

## **Goodbye, Santero**

**By Teresa Dovalpage**

To Victor Goler

*I don't like to be called a santero. See, my great grandpa, el bisabuelo, everybody called him an imaginero. This santero word came with the folks who started the Spanish Market in Santa Fe... gringos who couldn't tell a santo from a song but they knew people who would buy the santos. And they said: a santo maker must be a santero... Whatever.*

“Construction work ain’t for sissies,” Michael said.

Leroy nodded, though he hated the word “sissy.” He associated it with the surgery he had had as a teenager and that had left him feeling somehow emasculated.

“I’m tired, man,” Michael rested his head on the table, spotted with specks of coffee, nacho salsa and grease. They were having lunch at The Taos Diner. The air was thick with the smells of refried beans, enchiladas and freshly made flour tortillas.

Damian nodded. “Me too. There is no future in this town.”

“I thought that after high school things were going to change,” Leroy said. He was the only one who hadn’t dropped out. “But they are worse now, *ese*.”

“No fun,” Michael spoke without looking up. “No excitement, no money, no nada.”

They stayed silent while the enchilada sauce solidified on their plates.

“I’m joining the Army,” Michael said.

The others didn't answer. Not immediately, at least. But the following week Damian, Michael and Leroy went to see a recruiter in Albuquerque and the enlistment process began.

"Army, *carajo!*" Paula Paraíso barked upon hearing the news. "You kids are crazy! Go talk to Uncle Chuy first."

Michael and Leroy had lost their father when they were still in elementary school. José Paraíso had vanished without a trace, never sent them one penny and lived *la vida loca* somewhere in California. According to the deserted wife he was a big *cabron*, a bastard in all the senses of the word. Paula had burned all of José's pictures and his sons didn't even remember how he looked like. The few times they had asked about him, their mother had snapped. "You guys miss him or what? Go and live with the old bastard... if he wants you, which I personally doubt."

Uncle Chuy, Paula's brother, had taken up the paternal role. With his penchant for telling stories, his long, grayish ponytail and his eternal tie-dye shirts, he seemed to have been born for avuncular tasks. He had lived in Sedona and Ojai and, after coming back to New Mexico, he became a disciple of Ram Dass. Leroy was the only one in the family curious enough to ask about his trips, both physical and psychedelic, and his beliefs, or what Paula Paraíso referred to as spiritual mumbo jumbo. Uncle Chuy loaned his nephew *The Autobiography of a Yogi*, *Baghavad Gita* and a variety of books that expanded his mind (his consciousness, the old man said) beyond the narrow, dusty borders of Taos. Now he owned a store where he sold turquoise jewelry, Concho belts, sage smudge sticks, incense, New Age books, tarot cards, and the inevitable retablos and bultos that Uncle Chuy made himself. He never failed to give the faces of

his saints a distinctive, sad, almost desperate countenance. The store's name was The Astral Post but people knew it as Santero's, the name they used for Uncle Chuy though he did not like it.

“Santero, *ese*,” his buddies called him.

That puzzled Damian, whose grandfather was Cuban. “The only Cuban living in this old, waterless, dry, God-forgotten town,” he would say with a mix of pride and gloom. He still longed to see Cuba, but wouldn't go back because of Castro. And he missed Miami, but his wife, a *taoseña* with an attitude, wouldn't live in that humid place where people confused chiles with green peppers, *los estúpidos*.

A santero, for Cubans, was a practitioner of Santería, a believer on the African gods called *orishas*. But Michael and Leroy explained to Damian that a santero in New Mexico was just a maker of *santos*. “Simple, *ese*. We don't have no *orishas* here,” Michael laughed. “Only Unche Chuy's old *bultos*.”

*Now, not all saints are created equal, comprendes? There are the bultos, which are the santos as such. They are wood carved, real esculturas. I've made hundreds of them. And I make them by hand, everything. Even my varnish, I use piñón sap to make it, and my own gesso, too. I am not buying any made-in-China crap for my bultos. No, señor.*

Michael wouldn't have paid three pennies for Uncle Chuy's opinion. He informed his mother that old Santero knew as much about war as he did quilting. But Leroy's resolve started to melt. Passed the initial excitement, he reconsidered his reasons for joining the Army and they looked as nebulous as the early morning fog over the Sangre de Cristo Mountains.

