

EX-VOTO
GRAHAM MASTERTON

“Señor Foster! This way, señor!”

Henry stepped out of the shadow into the sunlight and into the middle of the marketplace. All around him, stalls were selling melons and tomatillos and decorated leather belts and scarves and holy statuettes and sticky-looking cakes and dishwashing brushes and bottles of Radiante floor-cleaner.

Mariachi music was playing loudly from competing loudspeakers precariously wired on top of the stalls, and the noise of shouting and laughing and dogs barking and parrots squawking was so deafening that Henry felt as if he had found himself in the middle of a riot.

He caught up with Esmeralda, who unexpectedly took hold of his hand, as if he were a child rather than a forty-five year old man with thinning brown hair and a flappy white linen suit.

“You said that you wanted souvenirs, señor,” she reminded him.

“Well, yes. But something artistic, you know. Something truly Mexican, of course. But reasonably tasteful. I can’t give the head of my sociology department a plastic cactus.”

“We will find something for you, señor,” said Esmeralda, and continued to tug him through the crowds. Henry had no choice but to follow her, as much as he didn’t like being jostled. A gap-toothed man leered right in his face, holding up a necklace strung with large red chilli-peppers.

“Show your girlfriend that you are hot stuff, señor!”

“She’s my guide, thanks,” said Henry. “Not my girlfriend.”

He didn’t know why he had felt obliged to say that. Esmeralda after all was stunningly pretty, with shiny brown curls and feline eyes and a mouth that seemed to be permanently pouting. The only trouble was that she was young enough to be his daughter.

“I know what we buy for you!” she said, as she pulled him through the acrid smoke that was wafting across from a *carne asada* stall. “I know exactly for sure what you would like!”

She led him down a shadier alley by the side of the marketplace, where old men with faces like wrinkled gourds were sitting on doorsteps together, smoking. At the end of the alley there was a makeshift stall constructed of packing-cases and blankets and sacking.

A roughly-painted metal sign outside the stall said *Retablos*. Inside, a woman was sitting on a kitchen chair with an easel in front of her, painting a small sheet of metal with enamel paints from twenty or thirty different little brightly-colored pots.

“*Buenos días,*” said Esmeralda. “*Mi amigo quiere comprar un retablo.*”

The woman turned toward them. She must have been about forty years old, with high, distinctive cheekbones and hooded eyes that were as shiny and colorless as ball-bearings. She wore a black scarf twisted around her head and a black dress with gray serpentine patterns on it.

“Ah,” she said, and her voice was deep and throaty, as if she had been chain-smoking *Delicados* cigarettes since she was old enough to breathe. “I have been waiting for you, señor.”

“Excuse me?” said Henry.

Without another word, the woman stood up and went to the back of her stall. She produced a small package wrapped in newspaper and handed it to him.

“What’s this?” Henry asked her.

“Your *retablo*, señor. *Ex-voto.*”

Bewildered, Henry unwrapped the newspaper. Inside was a thin sheet of metal with a shiny picture painted on it, like a scene from a comic-strip. It showed a city street, with a crowd of people standing on the sidewalk. A man in a white suit was lying in the middle of the street, with one arm pinned underneath the chassis of an overturned truck. He was cutting his own arm off with a large saw, and there was blood all over his sleeve.

Up above him, floating in the sky, there was a saintly figure dressed in blue and gold, and attended by golden cherubs.

“I don’t understand,” said Henry.

“It is simple,” the woman told him, pointing to the man in the white suit with a long, silver-polished fingernail. “People come to me when they have survived a terrible accident, or a life-threatening sickness, or maybe they have been robbed and nearly killed. I paint for them an *ex-voto*, a thank you to the saint who saved their lives, which they will put up on the wall of their church.

“In this case I have painted yours *before* your accident. Sometimes I can do that. It depends on who you are, and which saint will preserve you. In this case it is *La Virgen de los Remedios*, Our Lady of the Remedies. She told me many weeks ago that you were coming, and what would happen to you, and how your life could be saved.”

Henry said, “What? You think I’m going to be run down by a truck?”

“All fates are unavoidable, señor.”

