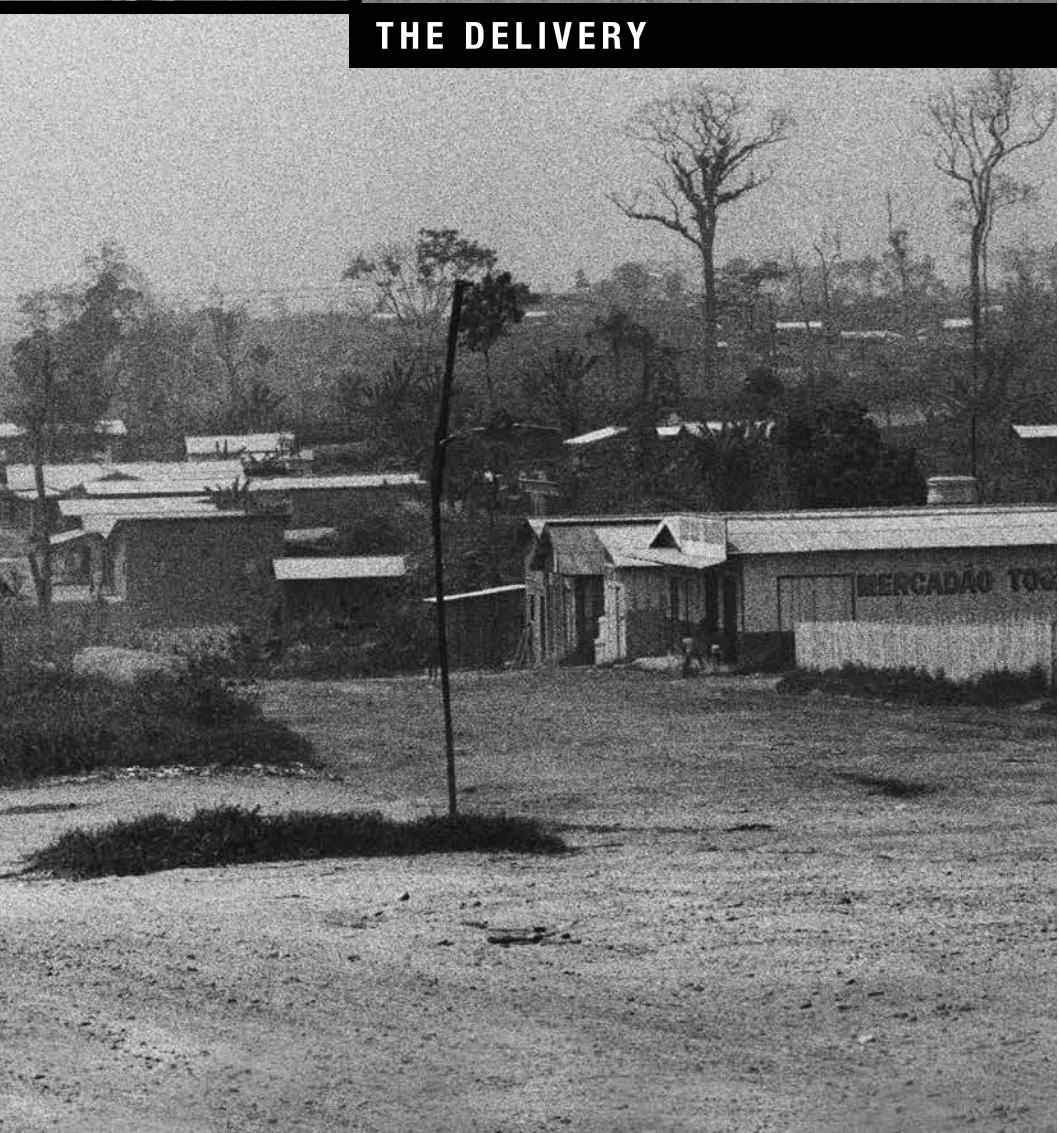




THE DELIVERY



Ayara had to hurry to hang the hammock before Judge Darcinta de Pedro Tomaia ordered her to turn off the light. She chose the corner furthest from the door of what had once been the school at KM 2. It was like a typical home-made shed, built, if that was the right word, of rough-hewn planks with a shingled roof, two crooked windows that barely closed and a door, which the Judge carefully locked with a very large stainless steel padlock that she took from her bulging bag.

