

# CREATURE

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Prince of Darkness, “you want easy wealth.”

Florencio nodded, a little nervous but quivering with greed. “Yes.”

“Excellent. I’ll make you one of the wealthiest landowners along the Río Grande. You will be powerful, revered by many men. But I have two conditions.” Here the Devil leaned in close and whispered in Florencio’s ear. “At the end of your life, your soul will be mine. And you will never, ever, have a child.”

Florencio gulped as the Devil smiled and stepped away.

“So, Florencio. Do we have a bargain?”

Though he was more frightened than ever, the bookkeeper agreed.

From that day, life changed for Florencio. Don Antonio confided in him more and more, regarding him as a better business partner than his own sons. The youngest Cano daughter, Sostenes, blossomed into womanhood, and Don Antonio permitted the much older Florencio to court her. Upon his deathbed, the old man gave his blessing for their marriage.

Sostenes inherited a large tract of land that

the newlyweds dubbed Toluca Ranch. Florencio established a mercantile store, and soon he was widely respected for his level-headed business sense. By 1882, he had become an Hidalgo county commissioner, rubbing elbows with the powerful. But try as they might, the Sostenes could not seem to get pregnant. She was devastated.

Florencio was wracked by guilt, bitterly remembering his pact with the Dark One. So when tragedy left their niece Manuela an orphan, he agreed without hesitation to adopt her.

As the years passed and Manuela grew into a beautiful young woman, Florencio regretted the deal that he had made. Having found a loophole for one of the conditions, he searched for a way to snatch his soul from the Devil’s grasp.

Inspired by the digging of a well that produced bountiful sweet water, the landowner invited the local diocese to build a church on his ranch. The Church of St. Joseph the Worker was a lovely little building, and for many years Florencio sought divine intervention, salvation for his bartered spirit.

There was no slackening of his greed for wealth or power, sadly. He continued

to buy up property, establish multiple businesses, serve the Tejano political machine.

When the Mexican Revolution erupted and the sediciosos, Texas Mexicans longing for independence, began attacking men they believed were complicit in keeping their people down, Florencio Sáenz was one of their targets. Even as the lively 79-year-old joined the cause of Texas Anglos, naming suspected rebels, Florencio found himself under attack.

His workers fled. The fields lay untended. The cattle began to die. By the end of 1915, Florencio was forced to shut down the ranch operations and move his family to Mercedes, where he spent the final decade of his life in relative anonymity and daily prayer.

In 1927, at the age of 91, Florencio felt Death sidle close. He knew the end of his long, hard-bought life was upon him.

“Take me to the chapel,” he told his son-in-law Amador.

The family loaded his now frail form into a motorcar and drove him out to his beloved ranch, long fallen into disrepair. They carried him inside the church, settling him upon a cot near the altar. Looking up at the painted sailcloth ceiling,

arching high like a vaulted cathedral, he pondered his life, unsure at the end whether his bargain had been worth his soul.

Florencio gripped his wife’s hand as the light began to fade. His daughter’s lips brushed his forehead. He heard distant sobs for a moment, and then his soul was free, drifting down the aisle and through the tall, narrow doors.

Outside waited, not the debonair gentlemen, but a mass of darkness in which roiled agonized forms — the sorrowful shapes of men and women Florencio’s greed had destroyed.

Without a sound, a tendril emerged from the impossible black, coiling round his meager spirit. Stripped of all possessions and power, Florencio was dragged into the void.

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*About the illustrators: Carlos Ortega-Haas is a high school senior from Northern California, who went from the colorful streets of Tijuana to the funky houseboats of Sausalito. Charlie Bowles is a freelance artist from the RGV.*

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*About the author: David Bowles is the author of Flower, Song, Dance: Aztec and Mayan Poetry, Mexican Bestiary and The Seed. Learn more at [www.davidbowles.us](http://www.davidbowles.us)*