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**BÉSAME
MUCHO**

Edited by

JAIME MANRIQUE with JESSE DORRIS

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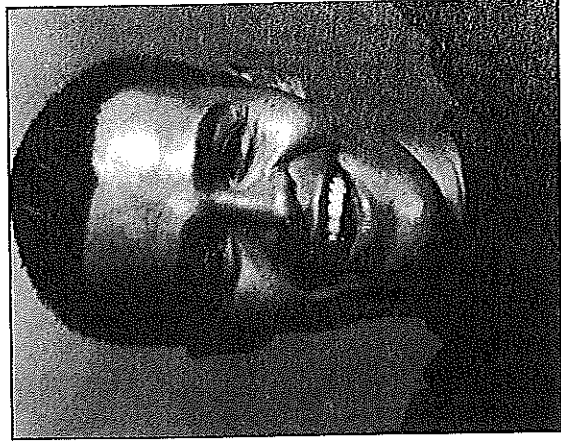


Photo: Robert M. Ford

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THE TWO MIRACLES OF THE GRINGOS' VIRGIN



James Cañón

My grandmother never goes to bed without drinking a shot of *aguardiente* and saying her prayers to a small replica of the Statue of Liberty. I've told her many times that it isn't a virgin, just a symbol of freedom, but she is stubborn, and a little crazy, too. She insists that the Statue of Liberty is *la virgen de los gringos*; and that one of these days the gringos' virgin is going to work her two miracles: making my penis disappear and reuniting me with my mother.

I know that faith is all we need to make things happen; however, since I learned that the Statue of Liberty has never been a virgin, I've been trying hard to dissuade Grandma of lighting candles and praying with such devotion to the rigid image. My first try was to send a *peon* into town to buy a few virgins of different shapes, hoping my *abuela* would get attached to any of them. He brought La Virgen de Chiquinquirá, La Virgen de Las Lajas, La Virgen del Carmen, and a few others from different

places of our country, but I had no luck. All those virgins ended up on an old shelf with San Antonio, El Divino Niño Jesús, San Lázaro, and some other "second-class" saints to whom Abuela only lights candles once a month.

"This is the gringos' virgin. She lives in Los Estados Unidos, where your mother is. Only she can reunite the two of you." She tells me this while gracing the altar with fresh-picked flowers, avocados, oranges, papayas, coffee, and everything else she thinks the Statue of Liberty craves.

Once I tried what I thought would be the perfect argument to convince her that she was wrong.

"Abuela, tell me why the gringos' virgin is not holding a baby Jesus like all virgins do?"

"Well..." she stammered, "the gringos, you know. They took the baby out of her hands; they don't hold babies like we do, God forbid. They pay someone to take care of their babies so they can go out and make more money." She learned all this from letters that my mother used to send us from New York.

"What about the book she's holding?" I asked, trying to sound smart.

"That's the book of the Sacred Scriptures." She answered confidently while grabbing the small statue with two of her shaky fingers.

"And what about the torch? What's that for?" I didn't want to give up.

"That's to light the way for those disbelievers like yourself. And now leave me alone because I have to start making dinner for sixty starving *peones*.

This madness may have started when my mother disappeared in Ibagué, the big city, two months before I was born. I was rooted out of her belly when she was only twenty-six weeks pregnant. Then I was put inside an incubator until I was ready to face the world, ten weeks later. My mother never went back to Fresno, the town where she and my father had lived; on the contrary, she ran away as soon as she was freed from the horrible pain that I was causing her. She didn't wait to see what she and my father had created: a hermaphrodite.

The doctors in Ibagué told my father that only one child in ten million was born a hermaphrodite, and that they couldn't explain the reason. My father took me back to Fresno where *el doctor* Ramírez, the only doctor in town, said out of ignorance that I was meant to be a girl, but that Mamá had eaten too much *caldo de aquel*, a soup made with the penis and the testicles of a bull, and that the bull had been so sexually powerful that it affected my reproductive organs.

The rumor spread in town that Don Francisco Medina, my father, had a little monster hidden in his house, and that Doña Carmenza de Medina, my mother, had disappeared. Therefore, all the nosy people in Fresno started paying unannounced visits to my father and my grandmother, just to see the amazing human being with both penis and vagina.

