The Street of the Canon

by Josephina Niggli

It was May, the flowering thorn was sweet in the air, and the village of San Juan Iglesias in the Valley of the Three Marys was celebrating. The long dark streets were empty because all of the people, from the lowest-paid cowboy to the mayor, were helping Don Roméo Calderón celebrate his daughter’s eighteenth birthday.

On the other side of the town, where the Cañon Road led across the mountains to the Sabinas Valley, a tall slender man, a package clutched tightly against his side, slipped from shadow to shadow. Once a dog barked, and the man’s black suit merged into the blackness of a wall. But no voice called out, and after a moment he slid into the narrow, dirt-packed street again.

The moonlight touched his shoulder and spilled across his narrow hips. He was young, no more than twenty-five, and his black curly head was bare. He walked swiftly along, heading always for the distant sound of guitar and flute. If he met anyone now, who could say from which direction he had come? He might be a trader from Monterrey, or a buyer of cow’s milk from farther north in the Valley of the Three Marys. Who would guess that an Hidalgo man dared to walk alone in the moonlit streets of San Juan Iglesias?

Carefully adjusting his flat package so that it was not too prominent, he squared his shoulders and walked jauntily across the street to the laughter-filled house. Little boys packed in the doorway made way for him, smiling and nodding to him. The long, narrow room with the orchestra at one end was filled with whirling dancers. Rigid-backed chaperones were gossiping together, seated in their straight chairs against the plaster walls. Over the scene was the yellow glow of kerosene lanterns, and the air was hot with the too-sweet perfume of gardenias, tuberoses, and the pungent scent of close-packed humanity.

The man in the doorway, while trying to appear at ease, was carefully examining every smiling face. If just one person recognized him, the room would turn on him like a den of snarling mountain cats, but so far all the laughter-dancing eyes were friendly.

Suddenly a plump, officious little man, his round cheeks glistening with perspiration, pushed his way through the crowd. His voice, many times too large for his small body, boomed at the man in the doorway. “Welcome, stranger, welcome to our house.” Thrusting his arm through the stranger’s, and almost dislodging the package, he started to lead the way through the maze of dancers. “Come and drink a toast to my daughter—to my beautiful Sarita. She is eighteen this night.”

In the square patio the gentle breeze ruffled the pink and white oleander bushes. A long table set up on sawhorses held loaves of flaky crusted French bread, stacks of thin, delicate tortillas, plates of barbecued beef, and long red rolls of spicy sausages. But most of all there were cheeses, for the Three Marys was a cheese-eating valley. There were yellow cheese and white
cheese and curdled cheese from cow’s milk. There was even a flat white cake of goat cheese from distant Linares, a delicacy too expensive for any but feast days.

To set off this feast were bottles of beer floating in ice-filled tin tubs, and another table was covered with bottles of mescal, of tequila, of maguey wine.

Don Roméo Calderón thrust a glass of tequila into the stranger’s hand. “Drink, friend, to the prettiest girl in San Juan. As pretty as my fine fighting cocks, she is. On her wedding day she takes to her man, and may she find him soon, the best fighter in my flock. Drink deep, friend. Even the rivers flow with wine.”

The Hidalgo man laughed and raised his glass high. “May the earth be always fertile beneath her feet.”

Someone called to Don Roméo that more guests were arriving, and with a final delighted pat on the stranger’s shoulder, the little man scurried away. As the young fellow smiled after his retreating host, his eyes caught and held another pair of eyes—laughing black eyes set in a young girl’s face. The last time he had seen that face it had been white and tense with rage, and the lips clenched tight to prevent an outgushing stream of angry words. That had been in February, and she had worn a white lace shawl over her hair. Now it was May, and a gardenia was a splash of white in the glossy dark braids. The moonlight had mottled his face that February night, and he knew that she did not recognize him. He grinned impudently back at her, and her eyes widened, then slid sideways to one of the chaperones. The fan in her small hand snapped shut. She tapped its parchment tip against her mouth and slipped away to join the dancing couples in the front room. The gestures of a fan translate into a coded language on the frontier. The stranger raised one eyebrow as he interpreted the signal.

But he did not move toward her at once. Instead, he inched slowly back against the table. No one was behind him, and his hands quickly unfastened the package he had been guarding so long. Then he nonchalantly walked into the front room.

The girl was sitting close to a chaperone. As he came up to her he swerved slightly toward the bushy-browed old lady.

“Your servant, señora. I kiss your hands and feet.”

The chaperone stared at him in astonishment. Such fine manners were not common to the town of San Juan Iglesias.

“Eh, you’re a stranger,” she said. “I thought so.”

