

After Matters

The cat hadn't bothered with Fidencio in almost eight years and Letty didn't notice what Gabs had done until she managed to maneuver into bed. And, even then, not right away.

Before bed, Letty lit the Virgin Mary candle on her altar, touched the blue crystal to her lips, and eased down to her knees to say her prayers in Spanish. These days she mostly spoke in English, as there were more *gringos* than ever living on the border. Letty didn't mind so much; they were, for the most part, *respetuoso*. Even the newcomers learned to say *Gracias*, and most of the Winter Texans mastered *De nada* as well. Letty's Spanish was reserved for private times, or when the English version of a conversation would only serve to confuse *gringos* who couldn't understand the old ways. Some of the old ways held tight in this high-tech world; not merely because they were traditions, but because they were powerful, *mágico*.

The *Mal de ojo*. Letty had been an eyewitness to that curse since childhood, far more times than she could recall. She knew if the spell was caught soon after being inflicted, simple human touch could evaporate it like a trail of smoke from a candle. But if the curse lingered long enough to set its roots, snaking into its victim, a *curandero* would be summoned to oust the

malice. With words mumbled so low they hummed, the *curandero* would pass a raw egg over the body of the afflicted person, and the egg would absorb the negative energy. That same night, the *curandero* would tuck the egg and a cross made of straw under the poor soul's pillow. In the morning, he would crack the egg and peer into it like a psychic's crystal ball. Then the *curandero* would know if his exorcism was successful.

This magic had not worked with Fidencio, not on the diabetes or the gangrene. But neither had the *gringo's* medicine worked. The death certificate indicated sepsis had killed him—her poor husband with no feet. Letty knew this conclusion was only half the truth, but the *gringos* didn't want to know about the reality of his death—about what she had done.

Tonight, Letty's knees hurt as she prayed at the altar Fidencio had built for her over 50 years ago. Chunks of missing wood marred the legs where her husband had begun to carve flowers. He had stopped this adornment after coming to Letty for bandaging and then announced decorative woodworking was a waste of valuable time.

Suficiente Bueno.

Whenever Fito said this, Letty knew he was finished with the task at hand. She didn't mind the rustic look of the incomplete altar, but she hated that it was too tall, leaving

her staring at its edge rather than the Virgin when she knelt to pray. Many times, she had asked Fito to shorten it, but his reply was always the same, *Manana*. So many tomorrows. And at last, *Suficiente Bueno*.

Letty finished praying the rosary on her throbbing knees, *Ahora y en la hora de nuestra muerte. Amen*. Then she let Jesus know of her suffering in English because Jesus looked like a *gringo* to Letty. She was glad Our Lady of Guadalupe wasn't so *blanco*. That was the version of Mary which hung in a gold frame behind her altar, surrounded by the cerulean blue wall, reminding Letty of heaven.

"Oh, my poor, poor knees. My aching back! Jesus, deliver me from my pain."

But Jesus didn't whisper back to her that night, as he sometimes did—as he had that night with Fito eight years ago, advising her how to end his suffering. But tonight, without a heavenly response, Letty conceded her pain was yet meant to be, still a part of God's plan for her. She would ask for a miracle again tomorrow.

Letty held onto the altar and rose to her feet, leading with the good knee, which wasn't so good. She was thirsty from all the praying but didn't dare drink a drop after 7 p.m., or she would be up and down all night. Worse, she might not make it

to the toilet. That would be unbearably shameful. Even the thought of this flushed her face.

At last, Letty sat on the bed and carefully positioned her glasses on the nightstand in case she needed to reach for them in the dark. She turned off the lamp before swinging her swollen legs onto the sinking mattress, using a loud groan to fuel this last major muscle movement of the day. As she lay her head on the pillow, she wished *Buenas Noches* to Fidencio, to whom she always spoke in Spanish.

