

The Cure

By
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The Cure and Yellow Flowers
By
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Black and white photographs by Frank Thayer 1967

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“Those unwittingly...consuming what a witch proffers...find to their sorrow that some animal, alive and gnawing, forms in their stomach.”

—Marc Simmons, 1974: *Witchcraft in the Southwest*

San Vicente is an incestuous town so much like hundreds of others with deep roots, but it is my town. Underneath the veneer of normalcy on its streets, I saw with my own eyes a thing churning in Lalo Hernandez’s belly, and I cannot forget the loathsome shape of it as it killed him. That day I became a believer in the *curandera* and as well in a harsh justice as old as the hills of New Mexico.

For me it began at the high school and a visit from sophomore student Amelia Valles. In the early 1980s I was employed by the school system to do career counseling and career aptitude testing among other duties. I met Mirabel Valles, her mother, at the fall open house, and she told me of her concern that her daughter should have an ambition in life beyond a boyfriend. Mirabel confided in me that, even though she was college educated and an administrative employee in the city offices downtown, her calling was as a *curandera*. I confessed to her that I could not even pronounce it, much less understand what she did.

She introduced me to her daughter Amelia, who smiled pleasantly but seemed to have more interest in a group of her fellow students whom she joined as her mother talked with me.

Mirabel chuckled as I revealed to her my interest in the occult. I asked if her therapies had any overtones of magic. She raised a well-manicured finger and looked at me with dark and piercing eyes as though she were going to impart a secret. “No, Dear, most of my work is as a volunteer midwife and I am a *yerbera* —you know, a worker with herbs.”

“How does a cur...and...er...sorry, I messed that up...does that have anything to do with the *bruja*? I know how to pronounce that one.”

She smiled, “I go to church, and that is the difference. Father Simone blesses my work, and I can just look at a person to know how they need to be healed.” She was looking at me, and I was suddenly a little uncomfortable and feeling the strength of her personality, even though the room was filled with parents and some students.

She took my hand a second time, “Anyhow, my Amelia will come see you for some career counseling, and I think we will talk again.”

“I hope so,” I blurted out, quite out of my normally reserved character. She walked away with fluid grace in high heels without looking back, and I realized that my eyes followed her. I remembered later how Mirabel struck me. She could only be described as a large woman, voluptuous, almost as tall as I was and in her early 40s. Though she was full-figured, her hips were well defined and her stylish dress was molded to her figure. Even hours later I could remember the fullness of her lips and the size of her dark brown eyes under flawless makeup. The upper ridge of her nose carried that attractive, subtle peak I always associated with Native American or Aztec heritage. Her dark hair was drawn up into a bun. Later that night I tried to analyze my fixation and felt a sudden flash of fear that in our brief conversation she could read my insecurities and the failures of my relationships that made me seek the solitary life of a writer.

On a sunny October morning two weeks later, Amelia brought her hall pass to my small office in the counseling complex of the high school.

When Mirabel Valles introduced her daughter to me, I could not deny that I thought Amelia was destined to be a burden to her family. I did not know then that Amelia’s father had died in a car wreck two years previously, and Mirabel was saddled with the responsibility of guiding her only child through the frightening maze of adolescence.

Well she should have been worried, because Amelia carried the curse of beauty, a fearful symmetry that opens doors and destroys families. Amelia had the tall, slender build of a model, with narrow Castilian nose and a regal face. While obviously Hispanic, her eyes were green and piercing, her full lips painted in modest pink. Her open smile was welcoming, but I sensed an amusement in her posture that was not quite flirting but possessed of a self-confidence beyond her age.

We spent an hour as I administered the standard Princeton Review Career Aptitude Test battery and promised to get the results back within the week. Amelia seemed unconcerned, and what little she said was typically about Homecoming and her boyfriend on the football team. Later in the day, I dropped

her name in a conversation with Principal Vance Koger. He gave me a wry smile, and suggested that Amelia would give her mother heartaches.

“Hey, she’s a sophomore, and I’ve heard she already has our quarterback Tommy Sanchez in love with her!” I wanted to impress on him my awareness of school gossip.

Koger crooked his finger. “Come with me.” We walked down the long hall to the front doors. “See that?” He pointed directly at a primer grey 1980s Chevrolet Monte Carlo lowrider with chrome-plated rims. A dull thump-thump carried the bass track from whatever was playing in the car. Smoke of some kind rolled out from the driver’s window. “That’s Lalo Hernandez—I know him by his other name, ‘Under Indictment.’ He’s there every day, and when her boyfriend’s at football practice, she’s in that ride, and off they go.”

“Amelia?”

“Amelia.”

I avoided an expletive. “Does her mother know?” The endless human tragi-comedy was displayed before our eyes. “Not yet, but you know how the story goes. San Vicente is smaller than she thinks it is.” Koger stood at the doors, arms crossed, legs spread. “Hernandez dropped out in 8th Grade, and today he’s one of the wealthy unemployed.” I just shook my head and went back to finish the day with other student files.

The following week I sent a note to Amelia’s home room and asked that she come by to pick up the profile and discuss the aptitude results. The reply from home room reported that Amelia Valles had not attended school any day that week, so I made a call to City Hall and was transferred to Mirabel’s desk, since she was the prime mover in the project.

I offered sympathy for her daughter’s absence and was rewarded with a reply that was tinged with fury. “What do you mean she is absent? Are you sure about that?” As I backtracked, we talked about the aptitude tests, and I told her I would bring the results to her house when she got home from work.

As I drove west on Sixth Street, the sun was disappearing behind the hills that surround San Vicente. The Valles home was set down below the street and four steps led down from the concrete sidewalk onto the front walk. Behind the house was a shaded ravine. The pleasant white stucco adobe presented a turquoise blue painted wooden door frame. The front room window presented the same blue trim and

the typical 1950s metal framed panes. Visible through the glass was a hanging *Ojo de Dios*, Eye of God woven from colored yarn.

Mirabel answered the door at my first knock. She was still in her business dress, and she shook my hand when I entered. She showed me to the plush sofa and insisted that I join her in a glass of ginger ale. “Amelia left me a note that she would be late at school working on a project for the football team.” She pursed her lips in a frown. We both knew it was a lie. As we talked, I realized what similarity I recognized in Mirabel, and though I did not say so, I compared her to the 1950s-film star Katy Jurado as she appeared in the movie “High Noon.”

After spending a few minutes showing Amelia’s profile and aptitude to work as a bank teller and a florist, among other possibilities, Mirabel asked me, “What is that on your left hand? I instinctively dropped it beside my left leg, feeling my face flush in embarrassment. At least once a minute she looked out the window up toward the street as if expecting someone.

“No, let me see it.” She crossed her legs as I stuck out my hand to show her that I had three stubby warts fully 3/8” in size—one in the web between thumb and forefinger, one between second and third knuckles, and another at the side of my left wrist. Mirabel’s fingers were warm as she touched the excrescences. “How long have you had these?” I admitted that I had tried all manner of remedies but the warts had remained for about two months.

Mirabel took the hand between both of hers. “I will buy these from you.” Under her blue eye shadow, her large eyes were intense, and I could not look away from her. “I don’t understand.” I could feel my brow wrinkle in confusion.

Her black vinyl purse was leaning against the coffee table leg. She leaned forward, opened it and took out a change purse. She handed me a quarter and two dimes. “That OK with you?” I was flustered, wondering if she noticed how I stared at her breasts under the trim blouse she wore.

I nodded, feeling a little foolish, but then the conversation went back to her daughter, and I could tell that Mirabel’s self-assurance was more tentative when she talked about Amelia, as though the stakes were very high in her mind. I told her we could talk about her daughter’s future any time, as I found myself liking this woman who had the knack for setting her guest at ease without catering to him.

When I got up to leave, Mirabel rose gracefully and accompanied me with lithe strides. She did not smile but she said, "I would like to call you if that is acceptable. Tell me if there is any change." Somehow, I did not think she was talking about the warts on my hand.

At the open door, I could hear the faint thump-thump of a car stereo down the block, and as I mounted the steps to the street, I saw Amelia walking briskly from the direction of the sound, and as I got into my car, I heard Mirabel's parent voice, "*MIJA!*" I was happy to escape an impending skirmish. I certainly would not risk the ire of a formidable woman such as Mirabel Valles.

The following Friday was a home game against the team from Socorro, and San Vicente handily defeated the visitors 38-27, with Tommy Sanchez throwing three touchdown passes and running for a fourth from 38 yards out. The unique ambience of the Friday night lights has a look and a fragrance all its own. The slight chill in the night air is invigorating. I wondered if Amelia was in the stands cheering on her boyfriend, but I couldn't make out her face in the packed stadium. Tommy got headlines in the *San Vicente Enterprise* on Saturday.

Tommy also got headlines on Sunday. A SVPD report listed Tommy Sanchez in stable condition after a drive-by shooting on Saturday. He was sitting in his parents' car outside his house when an unknown vehicle drove past and an occupant fired at least five shots at him. None of the bullets struck him, but glass splinters from a shattered front windshield went into his right eye and required surgery. The Sanchez family was concerned, because Tommy, a junior at SVHS, was seeking a service academy appointment. No suspects were identified, and the shots were from a small caliber weapon, possibly a .25 automatic. As I read the story, I jumped to a conclusion I could not prove.

The school was abuzz with rumors the following Monday, and the week was busier than usual, and Tommy Sanchez did not return to school until Wednesday, and then with a heavy patch over his eye. The SVPD made visits to campus to speak to Principal Koger, and students seemed restive in the halls.

On Tuesday I was leaving the building early to go to the head office of the school system, and Amelia was leaving alone among the throng of chattering students. Her long hair fluttered with an October breeze, and her smile was glistening. She greeted me, and I stopped to ask if she had spoken with her

mother about the tests. Her face darkened “No, we haven’t had the chance...” Her glance went over my shoulder.

I was in the presence of Lalo Hernandez. I first sensed the sweet odor of marijuana mixed with the stench of tobacco, and I turned to see a young man clearly one head shorter than Amelia, his sallow face marked with gang tattoos. He was wearing chinos low on his hips, a soiled tank top t-shirt loose on his narrow but muscular shoulders, his arms rich with arcane jailhouse tattoos. His small feral eyes had a puffiness that reminded me of fetal alcohol syndrome, and he wore a wool watch cap over what I presume to be a shaved head.

His hostility was palpable as his head jerked as if to say, “You’re in my way, *Esé*.” His hands were in his pockets and his eyes were on Amelia. I was thinking about Tommy Sanchez as the beautiful Valles girl followed him off campus. I could only imagine how her mother had interrogated her and how Amelia was probably seething to rebel even further.

That night I read some old love letters and went to bed feeling the frustration of confused and unrequited love. My fantasies reminded me of the tortures of Tantalus.

Friday morning, I woke up just before dawn and went to the bathroom where the sink was littered with toothpaste tubes, hairbrush, mouthwash and used lengths of dental floss. I splashed water on my face and grabbed a washcloth, looking into the bright lighted mirror. Why hadn’t I noticed it before? When had it happened? I felt a flash of incredulity as I lifted my left hand in front of the mirror. The uncomfortable, ugly warts had vanished. I looked into the mirror but I was seeing the penetrating eyes of Mirabel Valles, her full red lips slightly smiling, and when I remembered the three coins still in my pants pocket, I had to tell her of my amazement.

San Vicente had drawn a bye the week before Homecoming, and the building was as calm as a high school can ever be. When I talked with Mirabel Valles by phone that morning, I jabbered like a schoolboy in my excitement, as I kept inspecting the back of my left hand. She asked me to meet her after she got home from work.

Just before fourth period, Vance Koger called me to his office. His face was grim and ruddy, and I knew he must have been visited by a disgruntled parent. I didn’t bother to sit down, and he advanced a

delicate case. “One of Amelia’s friends, Michelle Goins—her mother came in 20 minutes ago and said that Amelia’s mother had performed an abortion on her daughter. She’s 17.”

“And why doesn’t she go to the SVPD?”

Koger pushed backward in the swivel chair, rolling on the carpet protector. “That’s the rub.” He massaged the sides of his face. “She says she’s scared—scared to death.” “That’s weird. Hey, I’ve met Mrs. Valles on more than one occasion, and she seems pretty strong willed, but I don’t think...” I stopped suddenly as I reconsidered.

“You know that more often than not, I am the court of last resort concerning these kids. I talked with Trammel in counseling, and apparently, nobody knew Michelle was pregnant. She’s absent today, and Adele Goins says that her daughter is very sick and almost hysterical.”

My stomach was rolling with a sudden queasiness. “So why are you dumping this on me?”

