

Dancing with Minguito

by David P. Gontar (November 2015)

One of her earliest memories was of a tall, gaunt *dama* handing her a cup of tea. The flesh was taut, stretched over contorted fingers, and of a nauseating variety of pale hues. In retrospect there was no face, but in succession a grinning *Catrina Calavera*, then a *negrito* woman struggling in a noose, and finally a ravenous crow trying to peck out the girl's eyes. When Teresita was six years old her aunt took her to meet La Chica Vaca, as Señora Villata had become known. The child had had a number of spells, collapsing on the dirt floor of her home, mumbling incoherently for an hour or more, and many locals suspected she was endowed with powers. The afternoon rains burst over Managua as they made their way to the tumble-down rectory where the famous woman was staying during the festivities, and when they arrived Teresita was bedraggled and mud-spattered, looking like the common urchin she in fact was. Señora Villata hardly noticed her as she stepped timidly into the decrepit cell, which reeked of cigarette smoke and a curiously pungent odor the girl could not identify. Father Ramon, a toothless eunuch with a hunched back, set her on a small stool beside the table where the grand lady was applying yellowish and earthen unguents to her face. Her aunt was denied entry and told to return in the evening. In a corner there was a cot where a woman who had died the previous day lay unshriven and unblessed. Three mournful figures stood over the corpse watering it with their tears. Teresita looked in the vanity glass and perceived that Señora Villata was staring at her with cold dark eyes. She was repulsed by the yellow teeth stained with fuchsia and the thin pink scar that curved beneath her chin. A tattered and diaphanous chemise did little to conceal the work of years upon her emaciated body. Without thinking Teresita covered her face with her hands, and tried to dash towards the door. But Father Ramon seized her and returned her kicking and wriggling to her perch.

"I know you," said La Chica Vaca. "You are one of the *diablitos*, aren't you? Open your hands and look at me."

"No."

"You little *cabrona*, you cannot deceive me. You are the bride sent for Minguito,

aren't you?"

Uncomprehendingly, and in a desperate attempt to halt the interrogation, Teresita nodded, her body trembling in the dampness.

"Yes, it's just as I thought. You will marry on the day of death and die in your hour of bliss." And her laughter was the shrill calling of the crow.

"No, I want to go home."

"The Bride of Minguito has only one home. In the crypt. But we must prepare. The Ship of Saint Dominc sets sail at dawn, and you must be on board."

Señora Villata helped Teresita to undress and led her to a low chest behind the stairs. Inside were strings of artificial pearls, long satin gloves, ostrich feathers, sequined shoes and bits of dust-covered costume jewelry.

"How lovely you will look."

Teresita had never seen such a treasure. "Will I be allowed to keep these things?" she asked, taking the faux emeralds and rubies and pressing them to her cheeks.

"Yes, surely. You must please the bridegroom, and when you lie beside him nothing will ever be disturbed. You will have a rare joy, like a rose that will never wither." And she selected one of the broad-brimmed hats with yellow and vermilion plumes and placed it on Teresita's head, letting it settle around her ears. When they returned to the cell her aunt was there, but laid out on a crude wooden bier in seeming sleep.

"Your aunt has returned and given her blood for you, Teresita." She is resting this evening, but at sunrise you may speak to her before your departure."

Señora Villata gave her cornbread, the first food Teresita had tasted in nearly two days. The only task remaining was the painting of the limbs and face. A strange preternatural calm flooded her body as she climbed atop the table. "Do you realize who you are?" the old one asked as she smeared the girl's face with ghastly zinc ointment, adding umber here and there in the eyes, mouth and nasal area, so that Teresita had the countenance of a skull, almost alluring in its macabre risibility. "You are *Santa Muerte*, the Daughter of Death."

"The Daughter of Death," repeated Teresita numbly, scarcely daring to credit her glorious transformation. And suddenly at her feet knelt Father Ramon and La Chica Vaca and they worshipped her and hailed her as their sovereign Queen and Savior, the one who would conduct them safely to paradise.

Now it was time to rest.

Teresita was placed in a warm corner of the room on an ancient mattress, and soon was falling into a bottomless abyss. Then she seemed to stir and sat bolt upright, a hint of fear glinting through her hollow eyes.

"Will Minguito hold me in his arms?"

"Of course, *Santa Muerte*, of course. He will open his arms to you and give you his most special blessing, and you will be a woman that day and know a woman's bliss as his bride."

"But, Señora, please, what about the Dance? Will he dance with me as I have heard?"

La Chica Vaca went to her and laid her down again. And when the girl was still and nearing the place of dreams she bent low and whispered in her ear, "*Santa Muerte, Santa Muerte*, it is I, Minguito, the little child of God, waiting for you in the Ship of Saint Dominic. Come to me, come to me soon, and we will fly together, dance on stars that will carry us out of this world. Come to me, hurry, before it is too late."

The Daughter of Death heard and was ready.

David P. Gontar's latest book is [Hamlet Made Simple and Other Essays](#), New English Review Press, 2013.

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