

## A Day of the Dead Story: These Good Old November Days by Isabel Hernandez

I remember in my heart and in my mind those good old days of November when I, as a child, would help my *abuelita*, grandmother, commemorate our loved ones who had passed away. Beginning in October I would ask:

- "Abuelita, when will we go to the market to buy the *papel picado*" (paper with cut-out figures)?

- "Abuelita, how many days until we go to the cemetery?"

- "When are you going to get the table ready for the offering?"

And she would patiently respond, "Very soon, sweetheart, but remember that first we have to clean the house really well for their visit. They're our most important visitors and we have to welcome them in to a very clean and organized home!"

I thoroughly enjoyed those afternoons when, after school, we would go to the market to buy everything we needed for the holiday. By that time the market would be packed with things for the Day of the Dead. I remember that before, just like now, flowers were sold everywhere, especially the *cempasuchitl*, that orange flower that is only sold during this time of year.

There were stands for everything – candles, black ceramic candlesticks, and the fruit of the season: squash, sugar cane, and bananas. The bakeries prepare "Pan de Muerto", day of the dead bread and other special types of bread as offerings; for example, the *golletes*, a pink doughnut-type of bread, which symbolizes the cycle of life and death.

"Get ready, sweetheart," my grandma would tell me, "Today we have to get up early to get everything ready."

October 31 had finally arrived, the eve of the big celebration. First I would help her put aside the living room furniture to get the table ready. Then we would cover the table with a white cloth, my grandma's favorite.

"This one, son, I embroidered when I was 16 years old, just before I married your *abuelo*, your grandfather," she told me.

I preferred putting out the brightly colored *papel picado* and the *calaveras* that made me laugh more than they scared me.

What is the name of the holiday (in Spanish) the author is excited about?

What is *papel picado* used for?

Why do people go to the cemeteries?

Who are the *visitors*, and why are they visiting?

What is special about *cempasuchitl*?

What are these objects used for?

What will they turn the table into? What is the Spanish word for it?

What is a *calavera*?

Once the tablecloth and *papel picado* were ready, we would carefully place the little toys for the *angelitos* – that's what we called those close to us who died as children.

"This little doll was your Aunt Margarita's favorite," my grandma would remember as she hung the old doll above the altar. One by one, we would take my ancestors' special belongings out of their box. Each one would remind us of a familial anecdote. Discovering the contents of that old cardboard box was for me like opening a treasure chest.

We would place the candles that we'd bought in the market one by one on the altar: one for grandpa, another big one for Mother, another for Aunt Margarita...My grandma said that their light would guide their souls to our house, and each one had his or her own candle because there was something special to remember about each one of them.

"Grandma, I'll place Baby Jesus and Mary," I would say as she held the bench so that I could climb up to put them in their places at the highest part of the offering. Then we would put *cempasuchitl* flowers and some sugar *calaveras*, the kind that have the name of the deceased on their forehead.

We would also take out pictures of our dearly departed and hang them on the altar. Oh! I couldn't forget the glass of water and the little plate of salt...they say it's to relieve the thirst of the souls that return.

The rest of the day my grandma would spend in the kitchen preparing our lost loved ones favorite dishes. Meanwhile, I took the petals off the *cempasuchitl* flowers to make a path to the offerings. In the afternoon, the house would be filled with the aroma of the food grandma had prepared: *mole* with chicken, red rice, little zucchinis. When I was younger I used to think that food would really be eaten, but then they explained to me that it was just so that the souls could enjoy the delicious aroma.

When everything was ready, we would go to the cemetery with more candles and flowers to wait there for the souls. To call them, the church bells would ring all night.

How time flies! Today I prepare an offering with my children and I see in them the same excitement I felt as a child. Today I light a candle in honor of my grandma and I know that, even if only for a few moments, we'll be together again.

What is the date and name of the day that is reserved for commemorating the *angelitos*?

What do the belongings of the deceased represent? How and why are they important in the celebration?

What is another word for the candles?

Why are Baby Jesus and Mary included on the altars?

If it was an altar for you, what dishes would you like to have placed on it? (List at least 4).

Write 3 descriptive sentences describing what happens in the cemeteries during this time.

Explain what the author means by "we'll be together again".