“But a stranger no longer, señora, now that I have met you.” He bent over her, so close she could smell the faint fragrance of talcum on his freshly shaven cheek.

“Will you dance the parada with me?”
This request startled her eyes into popping open beneath the heavy brows. “So, my young rooster, would you flirt with me, and I old enough to be your grandmother?”

“Can you show me a prettier woman to flirt with in the Valley of the Three Marys?” he asked audaciously.

She grinned at him and turned toward the girl at her side. “This young fool wants to meet you, my child.”

The girl blushed to the roots of her hair and shyly lowered her white lids. The old woman laughed aloud.

“Go out and dance, the two of you. A man clever enough to pat the sheep has a right to play with the lamb.”

The next moment they had joined the circle of dancers and Sarita was trying to control her laughter.

“She is the worst dragon in San Juan. And how easily you won her!”

“What is a dragon,” he asked imperiously, “when I longed to dance with you?”

“Ay,” she retorted, “you have a quick tongue. I think you are a dangerous man.”

In answer he drew her closer to him, and turned her toward the orchestra. As he reached the chief violinist he called out, “Play the Virgencita, ‘The Shy Young Maiden.’”

The violinist’s mouth opened in soundless surprise. The girl in his arms said sharply, “You heard him, the Borachita, ‘The Little Drunken Girl.’”

With a relieved grin, the violinist tapped his music stand with his bow, and the music swung into the sad farewell of a man to his sweetheart:

*Farewell, my little drunken one,*

*I must go to the capital*

*To serve the master*

*Who makes me weep for my return.*

The stranger frowned down at her. “Is this a joke, señorita?” he asked coldly.

“No,” she whispered, looking about her quickly to see if the incident had been observed. “But the Virgencita is the favorite song of Hidalgo, a village on the other side of the mountains in the next valley. The people of Hidalgo and San Juan Iglesias do not speak.”
“That is a stupid thing,” said the man from Hidalgo as he swung her around in a large turn. “Is not music free as air? Why should one town own the rights to a song?”

The girl shuddered slightly. “Those people from Hidalgo—they are wicked monsters. Can you guess what they did not six months since?”

The man started to point out that the space of time from February to May was three months, but he thought it better not to appear too wise. “Did these Hidalgo monsters frighten you, señorita? If they did, I personally will kill them all.”

She moved closer against him and tilted her face until her mouth was close to his ear. “They attempted to steal the bones of Don Rómolo Balderas.”

“Is it possible?” He made his eyes grow round and his lips purse up in disdain. “Surely not that! Why, all the world knows that Don Rómolo Balderas was the greatest historian in the entire Republic. Every school child reads his books. Wise men from Quintana Roo to the Río Bravo bow their heads in admiration to his name. What a wicked thing to do!” He hoped his virtuous tone was not too virtuous for plausibility, but she did not seem to notice.

“It is true! In the night they came. Three devils!”

“Young devils, I hope.”

“Young or old, who cares? They were devils. The blacksmith surprised them even as they were opening the grave. He raised such a shout that all of San Juan rushed to his aid, for they were fighting, I can tell you. Especially one of them—their leader.”

“And who was he?”

“You have heard of him doubtless. A proper wild one named Pepe Gonzalez.”

“And what happened to them?”

“They had horses and got away, but one, I think, was hurt.”

The Hidalgo man twisted his mouth remembering how Rubén the candymaker had ridden across the whitewashed line high on the cañon trail that marked the division between the Three Marys’ and the Sabinas’ sides of the mountains, and then had fallen in a faint from his saddle because his left arm was broken. There was no candy in Hidalgo for six weeks, and the entire Sabinas Valley resented that broken arm as fiercely as did Rubén.

The stranger tightened his arm in reflexed anger about Sarita’s waist as she said, “All the world knows that the men of Hidalgo are sons of the mountain witches.”

“But even devils are shy of disturbing the honored dead,” he said gravely.
“‘Don Rómolo was born in our village,’ Hidalgo says. ‘His bones belong to us.’ Well, anyone in the valley can tell you he died in San Juan Iglesias, and here his bones will stay! Is that not proper? Is that not right?”

To keep from answering, he guided her through an intricate dance pattern that led them past the patio door. Over her head he could see two men and a woman staring with amazement at the open package on the table.

His eyes on the patio, he asked blandly, “You say the leader was one Pepe Gonzalez? The name seems to have a familiar sound.”

“But naturally. He has a talent.” She tossed her head and stepped away from him as the music stopped. It was a dance of two paradas. He slipped his hand through her arm and guided her into place in the large oval of parading couples. Twice around the room and the orchestra would play again.

“A talent?” he prompted.

