

# In the Land of Exiles, Where Miracles Happen

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## I. Las Promesas

By her own account, the anthropologist was a specialist in ritual. She had single-handedly reconstructed the calendar of dances that kept track of time in Teotihuacán. She had discovered a cave, dug at the base of the pyramid of the Sun, in which there was an ancient small stone altar, on which sunlight fell for only one hour, on the first day of every planting season. Her new work examined the complex imaginary matrices that wove the ancient pyramid city into the webs of celestial light from the sun, the moon, the planets and the stars. She was going to speak that day about rivers, springs, gorges and caves: sacred geography. As she spoke those words, it was clear they made her uneasy.

“Of course,” she said, with a judicious pause, “geography is not *a priori* sacred. A land is made sacred, through rituals.” She must have come from a place where miracles didn’t happen much, I thought.

In south Texas, where I grew up, the laws of nature were frequently being relaxed or dissolved by signs many believed to affirm the supernatural presence of divinity in this world. The face of Jesus appeared in the scorch marks of a flour tortilla in a kitchen in Harlingen, and thousands soon appeared to gaze upon it and receive its divine blessings, as it hung from a tree in a courtyard. In the sierra of Coahuila, in northern Mexico, it once rained stones on my aunts and uncles at a time when the Mexican government was expelling all the priests and nuns. Somehow, this magic emerged from a timeless enchantment of the land itself.

My Madrina, sister to my Grandmother, told a story of a small valley in Coahuila, somewhere near their town of Palaú, in the Serranías del Burro. She said that in this valley, in a clearing by a large mesquite tree, there was a place where no sound could penetrate. If you stood in this clearing, no sound of birds could reach you, no sound of wind, no loud, coarse donkey’s bray.

She remembered one time when her cousin Narciso climbed the tree and was shouting down at her, and she couldn’t hear a thing.

The world was mute there.

Because of this strange phenomenon, the place was called El Valle de Silencio, the Valley of Silence. As to where it lay exactly, she could only say that it was near the Loma de los Muertos, the Hill of the Dead, where my father had once gone prospecting for gold. Madrina said she was told this was one of many places around the world that

God had, for some unknown reason, left unfinished at the time of creation. Magic was possible because creation was incomplete, in progress; anything could happen.

Forevermore, until the end of the world, there would be no sound in El Valle de Silencio. Just as some places are rich in malachite, uranium or gold, thick veins of miracle ore run through Mexico, reaching past the Rio Grande to San Antonio, Santa Fe, San Francisco. What to call these lands? Not Nueva España, or even Nueva Extremadura, as Texas was called in colonial times.

The magic was evident long before then, when the God Huitzilopochtli, Beautiful Hummingbird of the South, commanded the people of Aztlán to travel south in a one hundred and sixty year long exodus, before founding Tenochtitlán in the valley of Mexico. Before them were the Olmecas and Anasazi, the Toltecas and Maya. Since the crossing of the Bering Strait in deep antiquity, wandering south along the spine of the continent, they lived by the same cycles of signs and augurs, building cities, creating societies, then abandoning them and moving on — as if obeying a primordial genetic requirement to seek exile.

In exchange, those people were granted intimate contact with the divine. They talked with their Gods, who lived and moved among them. They lived in a cosmos full of extraordinary powers and forces, all of which met in the lands they lived in and traversed.

There is an economy to this legacy of the miraculous. For every miracle performed, a *promesa*, an obligation to the divine, is incurred. That was the logic of the sacrifices. The Sun must be fed with human hearts if the whole panorama of this world was to be protected.

In 1976, during my first visit to the shrine of the Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexico City, campesinos were crawling across the stones of the plaza to the basilica, several of them with spiny cacti tied to their backs. Many had walked from villages hundreds of miles away.