Basic combat training sounded exciting, yes. But what if he was deployed to Iraq right away? And where was Iraq, after all? He couldn't even locate the country on a map if his life depended on it. Plus he didn't know how to shoot. Michael liked to go hunting but Leroy had always felt an unexplainable aversion to José Paraíso's rusty rifle. The fact that his mother didn't want him to enlist weighed in heavily. Leroy didn't dare to stand up to her—in truth, few people did. Paula Paraíso had long black hair that she kept in a spinster's bun, imperious eyes and the sweetness of a drill sergeant. When her children were little, she often chased them with a broom. “*La escoba!*” she would yell when they misbehaved. “Where is the *escoba*? I'm gonna break it on your *pinche* asses!” But hard stares and the curling of her upper lip was generally all she needed to keep her offspring in line.

“Go talk to Uncle Chuy,” she repeated. “Go and listen to him.”

Uncle Cluy's home was behind The Astral Post. The casita, all eight hundred square feet of it, reeked of sandal incense mixed with piñón coffee and of the paints that Santero used for his art. Though he made the usual images San Pascual Bailón, San Francisco de Asís and the ever-present Virgin of Guadalupe, Uncle Chuy had a *specialty*. He created tailor-made Jesuscristos, Jesus Christs of all ways of life. He carved firemen, priests, surgeons, mechanics and even baseball players—of the San Diego Padres, no less—hanging from crosses in uniforms, gowns or overalls. Paula Paraíso refused to display them in her house. “Who has ever seen a Christ with a baseball cap? That's blasphemy, *hombre!*”

When the young men came in Uncle Chuy was, *milagro* of all miracles, sitting in front of his computer. Though he sometimes used the Internet for tracking orders, he wasn't fond of it. “I know,” he said, skipping any formal greetings. “I know you want to go and play war. But let me show you something.” He led them toward the computer where a video game was being played.

Was it Grand Theft Auto? Gundam Crossfire? It wasn't Word of Witchcraft, for sure. Leroy didn't recognize the avatar in red that stood defiantly in the middle of the screen. Uncle Chuy grabbed his mouse—he didn't have a joystick, of course—and after some gunfire exchange the guy in red was nicely killed.

“See? He's dead,” he said. “*Muerto*. That's it. He went with Doña Sebastiana. But there is no real blood, no spilled guts, no bad smells. He'll come back to life. You can play this game seven times or a hundred times. Some days you get to kill the guy, other days he survives. But when you kill a real man, you get the nasty smells, the blood and the spilled guts. And you know what? Once *you* are killed, *ese*, you never come back.”

That was all the light he shed on the matter. Then he offered them a cup of piñón coffee and started bragging. He was working on a new sculpture, a businessman Jesuscristo. “With the economic crisis and all that, I've already gotten ten orders. If my sister sees it,” he winked at Leroy and Michael, “she'll have a cow, *que no?*”

“Adiós, Santero,” Leroy said.

The following day he cancelled his second appointment with the recruiter. Michael and Damian soldiered on. They didn't taunt him, as he had feared, nor try to make him change his mind. But the last thing his brother said before leaving for the nine-week training course was, “The Army ain't for sissies, man.”

Leroy felt like a mama's boy, a sissy, a failure. In fact, a guy without *cojones*—what he often thought he (literally) was.

By the end of August Leroy also left Taos. He became a full-time student at the University of New Mexico and began taking American literature, Spanish and compared

religions classes. The latter was his favorite. His readings about Hinduism and Yogis, and Uncle Chuy's comments about such matters, made him sound... enlightened. Spanish came to him quite easy, too. During the first five years of his life that was the only language he spoke at home. But Leroy didn't see himself as a Mexican, and he certainly wouldn't claim to be "a Spaniard," as a pretty, dark-haired girl swore she was.

"Well, I'm *española*," she said to the instructor who praised her good pronunciation.

"Yes, a Spaniard with a *nopal* on her forehead," Leroy snickered. He had encountered the same attitude among some Taos old timers who maintained they were descendants of Cabeza de Vaca in person, though they spelled it C. de Baca.

Paula Paraíso was born and raised in Juarez. She was an outspoken, proud Mexicana who called the Spanish *gachupines*—quite an insulting term, particularly when preceded by the adjective *pinches*. Even Uncle Chuy made fun of the "Spaniards" who identified themselves with their own conquerors. "*Hijos de la chingada*, that's Stockholm syndrome at its best," he would say.

Leroy wasn't going to tell Isabella Chavez that she suffered from Stockholm syndrome. She was rather pretentious and, as Paula Paraíso would have put it, she farted higher than her ass, but he liked her. So he brownosedly agreed that she looked like a Seville queen, whatever that was. A month after classes started, the two were dating furiously.

