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Lost Virgin

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Mary Whiteside

PaKuula stole along a narrow passageway toward the mission, inhaling the scent of sage rising from the valley below. She had slipped out of her family's lodgings as the pink of false dawn edged the horizon. Pulling the massive, carved door just enough to wedge inside, PaKuula hesitated while her eyes adjusted to the dim interior of the adobe church. The silence did not betray her as she moved toward the sacristy, her nimble footsteps muffled by the earthen floor. A window set high in the east wall coaxed a reluctant shaft of light into touching the chancel and revealing the florid saints embellishing the reredos behind the altar. She knew he would be waiting; he always found the secret mark she left.

Everyone in the village had helped construct this holy place. As directed by the Franciscan friar, PaKuula's father, uncles, and brother carried timbers as big around as a man from a distant mountain to support the roof, obeying his decree that the logs could not touch the earth as the procession returned. For several seasons, young and old collected the large, round rocks that were transformed into solid walls. Using heavy sheepskins to plaster the soaring stonewalls with mud, her mother and aunts labored many days with other village women.

Sacred places and practices had been essential to PaKuula's family and the village long before the friar came, her people knew if the rituals were ignored their pueblo would be forgotten and the gods would cease to bring rain. However, the friar had captivated them with alluring new practices and remarkable stories—virgin birth, crucifixion, and miracles . . . so many miracles. Over the protests of the pueblo elders, the kiva and the church persisted, old and new, side-by-side. But now famine, marauding warriors, and disease were urgent threats. The people's prayers—PaKuula's prayers—were not answered. Villagers implored both the kachinas and

the saints—what must we do to survive? The elders declared their solution: Remove the new god. Return to the power of the kachinas!

As she had been taught, PaKuula knelt before the Blessed Virgin and painted saints. Her eyes were drawn to a graceful water pot. Illuminated with reddish-brown and white geometric designs, it had been placed on the altar as a gift that rain might come.

With fettered breath, she entered the sacristy. Even before he touched her, she sensed his nearness. They embraced. She could feel the coarse fabric of his garment against her cheek; how warm he was in the new day's chill. Whispering, she told him that her grandfather had received the knotted string indicating today was the day the kachinas would vanquish the friar's god. After this day everything would be different. They both knew what he must do. PaKuula rested her head on his shoulder. As he touched her dark hair, the scent of desert reminded him of all he was leaving.

He was gentle in pushing her away. "You know I must take her and go."

PaKuula left the church. She latched the door behind her and moved noiselessly along the dusty path. As soon as she was gone, he left the sacristy. Genuflecting, he made the sign of the cross, then stepped toward the altar. As tall as he was, he stretched to reach the carved wooden figure dressed in fine white silk and a blue lace mantilla. He wrapped her in soft deerskin, praying that saving the statue from the coming destruction would bring blessings. As he passed the altar, he caressed the edge of his grandmother's water pot. Departing the mission unseen, his precious bundle tucked under his arm, he muttered, "Perhaps rain will now come."



MY LADY OF TEARS Eunice Bridges

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