In a sooty candlelit subterranean chapel, kneeling before a statue of the Virgin, an old Indian woman finished her devout prayers, reached around her back for her long, rope-thick gray braid and then in one swift stroke, cut it off with a large knife. Very slowly, she then laid it at the feet of the statue, crossing herself, probably accomplishing some secret promise she had made for some intercession of La Morenita's powers in her life. Just like all the crawlers in the plaza.

Beginning in Central America, straddling Mexico, Texas, New Mexico and all of California: the land of the perpetual exiles where miracles happen.

## II. Hometown of Miracles

In downtown San Antonio, Texas, my home, at La Capilla de los Milagros, the chapel of miracles, there is a charred crucifix which survived a catastrophic fire in San Fernando Cathedral in the 1820's. It began to heal the faithful — tuberculosis, gout, complaints of the heart — after a family created a shrine for it in what is now a fenced-in shed, in a housing project parking lot. Blessings humbly asked for were granted there, petitions were made, with promesas vouched for in return.

There was holy red dirt in a church outside of Taos on the highway to Las Vegas, which Uncle Raul used to heal his arthritic knees. My ninety year-old great aunt, Tia Pepa, took a bus to Querétaro to gather a few gallons of life-giving waters from a spring that had been discovered there recently.

According to the old abuelas, the grandmothers of Tenochtitlán, each body is a crack in the universe, an infinite chasm that contains the thirteen heavens of Tamoanchan and the nine underworlds of Tlalocan. When they arrived in the New World, the Spaniards brought their own Heaven and Hell with them.

Since then, these two universes have been colliding and churning, one consuming the other, then being consumed anew in a whorl of endless creation. But the magic of the land abides, witnessing all.

There are stories of the presagios, the darkening augurs that the Mexicas, or Aztecs, wrestled with before the Conquest. They were told to Padre Bernardino de Sahagún by Indians who had personally witnessed them.

It was ten years before the arrival of the Spanish. In the year 12 House in the Azteca calendar, for an entire year, people saw fiery signs in the heavens. Sometimes they were shaped like a spike pointed down, sometimes like a flame hanging from the middle of the midnight sky, sometimes like a tear. They said then that sky was weeping fire. And then the fire came to earth.

At the Templo Mayor, in the center of Tenochtitlán, the House of Huitzilopochtli, the God who had led the Mexicas on their long migration south, burst into flames and would not be extinguished.

A swift, silent bolt of lightning destroyed the temple of Xiuhtecuhtli, one of the Aztec's most primeval and revered Gods. His temple had always been made of straw. They would say later that it was struck by the Sun.

Then one day, the Sun reversed its course, streaming a tail across the sky like a comet coughing flames, rising in the West and rushing to the East, raining bright red sparks with the sound of thousands of tiny bells.

Phantasmagorical beasts and men appeared among the Mexica. A two-headed man. An ash-colored bird was caught in a maguery net and taken to the House of Magic Studies, so that it could be shown to the Emperor Motecuhzoma.

In the crown of its head was a mirror that seemed to be turning like a spiral. In that mirror, Motecuhzoma first saw a pageant of all of the stars in the night sky, spindling around the North Star. When that scene dissolved, in the distance he saw a vision of an approaching legion, raising battle against a herd of running deer.

After the Cacique had beheld the marvels that had been brought before him, they are said to have disappeared before the attending priests could witness them. When they looked, they saw only themselves in the mirror. By then, Motecuhzoma had come to believe the Aztecs, who spent so much of their lives doing rituals to keep their world from being destroyed, were now being warned their world would soon come to an end.

This, too, had been prophesied.

But of all these mystical presagios, these long-remembered premonitions of doom, the most haunting premonition of Mexico's destiny is the report that people heard the sound of a woman's voice off in the woods, crying, letting out great peals, and screaming in the darkness. The ancient mother was abandoned and hysterical in the old wild night.

Fretful and plaintive, they heard her speak these words,

"My little children, now we must go far away!"

"My little children, where will I take you?"

