



From the green grass of the bosque came the squeals and shouts of the children who played together in the last light of the autumn day. With long shadows

cast at their feet, they chased one another until they were breathless near the banks of the Rio Grande, in the shade beneath the cottonwood trees.

Feeling boastful, Miguel called out a challenge. "I dare you all to meet me here tonight when La Llorona comes out!" he taunted.

Juana frowned at him with a hand on her hip. "You wouldn't be saying that if you ever saw her for real, Miguel."

"No one has ever seen her," scoffed Jose, but Jose was Miguel's younger brother and his opinion carried little weight amongst the group.

"That's not true," Juana countered. "My cousin said she heard her one night when she was walking home near the bosque." The scorn on the faces of the other children changed to grudging curiosity as Juana continued. Her voice dropped to take on a breathless quality as her brown eyes widened. "She said she was still wearing a white lace dress and her hair was wet and streaming down her body as she moaned and held out her hands to reach for her!"

A ripple of nervous reactions broke out as the ghastly image of the riverside ghost began to fill their imaginations. "When did she see her?" asked Miguel, still unconvinced of the veracity of Juana's tale.

"It was last summer, after the monsoons, when the arroyos ran full," Juana answered in a superior tone. The others nodded to themselves, recognizing this

detail which matched their parents' own accounts of La Llorona, the Weeping Woman. She was always most active when the rivers ran faster with fresh floods.

Still, Miguel held on to his doubt. "If she really saw her, then what is La Llorona's real name?" he challenged.

Juana took a moment to scan the faces of the circle of her friends, watching each of them as they listened to her intently. With a smirk, she answered at last. "Her real name was Maria...."

All her life, Maria Consuelos was told of the great beauty she possessed by the adults who surrounded her. With almond-shaped dark eyes set in a heart-shaped face, encircled by black hair, Maria's skin shimmered by evening candlelight and her hands were as soft as fine silk, unblemished from the harsh reality of household chores. "Que bonita," the adults would croon, cuddling the girl as the child's innocent beauty grew greater each day, promising her a lifetime of loving adoration and attention.

Her family was not privileged, but her father's ranch did well enough for him to afford his only daughter a wardrobe of lace gowns, each one a shimmering cloud, delicate and white. Having her beauty affirmed for so long, it was no surprise that after her quinceanera many callers came to her father's doorstep seeking to court the beauty who was quickly blossoming into a comely young woman. Maria's father was protective, but one young suitor managed to gain his approval, either through his good manners which he displayed each time he came to visit Maria, or through the reputation of his family's good fortunes.

Paper flowers were strung in bright bouquets of red and gold on the day of Maria's wedding celebration in the early summer of her 18th year. Both of the families came to her father's ranch to celebrate the joyous occasion as Maria and her new husband, Fernando, joined their lives together. So deeply in love were the two that they danced each and every dance all through that magical night, unwilling to let one another go. By the following summer, a young son was born to the couple, and only a few years after that, another son came into Maria's arms. But even as she held her sons close to her breast, she became achingly aware of the slow and disturbing changes in her husband's behavior.

Maria's joy soon began to fade, like paper flowers

left too long in the unforgiving sun, as Fernando's desire for other women began to steal into their home, and into their bedroom.

Fernando often left the ranch to purchase cattle and other provisions, but the task that once took him away for only a few days at a time began to grow longer and longer. A week would pass then two weeks, and still every day Maria would dress in her white lace gowns to wait for her husband on the veranda, shading her eyes as the shadows grew in the dying light of each setting sun.

As Fernando's passion for his beautiful wife paled, so did her beauty. Nights of crying herself to sleep began to take its toll upon Maria's once-delicate features, drawing forth lines of worry around her mouth, and insomniac shadows beneath her dark eyes. Her skin grew pale and white streaks began to paint her hair. The servants whispered but never in front of Maria, who continued to wear her best gowns each day as she dressed her young sons in their finest suits, hoping that this sunset would be the occasion of Fernando's return.

Finally, unable to contain her restless anticipation, Maria began to wander in search of her errant mate. At first she would walk only to the end of their property and back, touching the barbed wires gently lest they should prick her and draw forth blood as she gazed into the scrub and dust of the horizon for any sign of Fernando's horse and carriage.

But soon, the ranch's fences could not contain her nor her grief, and she ventured out even further, into the streets of the town nearby, always with her sons at her side, always wearing her finest white lace gowns in the hope that Fernando would see her and his love would return to his heart, and bring him back to their bed. The boys would ask to visit the river while they walked with their mama and Maria indulged their wishes, allowing them to run along the banks of the Rio Grande as her eyes scanned the empty horizon each day for the man she believed to be hers.

After having been gone for nearly a season or more, one day Maria's meandering walk did indeed take her by Fernando's coach, and in a moment of unrestrained eagerness as Maria saw her husband's face again, she shouted out in greeting. "My husband, I have found you! Let us ride home together now," she smiled in invitation.

