

Pedro, Saint Francis, and the Angel

My name is Pedro Francesco Perez. My mother named me after my father, who is strong as a bull and just as temperamental. From working on our farm in Guatemala, he carries a dusty, grassy, animal smell. His eyes are dark, like strong coffee, and sometimes he has popped blood vessels from the shrapnel of wood shavings when he chops wood. If he asked me to do something, like get a haircut or milk the cows at four in the morning, I jumped to it right away, no complaints, no questions. *Si, Padre, si.*

When my father speaks, I do not say a word, only listen. He taught me that rule when I was three years old. Once when I was ten, he screamed so long and hard at me for spilling a bucket of milk that I peed my pants.

When I was sixteen, I woke in my bed in the middle of the night with my back flaming with pain and my face pressed into a lake of tears. Under my pillow, I was gripping a gun. I sprang back and shoved it away. It was the same gun I carried when I traveled, stuffed into the back of my jeans, protection against gangs and banditos. At first I could not remember how the gun got into my hands. But when I leaned over to put the weapon back under my bed, I groaned from the anthills of swollen knots my father's belt buckle had raised across my back. Slowly, slowly, I peeled off my t-shirt and bits of my bloody flesh tore from my skin. I had come home late from a dance.

If it weren't for my Angel that night I'm sure I would no longer be in this world. My Angel is not an Angel I can see with wings and a halo like a figurine which sits on my mother's dresser. He is a voice I can hear, sometimes gentle, sometimes angry, but always with me. "*Tranquilo, tranquilo-*" My Angel hushed into my ear that night, "*Calm down. Take it easy-*" until my heart stopped racing and my clenched fists relaxed and I no longer thought of a quick death to end my humiliation, but finally drifted off to sleep. It never crossed my mind to hurt my father. He is the man who taught me how to ride a horse, how to rope a steer, how to drive a truck. He is the man who gave me my

first Corona, the day I turned fifteen. With respect, he shook my hand and said, "Now you are a man-" I love him deeply. He is a part of my heart, like my mother and the mountains of Guatemala.

My second name, Francesco, comes from St Francis of Assisi, the patron saint of animals. He took a vow of poverty and believed a tiny sparrow was as much his brother as the Pope. I guess my mother hoped I would match his goodness. I try, Mama, please believe me, but sometimes I fall short, so very short.

In Guatemala, my father would not allow me to ride the bulls with my amigos at the annual rodeos. But the thrill of the ride was the only thing stronger than my fear of my father. I loved those glorious seconds in the saddle, the thundering hooves, the cheering crowds. Bull riding is in my blood. At nineteen years old, I dared to enter the competitions, riding bulls with names like Crazy Jack, Insane Asylum, Hellfire, Tornado, and Demonio. You sat tight, one hand in mid-air, the other glued to the burning ropes. When the bull bucked, you followed the bones of his dusty spine and adjusted to his wicked jumping and furious spinning and clouds of kicked up dust. Count yourself lucky if you didn't break your neck. Even luckier if you made the full eight seconds. There was much danger, yes. But how many men can say they had the courage to climb onto a two thousand pound beast and then hold on? I rode well for two reasons. Number one, I am very quick and strong, like a monkey: and number two, Saint Francis watches over me. Sometimes Saint Francis comes to me in my dreams, and his eyes are always full of compassion. He reminds me not to become distracted by worldly things and to treat coins like they are just pebbles in the road. Before every ride I kiss the medallion with his image, a gift from my mother, which hangs around my neck and never comes off. I won tall trophies and champion belt buckles, which I gave away to my friends, fearing a beating from my father if I took them home. My rodeo amigos called me El Pequeno Loco Hombre, the little crazy man, because there was no bull, no matter how terrible, that I would not ride.

In a single day in Guatemala, I lost the two things I love most in this world. When my mother had a heart attack, dropping to our kitchen floor with her brown fingers and toes swollen with hard bumps from a lifetime of chopping, peeling, cooking, sewing, tending our garden, and working the fields, I was riding El Demonio. The bull's fur was black as the midnight sky on our farm, his eyes rolled like a creature possessed, his nostrils flared, and his black lips threw ropes of saliva into the hot air, as he snorted and bucked. I felt a single stab to my chest, like one of his horns had just pierced my heart. (Yet I knew it couldn't be true, because I was still on top of him!) I *felt* my mother go. And then I lost my grip and went flying.

El Demonio trampled my legs.

