



## La Llorona

*by April Galarza*

**W**hen Señor Delajolla was a young boy growing up in Mexico there was a story about why you should never go out past Don Alberto's south pasture after dark. La Llorona was there and if you saw her face you would never know happiness again.

When Sergio first heard about the weeping woman, La Llorona, he couldn't stop thinking about the mysterious black ribbon flapping in the wind, caught in a splinter of wood on the gate. It was said she was back again wandering the dusty riverbed with her blood-red robozo wrapped around her shoulders and her black braid thick and swinging against her back like a snake hanging from a tree.

As he closed the gate behind him he saw the ribbon and clasped it in his hand, catching it from the wind. The second he held it the pain sharpened in his stomach like someone grabbed a fistful of flesh and was twisting it. It felt like he had been running hard and fast without taking enough breaths. He ran into the house clutching the ribbon in his fist like a moth that might fly away.

When he told his mother how he felt she admonished him for being so foolish. She stood on her tip-toes and pulled a green glass bottle from the plank shelf above the fireplace. She popped the cork of the bottle and held it under Sergio's nose. It smelled of cilantro and honey and something earthy like moss. As the smell rose through his nose and inhaled into his lungs the pain in his stomach was eased. "Now get that thing out from under this roof before you bring La Llorona to our doorstep," his mother said.

She sat him down on the bench and reminded him curtly that now that his papi was gone he was the man and somewhere in the night, outside the shutters and white scrubbed walls of the little house were things no Catholic should ever lay eyes on. Sergio slipped the ribbon into his pocket.

"Escucha me, Mijo," she said and began the story with a warning. "Try not to be by the riverbed after sundown, do your best to be within the garden gate by the time the sun is settled behind the mountains. La Llorona would love to take you home with her and I would never see mi cielo again, how would you like that?"

"No Mami, I wouldn't like that at all," he said of course.

“And if you ever do see her you should drop to your knees, cross yourself, and as quickly as your voice will allow, pray to Dios and La Virgen de Guadalupe so that you will live to see the morning.” He didn’t hear the last thing she said though, because he was thinking to himself. No woman could be that bad. Maybe if it was a big important man like Don Alberto or even his papi, but he could best any female, even if she were dead.

“It happened long time ago when there was a war that took all the papis away from their wives and children and La Llorona was left to fend for herself and three hungry mouths. And then after a while, word came back that her husband had died in battle, that he had been shot in the heart. Even though it was miles and miles away to the valley where her love lay, La Llorona felt the pain of the bullet in her own breast, lodged between the soft skin where lay her babies to be comforted and her own deep passion-filled heart. She became overcome with grief and began walking nights by the riverbed when she should have been asleep. She walked with her robozo tied tightly around her shoulders and her braid swinging behind her. She would toss her head back and stare eye to eye with the stars that had no empathy, or she would wrap her arms around the knarled Tamarind tree as if it were her love and scream and wail with a sound of pain so deep. It sounded like the call of a bird of prey, it was so long it could have been the howl of a coyote and it was so sputtered with sobbing it could have been the sound of cats fighting with arched backs. Night after night passed and she began bringing the children with her, who had not been fed at all except for what they managed to find buried in jars in the pantry or crumbs from the floor. The children wandered like blind men placing their hands on things looking for nourishment and then placing their fingers in their lips and smacking them shut around them. Their clothes hung off them like limp socks off a foot. One night La Llorona took them to the riverbed and held them under the water scrubbing them against the rocks. She filled her robozo with stones and walked into the black water where it swirls and rushes and you can’t see the bottom, her black braid floating behind her as she sank.

“The next night was the quietest night the villa had in years, and it continued the nights afterward and seemed that at last this town would know some peace, but around the time I was a little niña your age, she came back. Don Alberto, who was then much younger, was bringing his cattle in when the sky was purple, driving them along the dusty road of the riverbed when he heard a sound that sent a pricking chill all the way down his back. He told himself that it was the wind or two cats fighting and continued to drive his cattle forward towards his gate. The cattle themselves moved swiftly over the dirt path. Not one of them milled about near the sweet grass. They trotted so quickly that there was no point to driving them with his stick so Don Alberto tapped it nervously on his leg instead. He heard the sound again and turned quickly to look into the darkened pastures, down the dirt path he traveled all the way to the riverbed. There by the Tamarind tree was the silhouette of La Llorona herself, her head tossed back. As you can imagine Don Alberto took off and ran back to the safety of his gate passing the cattle to make their own way. Ever since we have avoided the river path after sunset.”

Sergio was as stubborn as the burro he led down to the creek each morning. He thought about all this, about the times before the cattle were his responsibility. How whenever the sky was starting to orange his Papi would tell him to rush on ahead and go tell his Mama they were coming. But the thought connected in his mind, if my Papi’s brave enough to walk alone, then so am I and besides what is there to fear? All the way through dinner he held tightly to the ribbon and thought of how he would catch La Llorona with his lasso and drag her back to the plaza and show everyone how foolish their fears were. “La Cabróna Llorona,” he cursed under his breath as he bit into his taco dipped in bean sauce. “They’ll see,” he said. “They’ll see.”

The purple sky faded to a thin line and Sergio could hear his mother breathing deeply in her sleep. With nothing but his lasso he slunk outside into the inky black night and climbed through the break in

Don Alberto's fence. When he was far enough from the house he shouted into the night.

