

—SANTA MARIA

by Jeff Cercone

“Can you believe these people? What the hell’s the matter with them?”

Rob ignored his friend and pushed his way through the crowd, bumping an elderly Hispanic woman in the shoulder. He started to apologize, but she was too preoccupied to notice.

“Santa María, Madre de Dios, ruega por nosotros pecadores ahora y en la hora de nuestra muerte. . .” She whispered the prayer, tears soaking her grizzled cheeks and her arms clutching what Rob assumed were her two grandchildren, who stared wide-eyed at the spectacle.

Dozens of people, the devout and the curious, had gathered at the underpass of the Kennedy freeway, positioning for a glimpse of the stain on the wall. A certain civility had taken hold despite the stifling Chicago heat and the decidedly unholy stench of exhaust fumes, sweat and urine.

Most kept a respectful distance, queuing up and allowing a few at a time, usually a family or a group of friends, to move up to get a closer look. Rob noticed, then felt guilty for pushing his way to the front.

“They’re nuts!” Mitch said, not caring who he offended. “It doesn’t look anything like her. It’s a freakin’ stain!”

“I dunno, if you stare at it long enough, it could look like her,” Rob answered.

Behind them, people held their camera phones up to capture the image on the wall.

“So how do you explain the one that appeared in rust on the water tower in Des Moines?” Rob asked. “And then there was the other one that was supposedly just a random case of brown patch on that football field in Texas. . .”

“I had a rash once that looked like Danny Devito if you saw it in the right light, but nobody was asking me for autographs,” Mitch said, shaking his head.

“You’re all class, Mitch,” Rob said, chuckling inappropriately loud.

It was Mitch’s idea to come here, not because either of them was religious; he just thought it would be worth a laugh, and he suggested that Rob could get some footage for his film class. They had been friends all through high school and Mitch hadn’t changed a bit, Rob thought. He wished he could say the same about himself. Iraq had done a number on him. But it was good to be home and among friends. And nice to be able to laugh again.

A small, middle-aged man in front of them turned and frowned.

SANTA MARIA

“Show some respect, boys. The virgin came to see us and all you can do is make jokes?” He shook his head, the brim of his fishing hat stained with sweat.

“Sorry sir,” Rob said sheepishly while Mitch rolled his eyes.

A young woman was hugging the stain on the wall as her three little girls watched, the youngest holding a beat-up plastic doll that was missing an arm and the oldest holding the leash of a large black lab who had plopped down in a mud puddle to cool off.

“Come up here and tell the Virgin your sins!” the woman barked at the girls, who approached the wall cautiously. “Ask for forgiveness.”

They waited another 20 minutes for their turn, Rob only having to shush Mitch a few times. The man in the fishing hat was on his knees at the wall now, holding rosary beads in one hand, his other touching the stain. After a few moments, he struggled to his feet and put the beads in his pocket. He looked at Rob and Mitch and tipped his hat, then turned and walked toward the sidewalk.

As they moved closer, Rob took out his video camera and began filming the crowd, then swung around to follow their gaze. In front of the wall, an impromptu shrine had emerged, with a couple dozen or so glass candles, the kind they sold at the discount store on the corner, some with pictures of the Virgin, others with Jesus. People had left bouquets of flowers, cards, rosary beads, Bibles and teddy bears. Rob noticed that the little girl had left behind the one-armed doll, probably at her mother’s urging.

“Unbelievable,” Mitch whispered. “Isn’t it scary to think about how many desperate people live around you?”

“Come on, now. If they want to believe in something, who’s it hurting?” Rob retorted, panning and tilting the camera on the stain. “It does look a little bit like her.”

“You’ve been overseas too long, dude,” Mitch said.

Rob zoomed in on it. If you stared at it long enough, it certainly looked like the outline of a woman wearing a robe, her head tilted slightly. He could sort of make out a feminine face at the top right and hands clasped in prayer above her chest. On the news, city officials were claiming salt runoff from the highway above caused the stain.

“Come on, dude. I gotta get back. I’m meeting Melissa for dinner,” Mitch said, tapping Rob’s shoulder.

“I think I’m gonna stay here and get some more footage.”

“Whatever, Jesus freak. Call me later, dude.” Mitch said, then headed back to the car they had parked a few blocks away.

Rob waved the next group in line forward, then stepped back a little to give them some space, filming the whole time. The three old ladies didn’t seem to notice him as they added to the pile of offerings against the wall and fell to their knees.

Rob was kneeling as well as he zoomed in on the women, panning from their feet and up over their hunched backs to the stain on the wall. He began to pan toward the shrine but doubled back to the stain. He was sure that he’d seen a pair of eyes open where the woman’s face would be.

He focused again on the stain for a moment until he shrugged it off as his colorful imagination working and turned the camera back to the shrine.