Even as the fearsome glory of the Aztec world was dying, a new world was just being created that would be part Spanish, part Indian. This is the mystical part of the inheritance. The incalculable *mestizaje*, the genetic mixing of the Old and New worlds, was rooted from its beginning in the unfolding prophecy of these lands, a geographical pageant of miracles.

Gods have come and gone. The last time Huitzilopochtli appeared to the Mexica, it was to a delegation of Eagle Warriors who were walking along a mountain path, on their way to a meeting with the Spaniards who had made a camp, preparing to enter Tenochtitlán.

He appeared, walking out of a stand of pines, looking like an old man wearing a hood.

"Where are you going," he growled at the Mexica emissaries.

"Why do you bother with all of this. Mexico is already lost."

It was only ten years later, in 1531, the year 13 Cane in the Aztec calendar, on a hillside outside Tenochtitlán called Tepeyac, where the Aztec goddess Tonantzin had been worshipped for hundreds of years, an Aztec peasant, Juan Diego, reported a series of apparitions of a being, an Indian woman in a plain cloak, who claimed to be "mother to all the people of these lands." The Olmecas, the most ancient of the Mexican ancients, are thought to have worshipped a female god. Hundreds of their big-hipped and pendulously breasted jade totems have been unearthed across central Mexico. In this tale of fields of roses in midwinter — where an old Mexica shaman is saved from death, a mystical painting appears on a shawl, and a velvet-robed Bishop is brought to his knees by the words of an Indian — *la Virgen* renews the enchantment

of these lands. With the miracles at Tepeyac, the Virgin Mother, in a brown body, reclaimed her place as spiritual sovereign of those exilic homelands. From silver pendants engraved with her image worn by the lace and black muslin Doñas at the basilica in Mexico City to the rainbow-colored tattoos of her face on the arms of Cholo gangsters in Sacramento, the meaning is clear: in these times of the Aztec fifth sun, on a planet churning through the universe with no definable destination, this remains her age, her world, her territories.

### III. The Vision of the Pears

My Grandmother, whom we called Uela, was a Rosicrucian.

From the time she was a young girl in Palau, she had been a follower of the Via Crucis, the mystical way of the Rosy Cross. She never told me about it. It was Tia Pepa who many years later remembered how the sisters studied the occult teachings of the Gnostic Christian secret society by correspondence. According to her sister, Uela had achieved the highest level of initiation, the Adeptus Minor, which traditionally is said to involve powers of prophecy, tongues, healing, and miracles.

Their books, sent from a central temple somewhere in the western U.S., told them it was a technique of natural magic that originated in the ancient Egyptian mystery schools of Thoth, ageless wise man, architect of the pyramids, founder of all sciences. There was a hidden tradition of wisdom in the world that had never been lost. It was possible, through practice and proper discipline to learn the secret essences of things.

How the three spheres of paradise are contained within the head.

How the heart is the seat of a universal blazing sun.

How everything in the universe was inscribed at the time of creation with mystical letters that could be read and understood.

Before she died, Uela called my aunts into her hospital room and made them promise to burn all of her Rosicrucian books and papers. They were to sign a certificate of witness that the material had been destroyed, and then send it to the Supreme Temple of the Ancient Mystical Order Rosae Crucis in San Jose, California. They burned the two trunks full of effects the day after her funeral in the alley behind Uela's house, on a raked-together bier of dry pecan tree leaves.

All that survives of her library is a copy of the 1602 Valera Spanish translation of the Bible, which she gave to Madrina as a wedding present in May of 1944. The worn blue fabric cover bears the hermetic insignia of the rose and the cross. Its spine is reinforced with silver duct tape. Inside, on the cover page, in her graceful filigreed handwriting, there is an inscription in Spanish that records the tone of her familiar daily hymns of sadness and strength,

