Just before midnight on Friday, January 21, 1916, a ten-year-old boy came rushing breathlessly into a police station in the center of Santiago. When asked what had happened, the boy explained, sobbing, that his father, David Díaz Muñoz, was lying dead on his bed at home. The detectives jumped to their feet and ran to the child's house. There they found a woman draped over the bloody corpse, crying inconsolably: twenty-seven-year-old Corina Rojas.

That is how this episode is described in the police report from the time. Its tattered pages also relate how, on the evening of the crime, the family had enjoyed a lively dinner party with a group of friends. After their friends left, past eleven at night, David Díaz went up to his bedroom, lay down, and fell asleep. Meanwhile, Rojas, accompanied by one of her domestic staff, freshened up in the bathroom. Only on returning to the bedroom did she find her sixty-two-year-old husband lying on the bed, stabbed in the heart.

"Horrific crime in Santiago" read *El Mercurio*'s headline the following day. Yet it was *Las Últimas Noticias*, a sensationalist rag, that immortalized this iconic murder on its front page: "The astonishing crime on Calle Lord Cochrane." A hematoma in the victim's temple and a stab wound to his chest meant

detectives could rule out suicide and arrest their first suspects: the three domestic employees and the dinner guests. One by one, however, they were released. Meanwhile, protected from the rumor mill, the widow remained at home: pale, uncommunicative, and suffering from fainting fits, according to the papers. But new information began to flood in: "strange goings-on for a respectable society," *El Mercurio* hinted, while *Las Últimas Noticias* spoke of "an attack against the noble sentiments that form the very basis of the home."

Both newspapers alluded in their articles to an "intimate friendship" between Corina Rojas and her piano teacher, Jorge Sangts—a relationship to all appearances irrelevant to the police investigation, but which aroused the judge's suspicion. In a move that would have the reporters all abuzz, the magistrate decided to arrest and isolate Sangts and Rojas. And after their arrest came more activity, avidly picked up by the press: at the guesthouse where Jorge Sangts was living at the time, they seized several love letters and the keys to none other than the house at 338 Calle Lord Cochrane. On top of these findings, the police received two anonymous notes that hinted at the possibility of a paid killing. The notes mentioned two new parties: Alberto Duarte, a thirty-one-year-old coachman, and an eighty-three-year-old empanada vendor named Rosa Cisternas.

With Jorge Sangts, Corina Rojas, Alberto Duarte, and Rosa Cisternas in police custody, the investigation quickly came to an end and the newspapers went public with the following story: Corina Rojas had been married to David Díaz Muñoz for twelve years when she committed her crime. According to her own statements, it was a "loveless marriage." Rojas felt alone and unhappy, the victim of a miserly and unfaithful husband.

Her economic dependency on him and the illegality of divorce at the time had kept her trapped in a life of domestic chores and interminable matrimonial spats that impaired her already fragile health and even more fragile patience.

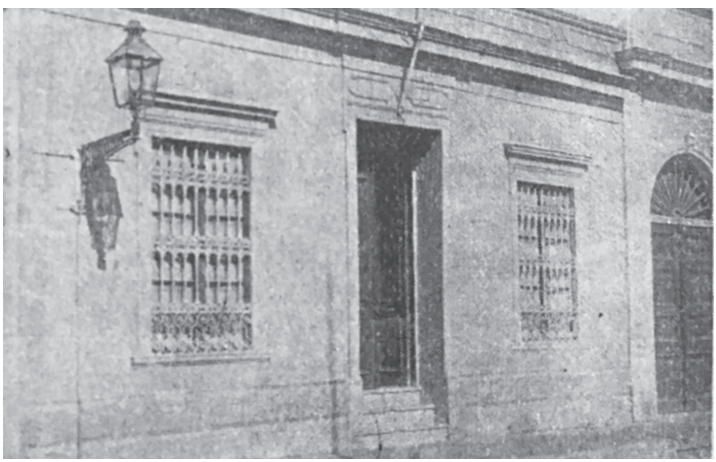
With no apparent way out, Rojas meets Jorge Sangts, a man not much older than her, who introduces himself as a piano and language teacher. Rojas decides to take him on as her tutor, and between private lessons and long evening walks, the couple strikes up a friendship that quickly develops into a love affair. After several months of secret encounters and distracted music lessons, the connection between them intensifies, as does their anguish at, in their own words, not being free. In the early twentieth century, there was only one condition that could afford them their coveted freedom: widowhood.