“Goins says that our Mirabel is a witch.” His eyes rolled. Mine didn’t, but I covered by saying, “A which?” “You heard me. What do you think?”

I lie badly, and so I did the next best thing; I dissembled, “I’ve been told that no such thing exists in 1980s America. She says she does herbal medicine and calls herself a *cunander*... or, uh, you know what I mean.” I was rubbing the back of my left hand, not comfortable mentioning my private study of magic and other occult practices.

“There’s more than one *curandera* in San Vicente, but they don’t usually inspire the kind of fear I just saw in Adele’s face. No doubt in my mind that something rattled her. I’d like to get some information on Mirabel Valles, and I think you might help.”

I nodded and promised I would say something to Amelia’s mother, although I had no idea how I would broach the subject. Even if Mirabel Valles had helped the Goins girl terminate her pregnancy, why would that cause her mother to be afraid? If anything, it would be Mrs. Valles who would fear prosecution or a lawsuit.

It was just past sunset when I parked on Sixth Street and walked down the steps to the Valles house. The fall evenings in San Vicente cooled quickly as the breeze flowed down from the forested hills to the north of town

An older woman was coming out the front door, holding a plastic bag and a small tied bunch of what appeared to be sage. Mirabel gave her a parting hug and stood in the doorway as I approached. I know I was smiling, but her lips barely turned upward in self-satisfaction.

She ushered me to the sofa and asked to see my hand. I could hear music coming from another part of the house. "It's Amelia. She is grounded." Mirabel's voice was clipped and terse as she raised her long, dark eyebrows, still not smiling.

I feigned ignorance as I changed the subject. "Can you believe they're gone?" I offered my left hand, and she took it, inspecting the healed skin.

She shrugged and sat back, her full figure swelling the sleeveless white silk blouse that she must have worn under a suit jacket and which glistened in the soft light of the floor lamps. On her upper left arm was a three-inch tattoo of a scorpion looking toward her breasts. "I told you I know what is wrong with people."

Again, I did not think she was talking about the disappeared warts on my hand. I studied the strength of her face and its almost dramatic makeup. Her cheeks were full and round as is sometimes the case with Scorpio natives, and though her lips were thin, bright red lipstick was thickly applied. She crossed her legs in my direction. "Did you know about Hernandez?" She demanded.

"Uh oh. I had hoped that was not going to be a big deal. I mean, Amelia already has a boyfriend." I was smiling ineffectually. After all, it is common knowledge that every girl in San Vicente had a boyfriend from the time she reached puberty.

"I caught her in his car when I came home early yesterday. Lalo Hernandez will not be part of my world." Her gaze was almost glowering, surrounded by styled midnight hair that glistened in the same manner as the stretch of her silk blouse. A few almost-invisible grey strands wandered through the dark waves of her hair.

A door opened in the back of the house, the music suddenly getting louder, and Amelia stalked into the living room, dressed to go out. She was pouting. "Mama, I have to go see Michelle. She is still not

better.” I sensed an accusatory tone. Mirabel was cold, her face dark. “*Mija*, you stay in this house unless I go out with you. You can go to school on Monday.” “Whatever!” Amelia snapped, her perfect mouth twisting, her fists clenched. She did not even acknowledge my presence. “We will talk about this later when I can trust you again. You are lucky I still allow you to use the phone.”

Amelia exhaled loudly and stomped out, the door to her room slamming. Now we faced each other on the sofa, and I jumped in without preamble, “My boss says that Mrs. Goins is afraid of you for some reason.” Mirabel did not answer. She only shrugged. “OK, now I look at what you did for my warts—no question you did something—and I have been thinking about this. You say you use herbs to heal, and that you help women in childbirth.

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Her expression was impassive. “Yes, I told you I was also a *partera*...” She lifted her hand and rotated it to encourage me. “Well, what I want to know is if you use magic...” I was suddenly uncomfortable at the blunt sound of the word.

Her expression did not change, and I could hear cars going by slowly out on the street and the muffled rock music from Amelia’s room. Mirabel’s hand came up as she faced me, her hand with its bright red nails making a knife, one edge touching her nose, and the other pointing at me. “Anglos see medicine as acceptable therapy on one side, with magic on the other side having no power to affect anything.” She made her fingers close and then fly open in a small explosion. “In fact, there is no dividing line. Anglos do not believe in magic even though it surrounds them. Look at your hand.”

I nodded and leaned forward as she sat up. “So, are you practicing magic?” I blurted out the question.

“I heal people. I told you that. Scientists are still scratching their heads over the placebo effect that works with some people—you know, sugar pills that cure everything from anxiety to indigestion. Then, sometimes terrible cancers just disappear. They call it remission, but it is still a cure. The *curandera* was here long before modern medicine, even in San Vicente. Remember that aspirin was first discovered in an herb.”

Now I was approaching tentative friendship with this enigmatic woman. “Why is Mrs. Goins afraid of you.”

Mirabel rose to her feet and straightened her tight skirt. She took a few measured steps toward a closed door at the other end of the living room, whose frame was painted in turquoise blue. I was telling myself I could never be attracted to her, but I watched her hips sway as she walked. She opened the door and then looked back at me. "Come over here."

I got up and followed her into a darkened room. At the north wall was a desk upon which sat a small gooseneck tensor lamp that gave a small circle of brilliance on the green desk pad but to little else. On the north wall was a sideboard with a marble top and carved cabinet doors below. At elevated platforms above the marble were two votive candles whose glowing glass containers depicted the blessed virgin. Two more candles sat at the right and left of the marble surface. A few items could be discerned on the waist-high milky stone surface including a mortar and pestle, and several clear spice jars with labels not clearly legible. Centered on the backsplash of the sideboard was a metal crucifix that appeared to be light, stamped metal. It gleamed in the candlelight. A cabinet door beneath the marble top was open and I saw a shelf crowded with glass jars and paper packets, all carrying inked labels. As I looked around the room, the faint but pleasing fragrance of sage wafted into my nostrils, producing a feeling of calm despite the tension I felt from being around Mirabel. "Your altar?" I broke the temporary silence. She did not look at me. "Sometimes it is. Everybody needs to pray, even atheists." "What about Michelle Goins?"

"I won't talk about that except to say that my Amelia cried to me asking me to help her friend. It is a bad situation. I think the girl blabbed everything to her mother, and the mother called me at work during the day, threatening to send the cops after me." Her profile was illuminated by the candlelight, and I offered a final comment. "You weren't worried?"

"I just politely told her to go to hell, and I hung up on her." She snorted in amusement but did not smile. The candle flames wavered. It was a story half-told. A rumbling of a car exhaust could be heard in the street as we went back to the living room. As we returned to the living room, Amelia came running toward the front door, her long hair flying. Mirabel reached out and barred the way.

Amelia pleaded, "Mama, I just have to go outside for five minutes. That's all. Let me go." There was an engine revving on the street.

“Back to your room.” Mirabel’s voice was quiet but menacing. It was a standoff, and tears were welling in Amelia’s eyes as she weighed the cost of walking toward the door. I just stood by in uncomfortable silence.

Amelia hesitated and then spun around and stalked back toward her room. In a stage whisper, she softly mouthed the word “bitch,” that made Mirabel start to follow her, but thinking the better of it, she stopped, clenching her fists. She was looking at me with her dark eyes. “Maybe I had better go. We can talk about healing and magic when things calm down.” “No, it would help if you stayed for a few minutes. Let me get us a soda.” Now she smiled faintly as if hiding something behind her flawless makeup. Music was booming from behind a closed door at the back of the house.

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The fizzy sweetness quenched my thirst, and I did not realize how dry my throat had become. Mirabel sat back on the couch, stretching the blouse as she took a deep breath and stretched her left arm across the sofa top. She looked at me, unblinking. “You know a few things, don’t you?” I felt a challenge as I tried to explain. “What you do...uh, what you did for me...is brand new for me. I have just read books on magic and witchcraft—even a book on witchcraft in the Southwest.” She shook her head imperceptibly, “I’m not a witch, but our traditions recognize *brujas*, including cops and councilmen. Anglos, not so much, but they have much to learn.” “Mirabel, look at my hand! You didn’t give me any herbs, no poultices, no drugs, but the warts are just gone.” Her face softened. “You did what you could for Amelia.” “Is it magic?” I leaned toward her.

“What is magic? Do you even know? I just know that some things work, but not everybody can make them work.” She looked away as if thinking about what to tell me next.

“I know I grew up being told there was no such thing as magic; maybe that’s why I have read so much about it.” I’m sure my face reflected my consternation. The Valles living was eerily quiet. Even Amelia’s music had faded.

“You grew up here, didn’t you?” It was a rhetorical question. “When I was just out of high school, I found my talent. Do you remember Aaron Padilla? It was 20 years ago.” She paused as I tried to place the name and suddenly knew she was talking about San Vicente’s best known disappearance.

I felt an icy finger going down my spine and a tightness in my abdomen as Mirabel leaned back and crossed her legs. I thought about one of San Vicente's signature mysteries, "I was out of college by then, but I remember the cops were clueless. Padilla was the son of the police chief, right?"

Mirabel nodded forcefully. "What most people don't know is how Aaron stalked me. From the time I was 17 he tried to date me. He was a big guy—about 6-feet, 200 pounds, and mean because he could get away with it. He beat up a guy I wanted to date, and he sometimes parked across the street from my parents' house all night." "You could charge him!" "Ha! You know better. The cops here back each other to the wall. My parents were told to keep quiet and that Aaron was just a romantic young man." "So, he just disappeared. Doesn't make sense."

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"My dear, I prayed to the Blessed Virgin day and night, but she didn't help me." I sensed something terrible emerging from her memory, but I didn't want to hear it. "That is awful. I don't want you to remember if you don't want..."

Mirabel's face softened, and she looked at the pale ceiling, moisture in the corners of her dark eyes as she cut me off. "He raped me one night when I was walking home from the movies downtown. He had a knife, and he hurt me badly. His father warned my parents to keep quiet and that it was my fault."

A leaden weight dropped into my stomach, and I closed my eyes in disgust. As I recovered, I wanted to ease the pain of her memory. "They never found him. I remember now—his black 1961 Chevrolet Impala was found abandoned in the Cherry Creek campground. It was locked and his wallet and watch were found locked in the car. No keys"

"That was the way the story appeared in *The Enterprise*." Mirabel closed her eyes, still leaning back. I reached out and put my hand over the scorpion on her arm. The flesh was cool, and she did not react. "Maybe you can tell me more about your...your, uh abilities when your daughter calms down."

Mirabel nodded, and we both stood up. We walked slowly to the front door and opened it to the burst of cool air outside. I turned to say good night, and she was leaning against the turquoise door frame arms crossed under her breasts, her figure silhouetted by the living room lights. She did not turn on the porch light. I just lifted my hand and said nothing, turning to walk toward the street.

Her voice was clear and low, chasing after me as I left. "Aaron Padilla committed suicide."

The shock washed over me, but I quickened my pace, feeling relieved that I was only unsettled by, not attracted to, Mirabel. Preoccupied, I got into my Volkswagen Rabbit and pulled out into the street, my mind full of what I had learned at the Valles house. It was only a mile to my small house, and I was still fully concentrating on the Valles situation as I pulled into my dirt driveway, suddenly thinking that the steering was sluggish.

I quickly locked the car and went into my silent home, now aware of an uncomfortable feeling in my solar plexus. I checked for messages on my answering machine, not really hoping for a call, and then I fixed chocolate milk and turned on the TV to watch something, anything, before I went to bed. I should have known that sleep would be hard won this night. I lay in bed, turning and hearing Mirabel's words from hours before, while I imagined investigators peering into a black Chevy Impala hardtop coated with frost on a November dawn 20 years ago. Now mostly forgotten, the Padilla case was never solved, and he was never found. Much as I resisted it, I could not banish the image of a voluptuous silhouette.

Rolling out of bed with the dawn, it was time to take care of a multitude of housekeeping tasks, such as grocery shopping. My kitchen counter was cluttered with tortilla chip bags and a saucepan half full of red enchilada sauce. It would be the base for Saturday's supper. I looked at the old linoleum flooring slightly yellowed by somebody else's wax job before I rented the house.

After exercising and reading the newspaper, I went out to my car, only to see it down in the front end as though exhausted. Both front tires had gone flat. Kneeling in the dirt of the driveway, I saw a very small slit in the sidewall of each tire, and no epithet would repair the damage. As a AAA member, I called for a tow truck to take me and my car to the only tire dealer in town. I knew that it would be a half day down the drain.

