

Wilderness House Literary Review 14/4

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La Virgen de Pueblo Viejo

ONCE UPON A TIME THERE WAS A HANDSOME MAN...WITH PROPERTY. Not enough to make him a real, a genuine, *hacendado*, but, since he was more landed than anyone else in Pueblo Viejo, and his house, if not quite a hacienda, was a little bit bigger, we called him, not to his face of course, *el hacendado*. You know. You've seen him. Enrique. But you should have seen him then: shoulders like an ox, a bull, and that look in his eye..!

Here *la tía*, the aunt—not yet, but in the not too distant future—exhaled with such force that her words seemed to float in the darkness—for they would be uttered at night—over the ears of her nieces, two sisters who had never married and whose story this might, in the end, very well be.

Taking just a step or two into the past, it might be noted that the nieces, or sisters, had their work in the pueblo and had divvied up the housework on the basis of who worked the hardest outside the house, and so Gracia did almost nothing at home, while Inmaculada, who worked a little less in the pueblo, cooked, washed the dishes and cleaned. However it was, it had worked out well enough over the years. Neither complained. If either wondered about the life, the lives, that might have been, she kept it to herself.

La tía, the aunt, lived with her sister in somewhat similar circumstances, that is one did all the housework, while the other, much older, did little or nothing, yet seemed to decline day after day. Then, suddenly, against all odds, the younger sister died and the elder, with nowhere to go, ended up with her nieces, the much younger, hard working sisters who had worked things out so well for so long.

Suddenly, there was someone else to care for, a woman old enough to be their mother, though she wasn't—an old woman who, once upon a time, had had a name like everyone else, though now both called her *tía*—and in failing health, which is to say rapid decline. But, and this was a big but, somehow she never seemed to get there, to the end of her days. It had been a year now and the aunt, though, apparently, in freefall, was still with them.

The latest addition to the sisters' burden was, as to be expected, another winter.

Winters in Pueblo Viejo aren't that bad, rarely, very rarely, descending to a freeze, but cold enough, especially if your circulation isn't what it used to be. The aunt was cold, cold, cold, shivering all the time, never complaining, but the fact was that, just like she could never seem to depart this earth, just so she could never get warm. Inmaculada piled on the wood in the old stove, but it made no difference and it seemed, the aunt, though it might be a blessing for all, would resolve both issues and pass in the night when she was at her coldest and Inmaculada's conscientious tending of the fire had made no difference.

But she didn't and there was nothing for it but to take the old girl into the matrimonial bed, the bed that had once been the sisters' parents', the one they had been conceived and born in, the one their father and their mother had both died in, if years apart. Now they took their aunt into

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it, made room for her between them—it was a tight fit, for a matrimonial bed is not one of those you might see displayed in the city, ones you could easily fit three or four in—and managed, of a near freezing night, to keep the aunt who was plastered between them, from actually freezing. At first it was shudders and slight moans, almost, if not quite, the sounds of love, but, in time they died down and went away altogether.

There was to be yet another test of the sisters' faith, for the aunt, once warmed, like the corpse in one of our local legends, began to talk. She had been very nearly silent for a year but, suddenly, just when the sisters needed their sleep in preparation for the next day, she was all words and one of the tales she told there in the dark, if not the first, though possibly the last, was that of the exploded Virgin.

According to the aunt, suddenly breathless, as if giggling to her girlfriends sixty years ago, this, somewhat paraphrased, is how it goes...

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However vague and indistinct and requiring, as it were, the proverbial leap of faith, it wasn't the myth of the Virgin of Guadalupe but it was, as far as the locals were concerned, near enough: a Virgin had revealed herself, and she was their own, *la Virgen de Pueblo Viejo*. She was discovered by Juan rounding up his cows one evening and, afterwards, taking a shortcut through the more extensive lands of Enrique, the landowner who came the nearest we had to a *hacendado*, though his property didn't quite qualify as a hacienda and his house was just a little bit bigger than everybody else's.

And there you have it, our Virgin who, as you will see, is not quite as finished as she might have been and Enrique, the landowner who wasn't born into quite all he would have liked to have been. Anyway, there she, or a rough suggestion of her, was, at dusk, blackened into hard rock, but not with any tool, not by the hand of man, still as one of our stunted trees herself and head apparently bent in the time honored fashion to her right, revealing her sadness, as every *campesino* knew, not just for the loss of one, rather special, son, but for all of us, as she seemed about to shed a tear for the shortfalls of humanity as each of us failed, failed himself, and all of us failed each other.

Juan stood still and stared, even as the light failed around him. One undeniable aspect of the miracle was that—and Juan knew, for this was his downhill route every day of his life—it, she, hadn't been there before. She had appeared, even, as is said, the Virgin of Guadalupe to another Juan, Juan Diego, in the long ago, all at once, though, of course, our Juan had to watch his feet, now and then anyway, coming downhill, and it was possible he had missed it, once, twice, maybe even several times, but every day of his life?

