THE JUDGE'S WIFE
Nicolás Vidal had always known that a woman would cost him his life. That had been prophesied on the day he was born, and confirmed by the proprietress of the general store on the one occasion he had permitted her to read his fortune in the coffee dregs; he could never have imagined, however, that the woman would be Casilda, the wife of Judge Hidalgo. The first time he had seen her was the day she arrived in town to be married. He did not find her attractive; he preferred females who were brazen and brunette, and this translucent young girl in her traveling suit, with bashful eyes and delicate fingers useless for pleasing a man, seemed as insubstantial to him as a handful of ashes. Knowing his fate so well, he was cautious about women, and throughout his life he fled from any sentimental attachments, hardening his heart to love and limiting himself to hasty encounters aimed at outwitting loneliness. Casilda seemed so insignificant
and remote to him that he took no precautions against her and, when the moment came, he lost sight of the prediction that had always governed his decisions. From the roof of the building where he was crouched with two of his men, he observed the young señorita from the capital as she descended from her car on her wedding day. She had arrived in the company of a half dozen of her family members, all as pale and delicate as she, who had sat through the ceremony fanning themselves with a frank air of consternation and then departed, never to return.

Like all the town’s residents, Vidal was sure the bride would never survive the climate and that soon the old women would be laying her out for her funeral. In the unlikely event she did endure the heat and dust that blew through the skin and settled in the heart, she would without question succumb before the foul humor and bachelor manias of her husband. Judge Hidalgo was several times her age, and had slept alone for so many years that he did not know how to begin to please a wife. His severity and stubbornness in carrying out the law—even at the cost of justice—was feared in every corner of the province. In the exercise of his duties he ignored any rationale for humaneness, punishing with equal firmness the theft of a hen and premeditated murder. He dressed in rigorous black, so that everyone would be reminded of the dignity of his responsibilities, and despite the inescapable dust clouds of this town without dreams his high-topped shoes always gleamed with a beeswax shine. A man like that is not made to be wed, the gossips would say; their dire prophecies about the marriage, however, were not fulfilled. To the
contrary, Casilda survived three pregnancies in a row, and seemed content. On Sundays, with her husband, she attended twelve o'clock mass, imperturbable beneath her Spanish mantilla, untouched by the inclemency of the never-ending summer, as colorless and silent as a shadow. No one ever heard anything more than a timid hello from her, nor witnessed gestures more bold than a nod of the head or a fleeting smile; she seemed weightless, on the verge of dematerializing in a moment of carelessness. She gave the impression of not being there, and that was why everyone was so surprised by the influence she exerted on the Judge, who underwent striking changes.

Although Hidalgo maintained the same appearance—funereal and sour-faced—his decisions in court took a strange turn. Before a stupefied public he let off a boy who had stolen from his employer, following the logic that for three years his patrón had underpaid him, and the money he had pilfered was a form of compensation. He similarly refused to punish an adulterous wife, arguing that the husband had no moral authority to demand rectitude from her when he himself kept a concubine. Gossiping tongues had it that Judge Hidalgo turned inside out like a glove when he crossed the threshold of his front door, that he removed his sepulchral clothing, played with the children, laughed, and dangled Casilda on his knees, but those rumors were never substantiated. Whatever the case, his wife was given credit for his new benevolence, and his reputation improved. Nicolás Vidal, however, was indifferent to all of this because he was outside the law, and he was sure that there would be no mercy for him the day he was
led in shackles before the Judge. He ignored the gossip about doña Casilda; the few times he had seen her from a distance confirmed the first impression of a blurred ectoplasm.

Vidal had been born thirty years earlier in a windowless room of the only bordello in town, the son of Juana la Triste and an unknown father. He had no business in this world, and his sad mother knew it; that was why she had tried to tear him from her womb by means of herbs, candle stubs, lye douches, and other brutal methods, but the tiny creature had stubbornly hung on. Years later, Juana la Triste, pondering why her son was so different from others, realized that her drastic measures to eradicate him had, instead of dispatching him, tempered him, body and soul, to the hardness of iron. As soon as he was born, the midwife had held him up to the light of the kerosene lamp to examine him and had immediately noticed that he had four nipples.