“For doing the impossible. When all the world says a thing cannot be done, he does it to prove the world wrong. Why, he climbed to the top of the Prow, and not even the long vanished Joaquin Castillo had ever climbed that mountain before. And this same Pepe caught a mountain lion with nothing to aid him but a rope and his two bare hands.”

“He doesn’t sound such a bad friend,” protested the stranger, slipping his arm around her waist as the music began to play the merry song of the soap bubbles:

Pretty bubbles of a thousand colors
That ride on the wind
And break as swiftly
As a lover’s heart.

The events in the patio were claiming his attention. Little by little he edged her closer to the door. The group at the table had considerably enlarged. There was a low murmur of excitement from the crowd.

“What has happened?” asked Sarita, attracted by the noise.

“There seems to be something wrong at the table,” he answered, while trying to peer over the heads of the people in front of him. Realizing that this might be the last moment of peace he would have that evening, he bent toward her.

“If I come back on Sunday, will you walk around the plaza with me?”
She was startled into exclaiming, “Ay, no!”

“Please. Just once around.”

“And you think I’d walk more than once with you, señor, even if you were no stranger? In San Juan Iglesias, to walk around the plaza with a girl means a wedding.”

“Ha, and you think that is common to San Juan alone? Even the devils of Hidalgo respect that law,” he added hastily at her puzzled upward glance. “And so they do in all the villages.” To cover his lapse he said softly, “I don’t even know your name.”

A mischievous grin crinkled the corners of her eyes. “Nor do I know yours, señor. Strangers do not often walk the streets of San Juan.”

Before he could answer, the chattering in the patio swelled to louder proportions. Don Roméo’s voice lay on top, like thick cream on milk. “I tell you it is a jewel of a cheese. Such flavor, such texture, such whiteness. It is a jewel of a cheese.”

“What has happened?” Sarita asked of a woman at her elbow.

“A fine goat’s cheese appeared as if by magic on the table. No one knows where it came from.”

“Probably an extra one from Linares,” snorted a fat bald man on the right.

“Linares never made such a cheese as this,” said the woman decisively.

“Silence!” roared Don Roméo. “Old Tío Daniel would speak a word to us.”

A great hand of silence closed down over the mouths of the people. The girl was standing on tiptoe trying vainly to see what was happening. She was hardly aware of the stranger’s whispering voice although she remembered the words that he said. “Sunday night—once around the plaza.”

She did not realize that he had moved away, leaving a gap that was quickly filled by the blacksmith.

Old Tío Daniel’s voice was a shrill squeak, and his thin, stringy neck jutted forth from his body like a turtle’s from its shell. “This is no cheese from Linares,” he said with authority, his mouth sucking in over his toothless gums between his sentences. “Years ago, when the great Don Rómolo Balderas was still alive, we had such cheese as this—ay, in those days we had it. But after he died and was buried in our own sainted ground, as was right and proper . . .”

“Yes, yes,” muttered voices in the crowd. He glared at the interruption. As soon as there was silence again, he continued:
“After he died, we had it no more. Shall I tell you why?”

“Tell us, Tío Daniel,” said the voices humbly.

“Because it is made in Hidalgo!”

The sound of a waterfall, the sound of a wind in a narrow cañon, and the sound of an angry crowd are much the same. There were no distinct words, but the sound was enough.

“Are you certain, Tío?” boomed Don Roméo.

“As certain as I am that a donkey has long ears. The people of Hidalgo have been famous for generations for making cheese like this—especially that wicked one, that owner of a cheese factory, Timotéo Gonzalez, father to Pepe, the wild one, whom we have good cause to remember.”

“We do, we do,” came the sigh of assurance.

“But on the whole northern frontier there are no vats like his to produce so fine a product. Ask the people of Chihuahua, of Sonora. Ask the man on the bridge at Laredo, or the man in his boat at Tampico, ‘Hola, friend, who makes the finest goat cheese?’ And the answer will always be the same, ‘Don Timotéo of Hidalgo.’”

It was the blacksmith who asked the great question. “Then where did that cheese come from, and we haters of Hidalgo these ten long years?”

No voice said, “The stranger,” but with one fluid movement every head in the patio turned toward the girl in the doorway. She also turned, her eyes wide with something that she realized to her own amazement was more apprehension than anger.

But the stranger was not in the room. When the angry, muttering men pushed through to the street, the stranger was not on the plaza. He was not anywhere in sight. A few of the more religious crossed themselves for fear that the Devil had walked in their midst. “Who was he?” one voice asked another. But Sarita, who was meekly listening to a lecture from Don Roméo on the propriety of dancing with strangers, did not have to ask. She had a strong suspicion that she had danced that night within the circling arm of Pepe Gonzalez.