

BECOMING LA LLORONA

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Grandma Lola's land in El Guache, New Mexico was chopped in half by a highway long before I was born. Once an ejido that stretched from the Rio Grande to the monte, the highway separated the house on one side from the farming land on the other, marking the front of the house like a greedy finger leaving an obtrusive line on the icing of an uncut cake.

The loud swooshes and zooms of the cars and trucks on the highway were muffled only by two apricot trees protruding from the earth like fists protecting the house. When I was younger, on summer evenings, my family lingered on the front porch of Grandma's house, sitting on the white stucco wall, drinking Cokes, and cracking sunflower seeds. We learned from our elders to speak around the traffic patterns. "Mira, aqui viene el Franke". Sure enough, my tío's yellow Ford would pull in. We were the white Ford Fairmont station wagon.

However, if I stand by the kitchen door in the back of the house, I can imagine my mom's and her brother's world as they were growing up, a world without the black line of the highway. Yellowing weeds and yerba buena for carpet, scattered lumber, a rusty Studebaker, and an old outhouse are reminders of lives lived there before our childhood. My grandma's backyard stretches from the kitchen door to the Jemez Mountains. This backyard was a whole, huge world to six-year-old me, the youngest grandchild and the only

girl among my eight cousins who still enjoyed playing in the mounds of dirt and catching grasshoppers. Unfortunately, the boys never had the patience to wait for my short legs. All they wanted to do was run free without the burden of holding barbed-wire fences open, or stopping for me to tie my shoe.

I complained to my mom, “But Maaaaaaama, they never let me play.”

“Just stay close to the house and let them go, mi’jita. We’ll find you something to do here.”

“Something to do here” always meant dusting between the framed photos of familia and chuchulucus on the four-tiered corner shelf my grandma earned with A&E green stamps from Center Market. If my mom wasn’t watching, I dusted half-moons around the pictures. The plastic handle with feathers half-eaten by moths worked more like a pencil eraser than a duster. Mom warned me to not to do things por encima, but all I wanted was to retreat to my favorite spot beneath the two fluffy apricot trees in my grandma’s front yard. There, I collected dried apricot pits, which I smashed open with rocks. I found the juicy seed inside and mashed it into a pulp that I used to make oddly shaped animals. Very often, my primos or my brother came by to crush them or make fun.

“What *is* this?” my brother would mock.

“A dog.”

“Looks like a piece of caca!” He and my cousins would run off cackling.

One afternoon, I was busy at work on a horse when my brother, David, and my primo, Norman—destructo 1 and destructo 2—came by to see what I was doing. I feared the worst. They left me alone after lunch for hours, and I resented that they came back only to ruin my play. I tried to hide my horse quickly by tossing it under a rose bush. But this afternoon, the boys were all sweaty sweet talk. They had just come down from the juniper-covered hill behind my grandma's, where they were allowed to play because they were old enough, and where I was forbidden to go because I was too young.

I found this out the hard way, by walking off too far one morning so that my mom had to come screaming out of the kitchen door when she couldn't find me in the house or by the apricot trees. She and Grandma had been cleaning out the fridge so tío Frank could take the old food to the pigs. Mom realized that she hadn't seen or heard me for quite a while. When she found me collecting rocks under a juniper tree in the backyard, she swatted my bottom a good one.

“¡Malcriada! I've told you to never go off by yourself! You know you aren't supposed to come back here! It's too far!”

Tears slowly gathered in my eyes. “Sorry, Mom.”

“¡Que sorry ni sorry! You know you're not allowed to come where the junipers are! You have to stay where I can see you. You know what happens to little kids who run off, don't you?”

And I did know, La Llorona—a boogeywoman who lived in El Guache—would grab me and put me in a sack because she would think that I was one

of her children. One night around the kitchen table, amidst cans of Miller Lite and smoky haze, my tío George told us about her; he rolled up the sleeves on his paint-speckled flannel shirt as he began his story.

