

OUR LADY OF THE FISHNET STOCKINGS

by CHRISTOPHER MOORE

Chris's Introduction to Our Lady of the Fishnet Stockings

I wrote Our Lady in 1987 after I had a dream about some soldiers firing on a village of peasants and the bullets stopping and hanging in the air. This is the only story I've ever written from a dream, and obviously that single dream image was only a scene that set off an alarm in my mind to get silly. As with Cat's Karma, this story is a little rough, and I'm not a little bit embarrassed by it. Readers of my novels will be glad to see that I've gotten a little better at my craft over the years, and perhaps those of you who are aspiring writer's will get some encouragement out of the fact that you can get better. (Thank goodness). This is the first time Our Lady has appeared anywhere, and probably with good reason, but for all it's flaws, I still love the title, so much, in fact, that I'm going to use it as a chapter heading on my new book [The Island of the Sequined Love Nun].

Have fun. Thanks for stopping by my sweaty little [web site](#).

Part 1: The Miracle

The men with the guns came onto the village at dawn and demanded food and drink. There were twenty of them, all dressed alike except for one who wore a black beret and called himself Colonel Mendez. They ate and drank as they wished and by mid-morning they all lay full-bellied in the shade of the huts, belching and farting while Sister Octavia attended to their wounds, which were mostly suffered from moving through the jungle carelessly. By noon they were all asleep except for two that stood guard at the edge of the village.

The children were not allowed to go into the fields to pick cotton as they usually did, but were made to stay in the huts while their parents gathered the supplies that Colonel Mendez had demanded. Sister Octavia asked the Colonel to show restraint in his demands because it was a poor village and had little to spare. The Colonel smiled and said that he understood the plight of the people.

When his men prepared to leave they took several of the prettiest girls in the village and bound their wrists to long leashes. His men needed someone to cook the food the villagers had donated to the cause, he said.

Sister Octavia pleaded with the Colonel to take her to do the cooking and when his men laughed at her Mendez pushed her to the ground. It was then that the stone hit him in the head.

The men with the guns stopped laughing and turned in the direction of the attack. Little Estrella, who was not yet seven, stood alone weighing a second stone in her tiny hand. Mendez was furious. As he turned toward his small attacker she hurled the second stone which sailed by his ear.

"You piece of dung," she said.

The men with guns looked from the little girl to their leader. Colonel Mendez drew his pistol and aimed it at the child. Sister Octavia scrambled to the child and shielded her with her body.

The Colonel ordered the nun to stand clear.

She begged for mercy in the name of God.

Mendez ordered his men to aim their weapons.

Estrella called him a piece of dung.

Mendez ordered his men to fire.

The sound of automatic assault rifles drowned any thing else that was said. When the firing stopped Mendez dropped to his knees and began pleading to the Blessed Virgin for mercy.

The bullets had stopped. In mid air. Two feet away, the nun and the child still cowered from the noise they thought was the sound of their death. The bullets hung there, still. The men dropped their guns and joined the Colonel in prayer. Sister Octavia looked around and fainted when she saw the bullets hanging in the air in front of her.

It was a definite, concrete, tangible, empirically verifiable manifestation of the power of God. It was proof, at last, that mankind was not doomed to its own devices. It was a miracle.

Estrella seized the opportunity to throw a third and larger stone which nearly fractured Colonel Mendez's skull.

Officially, military advisors from all the world powers did not converge on the site of the miracle and report back to their respective governments because -- *Officially* -- they were never there. Nevertheless, teams of scientists were dispatched to the site and despite strict orders for secrecy they reported to the world that they had no way short of a miracle to explain the force that held the two-hundred and seven 7.62 MM. Two hundred and forty grain fully-jacketed hollow point bullets in the air. Furthermore, they reported that the need for secrecy seemed to be very unimportant in light of what they had found.

Pilgrims began filtering in from all over the country and military activity on both sides was suspended. Military aircraft were removed from the airports to make way for increased commercial traffic carrying pilgrims from other countries.