With the intention of bringing about Díaz Muñoz's death and realizing their dream of being together, Rojas and young Sangts pay a visit to a house of three supposed witches. These strangers offer the couple potions and teach them strange spells, but nothing works: their incense and concoctions keep David Díaz Muñoz in very good health, while Jorge Sangts becomes increasingly bent on changing his status of lover. He cannot bear that Rojas remains married to another, and he gives her an ultimatum: it's either her husband or him. In desperation, Rojas begs him to give it one last shot. She tells Sangts she has heard rumors of a woman who might be able to fix their problem, and one hot January afternoon she proposes they pay a visit to the notorious witch Rosa Cisternas, whose powers would guarantee a swift solution.

In a small house on the outskirts of the city, a lowly old lady with a hunched back receives them in her home. Clearly not

in good health herself, she is nonetheless hugely persuasive. Rosa Cisternas calmly listens to Rojas's story and prescribes her countless remedies and spells. Only after several failed attempts and at the infelicitous wife's insistence does she propose the most reliable and efficient solution: the crime must be committed by hand. It is Cisternas who then contacts the coachman, Alberto Duarte, and together they agree on a plan and a cash fee.

Some weeks pass until January 21, 1916. Rojas goes back to Rosa Cisternas's house that morning, upset about yet another argument with her husband. She tells Cisternas she can't go on like this a minute longer, that she wants to be free as soon as possible, and that she's willing to do anything. And "anything," from the mouth of Corina Rojas, includes killing. The witch Cisternas looks at her carefully. She understands the urgency and resolves to put an end to the wife's suffering once and for all.



At seven that evening, to the din of a dinner party in full flow, Duarte reaches Calle Lord Cochrane and waits patiently for his signal. The house is a typical upper-class Santiago home: high ceilings, a long hallway, wooden floors, and a small garden. Beside the window, the streetlamp is not yet lit, and from inside he can make out the sound of laughter, the merry clinking of glasses and notes from the piano that Rojas is playing for her guests' entertainment. Then, suddenly, the music stops. The front door opens a fraction. Alberto Duarte enters the house and is led by Rojas to the study next to the master bedroom, where he hides behind some heavy drapes.

There he waits for four hours. Every so often, Rojas checks that the hitman is still hidden and urges him, between offering him swigs of vermouth, to take courage, to remain calm. Just before midnight, the guests finally bid their farewells and Corina Rojas and her husband head up to their bedroom. He unbuttons his shirt, takes off his trousers, and insists on having sexual relations. Shortly afterward, Rojas leaves the room. Unlike other nights, she goes to the bathroom in the company of Victoria Granifo, her most trusted maid. She will be both Rojas's alibi and the hitman's signal. Once he can see that the husband is alone, Duarte comes out of his hiding place and enters the couple's room. Waiting for him there, under the foot of the bed, is an unloaded rifle. A violent blow to the left temple wakes Díaz Muñoz, but Alberto Duarte is also carrying a dagger that he thrusts ruthlessly into his victim. There is no screaming. No resistance. No suggestion that a crime has just been committed. The murderer flees the house and tosses the dagger into a ditch. Only then does Rojas return to the room.

Her screams wake her eldest son and the boy makes a frenzied dash to notify the police.

[DIARY OF THE SEARCH]

The stark landscape multiplies in the mirrored windows of the new court building. In front of it, like a stubborn old relic, a huge red-brick building with an old sign tells me I have reached my destination. It's the last remaining court from the old justice system and it's my belief that somewhere inside this building I might find what I am looking for: the court ruling against Corina Rojas. I approach the counter and watch closely as a woman stirs her coffee. Every orbit of the cup with her spoon adds to the impression that she, like the court ruling, has been sitting here for a century. She doesn't look up on hearing my question. She merely repeats the year: 1916? I nod. I explain that all those involved are now dead, that what I'm looking for is a historic, closed case. She shakes her head and loses interest. Ignoring my protests, she replies that I need power of attorney if I want to withdraw a file. In practice, this would require Rojas herself coming back to life and signing a piece of paper granting me access to the case—a case which, by the looks of things, is actually far from closed.

After being arrested as the two primary suspects, Corina Rojas and Jorge Sangts gave a string of highly inconsistent confessions and retractions. For the first few hours, Rojas denied having any connection at all to her piano teacher. She'd never met him, she said. She'd never taken music classes and she didn't know a single word in any language other than Spanish. But in a well-prepared interrogation by the police, in

which they confronted her with dozens of love letters written in her own hand, she was forced to retract her original statement. Rojas then admitted to her infidelity and claimed sole responsibility for the crime. She stated that her darling Jorge had had nothing to do with the murder and that the whole thing had been her idea from start to finish. Only after learning that her beloved Sangts hadn't thought twice about pointing the finger at her would Rojas disclose the truth: they had planned the murder together, but she had done so purely out of love for Sangts. "Perhaps I was overambitious and loved too hard," she admitted to the incredulous court officials.