As the rodeo clowns dragged me off to a bullpen, the crowd gasped. For some time, I lay unconscious with a pillow of straw beneath my head, and when I woke, there he stood, having searched to find me, my father.

"*Su madre es muerto-*" he said. His brick-colored cheeks and lips were as stiff as if he himself had turned into a corpse. From the bench where they laid me out, shaking with pain and now fear, I looked up at my father. He was standing above me in the sunlight. He blinked and some dust and bits of hay swirled around his eyes, like fleas or mites.

He had asked me to stay home that afternoon and help my mother. But I begged her to let me go out with my friends. "Go on-" she said, wringing some clothes in the sink, "You can help me later-" I kissed her flushed cheek and ran out the door.

In the bullpen, the odor of sweat and manure was strong in the heat, and I felt dizzy and sick, knowing that I might have saved my mother.

"I will never forgive you-" my father said next, and then he turned away.

I couldn't speak. It was as if somebody had stuffed fistfuls of dry hay down my throat and set it afire

I watched my father's muscular body stride off, kicking up a cloud of dirt, and my heart broke.

I passed out from the pain before the doctor finally arrived.

My Aunt Manuela, my father's sister, took me in and nursed me back to health. Frequently she picked up clothes, pillows, or toys to whack my little cousins to get them to listen. But other than that, she was okay. On both legs, I wore heavy casts for three weeks, got tired of the itching and not being able to get around and ripped the things off with my bare hands. I hopped around on crutches for a month. And not once did my father come to see me. My Aunt Manuela called him many times. "He is your son. Forgive him. How much longer can you punish him? It won't bring Guadelope back-" Only because of her pleading did he allow me to go to my mother's funeral, but he still refused to look at or speak to me. At the funeral, from a distance, I saw my father cry for the first time. I tried not to look at him, but I couldn't help myself; it was like seeing a mountain dissolve before my very eyes. Like a razor slashing my heart was the pain of my mother's absence and my father's grief. It made the pain in my smashed legs seem like nothing. Sometimes at my Aunt's house, I thought I could smell my mother, a good garlicky kitchen smell, as if she'd just walked right past me. She would never send a bum away hungry, and always she fed the birds with stale bread. Somebody said that at the funeral.

The doctor ordered me never to ride bulls again. My legs wouldn't take it. One of my legs was worse than the other, and I limped some. A part of me died. Every night I listened to my rodeo music, ranchero music, my music, Caballo Dorado (Gilded Horse), Joan Sebastian (El poeta del pueblo/ Poet of the People), and Banda Machos (Gang of Men). Every night I felt an emptiness in my chest that reached to my soul, and every night I cried. "*Tranquilo, tranquilo-*" My Angel said, "Rest, Pedro, Go to Mass every Sunday and don't forget your daily prayers. In time, things will get better-"

For five years, I lived with my Aunt Manuela's family, helping them on their ranch. Dutifully I went to Mass and said my prayers. But the whole time, my father never spoke to me. The pain of him no longer loving me ate at my soul, and I decided to travel

to America, hoping to get a good job and send back lots of money, praying that he would some day forgive me. I could picture the smile on his broad face as he picked up the checks at the Western Union Station, telling anybody who would listen, "Hey, my Pedro, he's a good son--"

On a cool November night, wearing my best cowboy boots, a pair of Wrangler jeans, a professional bull-riding t-shirt, an orange cap embroidered with a bull's horns, and a belt with a rodeo buckle as big as a plate, I set out with my two friends, Rudy and Tito, for America. It was a fifteen day hike through the low plains, the high plains, some jungles, even over some mountains, and then into Mexico where we were to be driven to Baltimore where my aunt had some relatives. We carried bookbags packed with bottles of water, food, and blankets. My aunt had sewn three hundred dollars into the waistband of my jeans in a secret little pocket. We set off at a good pace. Often I felt for my lump of money, reassured by the snug bundle of cash. By the third day, climbing some steep and rocky roads, my feet burned with fat blisters, and my bad legs ached with pain. My amigos offered to trade their Nikes for my boots, but their tennis shoes were way too big for me, and even if I stuffed them with leaves, my amigos still could not fit their big feet into my narrow snakeskin boots.

"Why did you wear those things, Pedro?"

"I want to look good in America--" I said.

When the pain got really bad, I put my arms around Rudy and Tito's necks, and they carried my weight for me.

In the jungles, we got bitten by bugs and mosquitoes. Crossing the mountains, we shivered with cold, and it hurt our lungs to breathe. In the highlands, we passed a volcano. We stopped to have a look. It was crusted over, quiet, sleeping. I put my hands to the rock to see if I could feel any heat from steam or lava inside, but it was cool to the touch.

