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eternal lovers

by JACK WEBB

She was left, finally, even without love, condemned by the old gods to wander forever in the nether regions.

A LOT of big time art is a racket. I know. I've packaged it for the one-generation-rich, the wives who suddenly need something in the living-room their husbands can't understand and seldom care for much. Something somewhat like themselves. I know what they want and I have a whole string of poor man's Picassos to keep them happy. It's easy to make a painter a 'must' in the mind of a contractor's wife or to create a 'rage' in Dallas. But if pandering is my trade, that doesn't mean I'm not always on the lookout for the real thing. I am.

I found it once. One of those blades of truth I'll take along with me when I stand before the Lord.

I discovered Fermin del Rio.

He paints what he sees, my Fermin, and he paints it well. Sometimes, too well. Take *La Llorona*. Take it and put it up against the best of Rivera, of Siquieros, of Orosco. You take it!

Last month, I sold *La Llorona* to the Museum of Modern Art. The check had four figures to the left of the decimal point. There could have

Mystery readers will remember Jack Webb's warmly human novels about the little Padre and the Police Sergeant (THE NAKE ANGEL, Rinehart; etc.) Here is a different story, a haunting page out of Mexico's memories where centuries seem to at times blend into the present.

been more if I hadn't been in a hurry to sell. The current issue of *ART IN REVIEW* quotes me as saying I was willing to sacrifice the painting because it was too great a thing to hoard in a private collection.

That is a half-truth.

Do you know Mazatlan? Then you know the cafe of Papa Moreno on the *escarpa* opposite the sea wall. When the sundown breeze comes in from over the islands of the Three Marys and passes over the rocks where the vendors of fresh oysters have thrown the empty shells, the Cafe Moreno is filled with the tide's edge smell half tasting of salt, half tasting of death.

We were done with dominos late that night and had settled to the pleasure of serious drinking. Pepe Valdez, Nacho Solorzano and Don Antonio de Anza were arguing a point of politics.

Fermin del Rio and I were discussing elephants. Early Mexican elephants carved in stone before the time of Cortes. I said they proved the roots of Mexican culture to be Asiatic. Fermin said not. He spoke of racial memory, contended that the sculptures were a subconscious remembering of all the tales ever told from that time when Tepexpan man battled with mammoths on the shores of Texcoco some fifteen thousand years ago.

We had reached an impasse when Fermin changed the subject abruptly. His fat shoulder against mine, he spoke softly. "Observe Don Antonio."

I glanced across the marble table top. Aware of my scrutiny, de Anza raised his head and smiled. A polite smile, a sad smile made only with the mouth.

Pepe said something about Toledano then and Don Antonio replied instantly militant. I glanced back at Fermin.

He asked, "How old is our friend?"

I thought about it, surprised that I was puzzled. "It is either," I said finally, "that Don Antonio is a young man old beyond his years, or an old man with access to some partial fountain of youth."

"For a novice," Fermin admitted, "you make good use of your eyes." (All who do not paint are novices in the art of seeing according to Fermin.) He reached forward with a chunky hand to retrieve the square bottle of *habanero*.

After he had filled our glasses and we had made the salute and taken each of us a taste of the sugar cane rum, Fermin rubbed his index finger along the ridge of an enormous, veined nose and asked, "You still have *La Llorona*, eh, Johnny?"

"Pues," I shrugged, "and who parts with a miracle?"

"*Gracias.*" His large moist eyes met mine level. We were sharing that fondness men can have only when they drink well together and it makes little difference what the hour. It is a thing the men of my country have lost. Their wives have seen to that. I was glad I could still have it with Fermin.

"And what do you know of my lady in white?" he continued.

I drank my *habanero* and watched a trio of street singers enter the cafe and take a table near the door. They laid aside their guitars and ordered *pulque*. I thought about Fermin's question, about the strangely beautiful woman in the painting.

"*La Llorona,*" I said softly, "The Crying Woman, a ghost who wanders down the deepest watches of the night. They have forgotten her, your people. Only the grandmothers remember sometimes and use her to frighten naughty children."

Over at their table in the corner by the door, the *marichis* had exchanged their *pulque* for their guitars and had begun a very old song about four corn fields.

"Of all the stories about her," I said, "there are two I prefer."

"And those?" Fermin's sleepy eyes watched me from under veined lids.

"The one which has it she is the Aztec goddess, Cihua-

coatl, who called in the nights before Cortes came." I pressed my temples with my thumbs and remembered, "*Oh, my sons! Where can I take you that we may not be lost?*"

Fermin nodded. "You are a student, Juanito."

"Of ghostology," I said. It made a poor joke. It did not translate well.

"And the other story?"

"She's the spirit of *La Malinche* who was named Dona Marina by Cortes when he loved her and would make her a Christian. He deserted her later, though. Gave her to one of his captains. So she was left finally even without love and condemned by the old gods to wander forever in the nether land on the other side of sleep. Because she had betrayed her country and her people. Because even forsaken, she loved their conqueror."