*And then you have the retablos, the wood panels. Too flat, if you ask me, but I have made a few. Once I made a retablo of San Pascual Bailón for a woman who had just gotten married and didn't know how to cook. She put it in the kitchen and prayed to him every day, asked him to help her prepare yummy green chile and good posole. That was in the fifties, when viejas cared*

*about cooking and pleasing a man. Now the vieja says: Chinga, cabrón, qué San Pascual ni San Pascual. Cook your own food or go hungry. And that's the way it is.*

Isabella's mother was a classier, taller, Spanish-style version of Paula Paraíso. Señora Chavez had the manners of a Grand Inquisitor and the long nails of a Tang-dynasty princess. She was a court interpreter who wore tortoiseshell combs and spoke in an affected manner. She didn't have an accent but *feigned* one. Leroy suspected she considered him too Mexican for her Spanish princess, but used to showing respect to older women, he was impeccably polite.

"Take care of *la niña* and come back before midnight," she would tell Leroy before the couple left Isabella's home, a freshly painted house ensconced in the Sandia Mountains neighborhood.

"Yes, *señora*."

Floating on the pink mist of their love, Isabella and Leroy told each other everything about their past. Or almost everything. Isabella confessed that she wasn't a virgin, though her mother—*ay*, God forbid!—didn't know that. He shared with her his fears of being considered a weakling by Michael and Damian. He admitted that he still felt like a five-year-old kid when he was around Paula Paraíso. "How sweet," Isabella purred.

Yet Leroy didn't mention that he had suffered from testicular cancer when he was a teenager. Surgery had left him unable to father children, but he couldn't bring himself to confess that. What if she thought of him as a ball-less guy? A man with no *cojones*! The shame! Besides, Isabella might want to have kids, like most women he knew. And even if they weren't planning to start a family any time soon, it was a taboo subject, a topic that was better off postponed or simply left unsaid.

Isabella and Leroy met a few times at an old Motel 8 in Central Avenue. But she preferred her own house and they would sneak in while Señora Chavez was working. They frolicked on Isabella's bed under a stern image of the Virgin of Guadalupe that watched them from the wall. Leroy avoided looking at her; the image had the same somber, mournful expression that prevailed on the faces of Uncle Chuy's bultos.

*There is a santo for everything. San Pascual Bailón and San Lorenzo for the kitchen... I prefer old Lorenzo, you know? The guy had a sense of humor. When he was being grilled by the pinche emperor, he even made a joke about it. He said, "I'm done on this side, turn me over." That's why he's also the patron saint of comedians... And there is el Santo Niño de Atocha, who comforts the prisoners... And Santa Cecilia, patron saint of musicians...once I carved her with an electric guitar. And Doña Sebastiana... she has quite a history, that old broad.*

The day of the mid-term literature test Leroy was shaking like a ristra in the wind. The professor had a knack for asking about obscure plot details to catch the cheaters who read only book summaries in Wikipedia. Then his cell phone rang during the test. "Turn it off, Leroy," she ordered him. "No cell phones in my class. No chewing gum, no coffee, no nonsense."

He forgot all about the call. Later he and Isabella ate at El Patio and went to The Cooperage to dance. It wasn't until the next morning that he heard a message from his mother saying that Michael had been deployed to Iraq. Leroy had nightmares about exploding bombs and turban-clad snipers for the rest of the week.



By the end of his second semester at UNM Leroy was pleasantly comfortable in the academic setting. He had gone to college because he wanted to show Michael and Damian that he could also do something with his life—something that they hadn't even dared to try. Both of them had gotten mostly Cs in high school. But to his own surprise, Leroy found out that he *liked* taking classes. He even befriended the fastidious literature professor and read the entire assigned novels. For the compared religions class he wrote a paper on Uncle Chuy's New Age experiences, peyote and hallucinogenic mushrooms included, and received an A plus.

Señora Chavez's opinion of Leroy improved after he took a part-time job at the university library and another at the Institute for Southwest Studies. "The young man has potential," she told her daughter, who in turn transmitted the remark to Leroy. He considered it more insulting than complementary, but bit his tongue before stating so.

Then Isabella, who was a year ahead of him, began to talk about commitment. She was going to graduate with an associate degree in education and had secured a job at a middle school in downtown Albuquerque. But Leroy wasn't ready to tie the knot yet. When he got letters from Michael or Damian, who were both in Bagdad, he almost envied them. He wanted to see the world, too. The most distant place he had visited was Los Angeles. Pathetic, *que no?* He dreamed of traveling abroad at least once while still in college.