On the tenth night, sleeping on the ground, with the moon as our nightlight, we

woke to find ourselves surrounded by a pack of wolves. In the dark, they circled us, growling with hunger, and pawing the dirt. Their eyes shone like yellow stars, and their ribs poked through their shabby fur. Slowly, from my back pocket, I pulled out my knife. I could hear my friends panting almost as hard as the wolves. At twenty-four, I was the oldest. Tito was twenty-one, and Rudy only nineteen. "Get behind me-" I said.

Gripping my medallion, I prayed, "Saint Francis....protect us...-" It was not easy to pray with the snapping of the wolves' jaws and the low rumble of danger coming from their throats,"Save us, please...-"

"They'll eat us alive-" Rudy moaned.

As the wolves closed in, we prayed faster and faster.

"*Tranquilo, tranquilo*-" My Angel said in my left ear.

"Don't move-" Saint Francis said in my right ear.

From church, I remember a story about Saint Francis talking a wolf out of eating some frightened town's people one time. "Brother wolves-" I said, "Go away now, and I promise Saint Francis will help you find some other food soon-"

I wanted to jump up and run. "Do not run-" I instructed my amigos.

The wolves were so close now, we could see the moonlight shining off their sharp teeth. I prayed if they ate us they would be swift about it. Then, as if hearing something we couldn't hear off in the distance, the wolves' ears pricked up, and I swear on the grave of my mother, they just up and bounded away.

I kissed my medallion over and over. We all kissed it.

On the fifteenth day, we squeezed onto a crowded, noisy bus in Mexico. It dropped us off about 40 minutes from the border. We walked fast, and when we snuck across, in broad daylight, running in the infernal heat, I half expected to hear the crack of rifles from Border Patrol trying to shoot us in the back. But thank God that didn't happen. For another hour, we continued walking, the sun burning our scalps, and with the taste of our own sweat and fear in our mouths, a salty metallic taste, until we saw the van

which was waiting to drive us to Baltimore. The vehicle was the color of dirty dishwater, and a rope held the back door closed. But inside were smiling Guatemalans, friends of my aunt's who were taking us in. They kissed us and handed us cold drinks. It was a sweltering ride (no AC) from Mexico to Baltimore. And to avoid staring at the endless concrete highway, I slept with my cap pulled down low over my eyes.

My first job in Baltimore was working at a corner grocery store in Fells Point on Broadway Street, a two block stretch of Latino community with numerous boarded up windows pasted with ads for Corona, cheap cell phones, and phone cards. Bargain stores sold used clothing and furniture. All this right along side of a painted mural of the Holy Virgin Mary, her arms outstretched beckoning everyone to Mass at a church which had once been a Goodwill. Metal grates covered liquor store windows. Lotto lines extended down the block outside bullet-proof glass enclosed check cashing windows. Fly paper dangled from the ceilings of pizza joints. And fat mothers and grandmothers squeezed into lawn chairs on the sidewalks and ate snowballs or drank Inca cola, while keeping an eye on their little ones at play. At the grocery store, I stocked shelves, swept, mopped, and fixed things (unclogged toilets, cleaned up spills, scrubbed bathrooms). Twelve hours a day, Monday through Friday, for three hundred dollars a week. About the low pay, I did not complain, happy to work my way up to a better position and salary. I worked hard for my boss, Juan. He had a huge belly, like he'd just eaten ten hens, something he bragged about doing once, on his wedding day. He let me eat from his store (burritos, tacos, and bowls of steaming hen soup with noodles his wife made). But when it came to paying me, he dragged his feet. Three weeks went by, and I never saw a peso. He kept promising to pay me and then didn't. "*Manana, manana-*" he bellowed, waving me off like a pest. But I couldn't report Juan to the police because I had no green card or Social Security card. Every day that passed without pay (always some lousy excuse) my blood heated up, like a pot of beans about to boil over. I chewed the inside of my cheeks to keep from cursing or hitting him. Because where else could I

work, an illegal immigrant with no papers and very little English? I bit my cheeks until they bled, swallowing down the bitter blood.

Finally after six weeks of no pay and always a sour stomach, I came up with a plan. At closing one Saturday, I had Tito pick me up in his work truck. He delivered frozen chickens. Together we cleaned the store out. We took dry goods, canned meats, beans, rice, frozen foods (bull's tongue, my favorite), six-packs of Guyana beer (the number one cerveza in Guatemala), shampoo, even deodorant. When we finished, sucking down Juan's Coronas the whole time, not a single pea or a grain of rice was left.

