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“Please, make me a VIRGIN again”

It's hard to believe that there are women in America who feel compelled to go secretly under the knife to get a husband. Silvana Paternostro reports on the clinics where women go to surgically restore their virginity

Sandra*, a single mother in her early 20s, knew her fiancé would never have proposed if he was aware of the truth: The 1-year-old boy living with her was not her baby brother, as she had led her fiancé to believe, but her son. Sandra did not mind the deceit. She understood that she risked losing her fiancé if he ever discovered her secret. And to Sandra, this man was too good to risk losing—he was successful, he was handsome and, like her, he came from Latin America.

But she now faced a problem. Her fiancé was expecting a virgin on their wedding night. Never during their relationship had he suggested they make love. It hadn't surprised her. She knew that many traditional Latin American men, even ones that live in the United States, insist on this requirement. They want to marry demure and virginal women.

Sandra called the Northern Ladies Plastic Surgery Center and sched-

*Names have been changed

uled an appointment. When the center's receptionist answered, Sandra whispered into the phone, "Please, make me a virgin again."

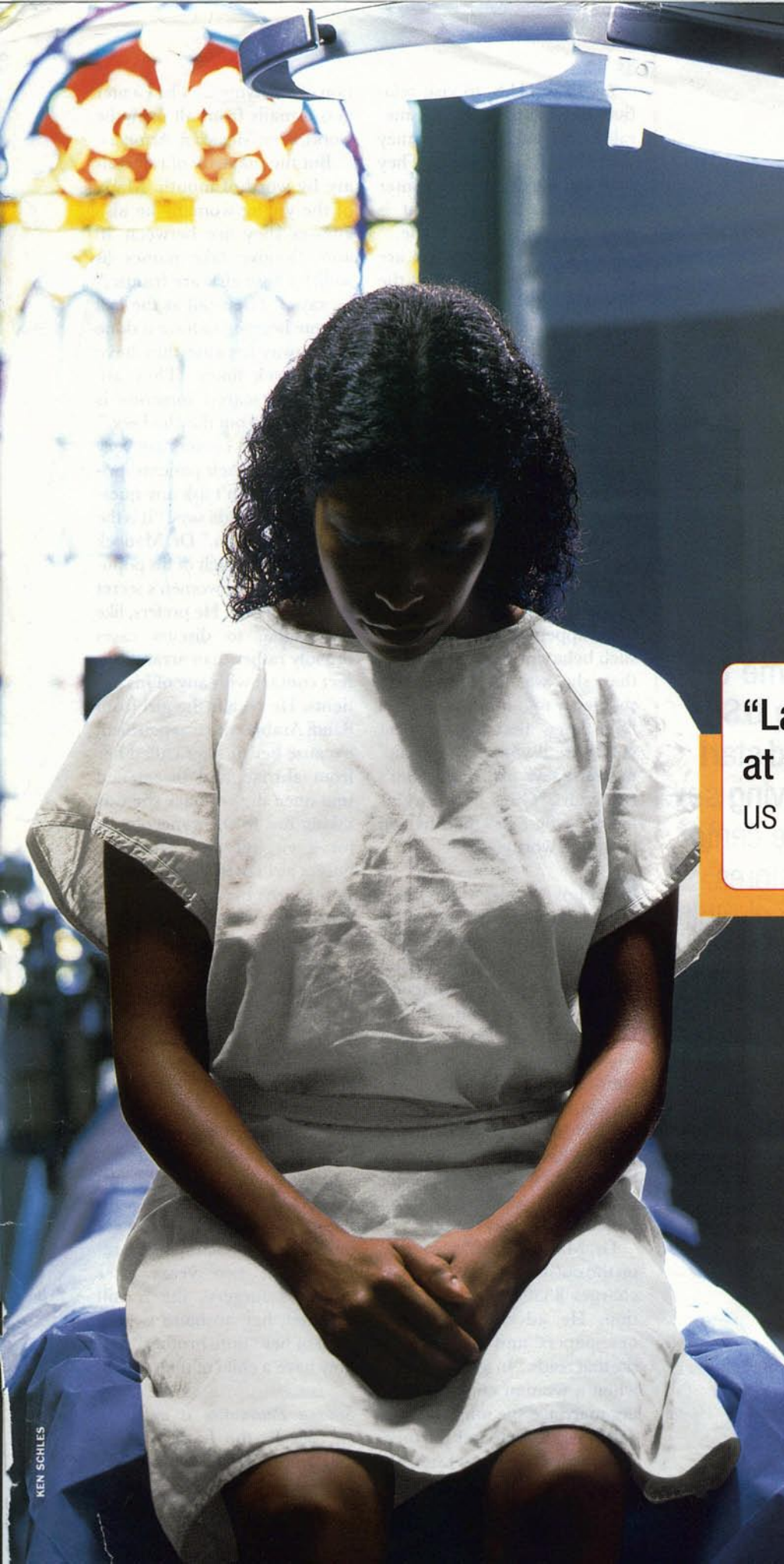
"It is a lie out of love," says Esmeralda Vanegas, the owner of the center that sewed up Sandra's vagina so she could convince her husband-to-be she was a virgin.