Fito had protested when Letty studied English soon after they were married. He claimed to speak only Spanish out of loyalty to his ancestors, but Letty suspected parts of his brain didn't work well enough to grasp a second language. She attributed this to his near drowning as a baby in his mother's knapsack. His mother had crossed at Progreso, keeping sight of the bridge. Since the *Rio Grande* was low that year, she needed to swim only a short distance while clutching her Styrofoam float. As Fito told the story, over and over again, his mother was carrying so much on her back she didn't feel his sack come undone. When she reached the riverbank, she turned to see the drifting baby bundle. Dropping her things, Fito's mother rushed back to save him. Poor Fidencio was floating face-down. It was

then the angels carried him back to shore and breathed life into him. Letty wondered if the angels were fellow crossers or border patrol, but she never dared to question the identity, or legal status, of the angels.

Tonight, Letty reached for Fito, as she did each evening. He wasn't where he should be. Instead, she put her hand into a substance the consistency of partially mortared corn. Her first thought was that she had spilled the talc, but she couldn't remember using it anytime recently. The second thought slammed into her, and she bolted up to a sit. Fidencio had been spilled!

"Oh, my Lord, Jesus, no!"

After his death and cremation, Fidencio had not rested even a night in the brass companion urn engraved with both their names. Letty needed him close to her and had emptied the cremains into an over-sized Ziploc bag and squeezed out the air. To give him a softer place to rest, she wrapped him into a dish towel, and lay him on the pillow next to her own. Letty had intended to make him a better resting pouch, with a zipper to secure him in place. She had gone to the fabric store, even picked out a quilted material printed with angels, baby blue

with yellow-gold halos. But while she stood in line for the clerk to cut the fabric, Fito's voice had crept into her head.

¿Por qué estás perdiendo el tiempo en tonterías?

She didn't know why he thought it was nonsense. Perhaps he was contented resting in a plastic bag. As she contemplated, he spoke again.

¿no tienes nada mejor que hacer?

Of course, she had better things to do. There was the gardening, and she hadn't done her dishes since the Meals-on-Wheels woman had brought her food last Friday. Letty could never remember that dear woman's name, so she used an acronym and called her Mow. Three days of dishes waited in the sink covered with a dishcloth to discourage bugs.

Her husband interrupted again. *¿Qué hay de la obra de Dios?*

Letty had tried God's work. For years, she had collected food for Our Lady of Perpetual Sorrow's pantry, and each Christmas she picked a family's name from the holy tree and shopped for presents. When school supplies went on sale, she filled a shopping cart with donations for needy school children. Somehow it had all fallen out of her hands after Fito died, and Letty had grown tired of God's work. Besides, Fito hadn't been a particularly religious man; he accompanied her to church only on

Christmas. Never on a Sunday. So, Letty wondered why he brought God into the matter of sewing a fitting resting pouch. But she let it be, let him rest for eight years wrapped up in the dish towel.

Sitting upright in her bed, Letty's heart throbbed in her chest. How could Fito have come undone?

She scrambled for her glasses, but in her angst knocked them to the floor. The lamp listed as she reached for it in the dark, but Letty clutched onto the base with both her shaking hands and finally, shed some light on the situation.

Letty prayed as she retrieved her glasses and eased them onto her face, "Help me, sweet baby Jesus."

There was Fito, all ground up, padded into the sheets, dusting the pillowcase. Gabby lay stretched out, neck extended, rolling softly into the ashes while playing with shredded bits of plastic bag, her head making a pillow of the dish towel. Letty's breathing became audible and she waited for chest pains to commence, praying loudly for her salvation between gasps for air.

"Dios te salve, Maria. Llena eres de gracia."

Letty's heart raced, but not sufficiently to remove her from this predicament. Her heart slowed. Letty was thirsty, but she didn't dare get a drink. Should she call the kids? How could she explain sleeping with their father's ashes which should have been in a place of honor on the mantle he built from a mesquite tree?

She and Fito had planted that mesquite tree, and it had sprawled its twisted branches across the yard, its tiny leaves dropping like confetti when the scorching summer released its relentless grip. In time, the borers had gotten to the tree, eaten into the branches until they dried up and crashed to the earth one by one.

When Fito passed, Letty had made their children promise to mix her ashes with his before planting them both in the garden. It had been Fito's garden, not her's. He had selected the vegetables and herbs, and directed their planting, but held her to the upkeep. Fito had not felt the earth in his fingers or coaxed out weeds or smelled the steaming earth after a long-awaited rain. After he died, Letty planted only catnip and cilantro, which didn't take much tending. For a few years, the tomatoes came, having reseeded themselves, but she didn't much care for tomatoes and left them for the birds.

