

Emily Torres

A Mother's Love

I had never seen a dead body. Well, I guess this only half-counted, since it was just a picture of one, but the sight still made my stomach clench. It's not that my grandmother's body was injured or bloodied—it was the serenity on her face that put me on edge. Death was supposed to be something tragic, but she looked so calm, like she was only sleeping in the casket. That freaked me out even more than some gory death scene would.

Besides setting up the traditional ofrenda, Mamá had her own routine for Día de los Muertos, where we took out our old photo albums and just reminisced. There were dozens of albums, and stacks of those Costco boxes from the photo center, all over the living room floor. I don't know how, but Mamá found a way to make room for all of this in the already overflowing cabinets.

I hesitated to look when Mamá first handed me the photo of her mother. It felt wrong. I never actually met my grandmother, so I wanted my mental image of her to consist of pictures where she was alive. I felt like it was the least I could do for her.

By the time I was born, she had been dead for years and Abuelito had remarried to my Abuelita Rosa. I wouldn't trade her for the world. But sometimes I wondered how different Mamá's life would have been if the crash had never taken her mother. That curiosity led me to look at the funeral photo. I kept wondering if this look on my grandmother's face was what people meant when they say, "rest in peace."

"The accident wasn't so peaceful," a voice said, tickling my ear.

I looked around, but Mamá was the only one here. She sat on the carpeted floor, flipping through the pages in her wedding album.

"Má, did you say something?" I asked, shifting in my seat on the couch.

“No, I was just laughing at this picture of tu Papá,” she said, not looking up from the photo she smiled at. Okay, guess it was just my lack of sleep.

“I always did quite like him; he brings out her smile.”

Again. The voice was gentle and faint, like it was being carried by the draft in the room. (Was the draft there before?) A sudden chill engulfed the room and crawled its way down my spine like a trail of ants. I shivered. Maybe I caught a cold. (Mari was coughing this morning). I was sure that explained it, until I felt a cold hand wrap around mine.

I held my breath, trying not to react for Mamá’s sake (or maybe I was just too panicked to move). Either way, there was a ghost sitting on the couch next to me—one of those tacky orange throw pillows pierced right through her abdomen, but she didn’t seem to notice or care.

“She gets the sentimentality from me,” she said. Her eyes were black holes, void of emotion, as they stared straight through Mamá.

I sucked air in through my teeth and muttered a quick, “I’ll be back.”

Photo still in hand, I stepped out to the backyard. My legs were so shaky that they refused to hold my weight anymore, so I sat on the ancient, creaky swing set—another thing Mamá wouldn’t get rid of (even though it’s been abandoned for years and it would totally break it if we tried to put it to use again).

I didn’t even know what to think at this point. I expected myself to be more frantic in this situation, but apparently accepting my own insanity was a simple one step-process. I mean, what else was there to do? Screaming for help would only make me look crazy, and she seemed harmless. Moving forward was the best option here. She appeared in front of me with her hands on her hips and a curious look on her face.

“Y’know,” I said to her, “I didn’t think I’d go crazy until I was at *least* sixty years old. That means I’m forty-two years too early. Imagine! How bad will I be *then?*”

The ghost laughed, throwing her arms over her stomach, like she hadn't done so in years. (She probably hasn't now that I think about it. Were there such things as happy ghosts?)

I took this time to look at her in detail. She looked like a hologram straight out of a Star Wars movie. Her dark hair stood out among her almost-transparent body, which had a blue, flickering hue. Despite that, I could tell she had tan skin, like Mamá's. Her prominent cheekbones and intimidating jawline didn't match her welcoming smile.

"You have your father's humor, y te pareces mucho a él." She put her hands on her hips and smiled brightly at me, but it didn't meet her eyes, and continued, "I'm Leonor. It wouldn't be right for you to call me Abuelita. That's Rosa; she's a wonderful woman, and I'm eternally grateful to her."

I couldn't believe she just pulled a Darth Vader on me. *Luke, I am your grandmother.* I should have recognized her sooner, but she looked different from the photos. This was the same woman whose photo I walked past every day in the hallway, and now I was speaking to her in the (translucent) flesh. A dozen questions ran through my head, but for some reason the most important one was: why me?