The first one to visit my father's house was the Mayor; then the sheriff; then *el padre* Rafael, and then everyone else who thought they had authority in town to put their nose in father's house. Not only did they visit him, but they all felt they had the right to ask indiscreet questions that never got an answer, and so they made up their own explanation of my astounding condition, agreeing among themselves that it was a castigation. The

mayor, for instance, said, "This is God's punishment because they have been evading taxes for over five years." He also refused to register me as a newborn since my sex wasn't defined. "It is a punishment coming straight from heaven," affirmed *el padre* Rafael, the town's priest. The reason, he explained afterward, was that my father, among other people in Fresno, wasn't paying the right tithe to church, and so the clergy had ended up full of fat hens, eggs, yuccas, and plantains, but no cash. He also refused to bless me with the holy sacraments. Nevertheless, it was Doña Melba, a neighbor, who went further than anyone else when she proclaimed, "That kid is the Antichrist. We should burn it alive in the public plaza before it's too late."

My father, however, made sure nobody else would see me by sending me along with my *abuela* to his farm. It was a smart decision. At least for himself. He avoided the unpleasant situation of having to show his anomalous child, and he punished my grandmother, whom he had always hated for being an alcoholic, by making her cook three daily meals for about fifty *peones* who worked on his farm.

In regard to my mother there were a few versions. Doña Romelia, another neighbor, said her son had seen my mother working in a whorehouse in Ibagué. Don Raimundo, Fresno's self-made dentist, assured he had seen, "with my own two eyes," my mother begging for money on the streets of the big city. Someone else said Mamá had killed herself by jumping down the bridge that connects Flandes and Girardot over the Magdalena River. Abuela, though, defended my mother by saying, "My daughter joined the convent of Las Carmelitas Descalzas," a bunch of crazed nuns who renounced the use of anything to cover their feet but their callosities, and were not allowed to

show their faces to anyone on earth. Grandma even said mother wrote her letters from the convent every now and then; but Don Miguel, the mail clerk, denied the version. "That old woman hasn't gotten anything in the mail since her husband died, about ten years ago. I remembered she received one hundred and thirty-seven condolence cards. No one has beaten that record."

Maybe all this madness began with the bitter taste of Pancha's herbal infusions on my father's farm, where I've spent twenty-three years hidden between the smell of fresh milk and the stench of cow dung.

I was only five years old when Abuela and I met with Pancha, the witch. Grandma thought I looked exactly like my mother when she was a little girl, and so she wanted me to lose, as if by magic, my penis and become a girl. Pancha, who took pride in having witnessed the most bizarre things, became horrified when she saw what I had between my legs: my penis was four inches down from my navel; a prominence the size of a growing silkworm, always pointing down like a boneless finger vanquished by gravitational force. The outgrowth was completely covered by soft skin contracted into folds, except for a little hole at the end from which urine sluggishly sprinkled. Right below it, two tiny little protuberances timidly appeared through the thick and wrinkled skin: those were my balls. And just because this wasn't enough to make me a hermaphrodite, one inch down from my balls I had a slitty cut. A straight narrow incision from which urine also came out sporadically. "This is a very special case," Pancha said after a close scrutiny. "But there's nothing in

this world I can't cure. If God gives us the disease, he gives us the remedy." From that day on I started drinking her "miraculous" potions that were supposed to help the gringos' virgin in making my little penis disappear.

My father, who didn't know anything about Pancha's sorcery, nor Grandma's wishes, decided to ignore the mistake of Mother Nature and started calling me Francisco, just like himself. He also ordered Abuela to make sure I was always dressed as a little cowboy: a pair of jeans, a shirt, a pair of boots, and, of course, a sombrero. He used to drive his red truck every morning from Fresno to help the *peones* milk the cows. He was a master. He taught me how to approach a cow so it wouldn't kick me. "Remember this, son," he told me once. "Cows are like women, you can never trust them; so make sure you tie their legs before you start milking them." Father also taught me how to press out the cow's udder so that more milk came out of it in a single squeeze; and once we were finished, we would drink together a full cup of warm, foamy milk sweetened with honey. After two or three hours, he would go back to Fresno with about one hundred gallons of fresh milk that he would sell to food stores, cheese makers and, if any was left, door to door to his big clientele. Then he would go back to his house in town, where his second wife and my two younger half sisters were waiting for him. They were not allowed to come to the farm, and I was forbidden to step off the eighty acres.

As soon as my father disappeared in clouds of dust, I was under the tutelage of my grandmother. My name was no longer Francisco but Carmencita, just like my mother. Abuela taught me, while drinking her shots of *aguardiente*, how to brew coffee. "Coffee should be like a good husband, not too strong, but not

too weak." She also taught me how to scale, clean, and cook fish; how to kill a chicken without letting the blood ruin the meat; how to wash and iron clothes, how to sew hems. She also taught me to please men, "But don't let them touch your body." To be obedient, to always say, "Sí, señor," just like she had taught my mother. And when the night came, she made me repeat one hundred times, "*Soy una niña, soy una niña*"—"I'm a little girl—while drinking Pancha's bitter concoction.