"Poor mite, a woman will cost him his life," she had prophesied, guided by long experience in such matters. Those words weighed on the boy like a deformity. With a woman's love, his life might have been less miserable. To compensate for the numerous attempts to eliminate him before he was born, his mother chose for him a noble-sounding first name and a solid surname selected at random. Even that princely appellation had not been enough to exorcise the fatal omens, and before he was ten the boy's face was scarred from knife fights, and very soon thereafter he had begun his life as a fugitive. At twenty, he was the leader of a gang of desperados. The habit of violence had developed the strength of his muscles, the street had made him
merciless, and the solitude to which he had been condemned by fear of dying over love had determined the expression in his eyes. Anyone in the town could swear on seeing him that he was Juana la Triste’s son because, just like hers, his eyes were always filled with unshed tears. Anytime a misdeed was committed anywhere in the region, the guardia, to silence the protests of the citizenry, went out with dogs to hunt down Nicolás Vidal, but after a few runs through the hills, they returned empty-handed. In fact they did not want to find him, because they did not want to chance a fight. His gang solidified his bad name to the point that small towns and large haciendas paid him to stay away. With those “donations” his men could have led a sedentary life, but Nicolás Vidal kept them riding, in a whirlwind of death and devastation, to prevent the men from losing their taste for a fight or their infamous reputation from dwindling. There was no one who dared stand up to them. On one or two occasions Judge Hidalgo had asked the government to send Army troops to reinforce his deputies, but after a few futile excursions the soldiers had returned to their barracks and the renegades to their old tricks.

Only once was Nicolás Vidal close to falling into the traps of justice; he was saved by his inability to feel emotion. Frustrated by seeing Vidal run roughshod over the law, Judge Hidalgo decided to put aside scruples and set a trap for the outlaw. He realized that in the name of justice he was going to commit a heinous act, but of two evils, he chose the lesser. The only bait he had been able to think of was Juana la Triste, because Vidal had no other family, nor known lovers. The Judge
collected Juana from the whorehouse where she was scrubbing floors and cleaning latrines for want of clients willing to pay for her miserable services, and threw her into a made-to-measure cage he then placed in the very center of the Plaza de Armas, with a jug of water as her only comfort.

“When her water runs out, she’ll begin to scream. Then her son will come, and I will be waiting with the soldiers,” said the Judge.

Word of this torture, outdated since the time of runaway slaves, reached the ears of Nicolás Vidal shortly before his mother drank the last drop from her pitcher. His men watched as he received the news in silence: no flicker of emotion crossed the impassive, loner’s mask of his face; he never lost a stroke in the calm rhythm of stropping his knife. He had not seen Juana la Triste for many years and had not a single happy memory of his childhood; this, however, was not a question of sentiment, it was a matter of honor. No man can tolerate such an offense, the outlaws thought, and they readied their weapons and mounts, willing to ride into the ambush and give up their lives if that was what it took. But their leader showed no signs of haste.

As the hours went by, tension heightened among the men. They exchanged glances, dripping with sweat, not daring to comment, impatient from waiting, hands on the butts of their revolvers, the manes of their horses, the coil of their lariats. Night came, and the only person in the whole camp who slept was Nicolás Vidal. At dawn the men’s opinions were divided; some had decided that Vidal was much more heartless than they had ever imagined; others believed that their
leader was planning a spectacular manner of rescuing his mother. The one thing no one thought was that he might lack courage, because he had too often demonstrated that—in spades. By noon they could bear the uncertainty no longer, and they went to ask him what he was going to do.

"Nothing," he said.

"But what about your mother?"

"We'll see who has more balls, the Judge or me," Nicolás Vidal replied, unperturbed.

