

# PADRE ALONZO

By Ann McGlinn

*I wrote this tale based on my experiences of living and working in a homeless shelter in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico and in the Chama Valley of northern New Mexico. It is also part of my short story and novella collection entitled El Penco and Other Stories from the Border.*

A table for checkers has been set up outside Victor Nogales's cell. He is always black. The guards take turns playing him, and each time he wins, which is frequently, one hour is taken off his sentence. After three weeks, he has managed to win sixty-four games, each victory tallied on a sheet of paper taped to his wall. The guards place their bets and often stick their hands through the bars to pat Victor's back after he has won them money.

He is not allowed out of the cell to play because they don't want to appear too friendly due to the sacrilegious nature of his crime. Caught exiting the rear door of the Juárez Cathedral with the statue of the Virgin of Guadalupe in his arms, Victor began to cry, telling Padre Alonzo and a policeman, who both happened to be standing just outside the door, that Mary had come to him in his sleep and asked him to take her to northern New Mexico. She had told him, he claimed, that she wanted to be placed inside a meeting house of Los Penitentes so that she could tell them, in person, to continue their holy practices. They searched Victor's home where they found several hundred crucifixes of varying sizes, several dozen statues of Mary, four half-life-size nativity scenes, a wall of wooden skeletons strewn with flowers and rosary beads, and hundreds of partially melted candles. They couldn't verify that any of the objects had been stolen, so they were left with prosecuting him only for the attempted theft of the statue, which

landed him six months in jail. Padre Alonzo, thinking Victor was perhaps a bit crazy or, if Mary had actually spoken to him in a dream, that he had misinterpreted her message and with proper guidance—namely confession and daily prayer—it could be properly channeled, asked the judge for visitation rights in order to help in Victor's spiritual recovery.

Padre Alonzo arrives every day at 11:30 a.m., after morning mass at the Cathedral. He brings with him his Bible, the final piece of consecrated host, and a small vial of blessed wine. The guards always make sure the checkerboard and pieces are taken away by 11:15.

*But during his fourth year of service at the church, Padre Alonzo fell into sin.*

Like most inhabitants of Juárez, Padre Alonzo found his way to the city through a series of mishaps. Born in Acapulco to parents who both worked at the Hyatt Regency hotel—his mother had been a cocktail waitress and his father a plumber—Padre Alonzo was raised in the dichotomous world of a Mexican resort town. From an early age, Alonzo was unnerved by the foreign tourists who pulled an endless supply of pesos from their wallets, flashing gold watches and necklaces and sporting cheap sombreros. Each night, when he heard his mother return from her shift in the early morning and his father rise to trace her path back to the hotel, he was imbued with a sense of injustice and he promised himself he would devote his life to righting the world's wrongs.

At the age of sixteen, he felt God calling him to the priesthood. His mother was ecstatic, his father despondent. Alonzo was their only son—the only brother to twin five-year-old daughters.

His father had hoped Alonzo would become the next Pelé.

He was accepted into the Franciscan seminary in Ciudad México at the age of eighteen and soon found himself at the top of his class. Besides being blessed with a strong intellect, Alonzo possessed physical beauty and an eloquent tongue. His superiors predicted that he would become a bishop, perhaps even the first Mexican Pope, but Alonzo was unaffected by such talk. His heart was devoted to God and whatever was God's will, he would do.

Padre Alonzo's first assignment was to a parish in Mexico City's wealthy district of Lomas de Chapultepec. For five years, Padre Alonzo performed his duties; he heard the confessions of his parishioners, married them, baptized them, gave them their final rites, and delivered passionate eulogies that spawned guilt and feelings of love in even the most corrupt, hate-filled, and hypocritical of hearts.

But Padre Alonzo felt he was not performing the services that God had created him for. Besides Jesus, he counted Mother Teresa and Gandhi as figures to emulate. His calling was to work with the poor. The clean, well-nourished faces lifted toward the host in his hand each Sunday didn't seem to truly need him.

He let his desires be known to his superiors, but they were hesitant to reassign him. His beauty, youth, and persuasive discourse led to his standing-room-only masses. His eulogies were replayed on the radio. He was the catalyst for a 60% increase in the number of young men and women in his diocese who joined Holy Orders. He was revolutionary.

