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## Night Visitor

The sky was brightening over the mountains and a shaft of sunlight already lit the peak of La Malinche, but the valley was still dark. Ygnacio knew it was a dangerous time to be abroad, especially so near the edge of the *barranca*. The ghosts always delayed as long as they could before returning to the chill of their unconsecrated graves, and it was clear that a witch or a sorcerer had been active in the valley in recent months. First there was the hailstorm that destroyed nearly half the tomato plants while they were still in flower, then old Guadalupe's horse went lame. In the neighboring village of San Juan a cow had died, and people said its unborn calf had the long nose and ears of a burro. No real burro would ever mount a cow, but a sorcerer in the form of a burro would do it. Sorcerers often took on

the form of burros, in order to kick unwary *campesinos* down into the *barrancas*.

Ygnacio heard a burro scream not far away, and quickened his pace along the footpath, bare feet slapping on the hard packed clay. For a moment he wondered if the money the gringo paid him was worth the risk involved in being out alone before sunrise, but the poor cannot be too particular about the work they do. It had been three months since his father and older brother had gone north looking for work, three months of no word and even less money than usual. The chance to work for Don Carlos had come as a godsend, and the work itself was not very difficult. In the morning he would fill the little gasoline stove, heat a basin of water in which the man would wash himself, and boil up a pot of *café negro*. Later there might be messages to carry, or the gringo might need a guide to lead him up the mountain to the *barrio* of San Tomás.

Nobody was really sure what Don Carlos was doing in San Juan Huahuastepec. He said he was there to learn how the people lived, but that made no sense. They lived just like other people did, like *campesinos* had always lived. Nobody had to study that to know about it, not even a gringo. Some people thought he might work for the government in Mexico, since he was always asking about things like how many people lived in a house and how much money they earned. Everybody lied about the money, just in case he was a new kind of tax man. A few people wondered if he might be the *brujo*, the witch. It was clear that there were a great many powerful witches north of the Rio Grande. Otherwise the

gringos could not be so rich while the Mexicans were so poor.

Ygnacio was sure his gringo was not a *brujo*. The man was just too stupid, too innocent to have any skill in witchcraft. For the same money he was paying Jose Lopez for the use of the tiny house near the *barranca* he could have had a house in town and all his meals prepared. For the same money he was paying Ygnacio, he could have had a woman from Apizaco or Tlaxcala living as his common law wife instead of a twelve-year-old boy boiling his morning coffee. Then again, money was not the same to a gringo as it was to an indio. Don Carlos said he was not a rich man, but he ate meat every day, wore a pair of boots that must have cost more than Ygnacio's father could earn in two months, and used a fancy camera and a little voice recorder that fit right in his pocket.

Hurrying along, Ygnacio could see the shadows go from black to indigo to the peculiar shade of turquoise that meant the sun was ready to peek out over the mountainside. His destination lay just ahead, down a gentle slope studded with agave and prickly pear. At the very moment the little house came into view, Ygnacio saw a white shape move away from its patio gate only to disappear among the tall corn stalks of the adjoining *milpa*. Terror stopped him so quickly that he fell forward on his hands and knees. He felt the contents of his bowels go liquid, but couldn't force himself to crawl off to the side of the road until, several long moments later, the sun finally appeared over the mountainside. Crying with relief, he stumbled to the

side of the road, dropped his pants, and relieved himself.

The sun shone on pink morning glory blossoms cascading over the top of a crumbling adobe wall. Tiny white butterflies slowly flexed their wings among the blossoms, drying themselves in the warm golden light. Ygnacio stood, tied up his pants, and looked down at the *milpa* where the white shape had disappeared. Millions of dewdrops glistened on the green stalks and yellow tassels. Perhaps, he thought, it had been something else. Perhaps it had been something stupid and innocent, like the gringo going to relieve himself out between the corn rows.

Ygnacio let himself into the gringo's patio and peeked through a knothole in the door to the house. It was dark inside, but he could hear the gringo snoring. The white shape had not been Ygnacio's employer, but that still didn't mean it had to be a ghost. No ghost could have passed within the patio wall unless it had been invited to enter, and even the gringo could not have been that stupid, that innocent.