The discovery of Rojas and Sangts's personal relationship became a focal point of the investigation and the judge insisted on digging up each and every detail that might help him clarify the motive for the crime. His hypothesis seemed to hold: Rojas wanted to kill her husband in order to be with her lover who, in turn, wanted his relationship with Rojas to be exclusive. The police inquiry and confessions from both parties quickly confirmed their romance, but the investigation didn't stop there. Instead, it would uncover all manner of intimate details: where the lovers had sexual relations, whether they had ever slept together in the marital home, whether Rojas had been intimate with her husband the night of the crime, whether she had ever had other lovers. Corina Rojas's sexual behavior would be painstakingly picked apart throughout the proceedings, and would eventually be the defining feature of her trial: "The defendant cannot claim no prior offenses," the sentence would rule, "given that, even before seeking the hand that would take her husband's life—that is, before her part in

the crime for which she is being prosecuted—Corina Rojas had already committed another offense: that of adultery."

For the judge, Rojas's infidelity is the most conclusive evidence of her guilt. The widow becomes a murder suspect only once her reputation as a woman and wife has been called into question. Her adulterous relationship *spurred* her homicidal behavior, the magistrate seems to say, and itself constitutes a prior offense that must be taken into consideration in the present trial.

As outmoded as his reasoning may seem, amazingly, it is not the stuff of distant history. Adultery as a crime was only removed from the Chilean criminal code in 1994, making the severe sanctions imposed at the beginning of the last century less surprising. Back then, the law punished "a married woman who lies with any man other than her husband" with up to five years in prison. If the same crime was committed by a man, however, it was a different story altogether. There had to be other factors at play for adulterous behavior on the part of a married man to be punishable. The crime even went by a different name: no longer "adultery," but "cohabitation." And for the husband to be convicted of this crime it was not enough that he lay with another woman; he had to keep "a concubine within the conjugal home, or outside it in scandal." The maximum penalty in this case was 540 days in prison, as opposed to the five years stipulated for a woman for an ostensibly lesser offense. That said, if the same crime was committed by the wife, that is, if she kept a lover "in scandal" or "within the conjugal home," the penalty increased to one of the harshest in the entire legal system: exile. Female adultery, in the most serious cases, was not only considered immoral,

but treacherous against the nation. And any woman guilty of such a crime had to be banished from the country in order to restore the honor of the what literary scholar Doris Sommer calls the "great national family."

But why was adultery a female crime? How did it come to be that the law penalized wives more harshly than husbands for the very same behavior? And moreover, why did Chile, up until 1953, absolve any husband who murdered his spouse if he caught her in a flagrant act of adultery? The answer points to an ingrained notion of honor that remains perversely prevalent today. Unlike female honor, which rests on a woman's sexual behavior (either her sexual restraint or her absolute marital fidelity), male honor, in other words his prestige as a *true man*, depends largely on women's behavior. The wife, as the anthropologist Myriam Jimeno argues, represents a latent threat to the husband, because his reputation is dependent on *her* actions. This explains why fidelity was a duty the wife had to fulfill at all costs, and why, if she was caught in the act, the husband would not face punishment for killing her. And Corina Rojas knew this perfectly well. "Even when I failed my husband," she would state, "I did not take my duties lightly. I was very careful to keep up appearances. Those who knew me never suspected a thing." But her discretion lost all importance once the murder was uncovered. The adulterous-woman narrative would be central to the arguments of all involved.

In direct contradiction of his first testimony, Jorge Sangts explains to the members of the court that he "rejected Corina Rojas a long time ago," that she was harassing him, not the other way around, and that "Rojas had other lovers at the time of the crime." Sangts picks up the infidelity argument and, to make

matters worse, makes out as if he himself had nothing to do with the adultery. And he doesn't stop there. Intimating that Rojas regularly saw other men, he asks the court to consider "which organ is vulnerable to be struck by Corina Rojas's 'hysteria.'" Sangts's use of the word *organ* is pointed when used in conjunction with *hysteria*, which originates from *hystera*, the Greek word for *uterus*. Sangts attempts to present a case of hysteria to the judge—a case of rampant female sexuality that allows him to frame Corina Rojas as the sole culprit of the crime. It's a cunning tactic: repeatedly bringing up Rojas's sexual transgression in order to reinforce her culpability and argue his own innocence.

