



*Sucia*¹

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She stood in the shower, letting the water roll its soothing warmth over the skin she had scrubbed over and over again until it was red and stinging. “*Sucia*,” she thought as she watched the drain swallow the last of the suds that had covered her body. As she scraped the *estrapajo*² across her body once again, she said out loud, “*Sucia*.”

The word brought back the woman's image. Cristina remembered when that woman first came to the neighborhood. Everyone had called her La Puta³ Gringa,⁴ until someone discovered that most of the letters on her mailbox had fallen off so all that remained was S. St_____. Then they started calling her La Santa⁵ because, they said, “she spent so much time on her knees.” But even in her younger days, she had been more available than attractive—there in her short shorts with her legs thick and shapeless like giant banana squash, pancake makeup plied on like patching compound to give some form to the plain amorphous face beneath. She walked the neighborhood flaunting her white shoulders which she was sure would lure the men from the dark-skinned embraces of their lovers. “Alabaster,” she called her reflection in the mirror; “cadaverous,” the women said of her pale form.

Though Luis told Cristina yesterday about the phone call from La Clínica⁶ letting him know he was on the list a client had given them, she still felt shaken and disoriented. She wanted to know who the woman was. She wanted details. He had refused at first, telling her it would serve no purpose, saying he wanted no chances for a confrontation if they ran into each other on the street. But he relented when Cristina began smashing things against the wall and then took aim at him.

“Okay, okay, I'll tell you, but you have to calm down and sit on the couch first,” he had insisted.

Cristina had no intention of “calming down” and his ordering her to do so would normally have sent her into an even greater rage, but she desperately wanted to know who the woman was and knew wearing a calm demeanor like camouflage was her only bargaining chip. So, she swallowed her fury and sat quietly on the couch, facing her husband squarely.

“It was a couple of weeks ago. I stopped at Javier's bar after work for a quick beer before coming home. The Garcia brothers were there, acting like big shots, because they just got a big landscaping project, and they kept buying shots all around. When I got up to go, Javier took my keys and told me to go into his back room and sleep it off. I crashed for a while and when I woke

¹ dirty, referring to a female

² loofa, the abrasive insides of a gourd used for scrubbing and exfoliating skin

³ whore

⁴ disparaging word for a White woman

⁵ The Saint

⁶ The Clinic

up, it was dark. And she was there.” He hesitated. “*Tocando me.*”⁷

Cristina had clenched her teeth as he started describing that night, and with his last words she felt an involuntary twitch on her cheek. “*Como?*”⁸ she yelled at him.

Luis froze for a moment. “What do you mean ‘how?’” he asked, shaking his head.

She raised her voice as she stood up from the couch. “I want to know everything, *everything!* What she did to you, what you did to her, but first tell me the *puta's* name!”

Luis's eyes widened when he heard the word “*puta,*” as though Cristina had already guessed the woman's identity.

Cristina noticed his reaction and took a step towards him. She spoke in a long, guttural exhale. “Who?”

Luis looked at the ground. “La Santa,” he whispered.

Cristina would have lunged at him if she hadn't been overcome by the nausea of imagining Luis and La Santa entwined on the cot—the same hands, the same mouth, the same body, hot and firm, that had been against her own the night before.

Luis stood outside the locked bathroom door, asking Cristina if she was okay. The only reply was the sound of her vomiting repeatedly and then the flush of the toilet. He called to her once again.

“Go away,” Cristina managed between the sobs that shook her body. “Leave me alone.”

Cristina pulled the towels off the towel rack and rolled them into a pillow as she lay down and pulled her legs into the fetal position so she could fit on top of the bathroom rug.

“I'll be right here,” Luis called to her as he dragged a stuffed chair to the side of the bathroom door and settled in for the long night ahead, her muffled crying a strange reassurance that she was still all right.

Cristina was not ready to talk with him yet the following morning, so Luis left for work without his customary shower or breakfast or any response to his entreaties outside the bathroom door. It had been hours before she stopped crying and fell into a restless sleep, so she woke up stiff and with a headache that made her feel dull and cotton-headed. At first, the images of her husband and La Santa had kept her in a sort of delirium, but now she began to wonder what she could have done to keep this from happening.

Her mother had told her to go home and “*cuida su esposo*”⁹ but Cristina knew her mother needed her the full six weeks as she recovered from surgery. There had been no other options. She was the only one of her daughters who did not have children yet, and it was summer, so she was on vacation from her teacher's aide job. Even Luis had agreed a visiting nurse once a day was insufficient care for her widowed mother. Besides, Cristina and Luis spoke every day and his increasing comments about how much he missed her made her feel more—rather than less—secure. Now she berated herself for not hearing the implicit message, for foolishly reassuring herself.