The wash basin and water were ready when the alarm clock rang inside the house. Don Carlos was slow shutting it off, even slower climbing out of bed and opening the door. Most mornings the man jumped out of bed to fling open his door and say "Good morning, Ygnacio, how are you?" in his funny schoolbook Spanish. Today he was sluggish and pale, as if a ghost had been sapping his vitality during the night. He recited his usual greeting and forced a little smile, then must have noticed Ygnacio's worried look. "I didn't get much

sleep last night. Guess I look a little tired."

"You look sick."

"I don't think so. Just tired."

"Did you have a visitor last night?"

"A visitor? Why would someone visit me at night?"

"Some visitors can come only by night."

"Oh, now I understand. I look sick, so you wonder if I've been entertaining a *bruja* or a ghost. Tell me, then, what should I do if someone or something was making magic against me?"

"What do gringos do?"

"Maybe ask a priest to help. Is that what you do?"

For the first time that morning, Ygnacio felt like laughing. "A priest? What does a priest know about magic? You have to see a *curandero*."

"Do you know a good one? Maybe you could take me to see him?"

"There's a woman up in the barrio who knows as much as anybody, but she couldn't help you."

"Why not?"

"You're a gringo. How's she supposed to know how to help a gringo?"

"The same way she helps an *indio*, no?"

"No. Anyway, all you have to know is that ghosts and *brujas* and *hechiceros* can't come into your house to hurt you unless you invite them in."

"So no visitors who come by night, is that it?"

"That's it."

Don Carlos spent most of the day writing things on his typing machine, so there was not much work for Ygnacio to do. For a while the gringo had him trying to

remember the names of people who had left the *municipio* to find work in Mexico City or up north in the border towns. Later he was sent to pick up their midday meal from Carmela Lopez. Except for some puffiness under his eyes, the gringo seemed to be back to normal. It was still early afternoon when he told Ygnacio he could go home for the day.

"Don Carlos?"

"Yes?"

"Remember what I said about night visitors. Maybe it's different in your country, but here..."

"I'll remember." The gringo gestured in the direction of his typewriter. "I've already written it down. And if it's possible, I'd really like to meet your *curandera*, even if she can't help *norteamericanos*."

"I don't know. The Public Health doesn't like her, and people around here don't know you that well, so ..."

"So they wonder if I'm a government spy, because I ask so many questions. Well, that's what an anthropologist does. He asks questions and writes down what he finds out so that people from different backgrounds can learn from each other. So, you see, she really can help me. Will you ask her?"

"I'll need a chicken, or maybe a sack of flour, to go to her. She won't even see me if I don't bring something."

Don Carlos took several large bills from his wallet and pushed them into Ygnacio's hand. "Try. Please try."

Clutching the gringo's money, the boy ran off towards the barrio of San Tomás to find Doña Isabel, the

*curandera*. There was no longer any doubt in his mind. The gringo's stupid curiosity had prompted him to invite a bad spirit into his house the night before, and now he needed help, needed it badly. The money he was offering the *curandera* was almost enough to buy a young pig. Shivering despite the bright sunshine, Ygnacio crossed himself as he ran.

The track that slanted up the side of the mountain to Doña Isabel's place was a dusty rut that became a stream bed whenever it rained. In some places it was so deeply eroded that Ygnacio was unable to see over the sides. He wondered if witches were working to place a new *barranca* on the path to the *curandera*'s house.

There was one place where there was a dip in the track, and in that place enough silt had collected to hold footprints. Ygnacio could see that a horse had preceded him up the path to Doña Isabel's, which meant that the gringo's business would have to wait. The only man in the *municipio* who kept a horse for riding was Don Pedro Alarcón . A man of great wealth and influence, Don Pedro would not want his consultation with the *curandera* interrupted by the young son of a poor *campesino*. In point of fact, he would probably prefer that none of his neighbors suspect that he might need the old woman's services. Always bragging about his business trips to Puebla and the capital, and about his sons at the University, he wanted people to believe he had no use for the old ways.

Ygnacio listened carefully for sounds from up the track. He was prepared to get off the path and hide

rather than meet Don Pedro coming down the mountain, but he knew it would be easier to hide among the cornstalks of the *milpa* adjoining the old woman's house and wait there until the rich man had gone. As it turned out, he had scarcely ducked into the *milpa* when both the man and the woman emerged from the woman's patio, leading the big brown horse. Ygnacio backed further into the *milpa* and watched.

