

## High School Daze, Sylvia Perez, and La Llorona

Manuel F. Medrano, University of Texas-Rio Grande Valley

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La Llorona is the best-known folktale in the Americas, existing for hundreds of years and believed to have pre-Columbian, European, and Mexican origins. It is about a betrayed woman who drowns her children and wails and searches for them at night near the waters where they died. For generations children have heard the story, often from their mothers, grandmothers, or aunts. I first heard it from my Tia (aunt) Lupe when I was seven years old. Tia said the weeping woman had been seen by an irrigation canal near our home. That frightened me enough to stay away from it.

A decade later, I was a junior in high school and enjoying life, despite working at a bowling alley forty hours a week and helping my father on our small farm. At 5 ft. 7 in. and 110 lbs., I looked like a long strand of Mexican fideo (vermicelli). I did, however, have something in my favor if you believe my mother and history teacher, Ernest Ramirez. They said that, on occasion, I was esmart. So, what does this have to do with La Llorona? I do not drink or smoke and am not visually impaired. What I saw was what I saw.

On Halloween night 1965, after a Friday Brownsville High School football game, I attended a Halloween sock hop in the high school gym. Built in 1946, its wooden floors were ideal for dancing the twist or the swim. On a dance scale of one to ten, I was a weak three. I knew that if a girl did dance with me, it would only be once. Many times, I just watched while the Playboys of Edinburg covered a variety of 1960s hits. That night, however, was not an ordinary night. I mustered the courage to ask Sylvia Perez, one of the Brownsville Eagle dance strutters, to dance. I expected the usual no, thank you response but was floored when she said, yes. Sylvia was totally out of my league- bleached blonde hair, green eyes, and dimples. You get the picture. I thought, maybe, it was her turn for a mercy or community service dance. For me, it did not matter because this was the pinnacle of my sorely lacking social life that year. Sadly, my lame social life continued for two more years.

In 1967, Sylvia and I were randomly- assigned as lab partners in Mr. Garza s freshman biology class at the local community college. She would not have picked me, but there we were. Believe it or not, we became friends. I grew up on a farm and could handle frogs and snakes - alive or dead. Sylvia trusted me enough to help her with the assigned dissections. Hijo, she looked and smelled so good, even in biology lab. Anyway, when I asked her to attend the Bougainvillea Spring Dance (a semi-formal affair) with me, Sylvia said yes. This time, however, we would dance more than once.

To impress her, I borrowed my brother Joe s 1965 Ford Galaxie to take her to the dance. I arrived at her house at seven o clock and Sylvia s father, a mortician, greeted me at the door. Mr. Perez was wearing a grey guayabera. His handshake was viselike and his voice, guttural. The front half of their house was a mortuary, and the back was living quarters. We waited for Sylvia in the living room, as I breathed in a faint scent of formaldehyde and alcohol. We did not wait long. My! My! Sylvia came out wearing a shiny green chiffon

dress. If there is a Nerd Heaven, I was in it.

The evening was memorable, and my self-esteem reached another level. I was with one of the prettiest girls in the school and stepped on her feet only twice. I did not dance very well, but the twist and swim were not rocket science dances. Besides, I had practiced them earlier in front of the mirror in my bedroom, bare-chested and a hundred and ten pounds. Worse, the Wate On Powder I was taking did not add one pound. A frightening specimen even to myself.

What does all this have to do with La Llorona? Thunder showers and high winds were predicted for Brownsville after midnight. I drove Sylvia home after the dance and got a kiss on the cheek (the kiss of death). Concurrently, I was elated and disappointed. Then, I drove to my brother's house, returned his car, and picked up my own.

The weather forecasters were on a chubasco (thunderstorm) high. They and Chac, the Mayan Rain God, were correct. It was like a tropical storm - fifty mile-per-hour winds and rain squalls that pricked my skin and whistled in my ears. Fortunately, I was only six miles from home. I parked my car at El Jardin Elementary School, less than half a mile from our house. Our street, Vermillion Avenue, did not have streetlights and was not paved, so when it rained, I left my car at the school parking lot. The advantage of leaving an ugly 1953 Chevy Bellaire overnight is that no one would steal it. Why would they? It was dented on both sides, had rust spots all over, and a bumper that was held up by steel clothes hangers and a thin rope. Anyway, I began my walk home. The heavy rain had transformed our dirt road into a mud road, and I had to navigate through it in almost zero visibility. On a positive note, I had borrowed my father's black rubber boots and had thrown them in the trunk. I put them on and began my journey. I did not have an umbrella, so to say I was soaked was a euphemism.

I got halfway home, and in the distance, saw a light in our kitchen. My legs were weary from dancing and trekking through the thick mud. Then, I heard a muffled, sobbing sound, through the squalls and strikes of lightning. I saw a tall, willowy figure with jet-black hair. She was wearing a veil and a stained, white dress and looked approximately forty years old. The woman was barefooted and had long, thin, milky-white feet. However, I continued my path. My mother, Antonia, had made papas y huevo (potatoes and egg), and I was hungry. When I neared my home, the sobbing became louder and louder, and now, I heard screeches and screams. I felt like I was in a Vincent Price (If you're younger than seventy, google him.) horror movie, but she looked nothing like Vincent Price.

The rain was streaming down my face. I rubbed my eyes, hoping that that what I was seeing was only imaginary - peppered with La Llorona cuentos (folktales). When the rain subsided, the figure appeared closer. Now, I knew it was not my imagination. This woman standing in the rain next to a ditch did not appear wet. I cleared my throat, and in a loud voice, I uttered, *Quien va alli?* (Who goes there?) No response except for a melancholy sob and a deep, somber moan. I thought to myself, *Medrano, quien es esta vieja?* (Who is this woman?) For a moment I looked away, and suddenly, she was gone. I did not see her walk away; she just disappeared.

When I reached my house, I felt like the butt-end of a viper rattled. I was trembling, wet and scared. My mother noticed it right away and asked what was wrong. In my usual deflecting manner, I replied, nothing.

It's been sixty years since that night of duality, but I still recall my date, the dance, and the weeping woman. Do I dare say that I remember Sylvia more than La Llorona? Sylvia was my dream girl, but both made a lifelong impression. Only one, however, frightened me enough to go to my curandera (folk healer) Chonita for a susto (fright syndrome) cure twice. Did I really see her? Yes, I really did see her! What happened, happened. I saw what I saw, and I'm sticking to it. C/S