"La Llorona, La Llorona, come meet your master, I am not afraid of you!"

Sergio walked the dirt path to the riverbed holding his lasso closely to his shoulder. He took wide, bold steps forward and tried to hold his shoulders straight and his back upright so he would look like a man. He shouted as he walked, taunting the phantom, calling her Vieja and Cabrona and bogymen to scare small children. He boldly marched toward the Tamarind tree.

The dirt shifted under his feet. The dry grass rustled on either side of the path. Little winds picked up bits of dirt and sent them swirling in tiny tornadoes. As he got closer to the riverbed he heard the water, continuously rushing in his ears. On top of the water at a pitch that echoed in the back caverns of his ears was the sound of a woman's scream. Just stepping forward toward the cry was enough to spite her. The wind lifted the dust from the path and flung it at the boy causing him to squint. He put his hand up to cover his face. The coils of the rolled up lasso were held tight in one hand, the black ribbon rolled in a sweaty ball in the other. Through his half-closed eyes he started to make out the shape of a woman standing against the Tamarind tree, but it wasn't until the wind settled and he was able to pull his hands down that he really saw her.

She was by the tree with her back to him. He could see white elbows stick out of shirtsleeves. Her arms were outstretched toward the water. Her moan came to a pitch as he stepped closer. He made out the words "Ay mis hijos, Ay mi vida," over and over in a whaling cry. She was wearing a long black skirt and he could see the fringes of the rust colored robozo falling across the shoulder of her white arms.

When Sergio was younger his papi took him to see a thief hung from the branch of the tallest tree in the plaza. The feet that hung below the black skirt were exactly like that of the dead man's. They hung below the skirt not touching the ground beneath it. The toes were pointed down and drained of blood, pale, white, like chalk and swung back and forth. He recalled the eerie sound of the creaking rope swinging with the weight of the dead man. Her braid was swinging back and forth and with her head flung backwards the ends of the hair swept the dust touching the ground that her feet did not. The braid was coming untangled because the ribbon that was supposed to bind it was in Sergio's sweaty palm.

Sergio crept closer to her. Her face was hidden by the tree, but the fingers of her left hand were knotted around the bark. She had a copper ring on her wedding finger, and lines in the folds of her skin, blue veins coursing under the lines.

"La Llorona," Sergio said, and it sounded much braver inside his head before he spoke. Out loud the "na" came out shrill and inflected like a question. He tried again a little louder. "La Llorona," he said. This time at least he didn't sound like a girl. He took one more step toward the tree; there were only about five paces between him and the weeping woman. She stopped wailing. The wind stilled and except for the sound of the rushing water it was silent. Sergio held out his palm with the ribbon. He didn't open it fully but held the end of it with his thumb against the palm, instantly the wind picked up and tried to lift it from his hand. It flapped against his wrist the same way it flapped when it was caught on the fence.

"Face me," he said. "Look me in the eyes and I'll give you back your ribbon." La Llorona didn't make a sound but the wind swirled the dust up all around her again, battering Sergio's arms and face. He had to squint and then the wind picked up the ribbon and his bargaining chip spun off into the dust.

“I don’t fear you,” he said but even as he said this the phlegm was hardening in his throat and the back of his neck felt as if it were pricked with a thousand pins and he got the feeling you get when staring straight down a cliff, like the worst could happen any minute. He realized he would have to act before the feeling could overtake him, so he undid the lasso from his arm.

La Llorona stepped from behind the tree, he could see her entire body now, the black skirt moved beneath her, the feet hovered not five centimeters off the ground. Her arms at first were straight out as if she were reaching for something or finding her way in the dark and then they swung to the right. Anticipating that her body was about to turn Sergio swung the lasso round in the air making a wide circle above his head with the rope. Then at last he jerked his arm forward and it landed wrapped around La Llorona’s upper arms and torso, falling tightly below her breasts. He yanked the rope intending to pull her closer to him, but instead she was as strong as a wild horse and he felt himself being pulled closer to her. He leaned backward but felt his feet being dragged in the dust and the distance between them shortening. Five paces, four paces, three paces. By now his skin was covered in cold sweat.

His heart was beating so loudly he could hear it over the sound of the river. He wondered if now was his time. He wondered if he should fall on his knees and bless himself and pray to the Virgen de Guadalupe to save his soul. But as soon as the thought crossed his mind he thought, it would be much easier to drag me on my knees and even God would understand if I don’t want to go without a fight. Two paces, one pace, and Sergio stopped leaning back against the pull and instead lunged forward grasping the long black braid in his free fist. It felt slick and greasy but his grip was tight and it held. The feeling of the yank must have taken La Llorona aback because the rope stopped pulling forward. Just as you would pull on the reins of the horse he gave her braid and the rope one big yank, expecting to jerk her backwards. Instead the braid came loose, the rope slipped out of his hand and La Llorona disappeared into the dust. The braid snapped off like an iguana’s tail without a sound. It writhed like a snake in his fist. This startled him so terribly he dropped it and it slithered into the bushes.

For many moments Sergio held his hand out in front of him felling the grease on his palm. The dust began to settle around him. La Llorona and all traces of her were gone, and the only sounds were the rushing of the water and the beating of his heart. Even his lasso was nowhere to be found. The moon had risen above the water and for a minute he watched the swirling black ripples and then he turned his back to the Tamarind tree and trudged off toward bed feeling less like a man than ever before.



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