There was no doubt in my mind who had stuck a knife into my tires, and I was glad that I could rely upon a pistol for self-defense, if this push turned into a shove. After using my credit card to purchase two brand new Continental tires, I sat in the office in front of a rack of new tires, smelling the hard rubber and listening to the rattle of air wrenches in the repair bay. I felt that Lalo Hernandez was more of a danger to the Valles family than to me, but I still had a fantasy of firing a hollowpoint .45 into his exposed breastbone.

As I sat waiting for the tires to be replaced, I looked out the plate glass window and to weekend traffic on Main Street. I wondered how many of those people went to healers such as Mirabel instead of local clinics. How many of these people believed implicitly in the powers of magic and witchcraft in this 20th Century? In my studies, I had found very few works on witches and necromancers in the Southwest, though I had read Simmons who surmised that traditional black magic was practiced in New Mexico by the *brujas*, who supposedly began their rituals by rejecting Christianity with such invocations as “*Sin Dios, Sin Santa Maria...*” or without God and without the Virgin Mary. Certainly, Mirabel wasn’t one of those. Simmons said that people in the land of the Rio Grande had a great fear of witches, though, and I was now faced with a reality I had always enjoyed only as theoretical. Reality is not so entertaining. I looked at my left hand and thought about every word Mirabel had said as I left her house the night before.

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It was afternoon before I finished grocery shopping and tackled the laundry, something that men rarely do, and after supper I promptly fell asleep on the couch until the phone jostled me awake around 10 p.m. For a moment, I thought it was a call I had long hoped for, but instead it was the intense voice of Mirabel Valles.

“I don’t want to bother you, but I couldn’t reach my mother in El Paso. Amelia isn’t here. Can you believe that she went out the window of her room?” Mirabel was seething.

As I attempted to placate her, without success, I wondered if beautiful Amelia was Mirabel’s blind spot. “You know she will come back before morning.”

“Oh sure! But how will she come back? I am sad and so angry. I know she is with him. How can she do this when a nice, handsome boy like Tommy is in love with her?” As she talked, I wonder if she was only enraged or if she was crying as she blurted out her frustration.

We talked for 30 minutes and I avoided asking her what she intended to do. I was sitting in my own small house with a table lamp for company and a genuine wish that Amelia would not throw away her future for a lowlife loser. After she hung up, I sat in my solitude thinking about how often this story was repeated. Perhaps Mirabel could do something...but I had read once that magical intervention was usually temporary and that human situation always returned to *status quo ante*, unless the person comes to interior resolutions and changes their own patterns of behavior.

I thought of Mirabel as a teenager, fighting against Aaron Padilla and losing. I wondered what I could find out about Padilla and his disappearance 20 years ago.

Sunday was bright and mild, with cool mountain air tempering the warm sun, and a faint odor of wood smoke tinging the atmosphere of San Vicente. Remembering the hours, I waited until noon and then walked to College Avenue and up to the city library, an unassuming brick building with west-facing windows and red painted front door with eight square windows trimmed in wood.

I asked about the 1962 files of *The San Vicente Daily Enterprise*, and long-time librarian Adrian Moody ushered me to a table at the back. I could not help but notice that she wore sensible shoes, though she was always pleasant to researchers and browsers.

Adrian brought me the bound volume of the newspaper, as they did not have the budget to have the paper microfilmed. I realized I had no idea exactly when the Padilla incident happened, so I asked her about it.

Adrian smiled and took off her dark-framed glasses, rubbing the lenses with a handkerchief she took from the pocket of the beige button-up sweater she was wearing. “Ummm, let me see. I remember it. People talked about it for weeks, and they never did find the poor boy.”

Of course, I could not think of him as a “poor boy,” after what Mirabel had revealed.

Opening the heavy board covers of the buckram edged binder, Adrian licked her finger and rifled through pages to September, October. And she stopped. “Oh yes, I know exactly. It was the first days of November. She turned to Thursday, Nov. 1, 1962, Friday, Nov. 2, Saturday, Nov. 3. There was nothing. There was no Sunday paper, and she opened to the next edition, Monday, Nov. 5, and there it was on page 1 in the left column, underneath a headline about an impending visit by some dignitary to President John F. Kennedy’s White House.

*Padilla mystery deepens:
abandoned car found in
forest belongs to Aaron*

By James Walz

Authorities confirmed Saturday that a car found in the Gila National Forest was registered to a missing San Vicente man who disappeared three days ago.

Forest Service Rangers identified a black 1961 Chevrolet Impala at the Cherry Creek campground as being registered to Aaron Padilla, 19, of San Vicente. They alerted N.M. State Police and the sheriff's office.

San Vicente Chief of Police Reynosa "Ryan" Padilla, Aaron's father, said that his son had failed to return home Thursday evening. "We just want him to come home and will do everything in our department's power to find him."

Preliminary investigations revealed that Aaron Padilla's car was locked, but police opened the car up and found a wallet, empty beer cans, foil wrappings with the remains of food, a small quantity of marijuana, as well as dried blood on the steering wheel and on the driver's side seat.

Padilla, 19, is a part-time university student and a graduate of San Vicente High School, where he played tackle on the football team.

Chief Padilla said in an interview Saturday that Aaron had no enemies and was well-liked in the community. He indicated that because the abandoned vehicle was found on federal property, the FBI could be brought into the investigation.

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"Oh yes, Jimmy Walz. He was so ambitious. You know he went on to *The Albuquerque Journal*."

Adrian always seemed to be enthusiastic about information, and hundreds of people enjoyed her company during their library visits. With her help, I put the binder face down on the copy machine and made a copy to show Mirabel Valles.

Now I was intrigued, and I asked Adrian what else was written about the case. I put the binder on the table and turned from one edition to the next but saw nothing.

Adrian's voice had a lilting tone, and she tilted her head slightly. "You know, that's the funny thing. There weren't any other stories other than a repetition of what is in this one. There were one or two small items with Chief Padilla's request for the public to call in with information, but the case just died." Her choice of words was appropriate.

"You know, I looked for books here on magic and witchcraft, but I have never seen any on the shelves." I made conversation as I paid her for the copy and thanked her for her help.

Adrian's smile was prim. "We don't even try to keep those subjects any more. No matter how we tried to monitor them. Every book on the subject was stolen, one way or another." Neither of us was surprised. She stuck her hands in the pockets of her sweater as she walked me to the front door. As I looked at the red trim on the door, I wondered why blue wasn't more common as a treatment for door and window frames.

Later that afternoon I called Principal Koger and asked what he knew about Aaron Padilla, even though it would have been long before he was a school administrator, probably before he was out of school himself. Koger said that his long-time predecessor Lindauer Haggerson had told him stories to the effect that the younger Padilla was “an untouchable son-of-a-bitch” who wore his father’s police shield as perfect immunity. Neither students nor faculty were able to say anything against him. Poor boy, indeed.

Sunday evening I was chopping onions, grating cheese and shredding lettuce while the oil in the skillet warmed and the enchilada sauce began to simmer. I hadn’t decided whether to include ground beef with the evening meal, but there would be a lightly fried egg as the crown on the dish.

While I was deciding, I dialed the number for Mirabel Valles. I recognized Amelia’s voice, and I asked for Mrs. Valles, hearing Amelia shout, “Mama...” and I could tell she was annoyed.

Mirabel’s hello was crisp and veiled until I told her who it was. “Did your daughter get home OK?” Her voice was low and controlled. “She was out all night. I could have killed her.” It was sarcasm, but I had that old unsettled feeling from the way she said it.

I read the article to Mirabel and related what Koger had told me about her abuser. She was silent as though not comfortable in having a horrific memory recalled. “If you don’t mind telling me, did the cops talk to you after Aaron vanished?”

“Sure, because Padilla told his father that I was his ‘girlfriend’— the bastard.” The venom was undiluted after all this time.

“Sorry to bring it up, but I’ll bring the clipping to you anyhow. I hope Amelia has begged your forgiveness.” I felt the urge to make her feel better.

Mirabel paused and cleared her throat, “No, she is defiant, and she uses lies to get past me. She tells me that Hernandez is misunderstood and that he has had bad luck since he was young. Amelia says that she knows she can help him.”

“What about Tommy Sanchez? That kid is aces.”

I recognized Mirabel's characteristic snort. "You know what she told me? She said that Tommy was such a nice guy..." She paused, and I was thinking that when girls say you are a nice guy, that means they would never have sex with you.

Apparently, Amelia had come into the room, causing Mirabel to delay her sentence. There was a pause, and then she continued, "...so, she told me that he was such a nice guy, but he didn't need her the way *Lalo* did. I wanted to strangle her." Mirabel's pronunciation of the name was venomous.

"OK, maybe I can drop by next Friday after you get home from work. Good luck with your daughter." She gave me a time and then interjected, "By the way, I think there is a woman at a distance you have been thinking about. I don't think she is ever going to call you."

"What? Are you trying to go psychic on me?" I was instantly covering for myself, wanting to deny her realistic prediction.

"Uh-uh. I'm not a *vidente*, but I told you I very often know what is wrong with people—except maybe with my own child." With that exchange, we agreed to meet when the new week was finished.

Passing in the halls Wednesday, Principal Koger mentioned to me that Amelia Valles had used hall passes to ditch school. The forged passes were to visit me in the counseling office, and I was not amused. I wondered what Mirabel would say now that she had been notified of her daughter's non-attendance. As for Tommy Sanchez, he had recovered and was back at football practice with at least one cheerleader comforting him between periods.

I didn't have time to think much about Aaron Padilla or Michelle Goins, but now and then I visualized the dark eyes of Mirabel Valles in the room with the crucifix on the wall, votive candles and jars of herbs.

Though San Vicente had no more than 10,000 residents, the downtown was always bustling with traffic that gave way on weekend nights to a stream of cruising adolescents whose cars crept up and down the main drag at a snail's pace. Errands and conversations with friends at the grocery store brought me home in time for evening news from the El Paso TV channels. Cable TV afforded me a luxurious 24 channels—only three of which I ever watched.

The mundane world was jostled just after 6 p.m. when Mirabel called to say she had come home late. I said I had not eaten dinner, and she asked if I would join her. It was a welcome invitation, and I grabbed the Aaron Padilla newspaper clipping and was out the door with a mixture of anticipation and apprehension.

The sun had just disappeared beyond the western hills as I parked at the Valles address. As I approached the front door, with its blue trim, a friendly grey cat walked over from the corner of the house, tail straight up in eagerness. A neatly coiled green garden hose sat beneath the outside yard faucet to the right of the front porch, bordered by a 3-foot tall rosemary bush.

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Mirabel opened the door and the cat scooted inside, taking the shortest route to the kitchen. She turned off the TV set, and I handed her the photocopied article. “I know you don’t want to talk about it, but you made me very curious, not just about Padilla, but about your work. I’ve done a lot of reading...”

She looked toward the ceiling and shrugged, “We can talk during dinner. She gestured to the right and led the way around to the dining room where two places were set. I didn’t hear the sound of music coming from the hallway to the left, “What about Amelia?”

“Thank God for *abuelas*,” She said. “Her grandmother came up from El Paso and took her down there for the weekend. Did you know she skipped school three days this week?” Mirabel gestured to a chair next to her place at the head of the table. “Now, sit.”

I winced and my mouth twisted, but I didn’t have to say anything. She already knew.

Mirabel’s heels clicked as she went from the carpeted dining room to the tiled kitchen floor. She brought plates with meat burritos smothered in a sauce rich with pieces of chopped green chile then sprinkled with cheese. She brought in frosted pilsner glasses and cans of Mexican Tecate beer. We poured the beer, squeezed lime juice into the beer and added a dash of salt.

“To good health,” Mirabel toasted, lips pursed, unsmiling.

“And to your daughter’s future,” I added awkwardly, as Mirabel looked at me, her mascara still perfect after a day at work. The food was superior, and I realized how hungry I was. Mirabel sat in a long-sleeved blouse with her elbows on the table, the beer glass held delicately between the fingers of both

hands, the red of her fingernails contrasted with the effervescent amber inside the glass. Suddenly I realized that I was staring and felt my face flush when she turned her head to look at me.

As we finished eating, Mirabel looked at the clipping, her eyes narrowing. “That bastard. Hell is too good for him.” “So, are you willing to tell me what you know about Padilla’s disappearance? I think you know.” She held the half-full glass up to the light, looking into it. “He was left with no choice. I can’t even describe it. My mother taught me. Let’s talk about something else.” She put the glass down, lifted her fingertips to her chin and tilted her head slightly as she looked at me, unblinking.

