THE SAINTS OF SANTA FE

Carla Trujillo

Pepa Romero splashed lemon oil onto her hands, massaged it through her palms and fingers, and immersed them in a basin of Pecos River water. She rested her hands at the bottom of the enameled white tin and watched her pulse beat in the citrus scented liquid. Grabbing a clean towel, she spotted her first patient of the morning and beckoned him in. Looking no more than twenty and sporting the heft of a few too many beers, the young cowboy gazed at the paintings lining the waiting-room walls—all of them bartered to Pepa as payments. He turned from the artwork, took off his hat, and stepped inside the clinic. Like most New Mexican men, he was a chaparrito, but he'd been blessed with such luscious eyes and full lips that even tall women thought twice. What he lacked in height he covered with swagger and fancy-ass cowboy boots. Pepa gave him a fat eyeball as she started taking his vitals. Christ Almighty, this guy's got a hell of a gift in that face, and since he stepped through the door all he's talked about is how much money he wants to make. He ought to think about acting, or modeling, or whatever people do with pretty faces. But good looks or not, he'd walked into her clinic hat in hand, full of worry. She was surprised, since men like him rarely showed weakness. But people weak and strong came to Pepa's clinic with tricky problems no one else would tackle. So she skipped the formalities and cut to the chase.

"Bueno, Emilio. Tú quieres hacer a million dollars by the time you're thirty, no?" Pepa asked as she felt his pulse and checked his eyelids.

"Sí, Señora."

Emilio's twang gave away his spending too much time in Dallas. Pepa knew that Tejano-speak was easy to get hooked on. She sighed as she eyed his lizard boots and guayabera shirt—pushing the rich cowboy act a little too far. He even carried an unsmoked cigar in his pocket.

"Ven acá. Stand over here." Pepa led him to the egg-rolling station. She instructed Emilio to take off his boots and step into a low, wooden box lined with clear plastic. She took a blue speckled egg and began rolling it over his body. The egg nearly leapt out of her hands when she got to his heart. Hijo 'la madre, the guy's got a bad ticker. She finished rolling, cracked the egg, and dropped it into a jar of purified water.

"Siéntate, por favor." Pepa pointed to a worn leather chair. "We have to sit and wait."

Emilio studied the egg, then slowly sat down. He spotted an ashtray next to the chair, and pulled out his cigar. "Care if I smoke?"

"Pues hell yes," said Pepa. "You're having a limpia. You can't be smoking."

He shrugged and shoved it back in his pocket.

"Que cabrón," Pepa whispered to herself. She lit a cigarette and sat down across from him.

Emilio's eyes fluttered. "Didn't you—didn't you just say no smoking?"

"Sí," she said, tapping her ash. "No smoking for *you*." She crossed her legs, then alternated her gaze between his hands and eyes. Watching them was what kept Pepa in business, since they typically revealed the scars of the past or the pain of the future.

She finished her cigarette then studied the egg's shape in the water. "A ver," she said, motioning Emilio closer. "This part," she said, noting the buoyant shape of the egg, "says you have strong spirit—ánima muy, muy fuerte."

Emilio nodded and grinned. Pepa always started the readings with Baby Jesus cocktails, the words patients wanted to hear. "So if you're going to make a million dollars como quieres, you probably can."

"That's good, no?" Emilio replied, still smiling.

"Pero hay un problema." Pepa pulled the jar closer.

"¿Dónde?" he asked, his eyes crinkled with worry as they darted between Pepa and the egg.

"Aquí." She pointed to a dark spot on the yolk. "Esta parte dice que you're gonna get un heart attack if you do. And not one when you're sixty like most hombres. Es muy serio. Think carefully about working so hard to make your million dollars, por que tú vas a tener un heart attack at thirty-six . . . umm—maybe thirty-seven."

Emilio sucked in a big gulp of air and coughed. "Do you mean maybe a mild one, Señora, kinda like Dick Cheney? Or, a slightly bigger one, kinda like John Belushi?"