For my tenth birthday Father brought me a cake with my male name written on it; and just like every year he also brought his guitar to sing to me the *feliz cumpleaños* song. He was just about to start singing when Grandma walked into the room.

"She's got to go to school," she said timidly in her anise-flavored voice. "I don't want my granddaughter to be *bruta* like me."

"It's not a she, damn it. It's a he," my father yelled. "And he's not leaving this farm unless I say so."

"But that isn't fair to her. She's got to learn to write and read." Father got up and grabbed Abuela by her shoulders as he repeated loudly, "It's a boy. Don't you understand, drunk bitch? It's a boy." Grandma must have said something else that I didn't hear, because all of a sudden he knocked her down on the floor and struck her with everything that was on the table. I saw the white frosting of the cake mixing with Grandma's white hair, and the guitar breaking against her head. I saw flying in the air the vase with the flowers, dishes, cups, and two of Abuela's yellowish teeth. I saw red blood squirting out of her mouth, and still I heard her repeating softly, "It's a girl, it's a girl." Father grabbed the only thing left on the table, a knife, and threatened her: "Don't make me kill you, *puta borracha*. I don't want to go to prison for slaying an old crap like you."

I couldn't hold it in any longer and began to cry. Father looked at me with compassion, stabbed the knife on the wooden table and walked out of the house. As he was leaving, Abuela managed to drag herself toward the door, and from there she repeated as loud as her almost toothless mouth allowed her to do: "It's a girl, it's a girl."

This madness, perhaps, started a few days after my tenth birthday, on a rainy day in October, when a plump, bleached-haired woman came to the farm looking for Grandma.

"I have news about your daughter," she told her, and even though they had never seen each other before, they locked themselves in Abuela's room and talked for hours. After the woman left, Grandma started dancing, singing, and screaming "Your mother's alive, I knew it. Carmencita's alive." I thought she was drunk again; and she was, but this time with happiness. "Come to my room, *hijita*. I'm going to show you some pictures that your mother sent me." In the first picture mother was surrounded by two men and another woman; they were wearing strange outfits and seemed to be very happy. In the second picture she was alone standing in front of the Statue of Liberty, the same symbol that would later become, in my grandma's drunken mind, the gringos' virgin. Mother looked totally different from the sepia pictures of her that I had seen before. She was another person and I didn't like her. I just couldn't think of a mother wearing bell-bottom jeans, polyester flowery blouses, rolled-up handkerchiefs tied around her head, and dozens of necklaces and bracelets. But my grandma was so happy to hear about her daughter being alive, that she didn't care if mother had become a hippie.

In addition to the color pictures, mother sent a box taped all around, and a short letter that the plump lady must have read aloud, since Grandma was, and still is, illiterate.

"The letter said she is working hard, taking care of people's kids and cleaning houses. And guess what else she sent me inside the envelope?" she asked me with half a smile.

"I don't know. More pictures?"

"No, *hijita*," she whispered. "She sent me these green bills. They're worth a lot of money." She rolled up the bills and hid them in her bosom.

"Did she send me anything?" I asked with anticipation.

"No, Carmencita. Not this time. She doesn't know you're alive." Mother never expected me to survive the incubator, the abnormality, or the rejection.

The box contained oversized clothes for Grandma, all with the textures and colors of the unknown and the distinctive smell of freedom; shoes, silver jewelry, a blond afro wig, key rings, and a small replica of the Statue of Liberty. As soon as Abuela saw the statue, she lifted it with both her hands, looked up at the ceiling and said, "*Gracias, Virgencita*." Then she moved down all the saints she had on the shelf in her room, and replaced them with her new, most-powerful virgin ever.

From that day on, Abuela became the most devoted and loyal disciple the Statue of Liberty ever had. For more than twelve years she never skipped a night without lighting a candle and saying prayers to the green piece of plaster. In addition to that, every Sunday she showed respect to the gringos' virgin by offering her typical dishes that she served on fine porcelain and placed right on the shelf next to the statue. "She was hungry today," Grandma would tell me while taking the empty tray back

to the kitchen. The truth is that the strong smell of garlic, cumin, and cilantro invited mice, roaches, and ants to celebrate every Sunday over *sancocho*, *cuchuco* or whatever dish Abuela chose to offer.