I leaned forward, “You know some people say the cure-eran...” I stumbled and she began to smile.

“Let me try that again. What you do has been labeled witchcraft by some sources.”

“Those are Anglo sources, of course. I know you have done research, and I read books too. The *curandera* is not a *bruja*, but the *bruja* can heal while perhaps the *curandera* can curse. What’s the difference? Perhaps the Hippocratic oath? Tell me that Anglos don’t do abortions.” Mirabel was challenging me and enjoying it.

“OK, so you are not talking about basil, rosemary, and thyme, but you know things about herbs.”

“Sometimes herbs and prayers make a powerful combination. Thoughts are things, you know.” She raised her accented eyebrows. My silence was agreement and confusion at the same time.

We were interrupted by a knock at the door, and Mirabel stood, straightening her skirt. “I forgot. I need to speak with Rafaela Espinoza. I have a poultice for her skin. She has a rash on her stomach that Dr. Henderson has not been able to control. Finish eating. I’ll be right back.”

As I listened to the mixed English and Spanish from the front room, I heard Mirabel bid the Espinoza woman good-bye, saying, “Don’t forget—nuestre Padre cada noche!” I was sure it meant “our father each night.” Mirabel returned to the table as I asked, “Will it work?” “Of course.” She picked up her glass and drank the last of the beer.

“How about herbs? I told you about the book I have on witchcraft in the Southwest. Can you use herbs to hurt people? Maybe kill people?”

Mirabel took a deep breath, her chest expanding, and then she exhaled. “You know as well as I do that killing people is easier than helping them. Anyhow, there are herbs not known to botanists. My mother gave me the secret of *cachana*. It is rare and found in the foothills of the *Sierra Madre Oriental*. I don’t think botanists have described it, but some call it a witch plant. It’s not the same as the common plant of that name in the U.S.” “I thought locoweed—jimson—was a witch plant.”

“Oh, a little knowledge can be dangerous, my dear. *Datura* is one of the most dangerous plants in the world, and it is growing right under our feet.”

When I was young, I learned that every part of the jimson weed was poisonous, from the roots to the leaves, the flowers. I told her about the two girls who came to the high school one day wandering the halls aimlessly with delirious hallucinations, and when they were taken to the hospital they admitted they had made a tea from *datura* leaves. If they had not found their way to the high school in their delusory state, they might have died from the decoction.

I helped her take the dishes to the kitchen where she told me, “I use *datura* for several things. It does wonders for asthma if used correctly.”

As she talked, I was hearing a Gene Autry ballad from my youth, “...where the longhorn cattle feed on the lowly jimson weed...” Back then I had no idea what the lyrics meant. Mirabel rinsed her hands and beckoned with her finger. We went to the back door where she flipped on the back-porch light.

When we walked onto the concrete back porch, I felt a gentle but very cool breeze. Mirabel clasped her arms under her breasts and shuddered. Then I looked down and saw the *datura* bush. It was at least five feet wide and in the last stages of its cycle. The flowers were dry and brittle. I bent over and picked up a devil’s claw, the best-known artifact of the plant. It was half the size of my palm but the two hook-like prongs extended beyond my hand. I always thought it looked like the head of a goat.

“You use this?”

Mirabel just looked at me and ushered me back inside. “You have studied witchcraft, so you know about the witch’s ointment that they used to ‘fly.’ The Southwest shamans use an ointment of *datura* to have visions and to fly through the night sky. *Datura* is from the nightshade family.”

“That’s what the book says too.”

Mirabel settled on the sofa, leaning back as her blouse again tightened. I tried to make a point not to notice, but I took the opportunity to come back to the mysterious disappearance of Aaron Padilla. I was looking toward her front window, “You said Aaron Padilla committed suicide. They found only his car...” She was looking at her fingernails, “I know because the alternative was even worse.” I turned toward her as her eyes, under lowered lashes, met mine, “I don’t understand at all.” Mirabel’s voice was clipped and precise, “I didn’t see it, but my mother, Amelia’s *abuela*, avenged me back then, and it is a terrible thing.”

“You are saying your mother is a witch?”

Mirabel glared at me. “She is my mother, and I was grateful to her for ridding me of that monster. What happened to him was only justice.”

I nodded and smiled. “I like to think it was, but I wish I knew...”

Mirabel shook her head imperceptibly and said, “No you don’t. Now, you have made me curious about this book of yours.” She crossed her legs in my direction.

I was quick to explain that it was not my book, and it was published by the Northland Press in Flagstaff, Arizona. “It covers all manner of witch tradition New Mexico, Arizona, the tribal lands and south into northern Mexico. Many of the unique references are about enchanted food...”

Suddenly Mirabel uncrossed her legs, sitting bolt upright. “Would you let me read it?” “Well, sure. I can drive back to my house and get it for you. It’s still early.” Mirabel turned toward me, “That would be really nice. It’s no trouble?”

“You made a delicious dinner. I’ll be back in about 20 minutes.” I was feeling some eagerness at having her read a source book familiar to me, and she escorted me to the front door as her cat emerged from a back bedroom to lead me outside. The rapidly cooling air was bracing, and I drove the back streets to avoid being mired in the Friday night Main Street cruise.

It was something I should have expected in that it was taking me longer than I planned. At first, I couldn’t find the book within the double pile of reading material I kept by my bed. Then I was back in my car and headed toward 6th Street. On the way, I saw the unique Monte Carlo lowrider belonging to Lalo Hernandez, expensive chrome rims on 14” wheels glinting under the streetlights, as he headed for the main drag along with three other passengers. After what had happened to my tire, I saw a cunning

malevolence in that vehicle. I wondered how many times he cruised slowly past the Valles house in a night, and as I watched the vehicle, I could see his silhouette slumped down in the driver's seat, chin raised as he peered over the small diameter chain-link steering wheel, and I allowed myself to indulge a murderous fantasy.

It was now fully dark as I parked and walked down the concrete steps toward Mirabel's front door. A 30-watt bulb lit the porch and the door, and the light through the closed living room drapes was faint. I knocked and looked down to see her cat waiting alongside me.

Mirabel opened the front door and ushered us both inside the room, lit only by a single floor lamp in the corner as I sensed the smell of the green chile sauce I had tasted not long before, and it was mixed with another elusive fragrance that made my breath quicken. I had the book in my hand.

She said nothing as I stared at her in the semi-darkness. In her heels, she was nearly at my eye level, her black hair glossy as it framed her full lips and eyes rich with mascara. She was wearing a long black silk negligee. Then she opened it and she was naked as she came into my arms enfolding me in the dark wings of the robe. Her breasts were against my chest as the book fell to the floor, the taste of her lipstick sweet, the lure of her perfume overpowering.

Wordlessly she led me to the hallway and the bedroom where scented candles burned. I was dizzy with confusion, my heart pounding, my hands sliding over her generous body as she helped me undress. Dazed, I found myself overcome by frenzied desire when she took me, wrapping herself around me until I lost track of the time, wanting only to stay inside her without limits. Her moans and cries filled the silent bedroom as I thought of nothing but pleasing her.

Afterward we lay in each other's arms until I could recover enough to talk. "I thought—I mean, the book..."

"To hell with the book." She pulled me against her again and our tongues met with the subtle taste of the dinner we had shared. Something about her created a wild surge of desire I could not resist, even had I wanted to. Her full body intoxicated me, although I had told myself that I was not attracted to her. Then she was on top of me, and I welcomed her voluptuousness as well as the emptiness she made me fill.

We must have fallen asleep, because it was very late when we awakened, still entwined in each other's arms. I cleared my dry throat, "I can't remember why I came here." My chuckle was insincere.

Mirabel's breasts pushed against me. "I said I knew about people. I tell you that there is nothing wrong with you now." Her hands roamed on my body, making me gasp involuntarily. She was smiling in the candlelight.

Later she fixed glasses of cold ginger ale as I reluctantly prepared to leave. The book was still on the living room floor, and the cat sleeping peacefully on the sofa. Once again, Mirabel enveloped me in the folds of the black silk negligee, kissing me deeply. "If anything happens, can I count on you?" She whispered.

She knew the answer, even as I nodded without comprehension, my arms under her robe, pulling her warm body close to me.

When I walked outside, the air was sharp and chilled. I took a deep breath and walked up to the street. I went to my car and looked back toward where Mirabel parked her car. From the glow of a streetlight 50 yards away I saw the glint of glass. I took another deep breath and went over to her car. The rear window of the car was caved in like a crystalline crater, and I thought, "The little bastard..." as I went down the steps again, but there was no need to knock.

Mirabel was still in the doorway, and I pointed toward the street, telling her what had happened while we were lost to reality. Her lips formed a smile as though it did not matter. She shrugged, "It is nothing, and I can get it fixed tomorrow." "Can I help?"

She kissed me firmly on the lips. "Yes, you can—but not right now. I will be all right tonight." Her calm was suffused with a deadliness.

I drove back to my house in the post-midnight darkness, parking in the yard and going into the silence of my living room, dazed by the evening's events. I paced through the house and came back to the stereo. Song lyrics were coursing through my mind, and from my stack of 45 rpm records, I found the classic from seven years ago and set the needle on the spinning disc. The words played on my

churning, almost unwelcome emotions: “Nights in white satin, never reaching the end...” then, “Just what the truth is I don’t care anymore, ‘cause I love you...” I wondered how long that song would remind me of this night.

As I lay sleepless but energized, the avalanche of thought shards surrounded me: the long-ago disappearance of Aaron Padilla, the vicious enigma of Lalo Hernandez and his hold on Amelia Valles, the fear of Adele Goins after her daughter’s unfortunate miscarriage. Then there were the veiled abilities of Mirabel Valles, who was part of it all. It came to me before dawn that the words “cure” and “curse” are separated by a single letter. Too soon it was dawn.

The morning streets of San Vicente were already bustling with traffic and people, mostly unaware of the early 20th Century nature of what was an Old West community. High concrete sidewalks had been poured to make it easier for people to dismount from horse-drawn wagons, and some iron rings remained embedded in the concrete for tying up horses. I knew that inside the Palace barbershop there was still an ornate bathtub in the rear where cowboys came for a weekly bath and a shave many decades ago.

When I looked at the faux Doric pillars flanking the doors of City Hall, I felt an emotional flash, remembering Mirabel’s body against mine as I thought of her office therein. It always amused me that the city’s oldest bar was next door to City Hall, and the smell of stale beer wafted out onto the sidewalk even at 10 a.m.

I crossed the street and into the bakery that had been in business since I was a child. I bought a dozen of their unique dollar-size shortbread cookies, some of them white and some chocolate, each with a nickel-size fudge button on top. These too I remembered from my youth. One of the freedoms of a sunny morning was the fact that the night crawlers like Lalo Hernandez slept most of the day. My last stop was the San Vicente Office Supplies conveniently across the street from the bakery and three doors down from City Hall. I needed typing paper, and it was my plan to record my strange story as it unfolded. With my purchases, I walked around the corner and headed west up Broad Street that inclined upward toward the courthouse and where my car was parked.

On the sidewalk was a sheet 8 1/2x11 foolscap obviously ripped from a tablet. Without breaking stride, I bent down and scooped it up as a breeze lifted one end of it. I recognized it immediately as a page of

writing from a woman I knew as “The Scribbler.” She was an ordinary woman who wore her hair neck length and was probably in her 50s. She usually wore green slacks and a tan jacket as she walked the streets of San Vicente.

Sometimes she could engage in pleasant exchanges about the weather, but other times she walked thoughtfully, writing furiously with a pencil on the tablet she carried with her. I looked at the sheet and saw one or two recognizable words, but the rest of the page was crowded with fierce angular strokes spaced as though they were secret words urgently scrawled until the page would hold no more. Then she ripped the page off the tablet and discarded it.

I had seen the intense look on her face, her eyes concentrating on the pages, and I wondered what secrets she was disclosing that nobody would ever decipher. Often, she smoked cigarettes as she walked, the smoke wreathing dark brown hair that was streaked with light grey. Friends had told me Margaret was once a registered nurse in a Veterans Administration hospital, but now she wrote prescriptions no pharmacist could fill, and she lived in an alternative world that some called mental illness, but a century ago, she might have been labeled as one possessed. What if those pre-Freudian alienists were right? We have always known how fragile the mind can be and how susceptible it is to the influences I labeled as magic.

As I reached my car, placing the ream of typing paper on the floor, and the cookies in the passenger seat, I realized that I was smiling broadly. For some reason, I was free of the long-term longing that had obsessed me for more than a year. I was also feeling uncomfortable arousal as I entertained the image of Mirabel Valles wrapping her negligee around me. No, I was not immune to subtle influences either.