"Why aren't you talking to Mamá?" I wondered out loud. "Not that I'm not glad to see you!" I corrected. I knew that manners were important to all grandmas—dead or alive. "It's just that... Well I'm sure your own daughter would be even more happy to see you."

"Claro que sí, but y-u're the one who has wh-t I need." Her voice sounded like she was on the other end of a phone call with crap connection.

Just then, Dulce hopped onto my lap. Her back arched in alarm, her tail sprang up, and her black fur bristled (she'd never done that before; I've only seen cats do that in cartoons). She hissed and clawed viciously at Leonor, who startled and stepped back a bit.

“Dulce! Sorry Leonor, she’s not usually like this.” Dulce purred at my touch and returned to her docile self. “Anyways, what is it that you need my help with?”

“There’s a necklace of mine, a locket. I need y-u...” She disappeared momentarily, then blinked into view and continued, “bring t- my grave. Y-u’re... the only way. Bring it so I can move - n.”

I didn’t catch everything, but I got the gist. She vanished completely now, which couldn’t be good. But I knew what necklace she was talking about; Mamá gave it to me when I was 8 (the same age she was when Leonor died). I never wore it—I was too scared of breaking something so important.

I set Dulce down and hurried to my room. Well, it wasn’t exactly *my* room—I shared it with my sisters. But since Nayeli was living at college, it was just Mari and me. She was sitting on her bed, typing on her laptop, when I walked in and made a beeline for the closet where my jewelry box was. I moved past some earrings, bracelets, and rings I’ve never worn, until I found the locket. It was a small, silver heart with a purple rosemary plant engraved on it. I clipped it on around my neck and put the box away

“I’ll be back. I’m going to the liquor store; I’ll bring you Hot Cheetos,” I said.

“And a Gatorade?” She said, looking up now with a smile.

“Okay but it’ll cost you a hug.”

She groaned in response. I walked into the living room, which was in even worse condition if that was even possible. I’d have to use the back door to avoid stepping on anything.

“Má, I’m going to the liquor. I’ll bring you a Kit-Kat, and cookies for Pá. Love you.”

“Con cuidado!”

It wasn't a lie, I fully intended on going to the liquor after I completed Leonor's request. (I thought I deserved an ice cream sandwich after all of this.) So, with that motivation in mind, I jogged towards the bus stop down the block.

I sat in the very back, as per tradition. Before Nayeli left, the three of us rode together to school and played I-Spy on the way. I would pick the most random objects and Nayeli guessed them correctly every time while Mari pouted like a sore loser the whole rest of the bus ride.

The lights above me completely shut off. When they turned back on, they brought a chill with them. I looked out the window to my left and almost let out a yelp. Leonor was next to me.

I-Spy with my little eye something transparent, and flickering, and staring into space. This was the only round I'd beat Nayeli in.

"Good. Y-u found it. It'- almos- time." Her voice was far away, like it wasn't her own.

I just nodded, not wanting to be that weirdo on the bus who talked to themselves. We reached our stop soon enough and walked towards the cemetery as the sun grew closer to its setting.

The orange hue in the sky illuminated all the gravestones on the grass below. When we arrived at Leonor's, I looked up at her. Her eyes looked like they were melting, but she was just crying black tears (which wasn't less terrifying). "Hey, are you okay?"

"Yes... Y-s. It's time now. Are y-u ready Adrian-?" She looked at me, but not really—she looked through me, into me. The hair on my arms stood up, like Dulce's fur did before.

"Sure, what's the process?" I feigned composure. If I had such thing as a Spidey-Sense, it would be tingling right about now. Something didn't feel right about her voice.

"Sit here. Put the locket down in front of you," she instructed.

I obeyed and sat with crossed legs, facing the tombstone. Leonor sat in front of me and took my hands in hers. It was like trying to hold onto air; she was slipping through my grasp.

"Now what?"

“Quiet! Just sit.”

Abuelita Rosa would never speak to me like that. I shrunk in on myself and complied, not wanting to upset my undead grandmother any more.

As the sun kissed the horizon, a gust of wind traveled through the whole cemetery, and I felt a tug at my chest, like I was being pulled towards Leonor. She murmured incomprehensibly; it sounded more like T.V. static than anything human.