"A terrible punishment for love," Fermin remarked. And then, "This I can tell you; she's *La Malinche*, my crying woman."

"Doubtless," I said, "this is a truth you learned from your grandmother."

"My grandmother," Fermin said soberly, "was a good woman. A good woman walks under the wing of an angel. Is such a one likely to encounter *La Llorona?*"

I had a feeling we were in something deeper than our cups.

A Maltese cat came softly

through the door of the cafe and out of the velvet night. *The cat came on little fog feet.* That was what I thought. That was how much I'd been drinking. I remembered a proverb. "*God made the cat so man might stroke a tiger.*"

Ignoring the *mariachis* improvising plaintive couplets to their guitars, the Maltese marched between the marble topped tables and the spindle-legged soda fountain chairs towards its couch beneath the long mahogany bar. I knew the cat. We all did. It was Papa Moreno's rat catcher.

One of the troubadors spotted the cat. His fingers changed the tune on the strings even as his voice sang softly. The air was melancholy with a devilish rhythm underneath, a rhythm peculiar to these people where its drum beat is carried by the heel of the hand thumping on the flat wooden face of the guitar:

*Once there was an old cat
who did his work for the
devil...*

His head was thrown back and his eyes were closed.

*"And the devil said to the
cat,
Said to his love,
the cat, the cat..."*

I felt Fermin stiffen in the chair beside me.

As the Maltese came even with our table, it suddenly altered its course and I watched its battle shortened tail pass out of sight among our legs

under the marble top that once had been ballast out on a caravel on a wind from Genoa. Then, so unexpectedly it frightened me, I heard a purr of pleasure rise from beside the chair of Don Antonio. Absently he reached down to stroke the animal. The cat leaped into his lap, rubbing its whiskers against the palm of his hand. Its eyes were closed in ecstasy; its stub of a tail stood stiff and straight.

Fermin's nails bit into my arm. "Have you ever seen that cat make up to anyone but Papa?"

"I tried to pet it once," I whispered. "It backed me away from the bar."

The Maltese opened its eyes and focused the immense amber orbs on de Anza's scholarly face. This was love in the desert, Witches Sabbath, a strange and unwordly love and I knew I was drunk. Though Don Antonio did not seem to notice, I was embarrassed. Embarrassed that he could casually bring such unholy rapture and talk of politics. Now, he was arguing with Nacho about agrarian reforms.

"*Maria Santisima,*" Fermin swore. "The cat knows."

"What passes?" I demanded. Too many things were being left unsaid. Too many little incidents, innocent enough on the surface were becoming enormous in my over-sensitized brain. I knew that I had been drinking too

much, that my head was full of needles. Uncomfortable with somethings that were nothings, with *nada, nada, nada*. "What passes?" I repeated.

Instead of answering, Fermin shrugged, and once more he made our conversation veer like a sail before a capricious breeze. "Is it not unusual, Johnny, that our distinguished Don Antonio has never married?"

"It is possible," I suggested profoundly, "that he has never loved."

"Fool," Fermin whispered, "do you believe that the de Anza family ever marries for love?"

"Then there's a reason it's not been arranged?"

Fermin shook his head. "Three times it has been decided that Don Antonio should play the bear. Three times he has courted a suitable young lady."

"So?"

"So?"

"So we shall have another drink." Fermin reached for the bottle.

There was a lull in the conversation among our companions and we alone at our end of the table had persisted in talking. Don Antonio absently stroked the cat as Riche-lieu had run pieces of fine silk between his fingers, as Goethe had tapped out complicated German meters on the bare back of his mistress. Fermin filled the glasses. We saluted and drank.

"It is as I have said," Pepe Valdez announced, "*El Presidente* is making a crusade for morality in public office. He is not forgetting the people. He is keeping the faith."

"Words." Don Antonio made a negative gesture with the wrist of the hand that was not stroking the cat. "How many words can come from a mouth. You know us, Pepe. Diogenes lost his lamp to a public official in Mexico." He smiled across the table at me, a foreigner. They were off again.

I got back to the three women he had wooed and never wed. "About the three *senoritas*?" I said to Fermin.

His eyes were like a sleepy bear's. "Accidents," he said. "Each in her own fashion. Maria Sepulveda," he laid a fat finger on the table top, "Don Antonio's auto hit another. Barbara del Rosario," a second finger joined the first, "a fall from a horse when they were riding together. Dolores Cortina," a third finger followed, "drowned when Don Antonio's boat overturned on a calm day."

"Ah," I said, "and that would explain the sadness behind his eyes, the grey hair above a young man's face."

"You *gringos*," Fermin sighed, "you practical North Americans. *Por favor*, do you have a scrap of paper?"

I found an envelope.