Whooping and laughing and pounding the roof of his truck, we drove the load to Tito's casa, a chilly basement rowhouse apartment. Tito's place had no heat and smelled of charred wood from the metal trashcan kept burning with firewood in the center of his sparse livingroom. All Tito's little cousins reeked of scorched smoke when I picked them up to greet them, but I did not comment on it. Thanks to Juan their little bellies were kept full for months with his food and drinks.

After that, Tito got me a job at the chicken plant, an ugly shoebox shaped warehouse which belched foul-smelling clouds under a noisy beltway. I used a phony Social Security card I paid five hundred dollars for. Ten hours a day, six days a week, for minimum wage, I worked alongside other immigrants from Guatemala, Peru, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Mexico, cutting chickens into pieces with a meat cleaver on a long wooden block which dripped with slimy chicken skins, steaming blood, and stinking guts. The big white room was very cold, so we wore layers beneath our blood-stained aprons. But that didn't keep my bad legs from hurting like crazy. We wore paper masks across our noses and our lips to cover the stink. After a week, I ripped my mask away, tired of fooling with it, got used to the smell and the drops of blood and guts flying into my face.

With numb fingers constantly working in the cold, I cut myself many times. My hands are full of cuts, but not so bad as some of the others who are missing their fingers.

The first time I cut open a chicken and saw his stomach full of long, white, slimy worms, I jumped back with disgust. (My father did all the butchering back home). Everybody laughed, saying, "Toss it in the trash, *chica*-" My face burned, because I am not a little girl. As much as I hated to touch those nasty things, I grabbed a wet handful where they lay squirming on the block and slung them into a trashcan. Some days, there were no worms, and some days there were many worms.

On those days when I found many worms, I sometimes vomited into the trash cans. Then after work, I walked straight to the nearest bar, the Iguana Cantina, a gigantic place with three pool tables and always salsa and merengue playing to bust your eardrums and glah-glah-glah, down go the Coronas. I tried to work my nerve up to talk to the pretty American girls, but my English was still so bad, it really wasn't worth it. The girls just laughed at me and tossed their shiny Barbie-doll hair and strolled off, sipping their pink drinks. So glah-glah-glah, down go more Coronas. If they don't hook up by the night's end, my amigos took home the South Baltimore prostitutes for twenty bucks. But I can't do it. Even if I looked at the wall or the ceiling the whole time or got stupid drunk, I'd still see their sad, toothless faces and dead eyes. I want a nice girl, a shy girl, a pretty girl who cooks and cleans and smiles a lot and smells nice. Besides I have better things to do with my money. Like send it home to my father. I sent him my last three paychecks. I know he got them, because the man at the Western Union office told me he signed for them. So I bought a cell phone with a two year plan just in case he decides to call me. I put my phone number on the checks. Every night I pray to Saint Francis and to my Angel that my father will call.

When I'm not working at the chicken plant, I listen to my English tapes in my rented room, sounding out the strange words until my head hurts. Yesterday I put up some curtains, peach colored ones (that's all the bargain store had). I took down the sheets I'd nailed up to keep out the sun. Then I used a length of rope I borrowed from the guy next door, worked it through the curtains where the rod goes, and tied the ends up with

cowboy knots to the nails above my window. I stepped back to have a look, and it looked pretty good. I have a little refrigerator for sodas and a hot plate, too. But still my room is no Holiday Inn or anything. It is small and cramped and smells like dirty socks. Plus when I open my window, the smell of stagnant water from Baltimore's Inner Harbor mixes with the stench of diesel fuel from the big boats, dead fish, and garbage (unlike Guatemala whose clean streams you can actually drink from), and generally I just keep the damn window closed.

One day, at the chicken plant, my boss, a skinny gringo in a fancy suit, came to inspect our work. He wore a clean apron, and bundles of plastic covered his shiny shoes. His hands looked soft like a woman's, and his teeth were white as a shark's. He did not shake our dirty hands, just passed through our lines observing us and writing in his notebook. I stiffened as he walked past me, hoping he wouldn't stop, but he did. My cleaver was slick with blood and the sweat of my palms, and I prayed it wouldn't slip out of my hands as I chopped. Thwack-thwack. Thwack-thwack.

"Good work. Very quick-" he complimented me. This one didn't speak Spanish, just smiled a lot and nodded his head at us like we were well behaved school children. He almost touched his hand to my shoulder, but seeing the chicken blood smeared there, he drew his lady's fingers right back.