Corina Rojas's defense turns out to be even more elaborate. Rather than playing down the relevance of hysteria, she, too, tries to use it—but to her advantage. Her lawyer asks the judge to consider "whether the accused's illicit relations with Jorge Sangts can or should be considered a vice or rather an outcome of the moral perversion typical of the hysteria from which the defendant suffers." He asks him also to look into "Doña Corina's menstrual disorders." This is a fascinating tactic by Rojas and her lawyer, involving, to paraphrase Josefina Ludmer, the twisting of gender stereotypes in their favor. If women are irrational, hysterical, or morally wicked creatures, they cannot be held accountable for their actions. And without accountability, clearly, there can be no punishment.

[DIARY OF THE SEARCH]

Defeated, I leave the courts and make my way to the national library. I request the newspapers from 1916, but after an hour or more spent reading them, I'm defeated again, this time by the

dark microfilms and gloomy subterranean light. So I turn my attention, instead, to a photograph. I scrutinize it as if it guarded a secret: the dangly earrings, the fitted jacket, that pale skin set off by her black eyebrows. Corina Rojas's face has a childlike roundness. Only the feather on her hat gives any indication that she is older, and from another era. I'm worried I'll never find the court ruling. In Chile all the truly important documents have been lost, be it in fires, earthquakes, or convenient floods. Just then, an idea flashes through my mind. From my own archive, from my own memories of law school, a single word floats to the surface of my mind: pardon. What if Corina Rojas was pardoned? I return the microfilms and disappear down into the metro's tunnels.

Women had virtually no independence in any area of their lives at the start of the twentieth century, and certainly not when it came to their crimes. Shortly after the murder was uncovered, the press dubbed the Rojas–Sangts duo a "true criminal couple." This added detail of the criminal couple was both convenient and reassuring, given the threat posed by a lone female killer, but also as a strategy to maintain the then-prevalent narrative of female weakness and dependency.

The feminist movement went through a vital moment in the early years of the twentieth century. Chilean women were taking their first steps in the public sphere thanks to the women's centers, unions, reading clubs, and societies that popped up month on month. Even these tentative advances were met with resentment by the political elite. And feminism itself, perhaps echoing those fears, was torn between a discourse demanding new rights and one that defended the traditional roles associated with care and motherhood. It is not surprising, then, that a premeditated murder committed by a woman raised concern among some feminists. And the "criminal couple" theory was instrumental in relieving those anxieties. First, it made the murder seem more plausible (it was unthinkable that a woman acting alone could arrange a murder); second, it eliminated the panic brought on by the very idea of an independent, violent woman.

By this logic, Corina Rojas simply could not have acted alone. An entire list of plausible criminal couples would be rolled out during the trial in order to exclude the possibility of a lone female culprit: Corina Rojas and her lover Jorge Sangts; Corina Rojas and the witch Rosa Cisternas; Corina Rojas and the coachman Alberto Duarte. Each duo would be key to

weakening the female murderer's power. And the tactic would have worked if not for the fact that Rojas's aforementioned partners—Sangts, Cisternas, and Duarte—each for their own reasons, actually exacerbated Rojas's insubordination in the eyes of the court.

In the Rojas–Sangts twosome, she holds an ambiguous position: sometimes she is under Sangts's sway and at other times she leads him. As the subjugated woman, one might expect the media to portray her as having been forced into her part in the crime and, as such, not a true offender. This is the impression Rojas tried to give when she stated that she had been talked into the murder by Sangts, that she, in the past, had received potions from him and was blinded by love: "I am not a criminal," Rojas would maintain during the trial, "but I am a wretched woman who, under love's wicked spell, was driven to the edge."

Taking advantage of this opportunity to play down the problematic prospect of a criminal woman acting alone, the court's sentence accepts that her impressionability was born of "the great affection" Rojas held for Jorge Sangts, but, curiously, it confers no legal weight to this detail. In fact, not only does the court not reduce Rojas's responsibility, it actually punishes her more severely than her lover. It comes down to her previous transgression: adultery. If Rojas's impressionability was supposed to make her less accountable for the murder, adultery quickly restored her culpability and the urgent need to punish her. An original offense (an original sin) that operates as a justification for a tougher sentence: the adultery, not the murder, is what ultimately prevents Rojas from being seen as a weaker half of the couple.