When I pulled in my dirt driveway, it was impossible to miss the black 1980 Chevrolet Malibu parked at the front gate, and I walked to the sidewalk as Mirabel emerged from the driver’s seat carrying a brown paper bag. The rear window was still unrepaired, and she was wearing jeans with silver studs on the front and back pockets that looked stylish on her generous hips, and eye-catching with black high-heel pumps. She approached me and offered me the bag. “Biscochitos—for you. Try one.”

The lard in those special New Mexico cookies was already staining the paper bag. “For me? Hey, I love those.”

“That’s even better. I put Kahlua in my recipe.” She held a cookie up to my mouth, and I took a bite, savoring the faint coffee and anise flavor mixed with the sugar. I ate the whole thing and accepted the bag, not mentioning that I had bought other cookies earlier.

Mirabel patted my cheek, and the absence of a smile did not lessen her appeal. “Could you go with me to the auto glass place. I have an errand, but I have to get this window fixed before tonight.”

“OK, I’m your guy. Let me put this stuff in the house first.” I trotted to my front door, wishing she would come inside, but she was already back in her driver’s seat. I dumped everything on my kitchen counter, and then banged my elbow on the kitchen door frame in my haste to get back outside.

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I backed out of my driveway and followed Mirabel’s Malibu downtown. With losers like Lalo Hernandez abroad, auto glass companies will always thrive. I remained puzzled why Mirabel did not show more outrage to the vandalism of the night before.

Custom Glass on College Avenue was bustling when Mirabel pulled into the bay. I parked on the street and walked into the small waiting area, surprised to see quarterback Tommy Sanchez behind the counter. Of course—his father owned the business, and his son worked at the useful skill of replacing broken glass, from plate glass to auto windshields. When Mirabel entered the waiting room, Tommy grinned and they hugged each other, with Mirabel patting him on the back as though he were her son.

Sanchez shook my hand and called me “sir,” to befit his upbringing. I remembered the first time a young person called me “sir,” because I realized at that moment that my youth was gone. I was only 24 at that time. With Tommy Sanchez at work on Mirabel’s car window, I knew the work would be accomplished quickly.

Mirabel and I walked out to my car, and I opened the door so that she could slide into the passenger seat. I then got behind the wheel and asked her where we were going.

“Go around to Broadway up Arizona Street onto the hill. I want to spend a few minutes with Hermina Sandoval.” She held up a small packet. “Hermina is an aunt of my husband. She has cancer, and I can help her.”

“What is in the packet?” I was curious.

“Verbena. She will drink it as tea. It will fortify the liver and fight the cancer.”

“Is the herb that strong?” My natural skepticism toward herbal remedies was emerging.

The herb is the carrier. The doctors at the clinic did not offer anything, but I know I can help her.” She did not offer to say what rituals might have gone into the herbs inside what appeared to be a plastic sandwich bag.

We headed south up Arizona Street where the paving was marred by small potholes and crumbling borders. I stopped in front of a modest adobe house with a sagging wire fence and relatively new black-painted ornamental iron gate. A dog was barking in the bare front yard with its 30-foot spruce tree standing sentry inside the gate. I would wait in the car.

Before she got out, Mirabel looked through the windshield, her face inscrutable, “do you have a gun?” I snorted as I voiced the old cliché, “In San Vicente, guns are like freckles. Everybody’s got at least one. Why do you ask?”

Mirabel gave me a dismissive wave of her left hand, then she placed it firmly on my thigh, her red nails gripping me. I felt the heat through my jeans. The gate squeaked, and I watched the glitter from the moving back pockets of her jeans as she walked to the front door of the Sandoval home, and then I shut off the engine and opened the driver’s side window. The day was brilliant, with light cirrus clouds in a turquoise sky, the quiet broken only by the occasional barking of San Vicente’s dogs and an occasional vehicle going to and from Saturday errands. Smoke coiled from a black metal chimney across the street carrying the fragrance of juniper and mesquite. Down the hill, I could see the town’s business district.

In the 15 minutes or so that I waited, I wondered if Lalo Hernandez had friends in this neighborhood, and I thought again about the mystery surrounding the disappearance of Aaron Padilla 20 years ago. An incestuous town holds its secrets very close, and I sometimes felt I was on the outside peering into an intricate genetic network that did not welcome me, even though I spent most of my life here.

When Mirabel got back into the car, she was silent as I made a U-turn and went back down the hill to the Broadway intersection. Turning west onto Broadway, we passed the Rainbow Café with its single window and painted tricolor logo arcing over the entrance that was reputed to be a place to find a drug connection. Two young men were leaning against the wall of the café, and one of the them was Lalo Hernandez. I looked in his direction as we passed, and he pointed at me with his finger, thumb raised as

he sighted along it. I could feel his hostility and decided it was a good thing that I did have a .45 automatic. I resolved at that moment to start keeping it as close to me as my own San Vicente secret.

Over a hill and down to College Street we found Mirabel's vehicle parked on the street with a new back window. I wanted talk but Mirabel seemed eager to get on with her Saturday. She put her hand on my thigh again before swinging out and walking around to the driver's side of her Malibu as I watched. She didn't look back or wave.

I went back to my house, ate several rich *biscochitos*, and typed four career narratives based on tests given the previous week. One of them was for Michelle Goins who took the battery at the insistence of her friend Amelia Valles. The test showed her aptitude for working with children. The fear described by her mother was another issue that remained a mystery to me.

As the afternoon lengthened, I took time to field strip and clean my pistol as I sat on the sofa... When it was re-assembled, I listened to the satisfying "snap" as a loaded magazine was inserted into the butt. Then I turned on the TV to catch any old movie that the cable company could provide. My thoughts turned to the relationship of herbs to healing. I wondered if prayers and conjurations affected the flow of reality.

I must have drifted off to the alpha waves from the 24" luminous screen because I was jolted awake by a tapping on the front door, and late afternoon light was light grey through the windows. I shook my face awake and went to the door.

Mirabel was the last person I expected to see, but I motioned her into my front room. "My daughter will be home tomorrow evening, and I want you to have dinner with me again tonight. Without preamble, she put her arms around me and I felt dizzy as her lips sought mine. Was it the taste of the cookies or her lipstick that was arousing me?

"Come with me. Besides, I wanted to see your gun." Her eyes were dancing, but she did not smile.

"You have already seen my gun, but you haven't seen my pistol..." I embraced her and kissed her again, holding her close so that I could feel her breasts against my chest. She responded without hesitation, and I could feel a genuine eagerness. This time, a faint smile lifted her full lips when she stepped back.

I retrieved the .45 and shoved it into my jeans pocket before following her out the door.

She drove to 6th Street, and this time my hand was on her thigh as she leaned against the driver's side door half looking at the streets and half looking at me through long, dark lashes. At her house, we walked to the front door, her arm around my waist and mine a little lower on her as her heels clicked on the front walk. Her cat was waiting patiently at the front door and probably expected immediate food service. He missed his guess.

Inside, we went directly to the bedroom and took each other hungrily, our clothes strewn on the floor. It was almost dark when we paused. She was lying on her stomach in the darkness of the bedroom, one arm across my chest. The bedside clock radio was the only light, and its numbers advertised a luminous green "6:47." Waves of well-being seemed to wash over me, and I wanted to stay here. My voice seemed very loud in the silent afterglow of our passion. "Mirabel," I paused. "Did you learn everything from you mother?" "That is the way it always has been. Magic is not learned from books. The herbs must talk to you." She turned on her side, her hair down in her face. "How does it work? Why does it work?" I was staring at the ceiling, my heartbeat still elevated.

"The herbs must be given life, and all food should be blessed. The herbs are alive and the prayers turn them into medicine. They reach into the patient and find the good within them. I believe most people are good. Of course, there are some who have no good inside them." Her dark eyes were on me and my first thought was of Aaron Padilla and Lalo Hernandez. I was going to ask more, but her lips were too close, and I wanted her too much.

Finally, we lay quietly, our bodies damp, our breathing the only sound, until...

It was a metallic rattle from the front room, and we both started. Mirabel gasped and whispered, "The front door."

There was a rock in the pit of my stomach, but I reacted, rolling off the bed onto the floor. I found my discarded jeans and pulled the .45 from the pocket. All I heard from Mirabel was "Go," as I scrambled to my bare feet and walked in darkness to the front of the house. Wavering light from the candles in Mirabel's shrine room to my right dimly described the metal crucifix on its east wall but little else. The front door was opening, and a figure was silhouetted in the gap. The first thought flashing into my mind was that Lalo Hernandez was invading the Valles home. Blood was pounding in my temples and my throat was as dry as the Namib desert while terror washed over me.

With my thumb, I pulled back the hammer of the .45 and it was the loudest sound in the room. The figure coming through the door went flat against the jamb, uttering a pitiful wailing sound. Beneath a bulky sweatshirt with hood was an obviously terrified female who was entering Mirabel's home.

Suddenly I felt ridiculous, standing in my underwear in a woman's living room with a pistol in my hand, while the female I was confronting was obviously unarmed and was now starting to weep.

"I...I...have to get it back." The woman wrapped her arms around herself for security. As the hood fell back, I recognized Adele Goins, with her short hair and a face showing extreme tension, even though it was veiled by the night.

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I backed up as Michelle's mother sidled into the room, her back against the wall. "Mrs. Goins, I don't understand. What are you looking for?" I could feel the heat of embarrassment replacing the fear I had just experienced. I could already hear the stories that would race through town when this lady got back to a telephone"

Adele Goins choked off a sob and extended her hand, "Tell her I will do anything, but I can't live this way." I was, of course, speechless, because I had no idea what she meant. I just stood there in the dark, staring at the distraught woman, remembering what Principal Koger had said about her. Then I heard the click of Mirabel's heels and could feel her enter the room. She did not turn on a lamp, and the faint glow from the shrine candles lent an eerie definition to the characters in this set piece.

"Michelle gave you something, didn't she? I know it." Adele Goins voice was supplicating, not accusatory.

"Did you see something?" Mirabel's voice was flat and cold. I glanced toward her and could see that she was wearing that midnight negligee and seemed a vengeful female spirit as she crossed her arms.

Adele nodded her head fiercely. "It's so awful. It will not let me sleep. My husband doesn't see anything, and I can't wake him when it comes into the room." "You were going to call the police and have me arrested. You told me that when you called me at my office in City Hall." Adele went from nodding to shaking her head. "No, no, I never did. I was just so angry. She is my daughter."

"She is better off now." The voice behind me was implacable. Adele's voice cracked with emotion.

"Michelle gave you something, didn't she?" Mirabel said nothing, and I felt myself in the presence of a praeternatural event.

“Nothing like this ever happened to me. I think I may be losing my mind. That’s why I’m here, and I know you could have me arrested.”

Mirabel’s voice was slow and measured. “You have learned much, and if you apologize, you can be blessed for it.” “Mrs. Valles, I am so sorry. I don’t want to die.”

Mirabel walked past me into the room with the candles, her negligee floating eerily in the dimness. Another candle was lit, and I could see Mirabel with her back to me, arms spread, intoning softly with words I could scarcely discern, “Santa Maria, nuestra madre, escucha mi oración...perdonar” I caught the word “pardon,” and I could see the haunted eyes of Adele Goins staring into the darkness. The front door stood open and cold air was uncomfortable on my exposed skin.

Then, so slowly, Mirabel came walking back to the living room. She was carrying a 5”x7” inch color photograph that I could tell, even in the candlelight, was of a younger Adele Goins, and I could see a dedication and signature. A narrow black ribbon had been wrapped three times around the width of the picture, and suspended from the ribbon was what appeared to be a locket. It was obvious that Adele’s daughter had purloined these personal items at Mirabel’s request. It seemed ominous.

Eager almost to desperation, Adele Goins took the photograph and its attachments and clutched the package to her chest, her eyes fixed on Mirabel Valles. Mirabel’s look was imperious. “You were not here tonight. You may go in peace.” She lifted her right hand and made the sign with two fingers, reciting: “*In nomine patre, filius, et spiritus sanctus—amen.*” I felt an almost-electrical charge pass through the room and heard Adele Goins exhale in a sigh. No other words were spoken, and Adele Goins scuttled from the house, departing from Mirabel’s life.

We stood alone in the darkened living room. Mirabel looked at the front door, “She is not a bad woman, but she understands very little.” As for myself, I was suddenly aware that I was cold and almost naked.

