

# Luz Maria

by Steven Gowin

Luz Maria Sepúlveda read poorly and mainly only religious tracts in Spanish.

But although badly educated, and although the Michoacán fought to deny it, she held the complex notion that borders are not abrupt lines, simple artifacts of geography and cartography.

She knew that *la frontera* is transitory and vague and permeable. She'd crossed from Mexico years ago, crossed and recrossed as authorities caught her, beat her, and returned her, until she finally made it far enough into *El Norte* to settle a bit, but only a bit.

What's on the old side, the other side, she'd often said, is lost forever while the new side was never really there, just as *El Señor Bandie* had preached. But Luz Maria hated that understanding and fought it because it was something Bandie had believed and something Padre Kelly said was wrong.

Before her husband, Jesús Bautista Sepúlveda, captured Bandie's mamba with a forked stick and dropped it into a burlap bag, and tied the bag tight with twine, Luz Maria had prayed to the Holy Mother who'd never failed her.

Then, with the Louisville Slugger *los niños* used to smash *piñatas*, Luz Maria beat the snake repeatedly, beat it furiously, beat it in a holy wrath, because she'd insisted she kill Bandie's pet herself and neither priest nor her child nor Jesús Bautista could help her.

Once *la serpiente* made no sign of movement, Luz Maria struck it a final blow and Señor Sepúlveda removed it and carried the dead snake at arm's length into *Rancho Bandie*. There, *El Asesino's* coffin lay across sawhorses, the lid closed tight. Poisoners of women and children are not suitable for view; nor are remnants of the cyanide executed.

When Jesús Bautista opened the box, it exhaled a cloud of bitter almond perfume that never cleared from the room. Then the Mexican laid the mamba out over Bandie with the snake's head, still

in tact, under Bandie's chin. And so began Lloyd Bandie's only funeral.

In the coffin, a simple Trappist made box the county loaned to indigents, Luz Maria placed *El Señor Bandie's* fancy Tony Lamas and his engineering degree from Reno School of Mines and Minerals. She prayed that *El Señor Bandie* would search out *Santisima Muerte* now, for better or for worse. What chance had he of *la salvación* otherwise?

Later the coroner's men would stop by to drive the body to Bakersfield where it would be cremated at the Union Cemetery on Baker and Potomac. They would talk of Mojave dirt bikes and Toy Haulers on the drive down but never see the mamba nor smell the almonds.

Luz Maria would tell the children that no matter what... no matter what they thought they saw in the orchard at night... *El Señor Bandie* had crossed to the other side and could harm no one again. But the children had grown up on *La Llorona* and refused to believe her.

And Luz Maria, who understood crossings and the the vaguery of borders better than anyone, could not believe it herself.