"All right-" he said. "Very good-"

"Gracias, grande pollo-" I said. Thank you, Big Chicken. Very seriously, I stared up at him. And all the workers around me bit their cheeks not to laugh.

Like a dumb cow, the gringo just nodded at me and then walked out to inspect the next room. Behind his back, we smiled, laughing, and chopping. That was a good day.

The next day was not such a good day. It was the anniversary of my mother's death. And on top of that, I counted over twenty chickens with worms I had to clean up. The management tries to kill the worms with special chemicals, but sometimes there are bad outbreaks, and so I must deal with the sickening things. I no longer vomited. But I

started to grind my teeth. After a while, my teeth started to ache every day. So I kept a pint of tequila in my locker and sucked down a shot or two on my fifteen minute break and during my half hour lunch to kill the pain. After lunch, I always checked my cell phone to see if my father had called. No missed messages, it always read. I keep the phone by my bed at night, just in case. Sometimes I have bad dreams where the long, slimy, white worms crawl into the cuts in my hands and tunnel their way into my guts, as I howl. "*Tranquilo, tranquilo-*" My Angel says. And two nights ago, he added a warning. "Be careful this week, Pedro. For a soul saved is a soul in danger. And that fallen angel, Lucifer, conspires against you day and night-"

So all week I kept to myself. No badmouthing the Mexicans who are quick to fight, no tossing dice out on the parking lot with the Salvadorans, no staring down or bumping the gringos.

Before leaving work today, I washed my hands at least five times with sanitizer and soap. After that, I went to a nearby Catholic church, prayed, lit candles, and made a donation to the poor in honor of my mother. I thought it best to skip the bar tonight, but I wasn't sleepy, and I didn't want to go back to my empty room. So I decided to have only a couple beers and then go home.

At the bar, I watched the pretty girls with their shiny lips and short skirts and sipped my first Corona. One girl caught my eye. She was quieter than the rest who gabbled like a flock of turkeys. Her skirt reached to her knees, and she wore a soft-looking, pale blue sweater. She wore pearls and had a nice smile. After my second Corona, I walked over to her. My heart raced and my blood zinged, the same feeling I got when I used to sit on top of a bull and the gate was about to open.

"Hello-" I said. "My name is Pedro-"

Up close, I saw some freckles across her nose, and I smelled her perfume, sweet as cotton candy. She just looked at me. Her eyebrows were two skinny moons above her green eyes.

“What is your name?” I asked.

“Don’t worry about it-“

“My name is Pedro-“ I repeated.

“Kiss off, Pedro-“ she said. I didn’t understand her, but the way she rolled her eyes, and then stuck a cigarette in her mouth and puffed some smoke into my face, I figured it wasn’t good. I don’t like girls who smoke anyway. In Guatemala, I had my pick of the girls. But in America, nobody cares that I was a champion bull rider. I am just a brown face in a sea of brown faces.

Tito was not around, so I sat at the bar alone. I missed my mother, and I missed Guatemala. The more I thought about it, the more I drank. It was like I had a mechanical arm, which kept lifting the bottles to my lips. I sucked down Coronas until my eyes were heavy and I felt like I was floating. After last call, when I stood up, I did not float, but dropped like a rock to the floor. It was slick with spilled beer, empty Corona bottles, and beer caps. Some gringos helped me up, and I staggered out.

I concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other. After a couple blocks, I turned into an alley to relieve myself. A rat skittered across my foot, but I was too drunk to even care. With one hand braced against a wall, I held myself up, until a policeman grabbed me by the back of my neck, pulling me away, and swinging me around. He was at least as big as my father, towering over me. “I need to see your ID. Right now-“ he said. His mustache was gray, and his eyes, too, were gray, like steel. I watched his face see-sawing up and down. “You got a green card, Taco? Let me see it-“

“No comprende-“ I rocked as if I were a ship tossing in a storm and about to sink. I started to fall and grabbed the officer’s uniform sleeve.

“Get your fucking hands off me!” he said and shoved me back.

Fumbling, I zipped up my pants and started to stagger away. But the cop grabbed me again. “Come with me, Taco-“ he said. He clamped his big hand around my neck and dragged me to the end of the alley where we stopped in front of a port-a-potty which

was being used by a construction site nearby.

“Do you know what this is?”