As suddenly as turning off a switch, Mirabel changed the subject. “It is too late to cook, and I know somebody working at Pizza Hut who will deliver—the son of my husband’s brother-in-law. She went to the phone as I thought that San Vicente is indeed an incestuous town. We then dressed and waited for the pizza to be delivered.

It was close to midnight when we sat on the sofa. With the taste of pepperoni in my mouth I asked, “What did she see, Mirabel? Was it some kind of demon?”

She looked at me with a slice of pizza delicately held and poised for a bite, and she shrugged, “I don’t know. My mother said we cannot know these things. We only know they exist, just outside of our normal vision.” I glanced down at the coffee table and saw the *Witchcraft in the Southwest* with a bookmark protruding from its pages.

I took a swallow of Pepsi and picked up another slice of pizza. “I wonder if Aaron Padilla saw something years ago.” “That was very different. What happened to that woman is nothing in comparison to what visited Padilla.” She was looking toward the front window as she spoke, speaking as from a great distance. “It still waits.”

It was 2 a.m. in San Vicente, and Mirabel drove me back to my house. I watched her taillights disappear down the street and stood in my disreputable front yard. I could smell wood smoke drifting over the town and see the glow from the downtown district where the stream of Saturday night cruisers was winnowing to its inevitable end. In less than two hours, Main Street would be empty. I wondered if Lalo Hernandez was out there, nursing his sullen attitude. Then I went into the silence of my messy house and threw myself onto my unmade bed, careful to unload and place the pistol on the nightstand. I did not wake up until high noon on Sunday.

There were still four *biscochitos* in the bag on the kitchen counter, a brown paper sack now thoroughly saturated with lard residue, and I wolfed them down with a glass of milk, all the while thinking of my strong and unusual attraction for Mirabel and feeling disappointed that Amelia would be back with her mother before the day was done.

With the sun overhead, what I had witnessed the night before seemed more and more surreal—the weeping and distraught mother of a girl who had conveniently miscarried—the prayers or incantations of an exotic woman in a negligee to release the mother from a spell—the effectiveness of a folk healer in the middle of a modern Southwestern town. Could medicine and magic have the same roots? I began to doubt the normal world I had believed in. What if the apparent normalcy of San Vicente was an illusion. It was possible that under every street, under the basements of brick and stucco houses ran a swollen underground river running down, down, into an oily black sea beneath the earth.

As the day progressed, I wondered if Mirabel would seek her mother's counsel after Amelia's return to the Valles home. It was obvious that not even magic could intervene when a rebellious child defied her mother. I wondered if it was the tragic loss of the father exacerbating the hostility Amelia had developed toward her mother so quickly after the year of her *quinceañera*.

The weekend gave way to a busy work week. Several times I saw Amelia and her friend Michelle Goins in the SVHS hallways. I gave Michelle the narrative I had worked out from her aptitude tests, and was relieved that she did not seem to look at me with any kind of suspicion, but I kept going back to the Saturday night confrontation and wondered if Adele Goins could keep the secret. My other memories of Saturday night brought me far more excitement.

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By Thursday, I could not help but notice Michelle was alone in the halls, and I had not heard from Mirabel. I was intensely curious, but it was not my situation. The other side of me suggested that I was just avoiding the insoluble conflict between mother and daughter. I had learned long ago that the outsider was always a stranger when involved with the family of another. Blood is the only destiny. Perhaps Mirabel would call.

I had been running late Thursday morning and did not read *The Daily Enterprise* when it landed in my yard, but I picked it up when I returned from the day at the high school. I removed the rubber band and opened the newspaper while still standing inside the front gate. Below the fold on the front page was a story that suddenly made me feel weak with apprehension.

Rock cleft in forest yields grisly find for hikers at Cherry Creek

by Marcia Kinnear

SAN VICENTE—Unidentified human remains were recovered in the Gila National Forest Sunday morning by hikers in the general vicinity of the Cherry Creek camping area.

Grant County Sheriff Leslie Goforth announced the discovery Tuesday and said the bones and personal items were turned over to the FBI to be processed by their laboratory at Quantico, Va.

While few details were released, Goforth said in an interview that the skeletal remains were of a male and had been exposed to the elements for at least two decades. He said that personal items recovered at the scene indicate an identity that is being withheld until next of kin can be notified.

Along with fragments of clothing and jewelry, authorities recovered a rusting .38-caliber Police Positive revolver. The weapon was loaded and one chamber had been discharged.

One of the GCSO deputies was interviewed Wednesday who said he was at the scene and observed that the skull found appeared to have an entrance bullet hole in the right side of the cranium as well as an enlarged exit hole on the left side.

If the story was accurate, there were only three people who knew what it could mean. I could still hear the words Mirabel used to describe the hidden finish to Padilla's life, and I hastened into the house to find the Xeroxed Nov. 5, 1962 article. I sat at my desk, looking at my typewriter and comparing two newspaper articles separated by decades, making a connection that would probably dawn on the rest of San Vicente very much later. My desk chair was an old straight-back piece with a slightly padded red leatherette seat, and it wobbled with age despite the glue I had used to extend its life. It did not do to be too comfortable when writing, but I could still tip it backward when I was contemplating. I wondered if Mirabel had seen the paper. I had to ask her.

After a makeshift dinner of local tamales and beans, I began to type a narrative that described Aaron Padilla, a young Mirabel, and I sensed a floating horror that moved in the juniper smoke over San Vicente. It was more than my imagination, but it defied proof. In the background, the TV was broadcasting a re-run of "Hawaii-5-0" and I did not have to watch because most of the episodes were familiar to me. On the cluttered desk was a 1980 copy of *The Roswell Incident*, about an unquestionably factual flying saucer crash and recovery in 1947. An open bottle of Pepsi was beside the desk lamp, and for some reason I craved another biscochito that could still almost taste. The metallic clatter in the rhythm of my typing was comforting, and I was making good progress as the evening progressed. By the TV, I could tell that it was 9 p.m.

There was no knock at the door. Mirabel stormed in, surrounded by fury. I'm sure I just sat and stared open-mouthed as she stood there, still dressed for work, except that her sleeveless carmine silk blouse was untucked at the waist on one side, falling over the waistband of her tight black skirt. She had a black purse over her shoulder. Then I stood up as she lifted her manicured hands to her face, the little scorpion on her left arm flexing its tail.

"She is defying me, the little..." Mirabel stopped before adding a name to describe her daughter's rebellion. I stood, hands at my side, waiting for her to explain as her face contorted with emotion known to thousands of parents in thousands of towns in America. I wondered, idly, why she could not use her secret power to bring Amelia to her senses.

I ushered her to the couch and offered her the inadequate soft drink refreshment I had in the refrigerator. When I brought her a glass, she put it close to her face as the carbonation sparkled over the ice in the glass. When she did drink, she left a generous trace of lipstick on the rim of the glass. “If my husband were still alive, this would not happen.” Her voice was sepulchral, and she was looking at the front door as she spoke. “I found a note when I got home from City Hall this evening. Amelia has gone to live with...” Her hands were in front of her, vibrating in frustration. “—him.”

I did not ask “who.” Mirabel’s anger was almost frightening to me. She did not seem to be a wielder of inner powers. She was just a mother whose love for her child clouded her every thought right now. I asked her, “Do you know where she is?”

“Remember, anybody with a utilities connection...” She clenched her fists and her body compressed as waves of anger and concern assailed her. “She wrote that she had taken most of her things and that HE would take her to school every day.” Mirabel threw her arms into the air and turned to face me. “He is evil. He does not deserve to live.” The words were icy and spoken like an incantation. She picked up the glass of soda and took a long drink.

“If I can help, you know I will.” When I said it, I thought the words were banal, but Mirabel just looked toward the front door and nodded solemnly, lips pursed. I could only imagine the deep convictions seething in her heart. I knew she was not a woman who forgave.

“Some things are meant to be. Amelia left a crumpled note from Hernandez. He scribbled it in his own hand.” She reached into her purse and pulled out a wadded piece of note paper as though it was a trophy.

My mouth was dry, and I swallowed noisily, still unnerved by her unanticipated visit. Earlier, I had wanted to ask her about the newspaper article, but now I had forgotten it. She put the glass on the coffee table, pushing aside a pile of magazines. She turned to me and began unbuttoned the silk blouse. As she looked at me, I found myself inflamed with irresistible desire as she reached over to me and took my head in her hands, her tongue pushing my mouth open as she kissed me. I don’t remember how she helped me undress, but I pushed her dress over her generous hips and we took each other fiercely. I felt her red nails digging into my back, her legs hooked around my own. Her moans drowned

out the irrelevant noise of the TV set, and it was a long time before I was too exhausted to continue. Mirabel had a depth of passion I had not experienced before, but perhaps it was the Scorpio in her or the reservoir of suppressed rage.

It was growing late, and my breathing was still labored. “Aaron Padilla...I have to ask you...”
“What about him? I already told you.” Her tone was curt, and she obviously had not seen the newspaper. I struggled to my feet, almost tripping over my pants lying in a heap on the floor and went over to the desk, bringing the Thursday edition over to her.

She read the article as though I were not in the room. Her face betrayed a look that took her to another time, but her lips were almost smiling. When she was done, she threw the newspaper on the coffee table and leaned back against the couch cushions, breathing deeply. She seemed to consider the subject closed.

This time I sat close to her and put my arm around her shoulders. “I thought about this, and I want to know how you could have known...”

Suddenly, Mirabel put her arms around me, her face against my chest. I could feel hot, silent tears on my skin. Her body was shaking with emotion, and we sat like that for at least five minutes.

“The women of our family pass the magic from one generation to the next. When that *cabron*—Aaron—raped me, I had nobody but my mother. She avenged me. Oh, he was so arrogant, and he had his chief of police father making sure he would never be arrested.” “But that doesn’t explain...”

Mirabel put two fingers on my lips. “Yes, it does. My mother was known to everyone in San Vicente. Some even feared her. Even though I was badly hurt, my mother made nice with the Padillas. She taught me to pretend that I liked him and one evening invited him to our house for dinner. Afterward, she gave him a package of burritos to take with him. He was so arrogant, bursting with pride. I was not the only girl he hurt.”

It was obvious what she was leading up to, but I wanted her to tell me everything. “My mother prepared the sacred herbs and said the words of the ritual, and she made me repeat the words as we prayed together in the candlelight before the food was prepared. I knew only that he would never bother me again. He vanished a week later.”

“...And they found his car in the forest. There was blood...but you were not there.”

“Something was there, and it was too horrible for him to bear. He had only one escape.” Mirabel leaned back and pulled my head to her breasts. The smell of her perfume was intoxicating me again. “And you knew, even though you weren’t...” “Yes, and that story in today’s paper is not news to me.”

Mirabel kissed me, stood up with her purse and went to the bathroom to adjust her clothes and her makeup. I heard the sound of the toilet flushing and then she came out, ready to leave for home. She kissed me on the mouth and said, “You could do a better job cleaning that bathroom, *mi amor*.” I was suddenly reminded of the burden that came with finding myself in what women called a “relationship.” I put on my pants, and I accompanied her to the door in my bare feet. “How about Amelia?” She paused, “I don’t know. She is my daughter, and I love her beyond reason. Hernandez has an apartment on Cooper Street—a duplex out past the courthouse and near the cemetery. My husband may be dead, but I can count on you.”

Although I saw her as ultimately formidable, I knew she was right, and I walked with her down the sidewalk to her Malibu parked on the street with its new rear window. The concrete of the sidewalk was cold on my unprotected soles. I went around and opened the driver’s side door for her. She slid in and reached out to clasp my hand before going back to Sixth Street. I watched the taillights disappear. I was hopelessly entangled in a drama that could not end well. It was only when I went back to the house that I realized I had stepped on a painful goat-head sticker—that pernicious plant pest of the Southwest. It probably had some herbal purpose of which I was ignorant.

The next day, Friday, I was relieved to see Amelia in the hall with Michelle Goins. Her beauty was only slightly dimmed. Her hair was slightly tousled and her face seemed pale. Perhaps there was a new normalcy setting in until Mirabel could talk sense to her. The authorities would not be called to the Valles home, and Lalo Hernandez would pick up Amelia after school.

I did not hear from Mirabel on the weekend, and I spent some time writing my narrative about the Padilla case. I learned that former San Vicente Chief of Police Reynosa “Ryan” Padilla was retired at his elaborate home outside of town in a development called Ridge Estates. Many had speculated about how a policeman could afford a four bedroom, three bath home with an in-ground heated swimming pool and an 8-foot stucco wall with iron gates surrounding the property. But then San Vicente is an incestuous town, and it does not pay to ask too many questions.