Whatever was supposed to happen undoubtedly ran its course. Starting from the tip of my fingers and moving upwards, I began to gradually lose feeling in my arms. They stayed where they were though, like I was still holding hands with Leonor. But I wasn't. Her arms vanished in the same direction and at the same pace. I couldn't see her fingers and I couldn't feel my own. If anyone saw me, they'd probably assume I was meditating on this grave.

“What is this? Leonor, what are you doing to me?” Panic coursed through my veins as the numbness slithered its way up my arms.

“Y-u're the one who has wh-t I need.” Her stream of tears thickened, and the same black ooze pooled in her mouth too. “*You're what I need.*”

Her voice didn't fade anymore, it rang loud and clear through my head, but it wasn't the same. It deepened and thickened. She wasn't Leonor anymore; her hair shortened to her shoulders and lightened in color; her face rounded and softened; her body glowed grey instead of blue. She was still human, except for the rivers of tar cascading from her eyes.

“Who the hell are you? Where's the real Leonor? You weren't—you...” I could barely speak. It felt like a mixture of fury and betrayal burned in the back of my throat. “You faked it this whole time?!” I wanted to puke. “How did you know so much about us?”

“I followed you and Leonor to learn about you, then trapped her and disguised as her. But soon I’ll be *you*—no, you’ll be *me*.” She flashed the opposite of a pearly white smile, and the black ooze trickled down her chin.

I kicked, twisted, and turned, anything at all to break free, but she had me locked. Even the parts of my body I could still feel wouldn’t budge. My arms were a lost cause now, and the next wave of numbness started in my toes.

“Why are you doing this? Why me?” I choked on my sobs. I hated crying.

“They took him—killed me and took him! I found you after, you have his name. I need you, so I can see him.” She shrieked, and her hair billowed the angrier she became.

“What? Who did they take?”

“My baby!” Her voice broke again. “*Mi hijo*.”

“You’re—you’re just a mom?” The anger boiling inside me was subdued. My tears fell onto my thighs, but I couldn’t feel the drops (or any of my limbs for that matter). “But if you could visit me, why didn’t you just visit your son?”

“I need to stay with him. Forever. I need a body—need *you*!”

“¿Y mi familia qué? Do you want my mom to lose her daughter like you lost your son?”

“My son. They put him in an orphanage, he’s alone. He’s *my* boy.”

The desperation in her voice was enough to tug at my heart. No, wait; she was literally *tugging* at my heart. As the numbness reached my chest, I felt cold fingers inside, clawing at my heart and squeezing it until I yelled out in agony. At this point, all hope of escape eluded me. I stopped wriggling as I felt my strength get sucked out of me.

At least I told Mamá I loved her...

The ghost’s suffering crept its way into my heart unannounced. It was debilitating; I felt my entire soul ache. My tears turned black with sorrow and my vision faded away. Then, her thoughts

and memories leaked into my mind. I could see and feel everything happened that night from her point of view. It was like walking through a dream—a nightmare.

I was walking home with my son in my arms. It was a long day at work, but seeing his smile made every crappy shift worth it. As we passed by an alley, I was pulled in by the elbow and held at gunpoint. They were wearing ski masks, how unoriginal. They were asking for money; I gave them everything I had in my purse. The man with the gun didn't believe that I only had twenty dollars to give. He was convinced I stuffed more in my bra, so he stepped closer and held the gun against my chest. His partner must have sympathized with me, because he grabbed the man by the shoulder and tried to pull him back. The man startled and fired a bullet right into my chest. I stumbled back against the wall and held my baby tightly as I slid down and landed on the cold concrete. The thugs ran. My boy was crying. I pulled my knees up and cradled him. My tears fell onto his cheeks. There wasn't anything else I could do but hold him.

"I'm sorry, mi niño," I whispered. Blood was pooling in my mouth. "I love you, Adrian."

My vision blacked out, and when it came back I was in the graveyard again, in my own body. Another gust of wind ran past us, and the chill served to slap me back to my own reality.

The locket between us started to shake on its own, like something was knocking from the inside. It popped open and a light so blinding erupted from it that I was sure I was dead. This must be the "light at the end of the tunnel" I had always heard about. I spent many hours in church, wondering what God would be like when I met Him, but I hoped that wouldn't be until years in the future.