By the third day Juana la Triste was no longer pleading or begging for water; her tongue was parched and her words died in her throat. She lay curled up like a fetus on the floor of her cage, her eyes expressionless, her lips swollen and cracked, moaning like an animal in moments of lucidity and dreaming of hell the remainder of the time. Four armed men guarded the prisoner to prevent townspeople from giving her water. Her wails spread through all the town; they filtered through closed shutters, the wind carried them through the chinks of doors, they clung to the corners of rooms, dogs caught them up and repeated them in their howling, they infected newborn babies, and grated on the nerves of any who heard them. The Judge could not prevent the parade of people through the plaza, commiserating with the old woman, nor stop the sympathy strike of the prostitutes, which coincided with the miners' payday. On Saturdays, the streets were taken over by these roughnecks from the mines, eager to spend their savings before returning to their caverns, but this week the town offered no diversion apart from the cage and the moan of pain carried from mouth to
mouth, from the river to the coast highway. The priest headed a group of parishioners who presented themselves before Judge Hidalgo to remind him of Christian charity and to entreat him to release that poor innocent woman from her martyr's death; the magistrate shot the bolt to his office door and refused to hear them, wagering that Juana la Triste would last one more day and that her son would fall into his trap. That is when the town leaders decided to appeal to doña Casilda.

The Judge's wife received them in the darkened parlor of their home and listened to their arguments silently, eyes lowered, as was her custom. Her husband had been away from home for three days, locked in his office, waiting for Nicolás Vidal with senseless determination. Even without going to the window, she had known everything happening outside: the sound of that long torment had also invaded the vast rooms of their home. Doña Casilda waited until the visitors had retired, then dressed her children in their Sunday best and with them headed in the direction of the plaza. She carried a basket of food and a jug of fresh water for Juana la Triste. The guards saw her as she turned the corner, and guessed her intentions, but they had precise orders, and they crossed rifles before her, and when she tried to walk by them—watched by an expectant crowd—they took her arms to prevent her from passing. The children began to cry.

Judge Hidalgo was in his office on the plaza. He was the only person in town who had not put wax plugs in his ears, because all his attention was focused on the ambush: he was waiting for the sound of Nicolás Vidal's horses. For three days and nights he had withstood the
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sobs of the victim and the insults of the people crowded outside the building, but when he heard the voices of his children he realized he had reached the limits of his endurance. He left the Court of Justice wearing the beard that had been growing since Wednesday, totally exhausted, red-eyed from waiting, and with the weight of defeat on his shoulders. He crossed the street, stepped onto the square of the plaza, and walked toward his wife. They gazed at each other sorrowfully. It was the first time in seven years that she had confronted him, and she had chosen to do so before the whole town. Judge Hidalgo took the basket and water jug from doña Casilda's hands, and himself opened the cage to minister to his prisoner.

"I told you, he hasn't got the balls I have," laughed Nicolás Vidal when he heard what had happened.

But his guffaws turned sour the following day when he was told that Juana la Triste had hanged herself on the lamppost of the whorehouse where she had spent her life, because she could not bear the shame of having been abandoned by her son in that cage in the center of the Plaza de Armas.

"Now it's the Judge's turn!" swore Vidal.

His plan was to ride into town at nightfall, take the Judge by surprise, kill him in some spectacular fashion, and stuff him in the damned cage; at dawn the next day his humiliated remains would be waiting for the whole world to see. He learned, however, that the Hidalgo
family had left for a spa on the coast, hoping to wash away the bad taste of defeat.

The news that a revenge-bent Vidal and his men were on their trail overtook Judge Hidalgo in mid-route at an inn where they had stopped to rest. Without a detachment of the guardia, the place could not offer sufficient protection, but the Judge and his family had several hours' advantage and their car was faster than Vidal’s horses. He calculated that he would be able to reach the next town and get help. He ordered his wife and children into the car, pressed the pedal to the floor, and sped off down the road. He should have reached the town with an ample margin of safety, but it was written that this was the day Nicolás Vidal would meet the woman from whom he had been fleeing all his life.

