



THE ACORN TREE GROVE



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The river water gleamed and flashed as the young boy waded across with his dog Sapo. The boy hesitated on a small sandbank in the middle of the river. He patted Sapo's head and rubbed it with his hand. The dog wagged his tail acknowledging his master's touch.

The boy looked at the opposite bank, at a large grove of acorn trees. "That's a good place to go into the grove," he mused. He started again to cross the river toward the acorn grove.

Once he reached the riverbank, the boy took hold of a small branch and pulled himself out of the stream onto dry land, where Sapo was already shaking the excess water off his body.

As the boy and the dog wandered into the grove, they heard a sad, mournful sound from the treetops: "Coo, coo, coo!" The sound kept repeating itself as they walked deeper and deeper into the trees. It was the call of a mourning dove.

Beneath Mundo's (that was the boy's name) and Sapo's feet there was a blanket of leaves that made a crushing sound when the boy and the dog walked on it. Near the hillside, Mundo noticed that the trees were larger and the grove was thicker in the

area, so that very little sunlight could filter through the branches.

"What a gloomy, dark place," Mundo said. In the meantime, while a cricket in the shadows made a chirping sound, Sapo was sticking his nose into piles of leaves sniffing and sniffing.

After awhile Mundo realized that he had lost track of time. It was very silent in the grove with no other sound except for the sad call of the mourning dove. Standing in the shadows of the grove, Mundo began to remember the many stories of the river that the old men from the barrio told when they gathered to gossip and exchange tales. He also began to regret that he had not listened to his mother when she warned him to stay away from the Río Hondo because of the strange things that had happened there.

Now it was completely silent. The mourning dove had quit its cooing. Mundo sensed that something was wrong. There was a very strange odor in the air. Sapo's ears perked up as if listening to something. Worried, Mundo decided to turn back and find his way to the riverbank. But he could not remember how he had come. The only sound now was the crackling of the dry leaves under his feet, and around him it was getting darker and darker.

"The sun is going down. I must get back to the riverbank before it disappears," he said to himself.

Mundo did not know how long he had been in the grove, though he thought he had at least a couple of hours before sunset. He did not want to be caught by the river at night. Finally, Mundo thought he could hear the gurgling of the river and he began to make his way toward the sound. It was then that, suddenly, the boy was engulfed by a

huge shadow from behind. The loud growling of his dog alerted him. The hair on the animal stood on end while he arched his back and showed his fangs, preparing to attack. Startled, Mundo turned to see what was happening. He stared ahead with Sapo snarling by his side. In front of them was a huge cone of leaves, rising, swirling faster and faster, and on the upper reaches of the swirling, growing pile was the head of the feared one.

Mundo could not speak or scream from the terror he felt; he was covered with goose pimples. He knew who that head belonged to. It was La Llorona, the Wailing Woman. Everybody knew her. It was folly to attempt to run from her. In that moment of terror, he remembered the stories he had heard from his mother and his elders, that whomever is caught in La Llorona's clutches has but one fate: Death.

"I am doomed to die this day! How foolish I've been!" Mundo whimpered.

La Llorona looked down on the boy, smiling viciously. A loud, terrible scream came from her mouth as the swirling column moved forward slowly, very slowly, enjoying the terror of her two victims.

Mundo knew what was about to happen. But although every nerve in his body screamed, "Run! Run!" to in his brain, he remained frozen, staring at La Llorona. Her jet-black eyes stared back down at him while her infernal screaming rang over the whirlwind of leaves.

Sapo crouched, snarling, determined to fight for his life, muscles flexed, blood pumping hard through his tense body.

The swirling mass of leaves came closer and

closer, and the screams became louder. Mundo clenched his fists. Tears streamed down his cheeks as he stood in the shadowy darkness waiting for the end. His sobs became frightened spasms when he saw through his misty eyes the huge, screaming fang-filled mouth approaching and the jet-black eyes piercing through him. The end was drawing near. Sapo was barking and snarling in a last show of force.

Then, like the sound of a bugle in the height of battle, a loud sad cry of misery and suffering came from a distant acorn tree, filling the grove. "Coo, coo, coo!" It was the call of the mourning dove.

The vicious whirlwind came to a sudden stop. The huge mass of leaves drifted then tumbled to earth. La Llorona had vanished, dissolving into nothingness.

What had happened? What had driven La Llorona away?

According to the barrio elders, all the birds in Noah's ark were white. First, Noah chose a white raven to check the waters on the earth and report back to him if they had come down. But the raven did not return. It flew around and landed on the floating corpses of those who had drowned in the flood. It pecked their eyes out. In punishment, its white feathers were made black.

Next, Noah sent a white dove to check the waters. The dove, tired from flying over the waters, decided to rest on a mountain peak and wash its feet. Because it did not return on time to report to Noah, it was also punished. Its white feathers were turned gray and its feet became a bright red color. For this reason, the mourning dove cries so sadly and with such misery and shame. (Noah had to

send out another dove to finish the job.)

From that time forward when the mourning dove looks down at its red feet and sees its gray feathers, the memory of the shameful punishment it suffered for its wicked mistake makes it cry. In the same manner, that evening in the acorn tree grove by the banks of the Río Hondo, the sad mourning sound of the dove made La Llorona remember her own wickedness; how she was condemned to roam the rivers of the world for killing her own children. Overpowered by her feeling of guilt, she vanished.

When it was all over, Mundo and Sapo turned and ran toward the sound of the river. They ran through the fallen leaves as if they were rabbits chased by foxes. They jumped into the stream and headed for home running, running without looking back, splashing across the river, across the sandbars, climbing the opposite bank of the river and across the fields. The low mournful cooing of a dove in the dark acorn tree grove and the sound of the churning waters of the Río Hondo filled the night.