But there was no tunnel and no God when I opened my eyes. Instead, there was another figure, but this one glowed a bright white. Maybe this was the guardian angel that would bring my soul to heaven.

“Back away from my granddaughter, maldito demonio! How dare you trap me in my own locket.”

Even better, she wasn't taking my soul to God, she was taking me home. It took some seconds to adjust to the light, but I knew that face well now.

“Leonor!” I never thought I'd be happy to see a ghost.

The real Leonor grabbed the other ghost by her shoulders and *pulled*. I felt the claws in my chest finally release me from their clutches. Then, one by one, our own limbs returned to us. When my body was completely my own again, I leaned forward, with my hands on the grass to steady myself, and panted heavily from exhaustion. That was about as awful as I would expect a possession might be, based off what little scary movies I've seen.

Meanwhile, Leonor struggled to keep the wriggling ghost in her grasp. I rose with difficulty and walked towards the pair of them, who looked so strikingly different that I was amazed at her ability to pull off the disguise.

“Señora, what's your name?” I said as gently as possible. The ghost quieted her sobs and turned her leaking eyes towards me.

“Alba.”

“I understand now, Alba. I *felt* it.” She looked away from me, but I held onto her freezing hand. “But please, you can't take other people's children to get to yours; that only makes you as bad as them.”

She stopped struggling now so Leonor let go. Alba fell to her knees and I held her shaking body as she cried. She flickered like a faulty flashlight.

“The best thing you can do for your son is look after him from beyond, the way Leonor just did for me.”

“I'm sorry...” She whispered. “I just wanted to be with him.”

“The night isn’t over,” Leonor said, helping her up. “Go to him.”

Alba’s tears finally stopped, and her black eyes weren’t voids anymore; I could see a glimmer of hope surface in them. She nodded, whispered, “Gracias”, and disappeared.

“So...” I said, “want to join me for ice cream?”

Leonor laughed, and her body glowed brighter. Her eyes were pure white, the opposite of Alba’s.

“I wish I could. There's a lot I want to say, but I can’t stay much longer, mija. Getting out of that locket took up most of my energy.”

“But—no, wait. I still have questions. Like, have you been watching over us this whole time? And is there anything you want me to tell Mamá?”

She smiled gently, a knowing smile, the kind Mamá gave me when I needed advice. Leonor held my face in her hands. They were warm. Follow up question: how can transparent hands be warm?

“Yes, and yes. But that's not very important. Your mom already knows what she needs. Now you should understand it too: I don’t regret what happened to me. I protected my children during the crash and that’s what matters. So, don’t waste your time wondering what could have been for me. Dios sabe por qué pasan las cosas, confía en Él.” She sighed, like that was something she needed off her chest. “I’m proud of you. What you did today was brave. But you can’t tell anyone about this, and I don’t think I can come back again. We’re allowed one visit and that’s all. I wasn’t planning on ever using it, I didn’t want to mess with the balance of things, but family shows up for each other—siempre.”

“Thank you, Leonor.” They were the only words I could muster. Tears were still falling down my face, but I let them out of the sheer relief that they were transparent again.

“Goodbye, hermosa. I better not see you again anytime soon—not for another sixty years, at least!”

I laughed and wiped all the muck off my cheeks as Leonor faded from view. I picked up the locket and placed it around my neck once again, but it felt lighter now. After one last look at her tombstone, I walked out of the cemetery with the moon’s light as my guide.

I made it back home, plastic bag in hand, and gave Mamá the promised Kit-Kat. She paused the novela she was watching and sat up from her spot on the couch. She had cleaned the living room already. I could see the worry in her eyes at my late arrival, so I explained myself.

“Sorry, I know it’s late. I had to help a woman who lost her way.” I reassured her with a smile. She relaxed again and thanked me for the candy bar.

I walked into my room, tossed the bag onto Mari’s bed and plopped onto my own. Dulce ran into the room and hopped into my lap. She pawed at the locket dangling from my neck, meowing with glee.

“You look like shit. What happened?” Mari shut her laptop and grabbed her snacks.

“Not much. Just remind me to call Abuelita Rosa tomorrow, will you?”

“Okay, weirdo,” she said with a mouth full of chips.

“Also... I think I'll take that hug now.”