But during his fourth year of service at the church, Padre Alonzo fell into sin. One night, he witnessed a group of men beating themselves with small whips on the church steps. He visited the church's library and pulled off the shelf a seventeenth century Fran-

ciscan text that described the practice of self-flagellation. He then found a book describing the history of Los Hermanos Penitentes. He read of lashing the bare back with thorn-studded branches and using a sharp stone to cut the shape of a cross into the shoulder. The wearing of hair shirts and the dragging of massive crosses across unforgiving terrain. As the body is the temple of God, the practice had been repeatedly suppressed by Church authorities, but Padre Alonzo could not resist. With each incision he created into his skin, with each whack of a thorny branch upon his back, he felt guilt released from his wounds. He felt closer to the suffering of Christ and of the sick, the poor, and the spiritually wounded. He prayed that God would pierce his hands with the sign of the stigmata, and that he be allowed to see tears flow from the statue of the Virgin that was placed to the right of the church's altar. In addition to daily sessions of self-flagellation, Padre Alonzo began to fast for days on end. The result was the withering away of his body and a severe case of anemia.

After being counseled by his superiors, ordered by them to abandon his practice of extreme mortification, and spending ten months in the Church's sanatorium located in the small, seaside town of Nautla, Padre Alonzo was granted his wish. His cheeks once again filled with color, his shoulders marked by only healthy white scars, and his arms once again fleshy, he was relocated to the landlocked, treeless, sand-swept, spider-filled, transient-occupied, dun-hued plane that is Ciudad Juárez. He was ordered to assist the bishop who ran the Cathedral, performing the daily morning, as well as Saturday afternoon, mass. He was put in charge of visiting the parishes in the colonias and providing spiritual services to those living in homeless shelters. With Victor Nogales's attempted theft, Padre Alonzo also began to visit the prison every morning.

When Victor Nogales exited the Cathedral with the statue, it had been two years since Padre Alonzo had arrived to Ciudad Juárez. Padre Alonzo's struggle to resist self-flagellation had become easier with each afternoon walk through a slum, with each sign of the cross made over a cripple begging on the street, and with each phone call placed to a government official in order to secure another donation for an orphanage, a shelter, or a clinic. After three years, his descent into self-abuse was but a vague memory.

Yet Victor's professed motive behind his crime piqued Padre Alonzo's interest, stirring the very memories he had come to repress. Was Victor brought to Padre Alonzo by God as a challenge? Was Padre Alonzo to visit New Mexico and preach God's Word? Was he to resist a visit to New Mexico, which could lead to a relapse of his compulsions, and instead focus on saving the obviously tormented soul of Victor Nogales?

Padre Alonzo spent the night before his first visit to Victor Nogales's cell on his knees in prayer. He felt the scars on his back break open. He heard the whoosh of the branch through the air. He felt blood flow from his palms, and he saw the Virgin's face wet with tears. He called out to God to quiet his imagination. To focus his energy on his duty to help guide Victor Nogales toward a peaceful union with God. With the first crack of morning light beneath his door, Padre Alonzo rose from his stiff knees and dressed for mass, still praying to God for a clear and strong head.

The first three weeks spent with Victor Nogales were filled with readings of Scripture followed by moments of silent reflection, confession followed by the giving of penance, discussion of God's power and grace, and the singing of hymns. Until today, Victor hadn't spoken again of his dreams.

"Each night she comes," Victor begins, raising his eyes to the ceiling. "Sometimes she smiles. Sometimes she weeps. But always she says, 'Victor, you are a good man. Free of sin. Do as I bid and God will forever hold you in His hand.'"

After a long pause, Padre Alonzo asks, "Victor, what exactly does she bid you to do?"

"She tells me," his voice quivering, "of holy objects that she desires me to find and place in my home. I am building a shrine for her."

"Did she tell you to build her a shrine?"

"Yes. So that all of Mexico will have a place to visit her."

"So why, then, did she ask you to take her statue to New Mexico?"

"Because she says it is still truly Mexico. And she wants to encourage Los Penitentes to spread their practices."

Padre Alonzo feels his hands begin to shake, longing to hold the end of a thorny whip. To pick up a hair shirt and wrap it around his torso.

"Several months ago, she instructed me to take one of her statues from the village of Creel," Victor continues. "I took the bus down and bought two seats for the trip back, wrapping the statue in a comforter. It weeps five times a week. Usually five or six tears just after 12:00 noon."

Padre Alonzo breaks down.

"Victor," he says, unable to stop himself, the old compulsive feelings coursing back through his veins. "Victor, may I have the key to your apartment? I can check up on things. Make sure your plants are watered. Do you have pets? A cat to be fed, perhaps?"