For a day or two I toyed with the idea of calling Chief Padilla, but a newspaper reporter took care of that task in my stead. Monday's newspaper story began, "Authorities confirmed on the weekend that the skeletal remains found in the Gila National Forest last week were identified through dental records as belonging to 19-year-old Aaron Padilla who disappeared in 1962. No other details were released, but an interview with his father..."

The rest was predictable boilerplate of parental grief and sympathy for a "fine young man" whose life was cut short. The world as presented in mass media was too often at odds with the gritty pockmarked reality of human life.

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In my reading and my reflection, I began to think of about the mechanisms of magic as discussed by Simmons in his enigmatic book about witchcraft in the Southwest, as well as those classic tomes and grimoires of more remote times. I had read of the Mexican witches living in Vera Cruz, and the evil women of Ixtmal.

And what of demons? The pale yellow light in my very ordinary living room told me what my parents had said: Demons do not exist. Yet I had learned better. The question was not whether they existed, but how they entered the world of humans. I had come to see them, not as manifestations of a tortured imagination but rather invisible beings shambling in the darkness of a dimension close to ours and waiting to be called forth by substances and rituals. They were present in mental disease, but I did not like to think of them as being able to take on physical substance. Our religions have spent millennia building barriers to keep the demons away from us, and yet...and yet...did some of Mirabel's prayers invoke something other than the saints and the Holy Mother? As I prepared for bed, I realized I could not be objective, because I felt the magic she exerted on me.

I lay awake realizing that the tortured images of Hieronymus Bosch were perhaps not imaginings. What if he had intentionally invoked the images he painted? Even now, the misshapen hordes of demonic entities clawed at the barriers, seeking entrance into the world of naïve humans. Perhaps this was the hidden meaning of The Key of Solomon, and the goal of ceremonial magic. While Solomon controlled the demons who built his temple, what hope had the rest of us in the presence of a horde of hideousness beyond our capacity to visualize?

As another hour passed, I stared at the ceiling thinking about the mystery surrounding the death of Aaron Padilla. What had stalked Padilla in 1962 and had driven him on a wild ride into the forest? He must have been convulsed with terror to flee his vehicle in the dark, running, stumbling, and then jamming himself into a crevice in one of the cliffs. Then he blew his brains out. I still could not explain the presence of blood found on the driver's seat and the steering wheel. Was the newspaper story of that time in error?

Then I fell asleep to wake for another long week. Mirabel did call me on Tuesday to say that her mother was coming to stay with her for a few days while the crisis with Amelia was all she could think about. I felt immediate disappointment, realizing that I wanted to see her, but she needed to talk with me about her daughter. She used clipped phrases, "I am so angry. The girl cannot even cook. She is as helpless as a kitten. I prepared her a tray of rolled enchiladas. She does not even know how to cook beans properly. *Cabron* waited for her in his ugly car. To think I am feeding both of them." She launched into curse words while I dutifully listened, wanting almost desperately to get her to come to my house. I said nothing.

And I dreamed on that Tuesday night in a manner alien to my experience. I saw the infantile scrawl of Lalo Hernandez on a crumpled sheet of paper. the string of words lifted off the paper in a long black thread, woven within Mirabel's fingers like a cat's cradle as her invocations were offered before the candlelit crucifix in her sanctuary, her floor-length sheer negligee hanging open. I asked her what the words meant, but she only stared at me meaningfully and turned back to her altar. Then, suddenly, I was in the forest, kneeling under a rock crag and holding a grinning, dirt-encrusted skull with two ragged holes in it. I was overcome with terror because its jaw opened to speak—and then I woke up with a start, my heart pounding. In the silence of my bedroom I clearly heard Mirabel's heels clicking on the parquet flooring in my living room, and I did not sleep for the remainder of the night.

The rest of the week found me occupied at work. On Thursday, Principal Koger mentioned to me that Adele Goins had called him to apologize for being so distraught in her previous meeting with him. He shook his head, grinning. "San Vicente—gotta love this town." I also saw Tommy Sanchez in his letterman's sweater, talking to two of the cheer squad, and I thought him better off where he was now.

All else was ordinary in a town where I couldn't buy a green light in traffic and where nobody used their turn signals. I remembered asking a long-time resident why he didn't signal, and he shrugged. "Hey, *Ese*, everybody knows where I live." End of conversation.

Mirabel phoned me late Friday afternoon and said she was calling me from her office. "*Querido*, I'm sorry I haven't seen you, but you know my mother is here right now. We are making some preparations. My mother doesn't like Anglos very much, and you know that Hispanics do not want their daughters to have anything to do with Anglo men." "Yeah, it was one of my major frustrations in high school." I chuckled at the truism, but my mind was stuck on the word "preparations."

"It won't be long. I find I still have to cook for my useless daughter. She says that her boyfriend is not feeling well. She wanted me to make menudo for him—she won't eat it herself, but she knows I only make it on Fridays."

As usual, my emotions oscillated between desire and apprehension. "I hope Amelia comes to her senses." There was a pause on the other end as I heard her talking to a co-worker, then back to me: "I will be with you soon. I can count on you?" "I meant what I said, but I don't know what you are thinking..."

Mirabel ended the conversation abruptly. "I will call you." It made little sense to me that she would continue to help her daughter after the girl ran away and should have been arrested and brought back home. That she would actually provide food for the abductor who had certainly smashed her car window and seduced Amelia made no sense to me.

Coincidence is the rarest of circumstance, and I long ago ceased to believe that events and encounters can be written off as "coincidence." Because life is intentional, human activity necessarily affects events in a large or small manner. Magic was once defined as the art of causing change in accord with will, and history is replete with events writ large that show how powerful will can even affect the world. I had read much and accepted that magical operations must necessarily be accompanied by unusual events that alter the normal flow of day-to-day events.

For the next few days, I became aware of "coincidences," and I scribbled some notes that still sit on my desk at home. I saw Adele Goins three times in as many days—once coming out of The Model Shop, the fashionable clothing store for married women on Broadway; then again at the grocery store where

our carts passed in the canned vegetables aisle as she avoided my eyes; and for the third time at the Shell station where I was refueling as she pulled into the bay.

That was not the end of it. Every day I saw the Lalo Hernandez lowrider somewhere in town, always with young Amelia in tow as they pursued their private lovers' errands. On Thursday I found myself at a stoplight with Hernandez next to me. I glanced across and was surprised to see Amelia driving, looking ridiculous as she hunched over the 12" diameter chrome-plated chain link custom steering wheel. Hernandez was slumped in the passenger seat, head lowered, an unlit cigarette drooping in his mouth. Amelia stared straight ahead, waiting for the always-overdue green light.

And I saw Tommy Sanchez in town at least twice, not counting his presence in the SVHS hallways. He was friendly and respectful as usual. Of course, there was a logical reason for these encounters, because all is coincidence, I am told.

The only person I didn't see during the week was Mirabel, but I was not about to walk into City Hall to remedy that. I admitted to myself that I wanted to see her more than anyone else I could think of. She telephoned me briefly Thursday evening to say that Amelia still had not returned home but had called to say that her boyfriend had taken sick and wasn't getting better. Mirabel then told me that Amelia had come to pick up a special dish that might help Lalo because her daughter knew that she cured so many of San Vicente's own. Mirabel's tone of voice was difficult to assess, but I sensed a discordant undertone. She rang off hurriedly after I heard another female voice in the background.

Friday at the high school included a pep rally 6th period in the gymnasium as the final game of the season loomed. I stood with Principal Koger at the north end as hundreds of students created a cacophony of cheers. I wondered how many hundreds of high schools across the nation were going through the same eternal rituals. The prospects for the evening were not promising as most of my friends were married and Friday evenings in San Vicente were for family nights at the local restaurants, and husbands dressed formally with shirts that buttoned.

That evening, sitting on the sofas and changing channels every five seconds, I decided that frozen TV dinners were aptly named, but I did not want to reduce myself to watching the new television channel MTV, even though I could not resist watching the video version of "Gimme All Your Lovin." I

promised myself to finish my short narrative of the Aaron Padilla mystery, but it always brought me back to Mirabel. Then the phone rang, startling me.

For some reason, I let it ring four times before picking up. I had learned that when the phone rings, it usually is bad news or somebody wanting money. It was Mirabel, and she wanted far more than money. She was compelling, “You said I could count on you. I need you to go get my daughter. You know where she is? You have a gun.” “I know where she is, but why not the cops?” “This is San Vicente. I cannot even tell them.”

I did not question her reasoning, and I felt a peculiar emotion akin to loyalty, but perhaps it was just normal lust. “I’m going now.” “Please hurry, *Querido*. I know what I’m saying.”

Next, I jacked the slide on the .45 and shoved it into my Levi’s pocket. I was wearing a long-sleeved blue denim work shirt, and it would have to do. I grabbed my 6-volt flashlight, tested it and left the lights on as I rushed out the door to find a blast of cold air and stinging drizzle. I trotted to the light blue Volkswagen Rabbit and put the flashlight on the seat. My senses ramped up as I smelled the rich ozone smell of electrical discharge in the air. It was good weather for high school football but not much else.

The engine turned over with the first burst of the starter. I hit the headlight switch and almost cursed because the windshield was a mix of dotted rainwater and the film of dust. When I turned the windshield wipers on, the dried blades protested and smeared the glass. No time to fix that.

I slammed the transmission into reverse and rocketed out of the drive, spinning the wheel, then shoving it into first as I headed for the main drag. The rain was dampening the traffic, but it was still early, not even 9 p.m. I turned west onto Broadway and sped up the wide street toward the courthouse, not stopping before turning left onto Cooper Street. I was able to see out of the windshield just barely, but as the drizzle increased, the spitting sprinkle washed the dust away.

When I swung into the dirt area in front of the duplex, I shut off the engine and vaulted out of the car. I didn’t see the lowrider Monte Carlo. Lights were on in one of the apartments, the front door standing open. I approached slowly, almost casually. I did not regret carrying a weapon, knowing what I did of Hernandez and his drive-by history. I knocked on the open door but got no answer. The TV inside was

blaring, and it was tuned to MTV, and I heard Pat Benatar, “Why don’t you hit me with your best shot...”

I burst into the room, the .45 in my hand. The ceiling light illuminated every corner and my nostrils were assailed with the stench of tobacco smoke and the sickly sweet smell of marijuana. A low table was littered with empty beer cans and a half-full fifth of vodka. A large ashtray was piled high with butts, and cast-off clothing was draped on the black leather sofa that displayed two rips in the seat cushion. The only item that did not fit was a half-full glass of milk. I picked it up and saw the trace of pink lipstick on the rim.

A pair of high heel shoes and a carry-on size beige leather handbag lay on their sides beside the sofa, and a pan with half-eaten burritos sat where people had been watching TV. To my left was the kitchen, lit by fluorescent ceiling fixtures. Nothing there, but the sink was piled with dishes and a half dozen glasses lined the counter. I looked into the refrigerator but there was nothing but a blue cardboard carton that had contained 18 cans of beer. The linoleum floor was grimy.

I went back to the living room and two doors: one to the bathroom, and one to the bedroom. I looked into the bedroom to see there was a second entrance to the bathroom. The bedroom was a mess of tangled sheets and...a splotch of blood.

In the bathroom, the sink was littered with cosmetics and lotions. The smell of feces told me the toilet had backed up, and I did not have to look. On the tank top I saw three used pencil-diameter syringes, and in the sink, was a Johnson&Johnson empty package for a gauze bandage.

Back in the living room, I paused. They had been there, perhaps within the past half hour, and I tried to think where they would be. I looked down at the front door sill and I my breath caught in my throat. It was blood. Had that evil bastard hurt or killed Amelia? Time was now my enemy.

I took a chance. If they had left within the past 10 minutes or so I would have seen them driving down Broadway from Cooper. In the other direction, the street led past the cemeteries and to U.S. Highway 90 heading south. That was the direction they had taken.

For some reason, I grabbed the handbag and stuffed the shoes into it before running to my car. Outside, I felt the denim shirt tight on my shoulders as the cold rain spatter darkened the denim. I had to be right, and I stabbed the accelerator, making the front wheels spew gravel as I aimed for the paved road. Behind me the apartment door stood open, a yellow rectangle of light getting smaller as I went from first to second, to third gear, my headlights lancing ahead, searching.

It was only a mile farther that I hit the brakes as I saw the glint of chrome rims on a parked car at the entrance to the Catholic Cemetery. As I pulled to a stop off the pavement, I could see that the distinctive lowrider was not parked—it was wrecked, listing slightly to starboard where it collided with one of the 8-foot tall white-painted brick gate posts, with its 5-foot broad frontage. The car had struck with some force without damaging the gate, but the nose of the vehicle was bashed in and slightly raised, the passenger door hanging open. The dirt entrance lane showed a cruel grooved scar on the gravel where the driver had slammed on the brakes and swung into collision with the closed entrance. Could I be too late?