It's not unusual to find chicken bones under Grandma's bed, or rotten pieces of food under her pillow. "She made a mess," Grandma would whisper in my ear blaming the statue. "But this is all part of my sacrifice. The more I suffer, the sooner you'll lose your penis and the sooner you'll be with your mother."

And she suffered plenty without giving up her faith or giving in to my father; because even though Father ended up paying *la maestra* Cleotilde, the school's teacher, to come to the farm and teach me how to write and read, he and Grandma continued fighting over my sex every time they met for about two years. Most of the time they just raised their voices and insulted each other, but a few other times my father lost control of himself, and it was in those few times that Grandma lost, one by one, all the teeth she had left in her mouth.

All this madness may have begun when my body decided to please both my father and Abuela by merging his dream with her wish.

A few months before my twelfth birthday, my body began to suffer drastic changes: my arms got strong and my hands grew big; a bulky Adam's apple sprouted out of my throat; my nipples began to hurt, itch, and finally grow into two protuberances the size of small oranges; thin hair began to show on my face and my chest; and the upper bulge of my odd private parts became more noticeable. My voice, however, remained soft and delicate.

It was at around this same time that I started taking pleasure from the strong smell of the sweaty *peones* that worked on the farm, and paying them night visits at the shelter where they slept.

As my body started defying nature with its unusual changes, my father stopped coming to the farm to train me on how to be a man. His dream of making a man out of me was being sabotaged by destiny, and he couldn't put up with it. He never came back, but he hired Don Luis as a tenant farmer, and it was through him that father made sure Grandma and I had everything we needed to survive physically, because emotionally we were both dying slowly.

I remember sitting on the bench at the porch of the house in the peaceful mornings, hoping to see father's red truck coming in raising clouds of dust, hear my male name pronounced in his hoarse voice, or feel the warmth of his embrace. I remember sitting on the same bench in the silent nights, watching the man he wanted me to be fade away with the years.

Learning how to write and read was a lot easier for me than it was for the children that went to school in town. At least that's what *la maestra* Cleotilde said to Abuela. She also said I was brilliant but obscure, lucid but enigmatic. She would have taught me mathematics, sciences, and geography, if Grandma hadn't hit her with a fat yucca when they got into an argument about the pureness of the Statue of Liberty. *La maestra* never came back either, but though she left me half-learned, I started writing, in embroidered calligraphy, long letters to my mother that Abuela dictated; then, the first Monday of each month, we would secretly go into Fresno to mail them.

Before going into town, we would disguise ourselves so that my father wouldn't recognize us if he saw us. Grandma would wear the blond afro wig that mother had sent her, sunglasses, and as if that wasn't enough, she'd put colorful makeup on her wrinkled face. Once she had transformed herself into what she called "a distinguished lady" she'd make me wear one of her oversized dresses aromatized with mothballs, and her old, torn mantilla. The first Monday of every month was the happiest day for me. On that day I had the opportunity of seeing, from afar, the handsome men that gathered in the café by the public plaza. They all wore pressed shirts and their hair was neatly combed; and they seemed very happy eating flavored ice in tall glasses, or drinking hot coffee in beautiful cups.

In our first letter, Abuela complained to Mother about how my father hit her and made her work like a slave, despite her old age. She thanked mother for sending us *la Virgen de los Gringos*, and she also updated her with the very little town gossip she knew. Finally, when she had nothing else to add, Abuela told Mother about me. She started by saying that I had survived, and that although the priest had refused to baptize me she had decided to name me after her, Carmencita. She also explained that "she's not a complete girl quite yet, but I teamed up with Pancha, the witch, and she's vanishing Carmencita's little penis with a magic concoction." Grandma was lying. In defiance of Pancha's potions my penis only grew bigger and thicker. Abuela knew so, because checking my private parts was then, and still is, our every-morning routine. As soon as I wake up, I rub my erect penis with one hand, and my sticky vagina with the other, while thinking of the strong, sweaty bodies of the *peones* or the good-looking men of the café. After a few

minutes, I rush to stand in front of the vertical mirror on the old wardrobe, and inspect closely between my legs, wishing to see my penis magically replaced with another navel or a bigger vagina, or at least hoping to notice any reduction in its size. Then Grandma comes into my room with a cup of coffee for me, a shot of *aguardiente* for herself, and a measuring tape, which she can't read, to verify the actual size of my penis. The tape is all marked in red ink with the growing length and width of my upper sexual organ.