Victor Nogales rests his eyes on Padre Alonzo's trembling lips.

"I don't have pets. Or plants. But the sergeant has my key—you can get it on the way out. She should weep tomorrow."

So begins Padre Alonzo's reacquaintance with his hibernating demon.

The next day, Padre Alonzo calls the jail at 11:00 a.m. and asks that Victor be told he will come that afternoon. While he waits, Padre Alonzo further instructs, Victor should read and meditate on Matthew, Books I-IV, and recite the rosary for at least half an hour.

As Padre Alonzo exits the Cathedral, he feels the key to Victor's apartment burning through his cotton-lined pocket and searing his flesh. He prays to God to release him from the torment that drives him toward Victor's apartment. He prays that the images of Mary's tear-lined cheeks, which had replayed themselves all night again and again while he tried to sleep, vanish from his mind. But his legs carry him forward, and he is soon jaywalking through streets, turning down narrow lanes, passing beggars without even a glance, oblivious to parishioners who call his name, until he is at the front door of the three-story, pale pink cement block that contains the small, cluttered, dark room that Victor Nogales calls home.

After unlocking and passing through the black iron security door, scaling one flight of stairs, turning down the dim hall, and reaching the last door on the left, Padre Alonzo once again calls upon God to save him from himself. Then his hand lifts the key to the lock, 11:44 glowing from the watch strapped to his wrist, and the door opens with a soft click.

The room smells of frankincense. The windows, covered by thin red drapes, cast a dim light. Padre Alonzo steps through the doorway onto the petal-strewn floor. The collection is dense; the ceiling is lost behind the crossbeams of hundreds of crucifixes suspended from hooks above Padre Alonzo's head. One wall is covered with paintings of holy scenes. Another is lined with shelves filled with wooden

saints. Four plates painted with images of Jesus are mounted above the door and lit with electric sacred hearts.

The faint sound of a digital alarm clock sounds above him, followed by footsteps. And that's when Victor Nogales's CD player, timed to begin playing *Dios, Nos Bendiga*, clicks on and fills Padre Alonzo's ears with voices of praise accompanied by guitars, a trumpet and a violin. He walks from one statue of Mary to the next, inspecting the cheeks for any sign of dampness. But only his own cheeks are wet from the sweat that pours down from his brow, his blood pressure rising with each pound of his heart. After many minutes of searching, he is finally granted his wish. A statue of Mary wreathed in a garland of silk bougainvillea, and whose right cheek is lit by a finger of white light that pokes through the edge of the window drape, suddenly sprouts a tear.

Padre Alonzo catches the gleam in the corner of her eye. He steps closer in ecstasy as the tear slides gently along the side of her nose and lips, catching momentarily on the tip of her raised chin before falling into his lifted palm. He brings the tear to his lips.

The first tear is followed by another, and another, until there are six tears in all. Padre Alonzo falls to his knees and gives thanks to Jesus, to Mary and God, to Joseph, as the loud but moving sound of the mariachi band continues to flow from the speakers.

While Padre Alonzo meditates on the spectacle he has just witnessed, Victor Nogales's upstairs neighbor, who works as a nurse at the Hospital of the Immaculada, dries her hands on her bathroom towel and applies a thin layer of pink to her lips. Her Tuesday through Saturday routine is always the

same. Wake at 11:45. Empty her bowels of the evening's sediment, wash her face and hands before applying her lipstick, step out of the bathroom, throw on her uniform, and exit the apartment to catch the 12:10 bus to the hospital. With the clockwork with which the nurse performs her morning ritual (10 minutes on the toilet, 2 minutes to wash her face and hands, 5 minutes to apply makeup, 1 minute to dress), so

does her leaking sink pipe, resting in the ceiling above the bougainvillea-garlanded Virgin, slip through the crack in Victor Nogales's ceiling five to six drops of water that fall into a sliver of space between the crossbeams of two suspended perpendicular crucifixes, landing precisely in the corner of

the statue's right eye. A miracle in and of itself.

And as the last note of the trumpet sounds, and the remaining trace of Mary's sixth tear evaporates from the skin of Padre Alonzo's palm, Padre Alonzo feels the demon that had inhabited him pulled from his skull. His hands stop trembling. His heart calms. He has witnessed a miracle, and the miracle is a sign whose meaning is clear. He crosses the room to Victor Nogales's small bed, pulls from it a thin cotton blanket, and returns to the statue. Wrapping the Virgin in the blanket, he thanks God for calling him to do His will and asks Him for a safe passage north.