Sister Octavia was flown to the Vatican where she related the story of the miracle to Pope Julius. It was on Pope J's word that the "stopping of the bullets" as it was being called, would be officially declared a miracle by the Church. The Pope ordered that a trip be planned that he might view the bullets in person.

When the Pope's plane left Rome, Las Vegas had the odds at seven to five for the Pope calling a full miracle, but because of the large contingent of Cardinals the Pope was traveling with, all bets on Vatican intramural basketball were suspended until after the trip. As the pope's entourage loaded into land rovers the odds jumped to two to one for the miracle as the world drew a collective breath of hope. By the time the Pope's caravan drove into the village no one was betting. Too many had been burned by taking the last minute longshot against Armstrong's "one small step for man" to risk bucking the odds again.

Estrella, wearing a pink dress and for the first time in her life, shoes, was waiting for the Pontiff at the place where the bullets had stopped. She knelt and kissed the Pope's ring and he gave her a somewhat distracted blessing. The two hundred and seven coppery cones hanging in the air next to her, however grabbed Pope J's full attention, and much to the chagrin of the traveling Swiss guard, who had traded helmet and halberd for silk suit and shoulder holster, he stepped in front of the bullets and raised his arms.

Ten thousand people who had crowded into the village that day and a billion more who watched on their televisions at home heard Pope Julius proclaim the "stopping of the bullets" a miracle and the spot hallowed ground. They heard the Pope promise that the church would build a great shrine around the bullets so that people might visit and always remember. And as the Pope bowed his head and led the world in prayer of thanks, they heard Estrella loudly complaining that being shot could not be nearly as bad as having to wear shoes.

Nearby, a reporter from a tabloid scribbled down the tentative headline: "Better Shot than Shoed", says Miracle Girl. That was how it began.

PART II: The Temptation

Though publicly delighted at the miracle, the church was privately vexed that God had chosen such impious vehicles for His power. Certainly Sister Octavia was true in her faith and a fine representative of the church in some jerkwater jungle village, but she lacked the presence and eloquence to speak for the church about the single most important event in a millennium. It was decided that Sister Octavia would be given important but low-profile position at the Vatican and brought out and paraded around on holidays or when someone threatened war (which had stopped all over the world, by the way, since the miracle). So while Sister Octavia picked up and delivered the papal dry cleaning (the most important work given a woman in the church) Estrella was sent to very private schools to be trained for Sainthood.

Eleven years passed before Estrella appeared in public again. Over the years the church leaked selected tidbits of Estrella's life to the press: She was a perfect student, an accomplished athlete, a painter and a poet. She was teaching crippled children to walk with crutches, helping deaf children learn sign language and blind children to read Braille. There was always enough information about Estrella in the news to keep the public aware of her, but never enough for the Bigfoot chasers to distort. By her eighteenth birthday the church decided it was time for Estrella to meet the world and prove to them that she was not a little girl whose shoes were too tight. She was a Saint (or would be soon). The world moved to the edge of its seat.

She arrived at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York looking much as the world expected her to look, that is: Quintessentially Catholic. She wore a white blouse and a plaid skirt with knee socks and saddle shoes. Her dark hair was done in braids and her face made-up only by nature. She was given a tour of New York by the Archbishop and the media had a field day with images of the miracle girl against a backdrop of the Big Apple. At Columbia's primate laboratory she spoke sign language with a chimp in front of five networks and thirty-nine countries. When a reporter asked her to sign something for the camera she graciously obliged him and for a few moments only the hearing impaired people of the world knew that she had told the reporter to "go jump up a porcupine's ass."

Temptation is the constant companion of Saints and Saviors, martyrs and messiahs, but unlike most who resist it, Estrella challenged its creativity. The next time the media caught up with her she was at a fashionable New York disco wearing her knee socks and saddle shoes -- *only* her knee socks and saddle shoes. She flew to Los Angeles with a rock group in their private jet and they canceled three performances so they could rest from the flight. She sat in some cement outside Grumann's Chinese Theater, played a bit part in a picture called *Ninja Babysitters*, did a guest spot on a game show, won ten thousand-dollars, went to bed with the host and two contestants, and was on a plane for Paris before she'd been in town forty-eight hours. Temptation didn't have a chance.