Don Pedro was carrying an old tequila bottle, the kind the *curandera* used to dispense her medicines. The rich man held it up to the light to examine it, and Ygnacio could see it was full of some cloudy white liquid. Probably some kind of love potion, the boy imagined, something to restore the waning powers of an aging man with a young wife. The rich man's marriage to a girl no older than his own daughter, only five months after the death of his first wife, had been Huahuastepec's foremost topic for gossip and envious jokes two years earlier. It looked as though some of the jokes might be coming true.

Ygnacio gave Don Pedro more than enough time to get out of earshot before he went to the old woman's patio gate and called out for her. "*Con permiso*, Doña Isabel. It's me, Ygnacio. I've brought you a gift." He saw her good eye peeking out between the boards of her patio gate.

"Ygnacio," she said, "Ygnacio Ramos y Castillo. Your grandfather's sister on your mother's side married my husband's brother, who was also *padrino* to your father. Now you have a job working for the gringo, I'm told."



"Yes, *señora*, he sent me with this money. He needs help, but I told him I wasn't sure if you could help gringos."

"We'll have to see. So, does he already know about the *brujo*? Maybe he has some powers of his own."

"I don't think so. I don't think he knows anything much. And he doesn't work for the government, *señora*, no matter what some people say.

"Of course not. He's just another gringo anthropologist, no?"

Ygnacio was stunned. He knew the *curandera* was wise, but he never suspected her wisdom extended across the border. She saw the expression on his face and laughed.

"You think this old woman never heard of anthropologists? Well, we had another one, you know, maybe forty, forty-five years ago. He was always after my mother to teach him curing, and after me too for the little I'd learned back then. He was going to put it all in a book. The funny thing was he thought he didn't believe in magic, but he did. Is yours like that?"

"I don't know, but he should believe. Last night he let a ghost in his house. I saw it leaving this morning just before the sun came up, and it had sucked out his strength, I could tell. Can you help him?"

The old woman was laughing again, but Ygnacio could not tell why. "A ghost, you say?" More laughter. "Nothing to fear from the ghost. It's the *brujo* he should fear. You're a good boy, Ygnacio. You brought all this money and didn't try to hold any back. Bring him here, this new anthropologist, in three, no, four

days. He might be ready to let us help him."

On his way home, Ygnacio considered what the *curandera* had said. How could it be that Don Carlos had nothing to fear from the ghost? And how could the old woman know a witch was trying to harm the gringo without conducting a divination? When she spoke of the witch in the masculine form, *brujo*, did that mean the witch was a man, or that she was not sure of its sex? And what could Don Carlos have done to make anyone want to work magic against him? One thing was sure -- when his mother asked how he had spent his day, he would have quite a story to tell.

Don Carlos was very enthusiastic about his meeting with the *curandera*, but Ygnacio thought it best not to mention the *brujo* before their visit. There had been no rain for almost two weeks, probably more of the *brujo*'s work. When the morning of the visit to Doña Isabel arrived, the boy had to stand on tiptoe to scoop the gringo's water out of the rain barrel. Not even the most powerful *brujo* could hold back the rain much longer -- neither the saints nor the old gods would allow it -- but for the past few days the water in the barrel had started looking a little cloudy. If it weren't freshened soon, it could develop a bad smell.

Don Carlos seemed in good spirits when he woke up, but Ygnacio heard soft swearing in English when the gringo was out in the *milpa* relieving himself. Whatever was wrong, though, was not something the man wished to discuss with the boy. If the problem was the work of the *brujo*, only the *curandera* could help.

The old woman was in her patio when they arrived, grinding some unfamiliar tubers with her *mano y petate* and scraping the white paste into an old tequila bottle. She answered the anthropologist's unspoken question. "They're for another client. Pest control."

"Fleas?" asked Don Carlos.

The old woman laughed. "Not that kind of pest. Come here, *joven*. You're still *joven*, right, not married?"

"No, I'm not married."

"Closer. Ah, good." She reached up and plucked a stray hair from the side of his head, then began to rummage in a plastic bag. "There's a street in Apizaco where the single men go, and some of the married ones too. They call it the Street of Burros."

"Burros?"

From the plastic bag she produced a hand mirror, on which she placed the hair. "That's what they call them, burros. Because you mount them, understand?" She lit a piece of straw at her charcoal brazier and touched it to the hair, watching carefully as it burned. "A young man in a little town wants to know how people live. He should know about things like where a young man goes to find a woman."

"What do you learn by burning a hair?"

"Ha, look at Ygnacio, the little devil. Look at that smile on his face. Even he knows about the burros."

