

In the Eerie Twilight, Frenetic Homage To a Potent Symbol

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[MEXICO CITY](#) Darkness descends on the street corner in Colonia Doctores, a [Mexico](#) City neighborhood named for the lords of its hospitals but known best for its blocks of stolen auto parts dealers.

Pressed against a wall, a woman stokes coals beneath a battered silver pot. A crowd begins to form around her, their hands tucked into pockets, shoulders hunched, eyelashes sweeping away a light drizzle of rain. The air smells of epazote, the pungent Mexican herb that María Alicia Pulido stirs rhythmically as her pot of water reaches a pitched boil.

All eyes are fixed hungrily on the roiling pot until a younger woman, dressed in black, flashes out of a doorway. She balances two fake skulls in her right hand and clasps a skull-topped walking stick in her left. It's 7:55 p.m. in Colonia Doctores -- time to pay homage to Jesús Malverde, the patron saint of [Mexico's](#) narco-traffickers.

Malverde lives in legend in Mexico. He was darkly handsome, his admirers say, a true macho Mexican man with thick black eyebrows and an even thicker mustache. In the chaotic years before the Mexican Revolution of 1910, he was said to steal from the oligarchs and distribute his loot to the poor. He was Mexico's beloved [Robin Hood](#), until one day he was caught and hanged.

In the century since his death, Malverde has morphed into a potent symbol, especially for poor Mexicans who saw crime as the only way to overcome the corruption and repression that kept them in misery. In modern times, Mexico's drug dealers have come to love Malverde's image -- drug runners have been caught wearing scapulars, small cloth necklaces, bearing his likeness.

Malverde worship, common in northern Mexico, is new to Mexico City. Pulido erected a shrine to Malverde near her family's Colonia Doctores home about a year ago to thank the narco-saint for answering her prayers and speeding the recovery of her son, Abel, after a car accident.

By 8 p.m., more than two dozen worshipers gather, some drifting away from Pulido's sidewalk kitchen to kneel before the shrine her family built. It stands more than 10 feet tall, a glass box the size of a large outhouse. Lantern-style lights illuminate the life-size statues inside.

Worshipers gaze on the plastic portrayals of Malverde, a blue bandanna peeking out from beneath a cowboy hat jauntily perched on his head, and La Santísima Muerte, the skeletal patron saint of death. La Santísima Muerte, who carries a scythe a la the Grim Reaper, wears a frilly white wedding dress. They look like a couple about to say their vows.

"Fatty," Pulido calls out to her 16-year-old son, Abel, whose nose bears a jagged scar from the car accident that inspired his family's shrine. "More coals." The crowd begins to fidget.

"When do we start?" a woman asks Abel's brother, Hector.

"At 8," he says.

A confused look crosses the woman's face. She glances at her watch. It is 8:15.

A few steps away, Abel's sister, Ivon Valdez Pulido, preps her daughter, Lizzuli Santo. Lizzuli is 9 years old but has the poise of a young woman twice her age. She stands regally as her mother sets an ostrich feather headdress on her neatly combed, long brown hair. Mother and daughter tie a leather band to her ankle fitted with rows of bells made of dried lime husks.

"Don't be nervous," Valdez tells her daughter. "When we start the music, start jumping." The crowd forms a semicircle around the shrine at 8:30, clearing an opening for little Lizzuli, who stands alone. From behind the shrine, a heavy electronica beat pounds out of a boombox. "Go, go, go!" Valdez hollers.

Lizzuli responds instantly, jumping in place, swooping down to the ground, shimmying her shoulders.

"I am the Devil. Dance with me," the recorded voice shrieks. "I can give you sex. I can give you drugs. I can give you house." The audience watches, transfixed. Some carry statues of La Santísima Muerte and peer at the whirling young girl under the blade of the saint's sickle.

The music crescendos. Lizzuli kneels before Malverde and La Santísima Muerte. She windmills her arms, a fake skull in each hand, finally bringing the motion to a stop and extending the skulls toward the shrine as an offering.

The music seems to have called forth the neighborhood. More than 200 people are here now, spilling off the sidewalk and into the street. A giant bread truck, unable to pass through the audience, daintily cuts over the center divider, pulling into the opposite lanes of traffic and going along its way. More than two dozen cars and trucks have passed during Lizzuli's frenetic dance, but only one has dared to honk in protest.