Weakened by sleepless nights, by the townspeople’s hostility, by the embarrassment he had suffered, and by the tension of the race to save his family, Judge Hidalgo’s heart gave a great leap and burst without a sound. The driverless car ran off the road, bumped along the shoulder, and finally rolled to a stop. It was a minute or two before doña Casilda realized what had happened. Since her husband was practically ancient she had often thought what it would be like to be widowed, but she had never imagined that he would leave her at the mercy of his enemies. She did not pause to mull that over, however, because she knew that she must act quickly if she was to save her children. Hurriedly she looked around for help; she nearly burst into hopeless tears: in all those sun-baked, barren reaches there was no trace of human life, only the wild hills and burning white sky. At second glance, however,
she spied in the distance the shadow of a cave, and it was there she ran, carrying two babies in her arms with a third clinging to her skirttails.

Three times Casilda scaled the slope to the cave, carrying her children, one by one. It was a natural cave, like many others in those hills. She searched the interior, to be sure she had not happened into the den of some animal, settled the children in the rear, and kissed them without shedding a tear.

"In a few hours the guardia will come looking for you. Until then, don't come out for any reason, even if you hear me scream. Do you understand?" she instructed.

The tots hugged each other in terror, and with a last farewell glance the mother ran down the hill. She reached the car, closed her husband's eyelids, brushed her clothes, straightened her hair, and sat down to wait. She did not know how many men were in Nicolás Vidal's band, but she prayed there were many; the more there were, the more time would be spent in taking their pleasure of her. She gathered her strength, wondering how long it would take to die if she concentrated on expiring inch by inch. She wished she were voluptuous and robust, that she could bear up longer and win more time for her children.

She did not have long to wait. She soon saw a dust cloud on the horizon and heard galloping hoofs; she gritted her teeth. Confused, she watched as with drawn pistol a single rider reined in his horse a few meters from her. By the knife scar on his face she recognized Nicolás Vidal, who had decided to pursue Judge Hidalgo alone: this was a private matter to be settled between
the two of them. She understood then that she must do something much more difficult than die slowly.

With one glance the bandit realized that his enemy, sleeping his death in peace, was beyond any punishment; but there was his wife, floating in the reverberating light. He leapt from his horse and strode toward her. She did not look away, or flinch, and he stopped short; for the first time in his life someone was defying him without a hint of fear. For several seconds they took each other’s measure in silence, calculating the other’s strength, estimating their own tenacity, and accepting the fact they were facing a formidable adversary. Nicolás Vidal put away his revolver, and Casilda smiled.

The Judge’s wife earned every instant of the next hours. She employed all the seductive tricks recorded since the dawn of human knowledge, and improvised others out of her need to gratify the man’s every dream. She not only played on his body like a skilled performer, strumming every chord in the pursuit of pleasure, she also called upon the wiles of her own refinement. Both realized that the stakes of this game were their lives, and that awareness lent the ultimate intensity to their encounter. Nicolás Vidal had fled from love since the day of his birth; he had never known intimacy, tenderness, secret laughter, the celebration of the senses, a lover’s joyful pleasure. With every minute the guardia were riding closer and closer, and, with them, the firing wall; but he was also closer, ever closer, to this stupendous woman, and he gladly traded guardia and wall for the gifts she was offering him. Casilda was a modest and shy woman; she had been married to an austere old
man who had never seen her naked. She did not forget for one instant throughout that memorable afternoon that her objective was to gain time, but at some point she let herself go, marveling at her own sensuality, and somehow grateful to Vidal. That was why when she heard the distant sound of the troops, she begged him to flee and hide in the hills. Nicolás Vidal preferred to hold her in his arms and kiss her for the last time, thus fulfilling the prophecy that had shaped his destiny.