The padlock was the least surprising object hidden in the bag. It was followed by a .38-caliber revolver, which the Judge placed next to her flip-flops before lifting her stout body into her own hammock.

Judge Darcinta was fifty years old, large and imposing; she was prematurely wrinkled by the never-ending heat of Amazonia, but above all by her work. She was the most experienced – and feared – circuit magistrate in the state of Pará, empowered to resolve every type of dispute: land battles, fights over women, robberies, ‘domestics’ and murders. Her job was to roam the abandoned jungle interior and somehow administer justice across that vast and God-forsaken region.

Ayara had not been able to resist the invitation to accompany this remarkable woman, whose sudden transformation from an apparently elderly country maid to a severe agent of the law was effected every time she placed her shiny .38 on the table. The heavy thud of metal on wood always signaled unambiguously to everyone present that court was in session, and she was in charge.

Her hearings took place in the most incredible settings: aboard riverboats, in schoolrooms and even beneath Brazil nut trees. The heat appeared not to reach the rolls of fat that

pushed out above and below her belt, where the revolver was placed when the hearings were over.

The .38 was the Judge's one true and ever-faithful companion. It went with her when she bathed in the creeks, when she lunched at the greasy spoons in the ramshackle settlements, and when she attended mass at the local churches.

Judge Darcinta: implacable, calm, fearless, and almost certainly a little mad. That was the conclusion that Ayara had reached by the time they arrived at KM 2, the judge's third stop on this trip.

KM 2 was located at the junction of the PA-150 road, from Marabá, with PA-257, which led to the gold mines of Serra Pelada. Sand and yellow clay now marked what used to be dense rainforest, once teeming with life. In 1988 the settlement had been renamed El Dorado of the Carajás, but the golden promise of El Dorado never materialised and the place went back to being called simply KM 2: the stop, or the purgatory, where people stayed while waiting for transport, wisely fleeing from hell or foolishly believing they were on their way to paradise, depending on which side of the road they gathered.

Those on the way to the pits were the dreamers. Those standing on the opposite side told of a starker reality: a wretched crowd of children, bloated with tapeworms and clinging to their prostitute mothers. Behind them stood a few disconsolate, beaten men, caked in sludge and despair; once hope-filled prospectors, they were now so broke they couldn't even make it back to nearby Marabá, let alone wherever they had originally called home.

Then along came the competing men of God – Adventists, Baptists, Methodists and even Catholics, planting their churches along the road like seeds from a watermelon. In Amazonia there is no lack of churches, prostitutes or violence – the forest's holy trinity.

When Ayara and the Judge had arrived, shortly before nightfall, all they had been able to see were a huddle of

shacks at the side of the road, two small shops and a half-dozen drunks mumbling by candlelight.

The two travellers and their bodyguard had installed themselves in the lone school hut, a building which had never known a teacher. Over the next few days, it would be a courtroom, a hotel and a kitchen.

“Good night. Sleep well.”

“Good night. I’ll put out the oil lamp,” said the soldier, Nonato, a timid youth new to his military service who was there to provide security. His athletic build was at odds with the acne that marked his still-adolescent face. His eyes didn’t hide the admiration he felt for the Judge.

“Sleep well,” Ayara said. She was still on her feet, waging a battle with the mosquito netting that was now made more difficult in the weak light of her small torch. It promised to be another sleepless night – “so humid that fish swam in the air,” as Garcia Márquez had put it. She spent a few moments trying to remember whether that was the exact phrase. She resolved once again that she would reread One Hundred Years of Solitude.

