

“Prologue”

One Lenten morning, with the wind chill in the low twenties, day old newspapers and empty white trash bags swirl in the courtyard of Nuestra Señora del Sagrado Corazón church in Colonia Azteca in Ciudad Juárez. Inside the church, Father Guillermo Cruz is woken by loud pounding on the sacristy door. Then he hears yelling: “¡Padre Cruz! ¡Padre Cruz!” As he rouses from sleep, he knows this is not the usual call of his parishioners, eager for him to open the door, to be let in to the warm, out of the wind, and have him begin services. As he gets up, he shudders. It is the cold of the tile as he steps barefoot, but it is something else too. He rubs his hands over his forearms and feels the goose bumps.

He throws on a robe, moves through the dimly lighted church, and opens the church’s front door, where he is confronted by Lupita Valenzuela, her hands pointing and waving. She is crying.

“¿Qué pasa Lupita?” Father Cruz asks. When her hands pause, he can see them tremble; he takes her hands and quiets them.

“¡Ramiro! ¡Mi hijo! ¡Ramiro!” is all she can say; she breaks free her hands and cries again.

He stands still at the door, not yet fully awake. She reaches inside the doorframe, grabs him by the hand, and pulls him outside, toward the side of the church. As they near the side courtyard, Father Cruz can hear praying, crying, “Madre de Dios” over and over. As he turns the corner, in the gathering dawn he sees women, many wearing shawls or wrapped in their modest and threadbare coats. It is chilly and windy, as usual in Juárez for the Lenten season. The cold wind comes off the Juárez mountains to the

north of the city, and Colonia Azteca feels the brunt of the wind. The colonia is located at the foot of the mountains, El Cerro Bola right above, below the sign on the mountain that says “La Biblia es la verdad,” which his own parishioners painted ten years ago, under the cover of darkness, with only kerosene fueled torches for light.

His eyes scan the courtyard: it is now just past daybreak, the sun slowly rising, creating the long shadow of the big Nuestra Señora del Sagrado Corazón cross. Padre Cruz feels Lupita’s hand grip lessen; she looks ahead and almost faints and one of the women comes up to hold her and sits her down on the church steps, where Lupita sits and cries still.

Father Cruz shields his eyes from the rising sun; his eyes go to the cross, and they follow the shadow of the cross back toward the church doors. This is when he sees the bloodied head lolling on the cement steps near the entrance, almost at his feet, near the church door.

“How could I have I missed this?” he thinks. It is now that he recognizes the faint metallic smell of blood in the air. The smell has been there all this time, and even in the cold and wind, there is the faint buzzing of flies.

Now he steps back, catches his breath, makes the sign of the cross, and he too mutters “Dios mío.”

Lupita is on her knees now and starts to move and Padre Cruz’s eyes widen as she shuffles over on her knees, bends down, picks up the bruised and bloodied head and, before almost fainting again, sits down and cradles it in her lap. In the silence of the moment, Father Cruz hears her crying mingling with the wind. For some reason he thinks of la llorona.

Father Guillermo turns away from the scene and it is then he sees what his sleepy eyes missed earlier.

Ramiro's body is dispersed, by macabre design, along the central path of the courtyard, along the shadow the cross and the sun have made, the body distributed in such a way as if Ramiro had fallen apart, body part by body part, as he made his way to the church door, as if if he could only reach the church door, perhaps go inside, he would be fine; he would be safe, remain in one piece.

The head is at the door, cradled by Lupita; the legless armless dirty boxer short clad torso behind it a few yards; then one arm close by, the other further behind – both wrists with bruises and cuts and what look like remnants of electrical wire, hands attached dangling barely to the arms; then the footless and torso-less legs farther back, and finally both feet, with their bloodied white tennis shoes still on, at the steps leading into the courtyard, as if in the process of taking their final steps, before the body fell apart.

Father Cruz has seen firsthand much of the escalating level of violence over the last five years in Juárez, but now he only shakes his head, one hand covering his mouth; for a second, he is frozen in place. Then he does the only thing he knows how to do.

He turns, walks back into the church, collects his bottle of holy water, and goes back out.

He starts with the feet in retracing the path of the body's dispersion; as he does so, some of the women start to follow him, "Madre de Dios" an accompanying litany as he walks from body part to body part, obscene stations of the cross. He blesses Ramiro's

feet with holy water; the legs are next, then he bends over the torso and traces the sign of the cross on Ramiro's chest. At each step he shoos flies away.

He sprinkles both of Ramiro's arms with holy water, picks them up and gives them to Lupita, who embraces her son's arm in her arms. She moans softly, "Ramiro, Ramiro." One of Ramiro's eyes is open; it stares out at the scene and looks unblinkingly at the rest of its own body dispersed in the courtyard.

The priest bends down and blesses Ramiro's head, making the sign of the cross on the bloodied forehead. He closes the eye, touches Lupita tenderly on the shoulder; she grabs his hand and caresses it.

Between jags of crying, she says "Gracias Padre" and his eyes well up but he does not cry. He says to Lupita and Ramiro both "Dios los bendiga." One of the women goes forward and covers Lupita's head with her long shawl; the shawl also covers Ramiro's head. At this sight, tears run down his cheeks. He wipes them with his robe.

He gathers himself, heads inside to make what he knows will be a futile call to the police. By this time, the sun having risen further in the early morning sky, the shadow of the cross is gone. The Juárez wind blows, trash and dust swirling, mixing with the soft whimpering of Lupita, the faint smell of blood, the buzz of flies, mumbled prayers.

## Epilogue

It is Sunday morning at Nuestra Señora del Sagrado Corazón. Padre Cruz sits behind the altar as the congregation fills the church. He sees Lupita as she sits in front, her usual place since her son's death. In the front pew to the right he sees his old friend, la Güerita, her black veil topping off her black dress. Her son Benito sits next to her, with Elizabeth, here on their Sunday visit from El Paso. Between them is Marisol, holding each of their hands. She is Elizabeth's daughter and they have adopted her. Padre Cruz officiated her first communion.

Padre Cruz rises, walks in front of the altar and says, "The last few years have been terrible ones for everyone, for Juárez. I know your suffering. I see it in your faces. But I also see hope and love in your faces. That, and the love of God, will sustain us all."

Then he walks behind the altar. "Demos gracias a Dios," he says.

"Gracias a Dios," everyone responds.

"Let the Mass begin."

That night, Benito dreams he is on the downtown bridge, on the El Paso side. Kathy walks toward him from the Juárez side. She is wearing what used to be a white dress, but it is now torn and old and splotched and splattered with crimson and brown and gray. But he sees her face and hair and hands are clean and she is smiling. They meet in the middle of the bridge and hold hands, facing each other. She touches his face. Her hands are warm. She says, "The bad violence is past, but the effects are in you, and you cannot go back. Not now. You love the border, but even more you love Juárez. Juárez will be there when you are ready."

Then he wakes up.