Pepa knew John Belushi's heart attack was drug induced, but in this case it didn't matter. "Mijo," she said, patting his hand, "absolutamente como John Belushi."

Emilio's neck splotched heatstroke red. Pepa noticed but didn't let up. "Y también, hombre, este heart attack will kill you. So think very seriously about

your life. I can see you with a más-o-menos beautiful mujer, tres niños, and muy contento, pero no millionaire. Or, un millionaire que trabaja fourteen hours a day, then dead at thirty-six. Qúe quieres, money or life?"

Emilio couldn't speak. The handsome cowboy dropped his head, his life's dream shattered. Pepa watched the poor guy, knowing without a doubt her diagnosis was solid.

"Bueno, Señora, I—well, I'm gonna think real hard about this." His Dallas accent had already begun to disappear.

Pepa prepared a solution with frankincense and lavender oils, and bits of camellia. "Mira, I want you to take this—" She grabbed a ceramic diffuser. "And ponlo en esto. Then hang it in your office. It's very important you keep this around you. It'll calm your head, but it won't stop a heart attack. Only you," she said, tapping his chest, "can do that."

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Pepa's clinic was a former beauty parlor attached to an adobe house on the outskirts of Santa Fe—Dog Town, the locals called it. Surrounding the house Pepa called home for thirty years was a large, fenced yard, a thriving garden and an old cottonwood. An altar, adorned with statues of San Martín de Porres and La Virgen de Guadalupe, took up a large portion of her treatment room. Next to the saints were a clear jar of purified water, a crystal geode from Carlsbad, metal plates for burning incense, white candles, and a tarnished copper urn. Her mother's picture, taken before she'd died of leukemia, hung above the altar. Across the ceiling dangled a variety of hierbas, hand gathered and tied with turquoise string: ruda, malva, oshá, trementina, altamisa. Inside

a wormwood cabinet were the items Pepa needed for limpias and diagnoses: eggs, lemons, purple onions, piedra alumbre, and her essential oils.

Pepa's clinic, fondly known as The Charm House, had a loyal clientele. Her patients commonly remarked of the divine power in her hands. This created a high demand for her services, compelling her to work long hours with few breaks. Despite this, Pepa woke early to hike with her mutt, Joaquin, out past Dog Town to the mesa. Seeing the mountains at daybreak inspired her, reminding her of life's enduring beauty. On the way, she stopped to pick up her neighbor Irma's little pit bull. Irma, long in the tooth, yet known around town for her wild parties, had broken a leg in-line skating, which prevented her from walking herself or the dog for at least six weeks.

"Ay Pepa, thank you for taking my perrito, pero can't you do something about my leg?" Irma pointed to a cast covered with a collage of whiskey labels done by her truck-driving boyfriend.

"Pues nooo, broken legs take time. Pero I can give you something for your nerves." Y something para la cabeza también, she said to herself. I don't know how that old goat thought she could skate como una teenager.

"No gracias, I think I just need it for mi hueso."

"The one in your head, or the one in your leg?"

"Very funny."

Pepa's morning walk revived her, especially after weary days with stubborn patients. As she marched across the packed clay of her street, junked cars, shabby houses, and the caw of crows delivered their daily greeting. She hit the well-worn trail that wormed its way up to the mesa as the dogs romped playfully through the scrub. A drought had persisted throughout the spring, yet the yucca flowers managed to bloom, their white torches framed against the red dirt. Pepa felt the day's heat rise as she crested the mesa. She took off her shirt, lit a cigarette, and sat on a rock to smoke. The Sangre de Cristo Mountains shed their violet hue as she received their daily blessing. Smoking her cigarette down to the nub, Pepa watched the sun blink over the hills and rounded up the dogs to head back home. Turning the corner onto her street, she spotted a long line of patients waiting at the door.

"Hijo 'la madre," she said, looking at her watch. "It's gonna be a hell of a day."