I killed the ignition and climbed out of my car 50 feet from the Monte Carlo, with a flashlight in one hand, the cocked .45 in the other. The moment I opened my car door I heard piercing screams as I tried to control my panic, my heart thudding against my ribs.

That 50 feet seemed as far as a mile as I advanced in a crouch, pistol extended. The first thing the flashlight showed was the girl in the passenger seat. Her arms were flailing, and her voice was a shrieking wail, a combination of terror and despondency in an endless night. It was the scream of a lost soul, and I was now her lifeline.

I approached the open car door, my car headlights shining through the cold drizzle, projecting my shadow onto the car. I could see my breath, and I could feel the cold rain soaking my denim shirt. I shouted, “Out of the car, Amelia. Get out now!” She just sat there, her hands shaking furiously in front of her face, while her screams came in waves.

I got close to the car door when I heard another sound. It was a low howling sound. It must be Hernandez, and perhaps he was injured when his car hit the cemetery gatepost.

In the beam of the flashlight I could see blood on Amelia’s jeans, and then I pointed the beam deeper into the passenger compartment. Dear God! The steering wheel was wet with blood and a red smear

was emblazoned on the inside of the windshield. My light went to Hernandez's face; his head was thrown back, his gaping mouth in a twisted "O" shape. From deep in his chest came the grisly howling sound. Then I saw IT as the flashlight descended to the man's midsection.

Amelia now covered her face with both hands, but her screams never stopped. What I saw then can never be erased from my memory. The horror of it will stay with me for the rest of my life. Amelia! Get out of that car! I don't know if I actually said it or thought it, but I was transfixed on the thing that was Lalo Hernandez, his black eyes sightless, his mouth yawning with that unearthly howling sound. That was when I saw the chrome-plated .25-caliber pocket pistol in his hand. He was raising the gun!

At the same time, I raised the .45, following the flashlight's beam. My pistol was cocked, and I was filled with revulsion and terror, wanting to extinguish whatever life I saw in that caricature of man. I never pulled the trigger.

Before I could squeeze off my first round, Lalo Hernandez abruptly turned the gun and jammed the chrome plated muzzle into the roof of his mouth, blowing a hole in his brain. Even then the funereal howling did not stop.

The odor from inside the car was indescribable—that of the slaughterhouse and worse. There was a smell of putrefaction, and I dropped the flashlight to the ground, reaching into the car with my left hand and grabbing the forearm of the unresponsive teenager. I shouted her name and yanked with all my strength. I felt my gorge rise, vomit sour in my throat.

I pulled her from the car while she stumbled as though having no strength in her legs. I threw her to the blackened gravel of the parking area, and she rolled onto her face in the wet grime. Now I backed away from the wrecked car, retrieving the wet flashlight from the ground.

When I pointed the flash beam into the Monte Carlo for the last time, I saw the form in the driver's seat wracked with spasms, the unearthly noise hollow and hellish. It could not be, but the pistol was still inside Hernandez's mouth. The howling was issuing from...

Suddenly I was vomiting, retching until only sour bile dripped from my mouth. The sounds from that car, the indescribable foulness of the odor, and what I was witnessing became too much for me to withstand.

I heard a soft moan from Amelia and was once more aware of the near-freezing rain on my face and shirt. I shoved the 45 in my right jeans pocket and wiped my mouth. I put the flashlight on the ground and went to the teenager who was still sprawled, motionless, on the wet ground. I lifted her gently and half-carried her to my car where I dumped her into the passenger seat before going back for the flashlight.

When I returned to the car, I could still hear the daemonic noise from the wrecked Monte Carlo, and I got into my driver's seat, slammed the door, and punched the accelerator, spewing wet gravel and needing to be anywhere but sitting at this gate to the netherworld. I pointed my car back into town. I would take Amelia to my house before doing anything else. I avoided Main Street because the post-game cruising parade would be in full swing.

I pulled in my drive and helped Amelia out of the car before grabbing the beige handbag. She was whimpering and unsteady. I noticed for the first time that her feet were bare. I half-carried her through my front door and placed her on my sofa. The lights were still on, and the cluttered living room seemed too normal for what we had been through.

Her clothes were soaked and spattered with blood, but I did not think it proper to undress her. She was shaking from the cold, and I went to my bedroom and retrieved a heavy wool blanket that I almost smothered her with. I got a towel from the bathroom and knelt down to wrap her bare and dirty feet. Despite the trauma, her toenails were still showing careful pink nail polish. For the first time, in the light of my living room, I could see that Amelia's right cheek sustained an ugly abrasion from my rough handling getting her out of the Monte Carlo. She still seemed oblivious to her surroundings as she hugged herself and cried softly.

My next move was to the telephone. I dialed Mirabel's number, and she answered on the first ring. "Mirabel, come get your daughter." She just said, "Ten minutes."

Not knowing what else to do, I went to the kitchen and poured milk into a sauce pan, adding powdered chocolate milk mix and turning on the front burner of the stove. In a few minutes, I was pouring the steaming cocoa into a large mug and taking it to the living room, where I wrapped Amelia's hands around the warm cup and guided it to her dry, pale lips. She had that objectionable odor of a woman who uses perfume that does not quite mask the acrid smell of cigarettes. She opened her eyes, and I saw for the first time that the pupils were pinpoints, the pale green of her irises no longer luminous. That slimy son-of-a-bitch had lured her into drugs during that short time he had power over her. It was a triumph of vengeance to know that Lalo Hernandez was dead or even worse than dead.

Ten minutes later, Mirabel walked in without knocking. Wearing a tracksuit and running shoes, she looked at me briefly and went to the sofa, sitting down and taking her daughter into her arms, "*Mija, mija,*" Mirabel murmured as she rocked her little girl whose tangled hair and pale face transformed the teenager into a child.

"Do you know what to do now?" I caught Mirabel's attention and she replied with a slight nod, closing her eyes. I handed her Amelia's handbag with the shoes sticking out, and she removed the towel and slid the shoes onto her daughter's feet.

They stood up and Mirabel asked if she could borrow the blanket, keeping it wrapped around the girl's wet clothes. I tossed my hand toward the door to affirm my agreement. I wanted to tell her about the horror at the cemetery, but she did not seem at all curious. I followed them out of my house to the front gate. The drizzle had stopped, and the air was tinged with frost. The cold penetrated my wet shirt.

After putting Amelia into the passenger seat of the Malibu, Maribel went to the driver's side and her lips formed a silent "thank you," and lifted her hand to suggest she would call me. I wondered what was planned when she got back to Sixth Street.

Back inside my house, I had to wash the sour taste from my mouth as I tried to calm myself. Sleep evaded me again, and every time I dozed, I found myself looking inside that wrecked car looking at something too horrible to describe.

The next week I heard nothing from Mirabel, and the story about the wreck at the cemetery did not make sense. Yes, they found the car, but there was a phrase about a "charred body" that could not be

right, unless somebody set the car on fire. I never learned what happened after I took Amelia away from the horror. My conflicting emotions about Mirabel found me longing for her and feeling an undercurrent of dread as well.

When I finally got a call from Mirabel, she told me that a much-chastened Amelia was back in school full time, stripped of the evil habits Hernandez has introduced to her. Amelia was still experiencing nightmares, but she remembered less about that November night than I did. She no longer defied her mother, and I noticed her in the halls having regained much of her previous fair skin and lustrous hair. It may have been my imagination but she did not seem to behave as frivolously as she did before. Mirabel said she invited Tommy Sanchez to have dinner with them one evening. Everything seemed to revolve around the mysteries of food, and I had a craving for Mirabel's *biscochitos*.

Then, in the late November night, I sat bolt upright in bed, finding myself at the cemetery. My flashlight painted the slack form of Lalo Hernandez leaning back, his mouth open as he jammed the little .25-caliber auto pistol into the roof of his mouth and shot himself to escape the indescribable, and I saw the demon for myself, though the word is inadequate.

The author of the book had spoken of a creature gnawing inside the stomach of the accursed, but he was loathe to describe the fulfilment of it. Aaron Padilla had died alone in the forest, driven to madness and suicide by the thing inside him that was gnawing its way out, leaving his blood inside his car before he ran screaming into the forest night and killed himself to stop the agony and the terror.

Twenty years later, Lalo Hernandez fought the demon that grew inside his stomach, with Amelia Valles as the witness. As she screamed, I saw the thing burst from his belly, spraying blood onto the windshield and onto his passenger.

It was a horror beyond description. Hernandez's peritoneum was rent asunder, the skin ripped and organs extruded. The thing—the thing I saw was an oily black blob wrapped in Hernandez's intestines. It throbbed and pulsed like a growing black liver, shiny with a viscous excrescence and a second protrusion growing from the first blackness. That second abomination opened its mouth to reveal glistening razor-sharp teeth that gnashed and chewed, even though Hernandez was already dead. The blasphemous mouth in the sightless lump spewed blood and organ fragments as it destroyed its host's

torso. It was undulating, expanding as it answered the curse that called it from its nighted dimension beyond our reality.

As I pulled Amelia Valles from that car and retreated in horror, I could still see the glossy black unnameable thing, swollen and growing as it consumed its human host. My nostrils were choked with a smell so noisome and sickening that I vomited in my revulsion. And, as I picked up the supine Amelia to get her away from the charnel evil, I heard the low-pitched howling and knew it didn't come from Hernandez. That blasphemy was coming from the faceless mouth as it called to the cosmic chaos from whence it came in a voice that no human could replicate. As I relived that dark moment, a phrase entered my mind: "and corruption shall return unto corruption." I could not remember where it was written.

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With the coming of Thanksgiving week, I had begun to regain my sleep habits, though the nightmare came occasionally when I was sure it had been exorcised. Now it was the night before Thanksgiving, and I lay down heavy with fatigue with only a bedside lamp burning. I heard the front door open, but I did not reach for the .45 on the nightstand. I heard her heels clicking on the parquet floor. She had brought my blanket, and she threw it onto the bed as she shrugged out of her coat and let it drop to the floor, revealing something silken and clinging underneath. My blood was racing when I felt the press of her soft warm flesh against me under the covers. All else evaporated inside my mind as I felt her power to cure.

And now, a special preview of an upcoming story, Yellow Flowers, page 32...
COMING SOON in 2021...

Yellow Flowers

The twilight was split with a BOOM, as Carmody's .45 single action revolver bucked in his hand, and a 225-grain flat nosed lead slug slammed into the center of Parrish's chest. Parrish did fire the .30-30 Winchester, the bullet making a tiny volcano in the dirt as he staggered back against the hood of his truck, already dying as he slumped, one arm on the truck bumper and the rifle still gripped in a dead right hand.

Even as he told me the story, Hickson seemed fixed on Parrish's sightless eyes staring into the growing darkness around him and in him, but his memory was more shaken by something else before he ran to his boss and took control of the revolver Carmody was still pointing in Parrish's direction.

Hickson's description was like a photograph in my mind. "Mirella was standing against the bar's dark wood outer wall planking, her tight black dress almost indistinguishable from the wood, but her smooth shoulders and legs pale by contrast. Her face was expressionless in its cold beauty, lowered eyelids masking her expression. I remember that her lips were slightly open and her perfect hands, one covering the other, were on her lower stomach. Hair piled like midnight on top of her head as she stood against the wall, she had eyes only for her man. I swear that her lips were forming a smile. That woman was so damned beautiful as she leaned against the wall. Like nothin' had happened. She scared me down deep, more than Parrish lying there dead in the dirt."

Hickson said the rest of the evening was blurred to him. It took almost an hour before the black patrol car of the New Mexico State Police came screaming up the highway from Truth or Consequences, and the Sierra County Sheriff's office was even slower. The flashing red lights splashed a pulsating ruddy tint to the faces of dozens of Hillsboro residents who had assembled on the roadside and the sidewalk. Sheriff's deputies photographed the scene before an ambulance arrived to load Parrish's body. "The cops interviewed Carmody, Mirella, and me, but they didn't even take Carmody's Colt. Finally, when the cops finished, Mirella wrapped her bare arms around Carmody, and I heard her say, 'You will always be mine,' and they got into the Eldorado without another word. I don't even remember going home that night, but I do remember how Parrish's truck sat in front of the bar for days after, gathering a coating of dust."

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(Illustration by Graham Kennedy)