“La Llorona,” he said, “was a bad woman.” He paused to pull a cigarette out of a pack; he lit it with a match he struck against his belt buckle. As he leaned into the tiny flame, I could see my reflection in his dark eyes. He took a drag, and continued, “She was the most beautiful woman in her village, and she was cruel to all the men who wanted to marry her; she didn’t think they were good enough—sabes, she was real high ’tona. Anyways, she would walk around like she was the shit, never giving no one the time of day—she thought she was all bad, like your big sister here.” He motioned over to my sister, eight years my elder, all dolled up with feathered bangs, layered tank tops, tight jeans, and two colors of socks stacked on each other. All the family chuckled. “Then one day,” he continued, “a real handsome man rode up on a horse. When she saw him, she instantly fell in love with the man, who was as handsome as she was beautiful. They went out for a while and then they got married. They were happy, you know, and they did what happy people do. They made a couple of babies.” My mom shot a jeño at my tío, which he waved off with his hand wrapped around a beer can. “But then,” he stressed, “then, that man of hers got to wandering around with other women. She couldn’t handle it, so she took their children down to the river, because she knew that the kids were his pride and joy, and because she was so jealous, she drowned them.”

I must have looked scared because my tío asked, “Are you all right, ’jita? Don’t worry, you’re here with us and she can’t get you.” He tousled my black hair,

same as his. "But I'm not finished. So, she drowns them in the river. The kids, of course, are all screaming and crying, 'Ay, mamá, no. ¡No!,' but she wanted revenge on her husband, and she kept right on holding them under the water until their bodies went limp and got carried off by the current. After her rage had passed, she realized what she had done and she started crying and screaming, '¿Mis hijos, dónde están mis hijos?'" My tío's voice got all high and screechy when he said this. I tucked in a little closer to my mom's lap.

"¿Pero, ya pa que? There wasn't much she could do, no? She threw herself in the river and, of course, the pendeja drowned herself looking for her kids. Now, because of her evil act, she has to search the river, and up and down the hills, for her children so she can lay them to rest. But," he stressed, "she sometimes gets confused, you know, and picks up the wrong children!" He addressed the youngsters in the room, "That's why you shouldn't be out by the river at night or out in the hills by yourself. She could snatch you up and there wouldn't be anything we could do!"

Hi'jole, that scared me. For days, I kept picturing this diabla around every corner, ready to stick me in her gunnysack for not being where I was supposed to be. Every time I crossed a line with my elders, they would raise a knowing eyebrow and say, "Do you know who comes for naughty little kids?" They even knew her phone number. One time when my brother and I chewed up an entire box of saltine crackers and blew the crumbs at each other, coating the two front rooms in doughy, baba-covered specks, my grandma sat by the phone as she gave us ten minutes to vacuum the mess before she picked up the receiver to call Llorona to come for us! When she saw our work faltering, she

would pick up the receiver, and within two or three swoops of the rotary dial we were back to work.

So, when the boys came over to me and complimented my “pretty cool” little apricot-seed horse that afternoon, I thought twice when they asked if I wanted to go on a walk in the hills, past the junipers. This was a momentous occasion! The boys wanted me to go with them! They weren’t leaving me out! Little-girl me with the big, strong boys. I was part of their little clica. Llorona who? Zooop! I was up and trailing behind them the way Puff, our dog, joyfully chased every car that came up the driveway. It took me three or four steps with my chote legs to keep up with their grasshopper-like strides, but I was determined. They helped me through the barbed-wire fence that was supposed to be the absolute boundary as to how far I could go, and we started up the hills.

The afternoon sun made us smell of salty sweat mixed with dirt. Dust clung to my moist skin. The boys, always a few strides ahead, were mumbling and snickering to each other. They made me feel left out but pushed me to catch up so I could hear their secrets and mini-man jokes. At least they let me come this one time. Hoping they wouldn’t ditch me, I yelled, “Wait up!” They just quickened their pace.

We walked in the hot afternoon sun until I thought my legs would fall off. I whined, “How much longer ’til we get there?” No answer. A couple of minutes later, “Are we there yet?” No answer. A couple of minutes after that, “Can we stop to rest?”

“You see,” my brother howled, “this is why we don’t bring you with us!”