Juan wasn't sure he shouldn't drop to his knees, but he crossed himself and kissed his thumb, as his mother had taught him. He then proceeded, in the gathering shadows, for he had stood there longer than he thought, to find his way downhill and to, however casually, mention it, her, to someone, who mentioned it to someone else and the next day, at dawn, before the day's work had really begun, very nearly the population

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of Pueblo Viejo had found their way out to see for themselves their own blessed Virgin.

This wasn't a case, however silently, however piously, their own heads bent before them, they made their way, of Juan's harmless feet through Enrique's grass, but of, relatively speaking—for Pueblo Viejo has never been large and is, taking into account those who have left and those who have died, a little smaller all the time—a horde. The good people were wise enough not to leave any gates open, Juan himself had always made his way through a couple of strands of Enrique's barbed wire, but there wasn't anything they could do about several hundred pairs of feet pushing down Enrique's grass.

Once, twice, would have been all right, almost harmless, for the grass, as determined as the rest of us to survive, would have, in a day or two, sprung up, but some, the most devoted, or the most credulous, amongst us, were coming every day, even twice a day, morning and night. By the end of the week, the niche in the rock and the indistinct outline of the virgin within was ablaze with candles, running with wax, darkening with lines of smoke. And the grass, well, suffice it to say that by the end of the week Enrique's head was as tilted as the Virgin's, if straight down.



Here, in the darkness, in the midst of her tale, the aunt, giggling with a gurgle not that far from the long awaited rattle, had the sisters to either side chuckling with her, though they weren't sure they had heard anything that funny, at least not yet, and the aunt, settling down, with the sisters close behind, went on.



Enrique wasn't sure when the idea came to him, perhaps in the night when he was half asleep. It wasn't exactly the Virgin appearing to him though, perhaps, it was, and perhaps she was understanding, even accepting, as it occurred to him there was only one way to save his grass. To send her, the blessed Virgin, back where she came from.

But when? And how?

All that came to him in the morning as he was frying his eggs, for he was a widower and his children were long gone. He was not without resources and what he didn't have he knew how to get. That afternoon he got what he needed and had only to await the conditions that would cover his tracks. They came soon enough. The next week, when his grass was literally crying to him in his sleep, the rains, usually considered a godsend, arrived, beginning, furiously enough, with a dramatic display of lightening across the night sky.

Enrique, seeing his opportunity, seized the moment. Pulling his poncho over his head, and burdening himself with all that was necessary, he ventured into the wildest of nights. After a slipping sliding approach which left him once or twice on his knees as suddenly as any of the faithful, if not himself overwhelmed and awed, he carefully placed his sticks of dynamite around the understanding, or unsuspecting, Virgin, underneath her feet which seemed to float upon the air even if she wasn't, in this case,

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supported by fluttering putti, perhaps, like the lowest unbeliever, sticking one or two underneath her flowing robes.

Enrique lit his fuses and, slipping and sliding in the godsend of a *chubasco*, as we call a sudden, violent storm, retreated. Luckily the blast coincided with one from the heavens and, in the blink of an eye, the Virgin was gone. Enrique returned to the scene of the crime to see if there was any evidence he ought to gather. But, as clean as a well washed nun, the site had been purified by the downpour. Just to be sure, he searched here and there with his flashlight to make sure there wasn't a fragment of a fuse, anything that would blow his cover.

Home free, it seemed, Enrique made his way home. The faithful would be there tomorrow no doubt, rain or shine, and the story of the Virgin's disappearance would spread like wildfire. As suddenly as she had arrived, the Virgin had departed. Perhaps, word went, she had other parishes to visit, other parishioners to pity.

Juan went about his survival as usual, as did the population of Pueblo Viejo, but the Virgin wasn't finished with Enrique. He made, and ate, his meals as usual, standing at the stove. He was out all day tending his hectares and was pleased to see his trampled grass beginning to recover, but something, deep within him, wasn't right. Had he committed the ultimate sin in destroying one of the Virgin's manifestations, perhaps an appearance she herself, for reasons known only to her, had chosen to make?

Whatever the cause, Enrique himself was failing. His hectares no longer seemed the be all and end all of life. His breakfasts didn't nourish and sustain him throughout the day as they had. About two in the afternoon, he was finished. He told his workers what to do and, instead of, as usual, staying to see that they did it, limped home and lay down on his widower's bed, fully clothed, but...

The roof of his old house—the old house which had never seemed quite large enough, but large enough, especially for a man alone—the roof which had always stayed just where it was, seemed to be descending. He blinked, and blinked again. Without a doubt, it was a little lower than it had been a second ago. He tried his blink again, and again, and then, in order to avoid being crushed, rolled onto his cold stone floor and scrambled out the door on all fours. Outside, his back against the wall, he waited for the sound of his few furnishings, his appliances, a luxury in this part of the world, being crushed, but there was nothing.

Silence.



At this point in the story, silence fell, as the aunt, somewhat overheated by the telling of her tale, took in a breath large enough to be her last, but no, though the sisters to either side of her, fingers crossed, hoped against hope, it was only a dramatic pause, for the tale was not quite told.