Letty surveyed the desperate situation. The cat was covered in her husband, as were the sheets. Letty hadn't been making her bed, so the *serape*, bunched up at her feet, had been spared. She needed to save as much of Fidencio as possible. The bedclothes could be rolled up, but she wasn't sure how to detangle her husband from Gabby. Brushing the cat seemed the best option, and she hobbled into the bathroom for the brush. At the sight of it, the cat leapt from the bed, dust poofing into the air like tortilla flour. After several minutes of cautious pursuit—here kitty, here kitty—Gabby scampered out of the cat door.

That part of Fito was gone.

Letty collapsed into her husband's La-Z-Boy. She was in his lap, and he wrapped his arms around her. He whispered she was a good woman. *Muy Buena*. He had said that to her on birthdays and mother's days, and sometimes New Year's Eve after tamales, beer, and fireworks. Letty dozed in her husband's embrace, her breathing shallow and heart rate decelerating. It was the next morning when the phone in the pocket of her fire-red and gold embroidered nightdress buzzed loudly. Fito melted, and the chair grew large around her. She had missed the call from her daughter in LA, the girl her husband would frequently proclaim had made something of herself.

Y nos envía dinero. No nos olvida.

Maria hadn't always been his favorite, but when his son disappointed him, Fito made a show of exalting his daughter and disparaging Jose. At those times, Letty felt compelled to defend her Jose, but she knew better. Fito was looking for a fight that wouldn't end unless she surrendered and agreed (without conviction) that Jose was of no use.

Fito prohibited Maria from phone conversations with her son who, just before graduating from high school, had fled to Guatemala to escape incarceration, flush the drugs, clear his head, and find his path. Jose hadn't intended become a volcano guide for American tourists, donning an accent that wasn't his. And he hadn't intended to stay on and on. He remained even after Fito became ill, even after the construction business, built from nothing, had to be sold well under-market. With no family to run the family business, Fito lost his legacy.

Letty knew her daughter would call back. She moved to the living room where she could admire the picture of Maria in her graduation gown as they talked.

Letty placed the phone on her lap and waited.

Maria's love was organized, practical, and prompt. She called Letty every day on her lunch break; asked what her mother was doing, what she had eaten, and what she planned to eat for dinner. As much as Letty found this part of the conversation tedious, she loved what came next. When it was Maria's turn to tell, she would talk about work. Litigation, arbitration, defamation, habeas corpus. Letty kept a growing vocabulary list on the side table. She didn't care so much what it all meant; what she loved was hearing the energy and passion in her daughter's voice. Letty picked up the buzzing phone.

"You okay Mamá? You didn't answer, and I got worried."

"Yes, *mija*. I only was asleep."

Without waiting for Maria's interrogation, Letty reported she had huevos rancheros for breakfast and planned to make chicken flautas for supper. But neither was true. How could she eat with Fito scattered about the house? Maybe toast later and Marie Calendar for dinner. Salisbury Steak or Fettuccini Alfredo. She hadn't decided.

"But tell me of your day, *Mija*."

"*Mamá*, the judge was hysterical this morning. She threw some guy out of the courtroom for smacking his gum too loud! Told him to chew his cud in the field with the cows. Then the

judge said it was the most disgusting habit on earth. I could have peed my pants *Mamá*."

Letty laughed with Maria, but her heart ached with longing. She didn't dare ask Maria to come home and help with the mess Gabby had created, but she missed her daughter.

"Are you sure you're okay *Mamá*?"

"Just missing your *Papá* today."

After the call, Letty rolled the sheets tightly together, bound them with kitchen twine, and placed them in a plastic trash bag. She tied the ends while squeezing out the air and put the bag into her most beautiful flowered pillowcase. Letty remade her bed, laid the Fito pillow next to her own and climbed in next to her husband. The cat joined Letty in the bed and repeatedly flopped on top of Fito, liking the muffled crunch of the plastic bag beneath before kneading it into her resting place.