"I want to settle down," Isabella insisted. "I don't really care about signing the papers, but mom would have a fit if we start living together without a wedding. We have been engaged long enough."

"Well, we will see..."

His vague answers irritated her. They still sneaked off to her house when Señora Chávez was working but he feared that something precious, the trust and tenderness of first love, was

slipping away. She would take offense of an innocent joke he made. She wouldn't call for days. Once, she mentioned she had gone to The Cooperage with a former boyfriend. As the semester moved towards its end so did their relationship, at least in Leroy's eyes.

"Marriage ain't for sissies, man," he told himself, bitterly. "One needs *cojones* to get hitched." Besides, why did *she* want to marry? He didn't have a real job. The money he made was barely enough for him. Where would they live? He shared a three-bedroom house with two other guys and bringing Isabella there was out of the question.

Around that time he learned about the scholarships offered to Latino students and filled out an application for the Thurgood Marshall College at UCSD. He didn't have much hope, but it wouldn't hurt to try.

*Pos Doña Sebastiana... well, in the old, old days, people always carry a skull, a calavera, when they were burying someone. The calavera was to remind the living that someday they would be dead too, just like the one inside the coffin. But los padres, the Spanish priests, didn't like that, said it wasn't right to take the skull of some poor chap and drag it around. No, calaveras belong in the tombs with the entire body, they said. So they came up with Doña Sebastiana. Los imagineros made the skeleton of a woman in an ox char called La Carreta de la Muerte, and used her to accompany the entierros instead of the skulls. She is dressed in black and has a bow and arrow... I've made several Doñas Sebastianas myself. But she's only an envoy, comprendes? Not the real thing. The calavera, though, was the real thing. Yes, times have changed. But los santos, they do not change.*

"We have to talk," Isabella opened fire as soon as they sat at their favorite El Patio table.

Leroy pretended he was reading the menu. For the first time in his life he felt a painful, somber connection with his absentee father.

“I thought you loved me, Roy.”

“I do. But we can’t afford to get married now. Rents have gone up.”

The waiter came and they both ordered beef fajitas.

“We can live in my house,” she offered after a while.

“With your mother?”

“Of course!”

“That’s crazy, Bella.”

“Why? We can live there rent free.”

Leroy studied the fajitas as if they contained the solution to all the world problems in their red, sizzling sauce.

“Have you talked to her about it?”

“Sure, *pendejo*! You think I would be telling you this if she hadn’t agreed?”

“I don’t want to do that. Let’s wait until we can afford our own place.”

“When is it going to happen? In the year of the noise?”

He refused to discuss it further. She stalked off. Her unfinished fajitas twinkled mockingly at Leroy but he stayed and cleaned his plate.

Good and bad news poured over Leroy like May rain on his roof. First, he received a letter from the Thurgood Marshall College: he had gotten the scholarship. He called his mother at once. “Congratulations, *mijo*!” Paula Paraíso yelled. “You aren’t a *pendejo*, you are a smart guy, *que no*?”

“*Que* yes.”

He also told Isabella, afraid of her reaction. But she lightened up. “Roy! Then everything is solved!”

“What?”

“With my degree, I’ll get a job at the San Diego school district. Your scholarship and my salary will take care of our expenses. You won’t have to worry about anything, just study. I’m so proud of you!”

She hugged him and he didn’t have the courage to escape from her arms, her kisses, her joy... He even went so far as to set a wedding date before the spring semester ended.

A week later he got news about Michael. But they came filtered through so many sources that when Leroy heard the message it had been reduced to a short, scary expression that his mother said over the phone, “He freaked out.”

“What do you mean?”

“*Pos* that he’s in a mental hospital or something. They sent him back. We need to go and pick him up.”

Leroy told Isabella that they had to postpone the wedding.

“My brother came back sick. I may have to stay in Taos and take care of him. You understand, don’t you?”

He knew that with Uncle Chuy around his mother wouldn’t need him. And he felt gutless for using his brother’s illness, that freaking out that had taken place in a foreign land, as an excuse.

“You are backing off,” she said.

“I’m just saying we have to wait. I don’t know how he’s doing.”

“You are so...so...” She wouldn’t pronounce the adjective but made it clear that it wasn’t anything good, or honorable.