La Llorona Painting (above) by Eric Garcia



But, curiously, Fernando did not return her smile. He looked at her while holding the horses' reins and simply sneered. "You with your tattered gowns and gray hairs? You are an old woman now, and with children in your arms, there is no room left for me. What makes you think I still want your love?"

In desperation tinged with sorrow, Maria's heart grew black with the venom of Fernando's dismissive love until she gave up taking care of her fine looks. Her lush hair became dry and unkempt as she stopped brushing the knots from her locks, and her soft skin now bore scars as she scratched at herself until bleeding while crying alone in her bed. White gowns grew dusty and then fell to pieces, discarded in her wardrobe and forgotten. Her eyes, once praised as sultry and inviting, grew hard and wild in her unending anguish and the servants whispered about the nights they heard strange cackles and grieving howls from Maria's bedroom when others were asleep. Her sons became frightened of the woman who had replaced the loving mother they once knew so well, and their young hearts grew distant as Maria lost herself inside her heartache.

At last, after another year had passed and still Fernando had not returned, Maria resolved herself to the only plan she felt would win back her husband's heart. For the first time in many moons, Maria pulled a white lace gown from her wardrobe. Ignoring its tatters, she smoothed the lace over her waist as if it were as fine as ever. Tears ran from her eyes but went unnoticed as she brushed the knots from her hair and her hands shook uncontrollably as she painted her lips, the crimson stain an uneven semblance of beauty.

"Come with me, my sons," she called, "it is time for us to go walking again!" Fooled by their mother's ruse, the boys donned their own best suits as they did in years gone by and she smiled as they ran towards the riverside. It will be easier this way, she told herself, and Fernando will love me again if my arms are empty and waiting for his return.

Finding a secluded spot beneath the trees, Maria's heart left her body as she held her young sons beneath the waters of the Rio Grande, ignoring how they thrashed in protest and waiting until their young faces became blank masks of death beneath the water. Standing to her hips in the icy river waters, her white gown quickly became soaked and mud-stained, and her hair fell forward, skimming the surface to become drenched as well.

As the life left their young bodies and they quit fighting for air, Maria let them go and the river's current carried their bodies off, like the flotsam of a wrecked vessel that had been dashed to pieces on rocks hidden beneath the river's calm surface.

With a mad look in her eyes, Maria watched their bodies float away. He will love me now, she told herself, Fernando will love me once again. Plodding from the shore, she ignored the dripping of her gown and hair as she raised her arms to the empty embrace of the wind. "Fernando! I am alone now and I am waiting! Fernando!" she

cried out, wandering about the town all night, as villagers shut their doors and crossed themselves in hope of protection from the demon-woman who wandered outside. She called out for her husband until her voice cracked and became nothing more than a long, keening howl of pain.

At sunrise, when the villagers believed it safe, they unlocked their doors once more but for the tragic Maria it was too late. Her lifeless body was found later that day floating in the Rio Grande, caught in the weeds at the shoreline, upstream from her children who were also pulled from the muddy waters.

Because of her gruesome wickedness and grievous sins, she was never given a church burial, dooming her spirit to forever wander near the banks of the river, always calling for her unfaithful husband.

"And that's why she drown children!" Juana said in a voice that held her audience enrapt. "So don't ever go to the river alone, and if you hear her moaning, you should run, or she will drown you next."

Miguel frowned, trying to hold on to his disbelief, despite his fear. "I still don't believe you," he insisted boastfully, hoping to sound more courageous than he felt after Juana's tale.

Juana pursed her lips together grimly. "It doesn't matter if you believe me or not, Miguel. La Llorona will never quit searching for her lost love, whether you believe in her or not. No one will ever forget her... and no one will ever stop fearing her."

The sky grew purple as the darkness of night approached and the air grew cold by the river. From the cottonwoods in the distance, a strange sound could be heard and the children scattered, yelling, "It's her! It's La Llorona!" and ran in every direction for the safety and warmth of home.



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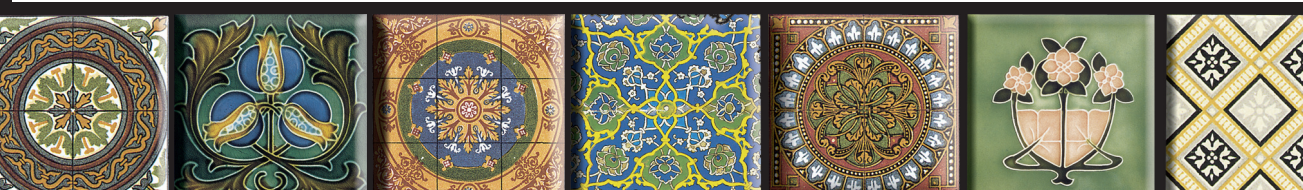
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