"Oh Gabby, what trouble you have made for us."

Letty gently massaged the cat's forehead with her fingertips, and the cat purred music into Letty's dreams of her husband. But it was the angry man dreams that came to Letty that night. Fito was red in the face, teetering on his stumps,

shaking his finger and accusing her of desecrating his remains. Worse yet, he shouted at Letty about her unkept promise.

;No hiciste lo que prometiste!

When she woke, Letty tried to explain she couldn't have kept that promise; it was a mortal sin. But she knew Fito would never let her rest in peace.

Because Gabby had scattered tiny bone fragments and dust particles everywhere in the house, Letty couldn't bring herself to vacuum or mop. She knew the AC was circulating Fito, knew she was breathing in tiny particles of him. And Letty couldn't be sure if it was ordinary dust, or Fito, in the spaces between the floorboards, so she didn't sweep either. She walked softly around the old house in her socks and didn't wash them. Instead, Letty put them in a wicker basket under her altar with as much reverence as she could give worn socks.

In another three weeks, Letty was out of socks. When she shopped for them at the dollar store, she also purchased a zippered pillowcase and put it under the one with the purple flowers. After the shredding incident, Letty didn't trust Gabby and wondered why, after so many years, the cat had attacked Fito.

Gabby and Fito had gotten along well when she was a kitten, but after a year, Gabby began to hiss at him and run from him. This change in her behavior came immediately after Fito told Letty the cat broke her leg falling from the mesquite tree. He had wrapped Gabby's leg between two halves of a paint stick, *Los animales mejoran o no* - because didn't believe in doctors for pets. When Letty noticed the claw marks etched into the backs of Fito's hands, she prepared a calendula salve for them both. Each night she circled the blue healing crystal over Gabby's body until the cat could no longer be caught. At least, she thought, the shiny stone worked well on animals. Fito wasn't convinced the crystal could cure anything, but he wouldn't risk offending it, so about that, he stayed quiet.

After the doctors took his feet, Fito didn't believe in doctors for people either. Finally, he allowed the hospice nurses into the house to check his vitals and change the sheets, but he wouldn't see a doctor. His moaning increased in volume whenever the nurses were present, and they gave him the sympathy he desired. Letty was grateful as her own empathic responses had diminished considerably, despite her efforts to emulate the Blessed Mother.

The nurses also left comfort kits, which included liquid morphine, morphine suppositories, and medications for nausea and

constipation, but Fito didn't want the *gringo's* medication. Still, he told Letty to collect the kits in case he someday couldn't manage the pain on his own. This was one of the few times Letty deceived her husband. When Fito would be out of his head with stomach pain, she made strong herbal tea, which took away his suffering and helped him sleep. He was used to her bitter teas and tinctures, the Bricklebush, Eucalyptus, and Malabar, which were supposed to cure his diabetes, but hadn't.

Then came the night Jesus told her what to do. As she did each night, Letty had served Fito tea and his pain had abated. She watched him grow relaxed and tired and waited for his eyes to close. But that night he called her to his side, telling Letty to bring the chair and sit next to the bed. She brought her crucifix as well and rubbed the dying Christ as Fito spoke.

Quiero que camines al cielo conmigo.

He told her they should be together, that she should walk with him to heaven. Letty agreed, *Sí*. Someday she would. Letty could see the tea was making him drowsy because the ever-present creases between his eyes softened. His eyes grew glassy but remained open and fixed.

La morfina de los kits, ¿dónde está? His voice was suddenly urgent.

Letty told Fito she had saved the morphine as he wished, but in reality, she had only saved the suppositories. The herbal tea had been mixed with the liquid morphine each night. Fito told her he was tired of the pain and was ready to die. She nodded as he continued.

Moriremos juntos, como Romeo y Julieta.

This time Letty didn't say *Sí*. How could he ask her to die with him, to hasten his death and take her own life? Had the sickness deranged his mind? Perhaps she had been giving him too much morphine.

Letty shook her head. *No Fito, no es posible. Dios no...*

He did not let her finish, did not give her time to explain that God would not permit suicide, and she would go to hell if she took his life or her own. Fito tried to raise his voice, but instead set off a raspy coughing episode. Letty trembled as he continued to speak through sputtering, hacking, and gagging, telling Letty they should die together, demanding she promise to drink the morphine with him.