Tome, 5/29/44

Cherish this Holy book as a remembrance.  
 You will find peace and tranquility in reading it,  
 just like the divine balm which sweetens and strengthens  
 our tired and hurting souls.  
 Its words of wisdom show us  
 the flowered path which leads us straight to the truth.  
 Words of consolation from which,  
 Sister, comes all that is holy, good and just —  
 the Divine love of God.  
 Your sister who loves you  
 Su hermana que te quiere,  
 Margarita G Santos

The “flowered path” Uela spoke of was the path we had always been on, the one that had begun in the inconceivably distant recesses of time. This path had continued whether the family was in Mexico or Texas, settled in a comfortable house, or setting out again in search of a new home. As Tia Pepa tells the story today, it was in the troubled days just after arriving in San Antonio at the time of the Mexican Revolution that, as a young girl, she received a sign that she was where she was meant to be, and that her family, the Garcias, were on the right road.

“How could God have found us otherwise?” she asks, joking.

It was a hot night, and the whole family, old Abuelo Teofilo included, moved their beds outside onto a small grassy hill near the house on Burr Road which always had such cooling breezes, even on the most uncomfortable days. With her sisters asleep next to her, Pepa heard from far off the slow bass vibrato of her grandfather’s snore, wreathed in that still night in the steady whistling of thousands of crickets. The mosquito netting drawn over the bed kept her from seeing any stars, but Venus and the Moon were as bright as polished ivory.

“Then, as I watched from my pillow, the Moon seemed to open up, like a yucca flower throwing out its seeds.”

In her kitchen, Pepa raises her hands above her head, spreading out and moving her fingers like a rain gently beginning to fall to the ground.

It was a slow-moving cascade of countless luminous pears, glowing bright green against the midnight sky, as they made their way down toward earth. Watching the pears descending, Tia Pepa looked from bed to bed and saw her brothers and sisters sleeping, scattered across the hill. The crickets and her father’s snoring had fallen silent.

These pears seemed to fill the air around all of them, bringing a sweet scent of the fruit, stronger and stronger as they drew closer. One pear passed with a whisper through the netting above her, and when Pepa put her hand out to touch it, it passed through her hand with the faint sound of radio static. The impalpable fruit seemed to rotate

slowly as it passed through her nightshirt and into her chest, above her heart. She looked again to see her sisters and brothers, and the pears were descending out of the sky and passing into each of them as well.

“For awhile, I just counted the pears as they passed into my heart. Some were bright green. Some were riper, with a little red on them.”

Eventually, Tia Pepa says, she lost count near one hundred. She remembers that night as the first real sleep she had since leaving Mexico, two months before.

The Rosicrucian studies the Garcia sisters had done over the years taught them a way to live with proper attention to the signs and visions by which the unknown meaning of things could be discerned. Since all creation was part of the same manifestation of God, everything the world presented was part of the story of something larger taking place, partly revealing the ultimate meaning of the world. Until the moment of rapture, when the entire meaning of the universe shall be evident to everyone, it was each initiate's obligation to be able to discover the messages underlying whatever they saw.

A hawk seen in flight in fog was a warning: your greatest efforts will be useless in the present web of circumstances.

A jug of wine with a drowned butterfly? Beware the drunkenness of a loved one.

A silver halo, doubled around the October moon was a sign of childbirth, probably twins.

Everything was connected. Mal aires, the evil airs, might enter your body through your uncovered mouth or head and wrap themselves like a treacherous smoke around your bones. This could leave you with a rheum, la gripa, a life-threatening flu. As Madrina well knew from the fits she had suffered since childhood because of a scare, a frightful sight could paralyze you with susto, a soul fright that could freeze your emotions and leave you quivering and blank, like a zombie. Worse, a malicious look from a stranger, the mal ojo, could kidnap your soul forever.

In Mexico, these ways of seeing the world had been implicit. In the United States, even in Texas, which had been part of la Nueva Extremadura, they began to feel like superstitions, especially to the men in the family. It was mainly the women who kept vigil over the knowledge that had been gathered across generations. In their blood, in their daily observances, they carried the book of the past. In their visions, they read the book of the future.