Enrique, it seemed, crawled back into his house, half expecting the roof, in its descent, to have paused about a meter and a half from his cold stone floor, but no, the roof was just where it had always been, or back

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where it was before it started its descent, but everything, his stove, his fridge, even the bed he had last held his wife in, even as her end was near, seemed to glow with a kind of halo.

Clearly, this was a message from on high, Enrique decided, as if the threat of his declining health and his descending roof had not been enough, and the promise of something unearthly and improbable was needed. And the message was, he decided, that he must, somehow, bring the Virgin back. Enrique knew his way in this world and so he knew, immediately, what to do.

The next day, his workers at work, at least while he was there, he drove his old pickup to a somewhat distant pueblo where there was a stonemason of some repute, one who, at the priest's request, had fluttered some putti, here and there, around the *templo*, and a man, Enrique knew, who knew how to keep his mouth shut. Well, everyone does, of course, when the folded pesos are pressed into his palm. However it was arranged, the man agreed and the next week, lugged his tools in his old pickup to Pueblo Viejo where he, inquiring the way of no one for he had been given precise directions, found his way to his house, even if it was not quite the landmark Enrique would have liked it to be.

Together, well off the, temporarily, beaten track, and as far as you could get from *el hacendado's* precious grass, they found a suitable stone face and the stonemason proceeded, in his own good time, to chisel a traditional Virgin, very much like the miniatures they sell outside the *templo* on fiesta days, but fainter, following the inner life of the rock as if only an event which passeth understanding could have carved it there. A day or two later, the scene of the crime well sanitized—stone chips would never do—Enrique discreetly mentioned to Juan, apparently happening into him as he descended from his gathered cows, that the Virgin—here both men crossed themselves—had reappeared.



The aunt, reaching temperatures that could only signal the final fever, exhaled, it seemed, from the depths of her soul and, as before, seemed to stop breathing but, though the sisters would have crossed their toes if they could, she soon gasped, as before, and proceeded to the conclusion of her tale.



The populace, led by Juan to the Virgin, even as he had been led to her by Enrique, were determined, this time, not to lose her, she who had been good enough to visit our pueblo—twice!—and posted guards around her until the same stonemason, his lips sealed, for he was a man who understood that, when money talks, he shouldn't, carefully, with all the necessary equipment, cut the Virgin from her stone background and, with the help of half the able bodied men in Pueblo Viejo, taking turns, and followed by everyone in the grandest procession we had ever witnessed, carried her to the *templo* where she was installed until the *santuario* with which we are all too familiar could be built.



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Now, if not, literally, in answer to the sisters' own prayers, *la tía*, the aunt, chortling, apparently well pleased by such a well told tale, even if she had told it herself, suddenly gasped a frightful gasp followed by the slowest, most resigned, of exhalations, and was gone.

After a day on display in the house with chairs set in the street and covered by the awning rented from the man who rents that kind of thing—not the casket itself that, for obvious reasons, has to be bought and paid for—the sisters had time, between the vigil, the procession and the walling up, to sit and think. Time, after Inmaculada had done the dishes and joined Gracia at the table they had sat at as children, to meet each other's eyes across it.

"What do you think, Inmaculada, do you think our crossed fingers did her in, carried her off?"

"I doubt it, Gracia," laughed Inmaculada, "I think it was her story did it. We always wondered where that slick Virgin had come from, so proudly displayed in her own *santuario*. Just think: our *tía*, somehow, always knew and kept it to herself all these years."

"I think, Inmaculada, that 'somehow' is a tale that tells itself. Someone, in the long ago, perhaps in the wildest of nights, when the *chubascos* were upon us all, that 'someone' warmed the widower's bed and he, having to unburden his soul along with his body, told all."

"You're right, Gracia. Lucky girl, she took on a little knowledge with her ecstasy."

At this thought, whether of the wisdom or the fun, the sisters who had never married and now, somehow, knew beyond all doubt that, in a pueblo doomed, like *la tía*, to fade beyond memory, they never would, fell silent, looked down at the well worn wood they had sat at all their lives, and fingered knives and forks, themselves twisted with time.

"What do you think, Inmaculada," asked Gracia when the angel had passed, "do you think too many years are behind us, behind him, to confront Enrique with his crime against the real Virgin, who had chosen, for some reason, to visit our Pueblo Viejo, with buying and paying for her counterfeit substitute who is still implored and entreated by the desperate and the lonely, the motherless and the abandoned, just to save his grass?"

"No, I don't think so, that is, if our *hacendado* is still alive. We haven't seen him at the *santuario* or the *templo*, but then he might consider it hazardous to place himself so nearly within reach of our father in heaven."

That was good for a titter before the sisters retired to the matrimonial bed, which if collapsed here and there, at least had sufficient room in it now for two sisters who were not that large and, with the years, getting smaller, and it was time, once again, in the darkness, each to herself, almost, if not quite, in the silence of the grave, to wonder about the life, the lives, that might have been.