from senators and congressmen he'd already called and from others called by the publisher of La Prensa, Roberto Eisenmann, in exile in Boston. Phil called Ambassador Briggs in his limo on the way to visit puppet President Delvalle. So even as the ethnologist raged at Sánchez, Delvalle and the rest of Panama's government was being harried from all sides to let him go. It happened, then, that bail was agreed to and Sánchez put at liberty just before sundown.

A crowd had seen him to the prosecutor's that morning. A larger crowd was at the prison when he emerged. It was still quite light, much lighter than in the basement of La Modelo, and there were, besides, TV cameras, so Sánchez emerged blinking, more or less blind, and was startled by the shouts and applause of the people. But right away he began to distinguish the faces of friends and relations, and with that emotion took over, and his eyes grew very wet, and his voice broke, and fielding as best he could the questions flung at him by reporters, he made his way through embraces and handclasps to his lawyer's car. Here, too, Hugo Spadafora was taking revenge. The United States had decided to signal its cooling ardor by changing ambassadors. Now Noriega's creatures had jailed Guillermo Sánchez and provoked the campaign noted above on the eve of the new man's confirmation hearing in the U.S. Senate. Such things are usually brief and boring, with one or two senators present just for form's sake, one or two aides, the candidate, and his family. Not so in the case of Mr. Arthur Davis. The room was packed with reporters and TV crews. Every member of the subcommittee showed up. And each pleased himself by asking the ambassador designate whether he believed in democracy and freedom of speech and

human rights and civilian control of the military. On taking his post, Mr. Davis demonstrated very clearly that he did, in fact, hold such values, but his confirmation hearing put the United States on record as having them as the bases of its policy toward Panama-something that still wasn't true but that had hardly been hinted at before. Noriega's discomfort was accelerated a little.

Guillermo Sánchez went on writing his column. In July, though, he was sued for calumny again. Panamanian justice disallowed bail in the case of a second accusation. It was one thing, Sánchez decided, to risk one's life another to end it in the Gallery of the Madmen. He went into exile.

Six agents of the G-2 saw him off at the airport. And brought a special well-wisher with them. As Sánchez was being seen through emigration, a pair of arms seized him from behind and mad laughter hooted. It was his false protector from La Modelo, the man who, when Sánchez had been raped by all who cared to, would have put a knife in his heart. Crime of passion, the regime's newspapers would have called it, just another falling-out among perverts. Sánchez didn't stop trembling till the plane was airborne.