

## PART ONE

### CHAPTER I

I come from Portugal, but I have not spoken Portuguese in years. I am proud of this, even though I have never learnt to speak another language properly. I suppose you could say that makes me feel twice as Portuguese. To tell you the truth, I do have some French, but I think I must have lost my tongue in Spain and I'm reduced to asking my companion, *La Française* (she is from Barcelona), to translate these, my vernacular memoirs, now that *The Pelican* has been forced to close. And it's perhaps thanks to the rainy season, which I haven't seen like this in ages, that some details of the story, swamped by the most striking adventures (if I dare say so) are rising to the surface like the bodies of the drowned from the days of old. What a phrase that is! 'Days of old.' The words come to mind precisely at the moment I write them. I hear *La Française* calling me. Seated at a table at the back of the café in the glare of a paraffin lamp, I see her, an exercise book open before her and a pencil in her hand, as she waits poised to transcribe my multilingual memoirs into French. I listen to the thunder and to my children running around the courtyard, yelling. I close my eyes, I can feel the rain coming. I settle deep into my hammock and conjure up images of those days of old. And as I say those words aloud, past and present fade away and the booming sound of the stranger's voice resonates in my head.

"Days of old," I hear again. And I catch myself saying:

*"En los nidos de antaño, no hay pájaros hagano."*

A fist comes crashing down on the table in the bar and the stranger utters:

"The days of old are upon us, sir."

*"The name is Coutinho."*

I'm sure of it, my father and the visitor were speaking English, the language my mother had forbidden. Outside, it was pitch black. They sat deep in conversation, drinking brandy at the back of the bar. I don't think I had ever seen my father drunk before. I don't think I've ever seen him drunk again, either.

"Come over here, son," he said. Then, to the stranger: "This is my son."

"I see," said the stranger. "Did you sleep well, child?"

"Oh, he falls asleep anywhere," my father replied on my behalf, "except in his bed."

"Excellent," said our guest. "All great men fall off at the drop of a hat, isn't that right, Madam?"

This latter remark was directed at my mother. I hadn't noticed she was in the room till then. That was odd in itself. Why didn't she say something? I was sure she'd make a fuss, that was her way to gain attention, for she particularly detested the English language. I watched my father carefully. This was incredible! He never ignored her like this, he wouldn't dare! What the hell was going on? There he was, the most cowardly of men, chattering away with a stranger and in English to boot!

And my mother stood by, not saying anything. Suddenly, I realized why. My mother was petrified. She literally couldn't move. For there, on the table, was something extraordinary: a pile of money. I couldn't tell you how much. Two, three thousand dollars perhaps. All I can say is that I remember the floor was covered in dollars and our cat – a cat with no name – was toying with them.

Then a strong gust of wind blew through the house and we were swallowed in darkness. I sensed that my mother was going to the kitchen to fetch some matches. But before she could come back, our guest had set fire to a five dollar note and gone off in search of the toilet.

"Whose is it?" my mother whispered, referring to the money.

"Ours," my father replied. He didn't seem particularly interested.

For a few moments we heard the stranger singing, then he returned. He was a completely different person now. He was pale, and smiling. And sober. Sober as a judge.