All day long, her emotions kept swinging the focus of her thoughts. The rage at his betrayal would send her into such agitation that she could not stand or sit still, and then she would suddenly dissolve into a tearful self-flagellation for not preventing it from happening. The image of La Santa would drift in and out of her thoughts and once again she would feel *sucia*.

Chlamydia. Cristina looked at the word Luis had written down on the pad next to the phone; the nurse had spelled it for him. Now she might have a disease with a name she wasn't even sure how to pronounce. But she had decided that neither of them would go to the public health clinic,

⁷ “Touching me.”

⁸ “How?”

⁹ “take care of your husband”

that she would not sit there like one of the *mujeres de la calle*.¹⁰ She would insist that they went to Tijuana for their tests and any medicine they might need. She would tell Luis he owed her that much, that it would spare her some of the shame and keep others from knowing she was *sucia*.

Cristina had not wanted to leave the house, to go out where someone she knew might see her, might know that something was wrong. She didn't know if she could talk to someone as though nothing had changed, as though she hadn't changed. But the cupboards and refrigerator were bare so she decided to go to the Ralph's on the farthest end of the neighborhood, where she was less likely to run into friends or neighbors.

Walking through the aisles, selecting familiar goods, filling plastic bags with fruits and vegetables, all the mundane things she did in the grocery store gave her a sense of normalcy for the first time since yesterday's events. And concentrating on the list she had made in her head blocked the images that had haunted her.

She stood next to her cart, trying to remember the last few items, when an elderly woman from her church entered the aisle.

"Hello there, Cristina. We've missed you at mass the past few weeks. It's good to see you."

"Thanks, Mrs. Esparza," was all Cristina could manage after she recovered from the shock of being recognized despite her efforts to avoid being seen.

"The children at the Sunday nursery miss you too. You're so good with them, I'll bet you can't wait to have *chiquitos*¹¹ of your own," Mrs. Esparza said, smiling broadly.

Before she could hide it, a look of panic came over Cristina's face. She hadn't thought about it until now—could chlamydia keep her from having children or could it damage them in some way, she wondered.

Mrs. Esparza saw the expression on her face and responded immediately. "Oh, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to be nosey or bring up anything that might upset you."

Cristina quickly caught her composure. "No, no. It's just that my mom's been so sick, and she was afraid she'd never get to see my children. But the surgery caught all the cancer, and we're all really hopeful now."

"Well, I'm sure you and Luis will give her beautiful *nietos*¹² in your own time," Mrs. Esparza replied, moving down the aisle to end what had become an awkward conversation.

Anxious to get home and look up chlamydia and its effects on childbearing, Cristina tossed the last couple of items into her basket. She managed small talk with the cashier and thanked the boxboy despite the gnawing thought of damage to her children.

She pushed her cart through the automatic doors and rolled it to her SUV which was parked adjacent to the sidewalk. She popped the rear door and loaded her groceries. As she lowered the door, she saw La Santa walking down the sidewalk toward the grocery store.

Cristina felt a hot rush of adrenalin and slammed the back door down with a loud crash. La Santa looked in the direction of the noise and saw Cristina's eyes fixed directly on her. Cristina began to move forward, her eyes never moving off La Santa, who now turned to go in the opposite direction. La Santa took a few steps and looked back to see Cristina, pace quick and strident, eyes dead still and focused, coming toward her.

La Santa picked up her pace, moving faster, but not wanting to attract too much attention by running. She kept turning to look behind her, to see Cristina gaining on her. She turned her head to look back once again as she leapt off the curb. She didn't notice the car that had swerved into the right lane to make a last-minute turn.

¹⁰ women of the streets, prostitutes

¹¹ little ones

¹² grandchildren

Cristina had full view of the intersection and saw the car signal as La Santa was about to step off the curb. Instinctively, she yelled, but La Santa could not hear what she called out and took it to be one of the names women had often yelled at her.

The driver had not expected anyone to jump off the curb as he sped up to catch the last of a yellow light, so he gave the steering wheel a quick spin. The wheels and bumper caught and dragged La Santa around the corner before he came to a halt.

Cristina watched from a distance as the crowd gathered then parted to make room for the paramedics and their stretcher. She could see through the breaks in the crowd when they raised the stretcher and covered La Santa with the sheet. As the ambulance drove away, Cristina felt a new shame, for the joy she could not control, knowing that now no one would ever know she was *sucia*.