#### IV. A Chevrolet Madonna

Along with the cataclysms, natural and man-made, this has been a century of miracles and visions. The epic of magic remains incomplete. Promesas are still being fulfilled. Before an apocalyptic vortex of killing and recrimination descended on Bosnia Herzegovina, there were daily visions of Mary taking place in the mountain village of Medjugorje. Three youths, two girls and a boy, carried on a year-long conversation with their

vision, whom they described as the Virgin Mary, Mother of God. After the crowd attending the punctual afternoon apparitions grew too large, the venue was moved by begrudging church authorities to the local church rectory, where only a few witnesses were allowed.

Appearing so routinely, the Virgin was able to address herself to such otherwise quotidian matters as the inefficiency of public waterworks in the village and the penurious local property tax rates. An Uncle of mine went on a pilgrimage there and claimed, along with other pilgrims, to have looked straight at the Sun at midday without harming his eyes. Instead, he saw a rapid dance of many-coloured light, as if filtered through a prism in the sky. The visions at Medjugorje ended without fanfare when one of the visionaries went off to join the Bosnian army. Another developed brain cancer. Then the war came, and it became too dangerous to gather at the rectory, even for daily prayers.

At Fatima, Portugal in 1917, a series of visions of Mary ended in a strange sign in the sky witnessed by hundreds of pilgrims who had gathered for a promised miracle. According to the witnesses, who stood in a narrow valley where there was an old olive grove, our twentieth century Sun appeared to swing from side to side in the sky like a pendulum, then it fell below the horizon, leaving the people in darkness for a number of minutes, until it returned to its proper place in the heavens.

Inevitably, we will receive the visions appropriate for the age we live in. In September of 1983, the Virgin came to San Antonio, with the help of a young witness and the polished chrome fender of a 1975 Chevrolet Impala.

It happened in an old barrio subdevelopment on the deep south side of the city, off the Pleasanton Road, which had once been a stagecoach route, but was now a long faceless asphalt trail of strip malls, feed stores, and massage parlors. The houses there are flat and weathered from the tea-colored sandstorms that blow through that part of the San Antonio river plain.

The Chevrolet Madonna was first seen by a Chicano boy on his sixteenth birthday, after taking out the trash around ten that night. For some weeks, he had been having nightmares that he would be shot in a drive-by on his birthday. In his dream, he would be taking out the trash, walking across the dry, straw-colored carpet grass of the front yard, when he would notice the same gray Ford Pinto coming around the corner towards his house. As he saw someone leaning out of the back window with a pistol in his hand, he would try to run back for his front door, but it was suddenly as if he was paralyzed by a mysterious force. Turning towards the house, the air was as dense as deep water. And each night, the dream would end just after he heard the explosion of the gun firing from behind him.

When he went out to empty the garbage that night, he said he saw a translucent bright white light descend swiftly onto a neighbor's lawn across the street. He watched as it moved down the street, zig-zagging between ash trees and pickup trucks like a spinning top, veering sharply in the middle of the street in front of his house, and coming directly for him. Before he could move away, he screamed, as he felt what he called



“the icy light” pass directly through him and waft farther on the night air, finally coming to rest against the side wall of the neighbor’s house.

When his mother and sister found him kneeling in the yard just minutes later, his hands were clasped in prayer and his gaze was already fixed on the house next door. As he looked at the large, jagged splash of light before him, he recognized in it a clearly defined shape where the light was brighter.

“It’s our holy lady, kneeling, reading the Bible,” he told them. They looked at the wall and saw the same shape there, and they were awestruck. There was a pool of light that might be a bowed head, one edge that could be a large book held open, a wavy glimmer towards the ground that could seem to someone to be a kneeling torso. But you had to look deep into the light, unfocusing your eyes, to see any of this. After holding hands and saying prayers together, the family went inside and built an altar to receive the Blessings the Divine Mother was bestowing on them.

