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It was a special day in Raquira, the day of the Virgin of Carmen, but more especially this year, on the 400th anniversary of the little town. 'Four hundred years of slavery!' laughed Chepe Toquica, the mayor. Chepe was a Chibcha man, one of the few Indigenous mayors around. He always made the same joke. 'True! Don Chepe,' nodded whoever was nearby. Today the listener was Doña Josefina who kept one of the mobile sweets stalls around the square, rain or shine, although it rarely rained and never on the day of the Virgin of Carmen.

Chepe walked from his office where he had been practicing his speech, across the square, and on to the church to check the progress of the float decoration. The statue of the Virgin of Carmen stood only five foot high but when placed on the bier and pedestal, then raised onto six sturdy shoulders for the parade, she towered above the crowd in her splendour. Chepe's unblinking eyes looked at the Virgin with pride.

Before they knew it, the whirl of the festival was upon them. Trucks, buses, cars, all decorated with blue ribbons and blue balloons were slowly circling the square as priests stood on the church steps spraying them with holy water. No-one stayed away, not even Elise who lived out of town and practiced what some whispered was witchery. Today, no-one stared at her because today was a day of joy. The noisy music forced shouted conversations. Chepe mounted the elaborate stage, sponsored by a beer company, to settle himself before the arrival of the Virgin.

Here she was, at last! Chepe was sharing a joke with the Bambucco dancers when he heard the crowd gasp. He turned and saw the final moments of the Virgin's fall to the cobblestones, the terrible smash into a hundred pieces and the fearful cries of women who ran to touch her. All in seconds, just seconds, and disaster was upon them. A broken Virgin! Hell was at their door!

Don Chepe leapt down the stairs and ran, yelling to the crowd to make way. When he reached the shattered Virgin, women and men were on their knees praying, the bier bearers were frozen in shock, drivers were leaping from their vehicles and the kids who had laughed at the spectacle were beginning to realize the gravity of the accident. The priests had hurried to the sacristy for candles and more holy water. 'Get some sticky tape and some glue, brothers!' yelled Don Chepe, always a man of logic and action. The kneeling nuns gathered the pieces into their tunics and the destroyed Virgin was taken away to the church. Car doors were left open, stalls abandoned and the entire town entered the church to pray for a miracle.

The town sat in the church during the afternoon and into the night, some praying, some feeling hungry, some playing with the missals on the pews, united in their fear of disaster befalling the town. Doña Josefina had organized a band of street-sellers to supply the multitude

with coffee and cake. Even Elise, the witch, had kept the crowd company, in the back pew, drifting off to sleep. She could be forgiven because of her age, which some guessed was more than 90 years.

In the sacristy, Chepe watched with increasing agitation as nuns and priests took turns to reassemble the Virgin with bottle after bottle of Boxer glue. Small paint chips picked up with sticky strips were carefully reapplied to the statue after lengthy discussion as to their placement.

Midnight passed, and a chilly wind blew in. Father Lorenzo pulled his hood over his balding head and hurriedly closed the heavy doors. Snores and prayers mingled in the air. The conversations about who was to blame followed the talk of what might befall the town. Don Chepe was sipping his ninth coffee. Everyone in the sacristy stood back a little to review his or her work by the light of the single bulb. The poor Virgin was a mosaic in progress.

Aware that the crowds were awaiting some good news, Chepe ordered the statue be taken out and placed on the altar. The crowd stirred and knelt, hanging their heads to pray or cry. The rosary widows clicked their beads and adjusted their mantillas. Despair was upon them. Even Chepe sensed impending disaster.

As heads were hung in fear, old Elise stretched in the back pew, stood up and walked down the central aisle. None noticed her. She walked to the altar, stepping up to where the ruined Virgin was staring with crooked eyes. Old Elise mumbled in an unknown language. People raised their heads, nudged their neighbours, and whispered angrily. Chepe raised his head and stood up. Father Lorenzo moved to quit Elise from the sacred place but Chepe stopped him. Elise, her hat tilted, her dark skin and wispy grey hair shining in the light of a hundred candles, reached out to touch the Virgin. The prayerful clambered to their feet. There was a hush, and Elise's mumble was audible in the silence. A growing blue light radiated from the space between Elise and the Virgin. Elise lifted her glowing arms to the statue head and ran her hands slowly over the rough edges. As her hands passed, the Virgin was reborn as new. People gasped, some falling to their knees, wailing in fear, some running to pull open the giant doors and escape. Some cried 'Miracle!' Chepe laughed. 'What else was there to do, but laugh at miracles?'

These days, in Raquira, the Virgin of Carmen stands on her pedestal in a newly constructed glass cabinet, decked daily with fresh flowers, looking bright and new as the day she first came. Some say Elise disappeared that day, some say she died in her cottage on the hillside and the angels took her to heaven, or the devil—it depends on the teller. Few now retell the story of the witch and the Virgin, except to passing travellers.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Miriam Taylor Gomez.*