Ygnacio, blushing, tried to hide his face. He had never heard a woman speak of such matters, and he was fairly sure that no other woman ever would. Don Carlos,

though, was ignoring the boy's embarrassment and asking again about the hair.

"The hair means nothing," the *curandera* replied, it's all burned up. But look." She held the mirror up to his face. "It's left its spirit mark behind." There was a grey-white smudge on the mirror, a little twist of grease. "This says everything I need to help you."

"Well, really, you can help me a lot by teaching me. I'd love to learn about the spirit world and how the saints came to do the work of the old gods and..."

"No, *joven*, those are the things you want from me, not the things you need. I only give a man what he needs. Do you know about *brujos*?"

"A little. They have the power to fly through the air, to ruin the crops, to cause accidents, things like that, right?"

"That may have been true in the old days, who knows? There are lots of stories, but the truth is that anyone who uses the earth powers or the water powers or any of the natural forces to get his way, that person is using witchcraft. Now I look at this mirror, and it and other things tell me you need my help. You've left yourself vulnerable."

"So how can I protect myself against witchcraft?"

The *curandera* returned to her grinding and scraping, saying nothing for several minutes. When she spoke again, she seemed to have forgotten the gringo's question.

"Back in the old days there was an old man who took a young wife. She was his second wife, so wisely he put her in a *casa chica*, some distance away from the

house of his first wife. Most nights he stayed with his old woman, but any time he felt the spirit of fire rising up inside him he would go to the little house of his new wife. Since he was so old, this wasn't very often.

"There was a young man who saw this and thought it would be easy to take advantage of an old man and his beautiful young wife. He started hanging around the *casa chica*, and sure enough it wasn't long before he persuaded that foolish young woman to take him as her lover. Well, he should have gone to Apizaco, because the old man found out.

"So the old man went to the Master of Rain, the Water maker, and he said 'That young man's fire burns too hot. Let's cool him down.' And the saint agreed, and thought the best plan would be to hold back the young man's water until his fire was quenched, to make him just like the old man he had offended. Sure enough, when the young man would go out into the *milpa* to pass water it would only pass with discomfort, just like an old man's water. He would wake up three, four times every night thinking he had to go, but only get a few drops. If he'd quit his mistress then he would have saved himself, but *jóvenes* can be very stubborn.

"A week passed, two weeks, a month. All that water backed up and quenched the fire of his passion. Knowing he would never again know the pleasures of his manhood, he cut off his testicles and became a priest."

It was quiet again while the *curandera* scraped the last of the ground tuber into the tequila bottle, then topped off the bottle with water heated over her brazier

in a tin can. The cloudy white liquid looked familiar to Ygnacio, and he wondered if it was intended for Don Pedro Alarcon.

This time it was the gringo who broke the silence. "The old man, then, he was a *brujo*?"

The *curandera* shrugged her shoulders. "The story doesn't tell us just how he obtained the saint's intervention. Still, he was a rich man, a man accustomed to using power. He wouldn't have shied away from witchcraft. Such men use whatever means come to hand. You can write that in your book if you like. It's an important lesson to remember, and as much as you need to know for today."

When the gringo left for home, Doña Isabel asked that Ygnacio be permitted to remain behind. She needed the boy, she said, to run an errand. Ygnacio was pleased to stay, since he had questions of his own.

"Please, señora, can you help him?"

"If he's willing to help himself."

"What does he have to do?"

"He has to do what's right. You know, he reminds me so much of my other young anthropologist. He doesn't believe, and yet he needs to believe. By the time you bring him back to me, though, he'll be ready to put aside his disbelief."

"Bring him back? When?"

"In six days, under the full moon. And tell him to bring plenty of beer. We'll get drunk and flush out the magic. By the way, what did you think about the story I told?"

"I thought it was pretty funny, especially the end."

"An *hechicero* got the testicles, you know, and buried them in the ground, where they sent up stalks and flowers. Those plant's come in handy sometimes. Now take this bottle of medicine to Pedro Alarcón. Don't be afraid, he won't hurt you, just don't let anybody see you hand it over. Tell him it should be the last bottle he'll need, but not to put it into the water until after the next rain. Do you understand?"

Ygnacio recited his instructions. "Take it to Don Pedro, don't let anybody see me, should be the last bottle he needs, don't put it in the water until after the next rain. Yes, I understand."

In truth, there was much that Ygnacio did not understand, but one day he would.