On the back of it with a stub of pencil he made a hasty

sketch and slid it across the table top for my inspection.

It was Don Antonio. "With a few lines," I exclaimed, "you have captured the very man. May I keep it?"

"In a moment if you wish. But first..."

He pulled the drawing back before him and worked rapidly. To the head they added a wedge of beard, a fine mustache and a fuller hairline. Over the suggestion of a double-breasted coat, he imposed a steel breastplate and sleeves of armor. Then, he pushed it back.

I gasped.

If you ever have seen the most famous painting in the Hospital de Jesus Nazerno in Mexico City, you'll know the figure that lay on the table before me. It was a rough but unmistakable portrait of Hernan Cortes.

Silently, with the desperation of a quiet drunk, I tried to fit the fragments of the evening together: *La Llorona*, Fermin's painting of a ghost, the enigma of the gentleman across the table who could talk of politics now and not quite hide the sad something which lurked behind his eyes, a man who stroked a cat. Fermin still watched me like a sleepy bear.

"With your permission, Senores, it is getting late." He put the cat gently onto the floor and had it winding about his ankles purring even as he stood.

Don Antonio, a handsome man with no wife to keep him home, saying goodnight to his drinking companions; it was nothing more than that. I stood. He shook hands with me first because I was the guest, the one from another country. *And another time*, I thought.

He shook hands with the others. A wonderful thing this sincere touching of the hands, a thing we have almost lost up home. I tried not to think of other things, the kind of things we should not think who walk alone down the night. Hernan Cortes; Don Antonio de Anza. 1519; 1955.

Fermin grasped my elbow as we walked to the door.

We came out of the cafe and onto the walk beside the curve of cobalt sea. Blue smoke curled in foggy wraiths from the door behind us, carrying the sad, lost song of the *mariachis*.

"*Noche de ronda.*

Que triste pasa..."

Night of revelry, what sadness passes. I tried to shake free of the artist. His hand tightened about my arm.

Don Antonio's stride lengthened. The four of us remained on the sidewalk before the cafe. Only the cat went with him, a grey shadow chasing a greater shadow before it.

He went around the corner of the cafe. A finger of cloud slid across the face of the

moon. Shadows closed around his retreating footsteps. From a long way down the empty street came a plaintive wail not unlike that of some secretive nightbird.

"*Una chotacabra,*" I whispered, "a whippoorwill."

Fermin let go of my arm. His voice was as sorrowful as it was fond. "Go with God," he said, "go with God on your bird hunt, Johnny."

So I went down the long street alone.

What can I tell you of my trip? Of shadows that caught my hollow footsteps and flung them to echo against pink adobe walls. Of shadows that had color, had substance. Shadows that moved like a seascape, scintillant and unholy with a light of their own.

Where I crossed the grey plaza, a man lay huddled upon a hard park bench wrapped in his somber *serape* against the cold of predawn. As I passed him, he moaned in his sleep like a child caught in the web of a nightmare.

Then, rounding the corner of the great blue church which faces upon the other side of the plaza, I saw Don Antonio... Don Antonio and the woman who leaned upon his arm.

A veiled woman in shimmering white, a woman with cold jewels like stars in her gown.

Seeing them together, I had to know.

Before God, no One else, I will answer to it.

Fermin had hinted of a terrible love, of a woman who had lingered through four centuries to love again a man like Cortes.

I had to know.

I began to run, and when I was upon them, I heard the savage hiss of a cat and saw the grey Maltese go skittering into the black shadows formed by the apse of the ancient church. Away from me. Not from him and not from *her!*

Don Antonio bowed gravely as a gentleman did when gentlemen there were.

"Your servant," he said.

"With permission," I said.

My fingers reached for the woman's veil.

I am certain my first impression was of great beauty. That my feelings were a flood and a mixture, half relief and half shame. The kind of shame a drunk has when the dreadful thing is done.

But before I could drop the veil, before the first stumbling words of apology found their way to my lips, the change took place. And there was before me in the moonlight a face without flesh, a smile without lips, a stare without eyes, and over the fishbelly brow, two coils of black hair like horns.

Then, the sound came again, the last, loneliest cry on the face of our earth. No night bird, this.

A whippoorwill has no soul to lose!

Have you ever been in an Mexican jail?

Do you know the odor of human spoilage after a hundred years?

Have you ever faced a sergeant of police with the face of an Aztec god?

Drunk and disorderly, passed out in a gutter before the church of our Lord.

Have you paid your fine? And called a cab? And had a bath? And changed your clothes? And taken the next plane north from hell?

Not that that was the end of it.

I had to go home. Home to my apartment where her picture hung.

The current issue of ART IN REVIEW quotes me as saying I was willing to sacrifice the painting of *La Llorona* because it was too great a thing to hoard in a private collection.

This is not quite true.

For Fermin is a painter who paints what he sees. And sometimes, he paints it too well.