Ayara made some final adjustments to the netting and turned off the lamp. She worked at recalling other phrases from Garcia Márquez as a means of falling asleep. She was drifting towards unconsciousness when a pounding on the door rudely awakened her.

“You! In the house! Open the door!”

Ayara leapt from her hammock. Nonato, drugged by sleep, tried to find his rifle. Judge Darcinta, God only knew how, was already in her flip-flops with the familiar .38 in her fist. She called out in a firm voice, “Who’s there?”

“My name’s Jonair. I’m a truck driver. They told me there was someone in authority here.”

“I’m armed, and I’ve got a bodyguard with me,” the Judge called out as she searched for the key to the padlock.

Ayara shivered.

Darcinta kept her habitual sense of humour; she could still joke. Whispering, she said to the guard, “Nonato, stay

behind me. I'm an ugly old woman. If I die, no one will miss me. It must be another of those fights between a husband and wife that we sometimes have to break up," she added as she opened the door.

Outside Ayara could see the silhouette of the driver, and hear his tremulous voice. "Please. I'm not armed. Don't be frightened, lady. I'm just supposed to deliver that thing to someone. It's there, on the stump. It was at the side of the road, close to the intersection. So, I've delivered it. I'm leaving. I want to forget that I ever saw it."

Jonair ran from the scene without waiting for a response. His truck had been left with the motor running and its lights on. He jumped into the driver's seat and took off like a bat out of hell.

"Nonato, grab your lantern! Let's see what it is."

Ayara followed them. It was hard to make out what had been left on the stump. It looked like a type of ball, but she knew that it wasn't. Nonato was the first to approach. As he directed the dim light of his torch towards the object Ayara could see that a thick cloud of insects had enveloped the tree stump. Nonato used his right hand to push the insects away.

"Oh my God! Yeuuch!" Nonato covered his mouth with his hand and backed away towards the school.

There in the torchlight lay a sodden, mangled human head. A smudge of clay covered part of its face, and the hair was matted with what seemed to be dried blood or mud. An army of large ants and cockroaches was marching through the eyes and into the nostrils.

"We have to take this inside! If not, some animal will devour it. See if there's a newspaper there in the school, Nonato," said the Judge.

"Darcinta, hang on. I've got a sheet in the hammock. I'll get it." Ayara ran into the school hut. She had to keep herself busy. This was her best defence against horror and panic: make herself useful. A minute later she was back at the stump, eyes averted and holding out the sheet for the Judge.

For the first time Nonato had disobeyed the Judge.

His panic revealed the lack of experience in his eighteen years. He had been able to reach the door of the school, but he could move no further. He was sobbing. Darcinta went to him, saying softly, "Calm down, my son. The dead can't shoot, and they don't bite."

"Darcinta, I'm going to wrap the head in my sheet." Ayara's voice quavered as she spoke.

"Can you do that?"

"I think so." Ayara had never seen a severed head before. Its eyes were open, but there was no blood flowing from it. She put her torch on the ground; it was a dark moonless night, and the dimness caused the sudden suspicion that this might not be a person. It could be a piece of sculpture, or a hoax. However, when she tried to move the head its weight dispelled that illusion. It was someone's remains. She used the edge of the sheet to cover her hands as she lifted the head from the stump and placed it on the ground.

Nonato was vomiting, but the Judge had no time for that right now.

Ayara sat on the ground by the sheet. She brought the light closer and used it to examine the head in more detail. The face was swollen, deformed and unrecognisable; death had made the eyes glassy, the lips were half open, and dirt was falling from the mouth. It had long hair.

The movement of two large cockroaches as they tried to enter the left ear caught Ayara's attention. When the torch shone on the left ear, Ayara's heartbeat quickened. An earring! A butterfly? She pulled away the muddy hair. That's what it was; the blue enamel was barely visible beneath the dark crust of blood.

Karl...? No, it just can't be, she screamed inwardly.
They've murdered Karl!