“You can’t hang,” my primo chimed in.

“We’re just going over there,” my brother pointed. There were some chiseled-looking cliffs on the side of a sandstone mesa. “We built a cool city over there. You can play cars with us, if you make it.”

I shut up. I was going to make it. It didn’t matter that I was marinating in my own sweat and that I was starting to see pink and orange Fruit Loops sunspots in front of me; I was going to play Hotwheels with David and Norman in their sandstone city! When we neared the cliffs, the boys warned me that we were going to have to climb down to get to the other side. David and Norman said they would go down first to find a safe way and come back up for me. Good, I thought, time to catch my breath. I sat beneath a juniper for shade.

There is nothing like a New Mexico afternoon wind to calm any person down. A cool breeze whipped through the hills, and it was welcome. It swept over the llano like a hand coddling a needy dog. The short yellow weeds tilted back and forth, and the branches on the tall junipers wagged, an army of happy tails. My temples were pulsing from being in the sun for so long. After a few minutes, my pulse calmed and the breeze settled me. I had just about caught my breath when I saw Norman dart passed me screaming, “Run, Marinita, run!”

Stunned, I stood up. Norman was already a blur down the hill. I walked over to the edge of the mesa. My brother grabbed my arm, giving me just enough time to see her! Across the arroyo, where we were supposed to play, there was a woman dressed in black with long, flowing hair and arms outstretched.

A sack in one of them! His body never stopped moving forward, and when he grabbed me, he ended up dragging me like an anchor into a dried bush covered in espinas. I'll never forget the moment he released his grasp from around my arm; it felt like a helium balloon drifting quickly up into the sky. My brother was gone just like that. Instead of going up, up, up into the blue above, his legs carried him down, down, down to the safety of the house below. I was paralyzed. I couldn't bear to look across the mesa to see her—La Llorona.

My gaze turned to that spot. I swore she looked closer than she had the first time I saw her; I ran. No time for my little legs to be tentative with each step, and so my feet plodded down the hill haphazardly. I could see my brother several hundred feet in front of me, getting smaller and smaller. My cousin was nowhere to be seen. All I could do was follow in their footsteps. I kept looking over my shoulder, anticipating a gray, decrepit, bony hand reaching out for me. While stealing a glance over my shoulder, I tripped over a large rock and split my knee open. It was over. I was doomed. That was the last thing I remembered.

I woke up about an hour later in my grandma's bed, all tangled up in one of her nightgowns. I cried out, "Maaaaaaaama!" She quickly came to my side. I burst into tears as I told her about seeing La Llorona. My words were caught in my throat and I immediately became a six-year-old Llorona. Tears and mocos swamped my face; the taste of salt filled my mouth. My small shoulders bobbed up and down as I struggled to find my breath. I cried until I hiccupped. My mom held me; she let me cry, told me to get it all out. She brought me water and vanilla ice cream. When the torrents of my crying-

thunderstorm had calmed, she walked out of the room and brought in a mop with a yardstick taped across it for arms, one of my gramita's old dresses, and a pillowcase. "La Llorona," she explained. She pointed to the window in my grandma's room. I could see the boys outside the big window, on their knees saying a rosary. Their dusty cheeks were channeled with tears from the pain coming from, what I am sure, were their swollen, recently spanked nalgas.

My mom set the do-it-yourself Llorona kit on the floor, scooped me up in her arms, and rocked me. I was devastated and crying again. The joke was clearly more than the boys had bargained for. This became clear first when I didn't follow them right down the hill and then when they found me bleeding and crying. I was so scared I had peed my pants. I didn't remember my uncle carrying me down the hill or being washed in cold water. "But," I sobbed, "I thought they were being nice to me."

My mom covered me in kisses, one of the few times I remember her being that affectionate. She cooed and hummed. She tried to take the sting away from my hurt and humiliation. It was the first time boys had broken my heart. "I don't understand," I demanded. "I never did nothing to them."

"I'm sorry, mi'jita. It's too bad that you had to find out this way," she said as she smoothed out my damp hair. "Now you know what La Llorona is really crying about."