"Unfortunately," she continues, "the men in our culture make us do these things. They are *machistas*. They do whatever they want out on the streets, and then they want a virgin at the altar."

To fool these men, Esmeralda offers a \$2000 solution: a surgical procedure performed by a certified plastic surgeon who, with some anesthesia and a needle and thread, will make sure that a woman's vagina will bleed on her wedding night. "It takes about a half an hour," says Esmeralda, "and we advise them to do it six weeks before the wedding day."

Esmeralda and Sandra do not live in a faraway land where women who are unable to stain the wedding-night





sheets are cursed forever or stoned to death. The Plastic Surgery Center that Sandra visited is just a 30-minute subway ride from Manhattan.

Ridgewood is a middle-class immigrant community in Queens with a hodgepodge of nationalities. There, behind a government building, is Esmeralda's revirginizing center. In plain view, an awning with large letters reads PLASTIC SURGERY AND RECONSTRUCTIVE GYNECOLOGY, overshadowing the street's smaller signs for the bakery and deli.

Inside lies a temple of gaudy taste—gilt framed paintings depicting courtship scenes from the days of Louis XV—and beliefs that perpetuate the idea of woman as object, as slave to men's desires. A machine promises to rid women of cellulite; an operating room turns women into Barbie dolls. Above the beds where women rest after surgery, an open-

“Latin men want virgins at the altar. They make us undergo this surgery.”

—Esmeralda

armed Jesus blesses their recovery.

“I offer women more than 40 types of operations,” says Esmeralda, a tall woman in her late 40s with dyed-blond hair, fake nails and braces on her teeth. Her services include the tightening of the vaginal walls, for women who feel they need it after having children or too many men, and the reconstruction of the hymen, for women who want to pretend they have never had sex. Women also have hymen surgery to surprise their husbands. “It’s like having a second honeymoon,” Esmeralda explains. She is not only well versed in all aspects of the procedures—she is almost too passionate about them. “You come in one way, and you leave looking better, feeling happier about yourself.” She confesses that she has had more than 10 operations on various parts of her body. “You should have seen what▷

I looked like five years ago. Only my breasts are mine."

Esmeralda owns three centers: one in Queens, one in Brooklyn and one in New Jersey. The mayor of Union City, New Jersey, is a friend. She drives a Mercedes-Benz. In her office, she has pictures of herself with famous Latin singers, TV anchors, sportsmen and politicians. "We offer the same beauty procedures that doctors on Fifth Avenue do," she says, "but we offer them at affordable prices." Americans worry about the risks and complications of these operations. We [Latinos] don't. For us, appearance and beauty are far more important.