They began a marathon of Rosaries devoted to the Virgin Mary. The son fainted and began speaking in a high-pitched voice, while family members held a minicorder to his mouth, recording his every utterance. When he declared the tap water in the house was blessed, they placed roses in a vase filled with the water, and the entire house was filled with an intoxicating scent of the flowers.

As word spread through the neighborhood and the news media began to report the story, hundreds of people began to arrive every evening to see the light for themselves. It didn’t take the skeptics long to discern that the light of this apparition was nothing more than the reflection of the family’s porchlight off the front bumper of a maroon Chevrolet Impala, parked in the driveway. On the second night of the apparition, a couple of pachuco homeboys, who had been sniffing glue all afternoon, starting rocking the car and howling with laughter as the apparition bobbed up and down against the beige aluminum house siding, startling the devoted onlookers.

Nonetheless, on crutches, in wheelchairs, and in large groups, the hopeful, the devout, the sick and the curious kept coming. A man with acute colitis was rumored to have rid himself of crippling abdominal pain by touching the wall. Many swooned while just standing along the chain link fence of the neighbour’s backyard.

Then, one neighbour caught a pilgrim urinating on his lawn. Another found a couple, in flagrante delicto, in their own parked car as they had come to attempt to conceive a child in the apparition’s glow, unable to do so before without divine intervention.

The local Bishop said the church was “cautiously skeptical” in the matter.

“I see the Blessed Mother every day,” he told the newspaper, “but I don’t necessarily invite the whole community.”

“If it isn’t from God, it will die a natural death.”

It didn’t seem to matter to the faithful that the apparition had a perfectly explicable source. Was it not a miracle that the lamplight from the porch had even caught the dented fender of the Impala in the first place? What was the probability of those few shafts of light reflecting off that long curved chrome surface in precisely the way neces-

sary to project the Madonna's silhouette? Out of the million chance encounters in the ordinary running on of the everyday, this beam was a light breaking suddenly through a curtain, creating an aperture between worlds, showing us just how incomplete our own world really was.

The neighbour with the wall was growing desperate as legions of devotees trampled greater swaths of his lawn, and carried on singing and chanting all night long. He decided to illuminate the apparition with two gigantic mercury floodlights, thereby bathing the amber-toned reflection in a fluorescent silver glare that erased any hint of the Virgin Mary's outline, and drawing gasps and angry shouts from the crowd.

One reporter heard a woman scream at the neighbor, "If you have any love in your heart you will let us see the Virgin!"

"If you believe in Mary, the mother of God, you will turn out the light."

The mother of the family of the young visionary collapsed.

The family repositioned their Impala in the driveway, and used camping flashlights to try, without success, to cast the Virgin's reflection against their own garage door. All they managed were jittery Rorschach blots of a shapeless milky light. In fact, once the car was moved, the image of the Blessed Virgin Mary reading the Bible was to disappear forever. For several days, the devout and the nosy continued to come after sunset. For months after they stopped coming, the neighbour kept his modest house saturated in as much light as the Lincoln Memorial.

She had not been a Virgin who had come with much to say. As always, she had chosen an obscure place under humble circumstances to manifest herself. This time there were no clouds, no cherubim, no starry mantle. As apparitions go, she was more of a chimera, a cipher, a portal between worlds. For those who believed in her light, she brought the message that the interaction between the mortal and the divine in those lands has not ended. From her debut on a hill in Mexico City more than four hundred years ago, here at end of the twentieth century, she came to a parched, rundown Texas suburb. Her presence reassured the faithful who congregated there in the apparition's low wattage glow that the enchantment of the homelands is not over. The pact of the sacred lands continues.

On the night the miracle-busting floodlights were turned on, when the mother of the young seer of Pleasanton Road passed out, some of the devotees had gathered around her, holding hands, and improvised a song they sang over her as she lay unconscious:

"Stay with me Lord, stay with me, the spirit of the Lord is moving through my heart, stay with me Lord, stay with me."