

VLAD

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*Go to sleep, my girl,
here comes the coyote;
coming to get you
with a great garrote*

—Mexican lullaby

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“I wouldn’t trouble you, Navarro, if Dávila and Uriarte were available. I’m not going to call them your inferiors—*subordinates* sounds better—but neither will I forget that you are a senior partner, *primus inter pares*, and so are higher ranked in this firm. I am entrusting this task to you because, first and foremost, I consider this a matter of utmost urgency . . .”

Weeks later, when the awful adventure had ended, I recalled that, at its beginning, I had chalked up the absence of Dávila and Uriarte to luck. Dávila was off on his honeymoon in Europe, and Uriarte was tied up in a judicial embargo. As for me, I was neither going away on a wedding trip, nor would I have ordinarily accepted the work, appropriate for a lawyer just out of school, that our boss had delegated to our indefatigable Uriarte.

But I respected the decision of my elderly employer and appreciated the meaningful intimacy of his trust. He had always been an uncompromising man whose decisions were final. He was not in the habit of asking anyone for advice. Although he was tactful enough to listen attentively to his co-workers' points of view, he replied with orders. And yet, in spite of what I just said, how could I ignore the peculiar circumstances by which he'd acquired his fortune? His status as a rich man was recent enough for him still to be considered "new money," but even that new money, thanks to the gravitas of its owner, felt every bit as old as his eighty-nine years and tied to the history of an already buried century. His wealth was largely a result of the obsequiousness (or the moral flexibility) with which he had served (and risen in his service of) successive governmental administrations during his long years in Mexico. Suffice it to say he was an "influential man."

I must confess that I never saw my boss behave submissively to anyone. I could only guess at the inevitable concessions that his haughty gaze and already curved spine had been forced to make—over the course of his career—to politicians who could hardly be said to exist

at all beyond the six-year span of a president's term. He knew perfectly well that political power was fleeting; the officials did not. They prided themselves on having been named ministers for six years, after which they would be forgotten for the rest of their lives; whereas the admirable thing about the distinguished Don Eloy Zurinaga, Esq., was that for sixty years he had known how to slither from one presidential administration to the next while always landing on his feet. His strategy was quite simple. Throughout his career, he never fell out with politicians because he never once let them glimpse the inevitability of their political greatness dwindling to a future of insignificance. Few saw past the superficial courtesy and empty praise of Eloy Zurinaga's ironic smile.

As for his attitude toward me, I quickly accepted that if it did not behoove him to display any new loyalties, this was because he never demonstrated any lasting affection to anyone or to anything. That is, his official conduct was professional: honest and efficient. It can only remain a matter of conjecture whether that honesty was genuine and that efficiency just a type of tyranny, and whether both qualities combined into a mask necessary for survival in the swamp of political and judicial corruption. If

Licenciado Zurinaga never quarreled with a government official, that was probably because he'd never much liked any of them. He didn't need to say this. His life, his career, even his dignity confirmed it.

A year had passed since Mr. Zurinaga, my boss, had become housebound. In all that time, nobody at the firm ever dared imagine that the physical absence of the man in charge allowed for slack behavior, tardiness, or idle jokes. On the contrary, in his absence, Zurinaga felt all the more present. He seemed to have issued a warning: "Be careful. At any moment I might show up and surprise you. Watch out."

More than once during the past year, Mr. Zurinaga had telephoned to announce his imminent arrival in the office. Although he never showed up, on each occasion a holy terror put the entire staff on high alert, leaving us all on our best behavior. And then, one morning, an individual who seemed identical to the boss came into, and a half hour later left, the office. The only reason we knew it wasn't really him was that in the course of that half hour, Mr. Zurinaga telephoned a few times to issue instructions. On the phone that morning, he spoke in a decisive, almost dictatorial way, without entertaining a