

Hispanic Link

Nov. 2, Day of the Dead

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Column 1

OUR ANNUAL REUNION BETWEEN THE LIVING AND THE DEAD

By Elisa A. Martínez

When my husband Roberto presented me with the bouquet of chrysanthemums, he told me, "I brought you the colors of fall."

They're in a vase now in the living room. Every so often I walk in and inhale deeply the smell of the "Campo Santo." The cemetery, the Holy place.

On Nov. 2 Mexicans celebrate death. It's neither a scary nor a spooky day. On the contrary, it's a day of joy that has been set aside to remember our loved ones who have died. We visit their tombs to clean and decorate them. We gather at the cemetery to exchange pleasant memories and spend the day feasting. At the end of the day hundreds of candles burn and the smell of the chrysanthemums fills the air.

My grandmother and I would go to the cemetery early in the day. My mother would drive us there with our large collection of empty coffee cans rattling around us in the back seat. At the entrance to the cemetery there were stands where a variety of flowers were sold. We would stop and buy bunches of larkspurs and chrysanthemums and pile them high on our laps. She would drive along the winding path until we stopped at my aunt's tomb. She'd leave us there with our rake, a hand trowel, the grass shears, the pile of cans, the flowers and a basket filled with good food.

My grandmother made such a fuss about the plot. She would loosen the hard earth with her trowel and cut the grass neatly with her shears. She would rake and clean and raise big clouds of dust until everything was to her satisfaction.

She would forget me and everything else around her. She would remember out loud and laugh and cry with Soledad, her daughter who had died so many years ago. The dust made me sneeze and I could see the furrows that the tears made on her face covered with dirt.

We would lug all the cans to the nearest spigot and fill them with water. Then she would dig around the gravestone and placed them solidly in the ground. With great care we would snip the stems and arrange the flowers.

It was a festive occasion, our visit with the dead. The cemetery was full of people going about their business of sprucing up their plots. Always the same people. They were like neighbors, "vecinos de foza." They met once a year to spend the day together. We would sing along with the musicians' accordions and guitars as they walked around. For a small fee they played the tunes that brought back memories of better times.

The Franciscan priests with mud-caked sandals and dusty frocks would bless the tombs and even kneel with us and pray long rosaries. Lunch time was special.

We would all share in the feast. In the late afternoon my mother would pick us up and we would get in the car still full of the smell of chrysanthemums. The beautiful smell of the dead.

In Mexico they make elaborate altars for the dead. Food, flowers and personal articles that once belonged to their loved ones surround the photographs placed at the head of the altars. Candles and colorful streamers of "papel picado" adorn the

altars. Marigolds and chrysanthemums are strewn about. Special plates of food and personal articles such as cigarettes, pipes, candy and other favorites of the loved one are arranged carefully among the flowers. The strong beautiful smell of the flowers will guide the souls on their yearly visit back to earth.

I make an altar on the buffet in my kitchen. Photographs of my mother, father and grandmother are in their place of honor. I will surround them with the sugar skulls decorated with colored icing and the "calacas," the porcelain skeleton figures of death dressed in colorful outfits, with smiles on their faces.

I'll arrange carefully their favorite "things" and the "pan de muerto." The special bread of the dead covered with purple sugar and decorated with bones of dough will be consumed with good coffee on that second day of November. The flowers will be there, too. The marigolds and the chrysanthemums. They will be there for two weeks.

We'll remember and share our meals with these good people, captured forever in the sepia photographs. The smell of the flowers will stay in my kitchen for a while. The beautiful smell of the "campo santo."

My grandmother is buried now next to her daughter. Maybe I'll go back to clean their tombs. I think she will like that.

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