Prometeme! Tu propósito es estar conmigo.

Letty felt his barbed words piercing her tired heart. Did Fidencio really believe she had no purpose on earth outside of

caring for him? She dropped the cross onto her lap and reached for Fito, but he pushed her hands away and grunted.

There were so many times she had reluctantly acquiesced to her husband's wishes. She had obeyed when he told her school was a stupid waste of time, when he said she could not go to Mexico to visit relatives, could not buy clothes she wanted, and could not have friends over. And even when he told her to work as a cleaning lady for the *gringos* after Jose and Maria had left home. Still, Letty knew he was a good man. Fito had never hit her. He had provided for his children, and she had a beautiful home. Her life was good.

With her hand covering her mouth, she promised to walk with Fito to heaven. *Sí prometo.*

That night Letty heard from her savior while kneeling at her alter. Jesus had whispered, in English, it was time to help Fito out of his pain. Letty understood and made the sign of the cross in acknowledgement, touching her head, then her chest, her left shoulder, then her right. At the kitchen sink, Letty soaked and steeped the suppositories, adding Bricklebush tea leaves. Then she poured the hot mix into a mason jar and placed it outside for the morning sun to cook. Early the next evening, she strained the liquid through cheesecloth, poured it into a Talavera pitcher, and sweetened it with honey.

When Fito told Letty it was time for them to go to God because his pain was unbearable, she brought two cups of tea and sat beside him in the chair. She promised they would walk to heaven together. As they drank, Letty prayed the rosary, moving a bead with her thumb for each recited Hail Mary and Our Father. Fito went to heaven alone that night, but Letty held his hand until his dying breath and finished praying the rosary.

Te amo, mi esposo. Then she apologized for her falsehood and vowed to join him when it was God's plan for her. It wasn't her time. She hoped he would understand this now that he was with Jesus.

The night the chest pains came, Letty lay her head on Fidencio in the pillow and wrapped her silver-beaded rosary around her hand. She prayed until her heart imploded, "*Voy a venir Fito.*" Her body vomited bile onto the pillow and she peed her bed, but she didn't know these things. Gabby moved to sleep above Letty's head and play with her hair.

It was Mow, the Meals-on-Wheels lady, who discovered Letty the next morning. She had found many of the expired elderly in her dozen-plus years as a volunteer. These days she didn't rush

to make the 9-1-1 call. She checked for a pulse, but it wasn't necessary. Mow recognized death. She bowed her head and prayed the Our Father. Then Mow looked for a memento. She knew the family wouldn't give her a thought, wouldn't recognize she had been a comforting presence for years. Mow wouldn't take anything valuable; she never did. She wasn't a thief and only sought a remembrance, a token and reminder. She thought about unwinding the rosary from Letty's hand but went instead to the altar.

The blue crystal lay at the feet of the Virgin Mary statue. Mow slipped it into her pocket. It would look beautiful on her altar, and she would pray for Letty's soul every night, like she did the others. She was attending to death's after matter.

Moe called 9-1-1, filled the cat's bowls and let herself out of the house to sit on the porch and wait for the ambulance.

Flying in from Guatemala, Jose arrived home just before Maria. Together, Maria and Jose found the companion urn on the mantle and, as it was empty, wondered where their father's ashes were stored. Because the house was very dusty, and bedroom smelled horrid, Maria hired a cleaning service. She would leave three days later, immediately following her mother's memorial.

Jose stayed and promised to oversee the reckoning, although he thought about lingering a while longer. After retrieving his mother's ashes from the crematorium, Jose carefully poured them

into the engraved urn. He had scoured the house for his father's ashes, but with no success.

The remains of Fidencio's cremains had, unfortunately, found their way to the county dump, still in the plastic bag with the rolled sheets zippered in a cloth bag, and topped with the pillowcase of purple flowers covered in dried bile. But that was not all of him. When the cat left the house covered in Fito, she went to the garden and rolled in the catnip Letty had planted. Which is exactly where Letty was scattered by Jose as he said his prayers—in Spanish.