As it goes, it was no less problematic to be seen as the commanding half. The mere idea of a woman dominating a man in a domain that was both culturally and symbolically masculine—the domain of violence—sparked angry reactions both inside and outside the courts. "A hyena with immoral instincts," the magazine *Corre-Vuela* would report. Even *El Mercurio* would refer to Corina Rojas as "a jackal" personified. Portrayed now as the dominant half of the couple, Rojas is no longer even seen as a woman; she is an impulsive creature who not only breaks the law but ignores the commands that women must be passive and courteous. As such, she can no longer be seen as a woman but rather a fierce animal.

As if the Rojas–Sangts double act wasn't already rife with complications, there is one more ingredient to add to the mix: the couple is comprised of a Chilean woman of uncertain heritage (some call her bourgeois while others point to peasant roots) and a man whose identity became the center of a curious controversy.

Sangts had migrated to Chile four years before the murder, changing not only his residence but also his first and last names on arrival. He had people call him Jorge Sangts Frick, and he claimed to be a music and language teacher, although he was careful not to mention which languages or instruments he'd mastered. His somewhat mysterious profile meant he was soon rubbing shoulders with Santiago's elite, Díaz Muñoz being a prominent figure among them.

The newspapers, careful not to hurt the readers' sensibilities, initially describe him briefly as a young German piano teacher, but this terse description soon changes thanks to an extraordinary discovery. The Bolivian police, on the Chilean

authorities' request, sends a telegram informing them that Sangts is in actual fact José Justino Gandarillas, a native of Cochabamba, born to a Bolivian mother and unknown father, who fled the country having amassed heavy debts. With this new information, the court rejects the mitigating circumstances of prior good behavior and the newspapers start referring to "Sangts the fraud," abandoning their previously reserved language. The magazine *Corre-Vuela* even publishes a profile on the suspect entitled "The Split Personality," satirizing him: "He was like a coin. A fake coin. His friends believe him to be a 'thoroughbred' German. Many go as far as to say that he is the kaiser's bosom buddy. To others he is a great scoundrel, a ruffian, a rat, a fraudster. Or a pure-blooded Bolivian, of unknown paternity. Who to believe!"

Corina Rojas's collusion with this slippery character would cause some unexpected tensions. Sangts's description as a pseudo-European and pseudo-Latin American (and, therefore, potentially Indigenous) resonated with the origins of Chilean *mestizaje* (miscegenation). On the one hand, the selective, welcomed migration of people from Germany to supposedly improve the Chilean race and, on the other hand, the undesirable mixing with Indigenous people. In an editorial cartoon from the time, Sangts can be seen holding a quill and crucifix in one hand—symbolizing civilization and progress—and a knife and skull in the other. Sangts, a fake German, was in fact dark-skinned and Bolivian, and the newspapers made absolutely sure to highlight his true and compromising identity. The fact that Corina Rojas—a Chilean woman dressed in flashy attire with feathers in her hat and married to a distinguished aristocrat—had wanted to replace her white, upper-class husband for a Bolivian immigrant would be to her ultimate detriment.

She was influenced by this Sangts (*sang*, the French for "blood"), the ruling seems to say, and for such an insubordinate act she must receive an exemplary punishment. Neither her impressionability nor Rojas's criminal partnership with a male figure can minimize her offense. On the contrary, having been susceptible to a man *like Sangts* seems to make it worse. At this point, her infidelity (her treachery) applies not only to the husband David Díaz Muñoz, but to all Chileans, evoking the old ghost of adultery as a crime against the patria. And the homeland's very identity is put in doubt by a insubordinate woman who opens the door of her own home to a foreign man. Through their alliance, Rojas comes out looking like a central member of a seriously dangerous couple. And while Sangts is

put behind bars, she, Corina Rojas, is condemned to death by firing squad.

[DIARY OF THE SEARCH]

Almost exactly one hundred years have passed, I think, while a man almost as old as that places a leather-bound notebook on the table in front of me. I am in the National Archives of Chile, where the country's executive orders are held. I've requested all of the documents dated between 1916 to 1918 and beside me wait piles of books in a rickety old trolley. The man gestures at me to put on the gloves and I follow his silent instructions. I open the first notebook. Through my fingers, one by one, slip hundreds of pardons that liberated men and women alike, but mostly women. The fingertips of my gloves grow slowly darker. It's an endless task. I move on to another notebook, then to another, and another. Rojas. Rojas. Rojas. I pause. It can't be. There, etched in blue ink on a piece of paper that must have once been white, is her name. I read it again: Corina Rojas. A ruling lost for a hundred years. A century, I think, and I feel something very close to happiness.