“I’m going to be run over by a truck and I’ll cut my own arm off to get free? That’s insane.”

The woman shrugged. “I do not decide the future, señor. I will sell you this *retablo* for twenty dollars. You will be able to thank Our Lady even before she has saved you.”

“This is sick,” said Henry. “This is totally sick.”

He twisted his hand from Esmeralda’s grasp and started to stalk back toward the marketplace.

Esmeralda called, “Señor Foster! Señor Foster! Wait!” But Henry refused to turn around and angrily shouldered his way through the crowds.

He crossed the marketplace and walked back along the shadowy arcade that led to his hotel. His whole life people had treated him like he was some kind of a dupe and even now he was here in Mexico on business he was still being taken for a mark. He felt hot and sweaty and embarrassed and outraged.

If he hadn’t been so angry, maybe he would have looked to his right before he stepped out into the blinding white sunlight at the end of the arcade and across the street in front of the Soledad Hotel. An old Dodge truck loaded with oil-drums hit him at no more than fifteen miles an hour, but it knocked him through a wooden barricade that had been erected around a twelve-foot deep excavation in the street, where the sewers were being replaced.

He fell right to the bottom, amongst the sewer-pipes, and then the truck skidded on the dusty surface of the street and dropped into the hole on top of him, with a shattering, ramshackle crash.

He opened his eyes. It was gloomy and surprisingly chilly at the bottom of the excavation, and there was a strong smell of sewage and gasoline. He tried to sit up but found that he couldn't move an inch. His right shoulder was crushed under the right nearside wheel of the truck, and the truck itself was jammed at an angle.

He looked up. He could see anxious faces peering down at him from the sunlit street.

"Señor Foster!" a girl called out, and he recognized it as Esmeralda. "Are you hurt, señor?"

"I can't – I can't get out," Henry called back, his voice blurry with shock. "My arm...it's stuck under the wheel."

"Señor Foster, you have to get out. The truck is pouring gas."

"I can't. It's my arm."

Henry could hear Esmeralda talking to some of the men up on the street. Then there was a long pause. The stench of gasoline was growing stronger and stronger, and it was making his eyes water. It suddenly occurred to him that he was going to be roasted alive, down at the bottom of this stinking pit. That was how his life was going to end up, and he had never even found anybody to love.

It was then that he heard a clanking noise. He lifted his head again, and realized what it was. A large carpenter's saw was being lowered down to him on the end of a length of cord.

It came to rest next to his left hand. He stared at it in horror.

Esmeralda called down to him, "It is terrible, señor, I know! But what choice do you have?"

Henry picked up the saw and positioned it against his upper arm. The crosscut teeth were so sharp that they snagged in the fabric of his linen coat. He closed his eyes tight, clenched his teeth, and pushed the saw as hard as he could. It cut through his coat and his shirt, and ripped into his skin. He had never felt anything so agonizing in his life, and he screamed, or he thought that he screamed. He was deafened with pain.

He dragged the saw back, and then pushed it across his shoulder a second time, cutting through muscle. So much blood welled up that his whole sleeve was flooded bright red, but he realized that he would have to push even harder, or cutting his arm off would take hours.

He pushed a third time, so forcefully that the teeth cut into his bone. But the saw also skidded against the iron sewer-pipe, and set off a spark. There was an instant *whoompph* of exploding gasoline fumes, and Henry's face was seared by a blast of three hundred degree heat. His hair flared and shrivelled and his eyes were fried.

Henry blazed like an effigy. His linen suit turned brown and shrank and fell apart. His skin was scorched scarlet, and then charred black. But unlike an effigy he sawed harder and faster, with the jerky motions of one of those little figures on a weather-vane. Within a few minutes he was a mass of flames, but he kept on sawing and screaming until he had cut right through his upper arm. He dropped backward, blackened and smoking, but free.

The painter of *retablos* had joined Esmeralda in the street above. She laid her silver-polished nails on Esmeralda's shoulder.

"*Le Virgen de los Remedios*, she warned him," she said, in her throaty voice. "He had no faith in her, no trust. But the Virgin of the Remedies...she has a remedy for everything, even that."

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Words 1, 685