The supermarket scandal sheets hadn't had anything like it since the "stopping of the bullets". The television networks were euphemizing at a furious pace while trying to mobilize camera teams to follow Estrella. When her plane landed in Paris she was met by a special envoy from the Vatican with a message from the Pope. It said simply: "Why are you doing this?" Her answer, scribbled on the back of a "shrine of the Blessed Bullets" postcard, was equally simple: "It beats shining the shoes of a fisherman?" The Pope was at a loss.

Within hours Estrella was put in jail when the curators of the Louver refused to acknowledge her claim that *Saint Estrella Screwing a Guard* was a major work of living sculpture and should be allowed to remain on display for its religious significance. She was put in solitary confinement when she caused a minor riot by insisting the cowards put her in front of a firing squad. The next morning she was released in care of her lawyer, B. Sneed Banducci, who herded her through a seething maggotry of reporters to a nearby cathedral where he announced that Estrella would take confession before holding a press conference.

Estrella emerged from the confessional a blossom of renewed purity, soul, retreaded, spiritual hymen replaced. Her confessor was dragged out ears bleeding, face locked into a rictus of frustrated ecstasy. (Estrellas penance, seventy-three million Hail Mary's, was later appealed by Banducci and reduced to five stations of the cross and ten weeks of service as mistress of ceremonies on the Vatican cable networks bingo show.)

On the steps of the cathedral Estrella threw her arms around B. Sneed Banducci and announced that she planned to marry the corpulent attorney whom she had fallen in love with when he had come to her school to teach a course in corporate canon law. The wedding would be held -- God willing -- at the Shrine of the Blessed Bullets in two weeks.

Part III: The Martyring

Since the miracle the village had grown into a city and the villagers had grown rich selling their land to developers and peddling souvenirs to pilgrims. On every corner villagers set up booths and sold Blessed Bullet medallions and Blessed Bullet plaques (bullets suspended in Plexiglas over a photographs of Estrella and Sister Octavia). In every alley a villager in a trenchcoat sold nude pictures of Estrella buffing herself with a scarf (bootleg stills from *Ninja Babysitters*).

When the wedding was announced the hotels near the shrine began filling up with jet-setters and royalty from all over the world hoping to get a good spot in front of the shrine to view the wedding of the miracle girl. (The wedding was to be even more grand than those put on by the British royal family, who refused to attend and instead ate sour grapes at tea and read aloud from *The Joys of Inbreeding*). The networks established satellite hook-ups and rubber company blimps cast their rotund shadows over the shrine while proclaiming that "the third world rides safer on all-weather radials" in thirty-foot letters.

On the day of the wedding well wishers lined the boulevard leading to the steps of the shrine. The bride arrived in a gilt antique carriage from which she emerged wearing black fishnet stockings, a white gown with a twenty-foot long train, and headband advertising her favorite sports shoe. B. Sneed Banducci and the Archbishop waited at the top of the steps where the bullets hung in the air at their backs. Security guards cleared a path through the crowd for Estrella and Sister Octavia, who had been temporarily excused from her duties at the Vatican when the Pope consented to get by with wash-and-wear robes in her absence.

The wedding march concluded and the crowd fell silent except for the few reporters who murmured the obvious to their viewers in their best golf-match whispers. The Archbishop was adjusting his microphone when the first shot rang out and ricocheted off the steps.

The wedding party turned and looked into the crowd. At the bottom of the steps an old, somewhat wall-eyed man in black beret was taking aim at Estrella with an automatic pistol. Sister Octavia threw the girl to the ground and fell across her to shield her from the bullet. When the second shot sounded and there was no pain, Sister Octavia turned to see Colonel Mendez clutching his chest with bloody hands. The security guard who had fired the second shot ran to Mendez to restrain him but the Colonel had already fallen and was watching his life run red over the white steps of the shrine.

"It was to stop me from doing it, not to save you," he said.

As Mendez died there was a thumping noise behind the wedding party. They turned to see the Blessed Bullets falling one by one to the floor of the shrine, like the leaden tears of a giggling God.