On their way back from the James A. Haley Veteran Hospital, Leroy kept watching his brother who seemed strangely quiet and subdued, eating very little and talking even less. Paula Paraíso’s questions merited only shrugs in response. How many people had he killed? She asked once, and he gave her a blank stare. (Better if they never found out about *los muertos*, Leroy thought. What good would it made?)

Leroy remembered Uncle Chuy’s words and they had an ominous resonance: “When you kill a real man, you get the nasty smells, the blood and the spilled guts. And you know what? Once *you* are killed, *ese*, you never come back.” But at least Michael wasn’t wounded. There was no blood around him. His guts were in their place. Yet what had happened under the intact skull, inside the brain, in the veins and the tissues that formed the essence of him?

*Among the things that haven’t changed, you have la Muerte. It happens just like this: when your time comes, los santos take you. It doesn’t matter if you are ready or not. They simply say, “Vamos, señor,” and there you go. Right off the pot, or wherever you happen to be at that moment. That’s why I try to be in good terms with the santos. I want them to treat me like family when Doña Sebastiana, the fake vieja, shows up at my doorstep.*

“Go to San Diego,” Uncle Chuy said. “Michael is young and healthy. He’ll make it. And I am here to help.”

They were in the casita, sharing a pot of coffee. The computer slept its electrical dream of

dormant pixels and a serious-looking Jesuscristo in a suit gazed at them from his cross. Leroy wanted to tell Uncle Chuy about Isabella, the wedding and his fears of commitment. But it seemed like such a frivolous thing to talk about when his brother was still silent and unresponsive, and hadn't washed his face or left their house for five days. Leroy finally stood up, hugged the old man and left.

"We have to talk," Isabella said again and Leroy thought that his life moved in circles. Scenes were repeated over and over, as persistent and annoying as Florida mosquitoes. But once in California everything would be different, he hoped. He had already bought his plane ticket. The wedding had been postponed—indefinitely.

"Tell me."

They had met at the Sub, the crowded university cafeteria that smelled of fried chicken and teriyaki sauce.

"It's about my mother."

"Your mother?"

"Actually, *she's* the one who wants to talk to you."

Like in an act of magic, Isabella vanished and Señora Chavez took her place. "This is straight out of a 19<sup>th</sup> century story," Leroy shook his head, incredulous. He even struggled to name a novel. *Pride and prejudice*? Something by Dickens? The literature professor would describe this scene as Victorian, *que no?*

"You have to marry Isabella," Señora Chavez said. "You promised."

"Señora, my brother is sick."

“I heard that, and I’m very sorry. But you are still going to San Diego, aren’t you? You have a scholarship.”

“Er...I...”

“Then you can fulfill your duties like a man. What you *can’t* do is leave my daughter in the state she is.”

“In the state she is.”

He repeated the phrase, digging deep for some hidden meaning. Had *she* freaked out too?

“You understand,” Señora Chavez said.

“I don’t.”

“Isabella is pregnant, Leroy,” she spoke slowly and enunciating all the words, as if she were addressing a baby, an idiot, or a foreigner. “With your child. And if you don’t do the right thing, you’ll still have to pay child support. Hear?”

“She never told me she was pregnant. And that ain’t true. Can’t be. Child support, my ass!”

“Watch your mouth, *indecente!*”

He left the cafeteria without looking back though he heard Isabella’s voice calling him. *Al carajo* with her. But who had come up with that absurd, old-fashioned trap? Señora Chavez? Isabella? Both? Why? Could she be really pregnant? And if she was, whose child was it? Well, it didn’t matter anymore. He walked directly to his car and started off to Taos.

When Leroy came into his house, he found Paula Paraíso in tears. His first thought was that Isabella, or worse, Señora Chavez, had called her.

“We’ll see a lawyer,” he said, trying to control his voice. “Don’t worry, mom. They just don’t know. My medical record is all we need to prove I didn’t—”

“Who is going to accuse *you*, *pendejo*? Of course Michael didn’t know what he was doing when he shot him!”

Leroy’s mouth felt as dried as an *acequia* in the winter.

“What? Michael shot someone?”

“Haven’t you heard it yet? Uncle Chuy...”

“He shot Uncle Chuy?”

“Yes, he went into the store with your father’s old rifle and killed him this morning. In cold blood, *Dios mío*, and saying crazy things about computer games. They’ve locked him up. What are we going to do now?”

Leroy didn’t answer. He closed his eyes and imagined that Paula Paraíso, Isabella, Michael, Uncle Chuy and even himself had been turned into wood carved figures. Powerless, frightened bultos trapped inside the wooden prison of their selves, longing to escape.