“Si.....El bano-“ I said. “Bathroom-“

“*Wrong-*“ he said with the hint of a smile now. “This is what in America we call a Mexican spaceship-“

“No comprende-“

The cop jerked open the door of the port-a-potty, and a wave of stink hit us.

“Get in-“ he said.

I reasoned it out, calming myself. Maybe he just wanted me to finish my business in the bathroom, and then he'd let me go. So reluctantly I climbed in (even though I no longer had to go). He yanked the door shut behind me, and it was pitch dark in there, extremely unpleasant, just like I imagined a coffin would be. My stomach contracted with fear, picturing my mother locked in such a space, where her body would remain forever. My eyes stung from the strong odor of piss and shit. But the instant I reached for some toilet paper to wipe some tears leaking from my eyes, the whole port-a-potty tipped over, knocking me off my feet. A wave of toilet slop hit me then, wet my jeans, my shirt, and the half of my face shoved into a hard metal corner. The impact jammed my neck, hurting like hell.

“Houston, we have lift-off!” I heard the cop outside howl. Then he kicked the potty over several times, rolling it with glee. “How's the ride, Taco?! You reach Mexico yet?”

Rolling, I was covered in more piss and shit. It even got into my mouth, gagging me. I spit as much as I could, and then banged like a maniac to get out. I could hear the cop cracking up laughing. Somehow I managed to fling the door open and crawl out.

“How was your trip?” he wiped some tears from his eyes he was laughing so hard.

I struggled to get up. I stood as straight as I was capable, tears of fury and

humiliation rolling down my cheeks now. "Me from.....*Guatemala*-" My hands were balled into fists at my side.

"You wanna hit me, don't you, *Guacamole?*"

I didn't answer, just stood there, breathing hard, digging my nails into my palms.

"Me going.....*home*-" I said and started to walk away, fast.

"I ain't done with you yet, *Guacamole*-" I heard him say, and then I felt a blow to the back of my head which dropped me to my knees. Next the cop planted his boot in my back, kicking me over, and the cement waved up to meet my face, where the concrete busted my head, and my blood flowed, like lava. I saw red, nothing but red. As he tried to handcuff me, I spun and kicked at him from the ground, flailing like crazy.

I saw his nightstick raised like a bull's leg above me. When it struck my shoulder, I went for my knife. I stabbed him once in his leg to bring him down, and then I stabbed him again hard in his stomach to keep him down. The policeman was groaning, holding his middle with both hands. His blood leaked through his fingers.

It happened so fast, I just sat there blinking stupidly across at him. He was as shocked as I was. Then I looked up at the moon, bright as an interrogator's light, shining down on the cop's blood, accusing me. *Santo Dios*. Holy God. The fear set in then. My heart punched wildly. No way did I want to be deported and thrown into jail. Quickly I snatched his gun before he could shoot me. I looked around for witnesses; the alley and the lot were empty. Then I pulled my knife from the cop's belly, and he groaned louder and his blood flowed faster, covering his white, shaking fingers. Fumbling, I folded my knife and shoved it into my pocket. I jammed the gun into the back of my pants. Then I pushed myself up and ran like crazy. It was hard, because Up seemed like Down, and Down seemed like Up. The whole world was a spinning top, out of control, beneath my stumbling feet.

Back at my room, in the shower, I scrubbed each body part five times, like I do for my hands after touching those disgusting chickens. I washed my hair five times, too. In

the steamy mirror, I looked into my wild eyes and did not recognize myself.

After my shower, I wiped the cop's gun and slid it under my bed. Then, I fell onto my mattress, calling for my Angel. "Donde esta mi Angel? Donde esta mi Angel?" I cried. But I could no longer feel his presence. No matter how much I pleaded or called, he would not speak to me. I cried into my pillow, wanting my mother, her softness, her love, her understanding. But there was no sign of her anywhere. Never had I felt so alone. I held my medallion and prayed to Saint Francis.

With a voice full of sorrow, he whispered into my ear. "Beware that worm growing in your belly-" And then I heard him no more.

I would rather Saint Francis, too, were silent, then to bring me such news.

Kneeling on my mattress, I slammed my fist against the wall, punched many holes, feeling the muscles work and burn. Only when my phone rang did I finally stop. I took some deep breaths. I picked up my cell and read the lit screen. It was from Guatemala.

Squeezing the tears from my eyes, I listened to the rough, but familiar voice on the other end, a connection crossing thousands of miles.

"Hola, Pedro. Comment estas?"

"Hola, Papa-" I said. In a room no bigger than a rodeo stall, my heart was breaking and singing at the same time.