About three months after we mailed our first letter, we received a small package from my mother. They held it for us at the post office until we picked it up. She sent us new pictures in her eccentric outfits, and a long letter that I read for Grandma. In it she wrote about things the meaning of which I didn't know, like love, peace, and harmony, and how she was fighting to make this world into a more tranquil place to live. She also wrote about the importance of affection, devotion, and kindness in a friendship. She wrote about the many friends she had, the many places she had visited, the many people she had shared soul-thoughts with. She wrote about everything and everyone but me. And so Grandma excused her one more time. "They must have lost the page where she wrote to you. You know how careless they are at the post office." We would patiently wait for the next letter to come. One hundred and thirteen letters were mailed by us after that, and seventy-nine came back from Mother, and still my existence was never even alluded to in any of them. Mamá was so preoccupied changing the world that she didn't have time to care about me.

Perhaps this madness started after the rainy season of 1976, when I came down with what *el doctor Ramírez* said was malaria.

I was nineteen years old and we had already lost contact with my mother. The last two letters we got from her came from different cities; after that we never heard from her again, and with her silence ended our Mondays' cheerful visits to Fresno. Grandma was getting old and I could see the nineteen years of suffering on her flabby wrinkled skin, her shaking arthritic hands, her dilated, swollen veins, and her deranged mind. She said there was no reason worth the risk to go into town; and though I wished I could see again the handsome men of the café, I was terrified by them and other normal human beings.

Some boys had made fun of me before, some girls had called me names, some men had insulted me thinking I was a man dressed as a woman, some old ladies had made the sign of the cross upon themselves as Grandma and I walked by them with our heads down.

And it was due to my fear of people and Grandma's ignorance that we waited three days before sending a *peon* to get *el doctor Ramírez*. I began feeling ill on a Tuesday night. It's easy to remember, because that's the night of the week when Grandma and I say together a rosary to the "second-class" saints that she keeps apart from the gringos' virgin. I couldn't sleep that night, feeling hot and cold, and the next morning, when grandma came into my room for the penis-measurement routine, she found me shivering. It didn't stop her from measuring it, but right after she marked the tape with the new size, she sent a field hand for Pancha.

The witch came in the afternoon with a basket filled with herbs that she boiled in purple chicken's blood. Once ready I

drank from the coagulated potion three or four times, and every time my stomach rejected it. Since magic didn't work, Abuela tried religion. She improvised a little altar in my room, and placed the Statue of Liberty on it. Then she spent the whole night saying prayers to it, alternating rosaries with shots of *aguardiente* until dawn, and when the sun started rising, she was completely drunk but still repeating, "Amén, amén, amén..."

Pancha came back again in the afternoon, with more herbs and a wild rabbit that she killed with a knife right in front of my eyes. Then she forced me to open my mouth and drink the warm blood directly from the gash she had made on the rabbit's neck. I couldn't hold the blood for more than five seconds in my stomach, and so I threw up again until there was nothing left inside of me.

My temperature kept on rising and my body sweating. My eyelids felt heavy and my mind slowly got lost in a feverish dream. I saw myself completely nude, standing erect, like a naked version of the Statue of Liberty; only instead of a book I was gripping my penis with one hand, and instead of a torch, my other hand was holding upright a sharp blade. Without losing the straightness of my posture, I saw my right hand coming down furiously and chopping off my penis from its root in one single cut. There was no pain, nor blood, just relief. Then I saw myself running up the hills, my arms widespread as if I were ready to fly, running away from my past, taking nothing with me but my mutilated nude body. When my past was behind me, I saw myself running away from my present, fast, faster so that not even my future could reach me. I saw myself running for hours, days, years without stopping, without looking back, until I saw my mother.

She looked exactly like the sepia pictures I had seen of her when I was a little child. She was standing in the middle of a crystalline lagoon, surrounded by trees of green leaves and yellow flowers, and colorful birds serenading her. I walked slowly toward her, and I saw her singing lullabies to a baby girl she was holding in her arms. I walked a few more steps in her direction and I saw myself again. I was the baby girl mother was singing lullabies to, and for the first time in my life I understood the meaning of love, peace, and harmony. I thought about Abuela's sacrifices, and I thanked her gringos' virgin, because even though it was in a dream, I had finally lost my penis, and mother and I were together in the only place where we could enjoy love, peace, and harmony. We were together in heaven.

Maybe all this madness didn't start after the rainy season of 1976, either. Maybe it all started before that, maybe after. Maybe I'll never find out how it all started, or maybe I don't want to find out. But I know how I'll end it. I dreamt about it.

