THE DEATH OF MAE RAMOS
PART I
HOMECOMING
His silver hair tucked into a jaunty black beret, Henry Ramos stood on the crowded deck, his large-featured face so benignly placid, he seemed a giant Buddha marooned in his own pocket of tranquility. A ceremo- nial figure about whom others move with deference, respectful though not intimidated, occasionally even reaching out to touch as one might in passing a familiar devotional icon.

The illusion of size, however, was just that. An Illusion. Of medium height, he somehow contrived to convince others that he was a large man. Fully six feet, most would have estimated, though he never quite reached the five-foot-ten mark. Only his head was indeed large. Monumental, his fondest admirers claimed, like Rodin’s Balzac, with its oversize ears and its salt-and-pepper mustache. First affected his first year of teaching, the later had initially been intended to set him apart from his students, who were at the time virtual coevals, and was never after relinquished—with one brief exception. He did at thirty, on a sudden impulse, shave it off, until his wife, insisting his newly-naked upper lip made her feel uneasy, as if she were sleeping with a stranger, had him grow it back, so much a part of him had the mustache already become.

Now that the ship had come within shouting distance of land and his inexperienced sea legs, already anticipating the security of steady ground beneath them, once again seemed adequate to the task of holding him up, he was in his element. He had always enjoyed the anonymity afforded by crowds and found the easy jostling of his noisy and, more often than not, noisome, shipmates reassuring. Their indif- ferent touch reconfirmed the reality of his own thoroughly deodorized
being and at the same time formed a bulwark against the anticipated disappointment bred into all such sentimental journeys as his.

Because he had expected so little from the Azores, they had surprisingly charmed him. Unspoiled by the blight of housing tracts and industrial complexes creeping like some insidious fungus over his own land, they had so closely resembled the Bay Area of his youth, a landscape of gentle hills and lush vegetation, of rock-strewn coasts and sheltered beaches, it had perhaps been merely nostalgia he had felt rather than any sense of the islands’ intrinsic beauty. Calla lilies clustered in shady crevices, fruit trees in prodigal early bloom. Plums and cherries and quince. Everything seemed frozen in time. A primordial spring. And that fixity was the true source of their charm. The last fifty years might have washed over them unmarked, leaving only the scantest traces of its contaminating flotsam. They remained fixed in the first decade of the nineteen hundreds, well before the First World War had a chance to explode all the comfortable assumptions of the previous century. Though he had certainly never thought of his childhood as a happy one, he had just as certainly never blamed the times for his own particular unhappiness, so that the nostalgia he felt for his own past was invariably ambivalent. The evidence of his heart giving way to the evidence of his senses. It was the look of the old world that he most missed. And he had found that look in the Azores.

That was all he had found there. Although three of his four grandparents had come from the small whaling port of Fayal, he never thought of these mid-Atlantic outposts as his ancestral home. They were little more than a stopping-off place for a restless people and what his imagination secretly fashioned as his belated homecoming was reserved for the mainland of Portugal itself. The birthplace (once removed, for she herself had been born in California) of that last and tragically short-lived grandmother he was told he so resembled.

Like his size, his calm was equally deceptive. The reflex of habit rather than any true reflection of his present feelings. Stoicism is, anyway, mostly a matter of surfaces. Of style rather than substance. Long before the Carvalho Araújo steamed through the mouth of the Tagus, there had been too many fresh sensations for a non-traveling man of fifty-plus to assimilate with equanimity.

His very first flight, more than half-a-century after Kittyhawk, had
come close to being his last. For two harrowing hours their plane had circled the airport at Santa Maria for some never-divulged malfunction before attempting a crash landing. Beside him, in a frenzy of religious fervor, his wife had fingered her ever-ready rosary while he was quite simply too terrified to pray, the acid fumes of his fear scorching his throat.

But greater by far than the fear of so violent an end was the fear of exposing that fear. Like some ancient bust of Brutus, with blunt, square features, he had sat, as cold as any stone, his gorge and bowels at the last moment clamped shut by the claw-clutch of his wife’s hand upon his forearm as the plane came swooping down out of the clouds and onto the ambulance-ringed tarmac, bumping, skidding, screeching to a safe but horrendously noisy stop.

His wife’s sudden eruption of terror stifled his own, so that he was able, finally, to disembark with pride intact. His first steps upon Portuguese soil were shaky but firm enough to hold him up. He was even allowed sufficient grace to assist his wife, whose tears of relief were mingled with a laugh as sharp-edged as shards of splintered glass that for an instant verged on the hysterical. Thus the first, airborne leg of their journey had ended. Safely, but far more memorably than planned. Or desired. And not, he hoped, an omen of things to come.

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It was four days now since they had left São Miguel, with a single linenhoarding stopover at Madeira. To his dismay he had proved a poor sailor, his precious dignity maintained only at the cost of excruciating discomfort. He refused to take to his bed, and just as obstinately, he refused to be sick. As if sickness were purely a question of will, rather than of one’s physical constitution. Like his namesake, the great navigator, all of his own sailing had heretofore been confined to maps and books, his idle hours spent crafting meticulously precise models of ancient vessels lovingly reconstructed down to the minutest details of rigging. But on this, his first real voyage longer than the ferry ride from Oakland to San Francisco, he was beset with persistent nausea. Although he never, unlike a good many of his shipmates, allowed himself to be reduced to a groaning beast, jettisoning his guts over the ship’s sides, his control remained tenuous at best. Yet somehow it endured. Like that ideal marriage of true minds, his love of the sea was little more than the product of a poetic fancy, destined, as all