"The surgery of the moment is lipo, but now women are also getting excited about vaginoplasty. They have it done at the same time. They say, 'While I'm getting the lipo done, tighten my walls, too.' It takes a half an hour, and you leave the same day. But you cannot have sex for six weeks, just like the hymen reconstruction."

When asked to expand on how popular the revirginizing procedure is, Esmeralda becomes far more reserved. "It is not like we do one every day—maybe one every three months." They do, however, advertise the surgery. Ads run daily in *El Diario*, New York's largest Spanish-speaking newspaper, and in *Salud*, a monthly health paper targeted at the East Coast Latino community.

Most of the women who want it done are women like Sandra. They are between the ages of 18 and 25 and live in this country, but are marrying a Latino man who believes in the ideals he grew up with. Some women come all the way from Latin America for the procedure—like the daughter of the politician who was getting married and could not risk having the surgery done in her country, for fear it would be discovered. Then there are the women who



"Women come to the U.S. and start having sex. The center restores the virginity that is expected of them."

—Esmeralda

come to the U.S. to visit relatives or to study, and as Esmeralda explains, "They slip; they start being Americanized. They start having sex." The center restores the virginity that is expected of them back home.

Latin American women are not the only ones who visit the center. According to Esmeralda, Asian girls, mostly Chinese and Korean, stop in, too. "Korean women," she says, "have to provide a certificate of virginity to the groom's family."

One nurse recalls the case of Chu*, a 21-year-old Chinese girl, who was shy, almost silent. She worked as a waitress at a restaurant in New York City's Chinatown. The owner's son fell in love with her. The two would kiss, but that is all that happened. Chu knew that such behavior made him think that she was a virgin, and she never told him differently. "She knew that men respect you more if you are a virgin," the nurse says, explaining Chu's behavior. "Guys treat virgins better, so these girls think hymen surgery is worth it."

■ In Los Angeles at the Laser Vaginal Rejuvenation Center, Dr. David Matlock often performs hymen reconstruction on women of Arab descent. "I can fool any man," boasts Dr. Matlock, a gynecologist who has been performing the operation for 15 years. "My benchmark is not to fool the husband-to-be but to fool another gynecologist. Many of these women have to be examined by a gynecologist whom the groom's family chooses."

Dr. Matlock's center, located on the outskirts of Beverly Hills, charges \$3500 for the operation. He advertises in local newspapers and has a website that reads: "In some cultures, when a woman consummates her marriage she must bleed to prove virginity to her partner. The Center provides laser hymenoplasty for the reconstruc-

tion of the hymen." The Center gets e-mails from all over the world, from Mexico to Armenia.

But the majority of referrals are by word of mouth. Many of the young women—he also guesses they are between 18 and 25—give fake names as well. "These girls are frantic," he says. "They call at the last minute begging to have it done right away because they have to go back home. They are panicked, scared someone is going to find out they had sex."

Both of the centers are very protective of their patients' privacy. "We don't ask any questions," Esmeralda says. "It is the patient's decision." Dr. Matlock believes that much of his popularity is that the women's secret is safe with him. He prefers, like Esmeralda, to discuss cases broadly rather than arrange direct contact with any of his patients. He recalls the girl from Saudi Arabia who was petrified, because her mother called her from abroad and threatened that once she got back she was taking her to the gynecologist for a virginity test. Another time, a girl's mother paid for the procedure because she was afraid that if the girl's father found out, he would kill her.

At times, Dr. Matlock says, couples come to the clinic together. He remembers a young man who came with a Middle-Eastern girl he had "deflowered." "He paid for it and stayed with her," he says. They were so in love, but she had to go back home for an arranged marriage.

Esmeralda prefers to concentrate on the stories with happy endings—the successes of her clinics. For example, she reports that two years after Sandra's surgery, she is still married, her husband is very fond of her "little brother" and they have a child of their own.

Silvana Paternostro is author of the book In the Land of God and Man: A Latin Woman's Journey (Plume).