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<b>Correction:</b>	
<b>Notes:</b>	
<b>Text:</b>	<p>Shhhhh. Can you hear it? The wind carries the sound to my ears and it slips quietly into my heart. It is the part of my soul that rose from a land layered with hundreds of years of indigenous blood. It breathed itself with a whoosh into the consciousness of my parents, their parents, and those who fathered them. It was passed on to me through a cord that pulsed with blood, and through a spirit charged with collective memory.</p> <p>It calls me sometimes, this ancient piece of myself. It announces its arrival with the rattle of my ancestors' bones. Bones left behind long before I was yanked into a world of light and noise, before México struggled for power and order in a spray of bullets and horses' hooves. Bones that rose from a pool of Aztec and Spanish blood.</p> <p>I've always known they would call me back.</p> <p>The burial</p> <p>The moment is so sharp with its unambiguous emotion that it almost knocks me to the ground with its force: The sight of my cousins burying their mother, bent to the task with shovels in hand, slices through my heart in a swift, clean blow and at the same time draws me back to the bosom of a people long gone.</p> <p>My Aunt Pifa, short for Epifania and referring to the Epiphany of biblical times, was herself a model biblical woman: modest, face untouched by makeup, loving to her husband, children, grandchildren, nieces and nephews. And hard-working.</p>

Every Monday, her husband drove her across the border from Juárez into the United States, to his mother's home in New Mexico. There, she took her turn with the others who cared for her mother-in-law.

Her turn was the longest, beginning that evening and going through Friday. And every Friday, her mother-in-law begged again, "Please, Pifa, don't leave. Stay. Stay with me."

There was a mutual respect and affection between the two women who loved the same man, one as a mother, the other as a wife.

When she became ill, my aunt told her mother-in-law, "Don't worry, I'm going to get treatment, and I'll come back to you in two months."

No one knew how to tell the frail old woman that Tía Pifa had died. It was difficult enough for those of us with the strength to balance that pain across our shoulders and keep on walking, but an old woman?

How do you tell her she has outlived the most beloved of her caretakers? (We couldn't know then the power of their love, couldn't know that when the two months my aunt had promised passed and she did not return, the old woman would choose to go to her.)

As far as any one of us could remember, Tía Pifa never had a mean word to say about anybody. I've tried to recall if ever, while I played with my cousins or while we ate the lollipops she gave us off the counter of the tiny store she and her husband once owned - if ever during those times, I did something that made my aunt yell at me or spank me.

I remember we kids rolled tires with a stick. We played Lucha Libre and quinceañera. We scared ourselves in the evening shadows outside our grandparents' house - La Llorona was coming! But I can't remember a single cross word coming from my tía's mouth.

Forgotten links

For two days, we held vigil over Tia Pifa's body in that tiny chapel that opened directly to a Juárez side street.

During that time, it all came back to me - every reason that my heart tugged south with every mile farther I crept from home: the way my cousins' kids, adolescents and toddlers alike, were unapologetically and unabashedly part of the funeral. The way that even the smallest toddlers stood on tiptoes to bid a last farewell to my aunt, kept safe from their curious fingers by a pane of glass over her face. The way adults and kids alike slurped the chile-spiced juice of watermelon and cantaloupe sold by fruit vendors outside the funeral home.

And even - yes, even this - the way a little beggar crept into the quiet chapel to ask me for money for her next meal and, succumbing to curiosity, asked if she could look in the coffin: "¿Puedo ver al muertito?"

I held each of these moments close in my heart. Each was a link to another world already harbored in my heart, a world that faces death much the same way it faces life: with hugs, kisses and strong coffee. And, above everything else, with the knowledge that death is, after all, another part of life.

I knew what the cemetery would look like before we even got there: dusty, rocky, and waiting to welcome my aunt's bones, still fresh and moist from her earthly life.

Her sons, Arnoldo, Adolfo and Rubén, along with some other male relatives, hoisted her coffin from the hearse and walked it along the dirt road and across the other graves, their cowboy boots crunching on the gravel.

At the gravesite, a mound of dirt lay heaped to one side, four shovels leaning against it. A wheelbarrow with freshly mixed concrete stood nearby. My cousins maneuvered the gold coffin around these things and set her over the grave. A funeral home employee opened the casket for our final good-byes.

"Hasta pronto," said my cousin Leticia to her mother, after the prayers had been said and the songs had been sung. "See you soon." Her sister, Nieves, stood silently.

Then, the man from the funeral home closed the lid against my aunt's face and with the twist of a key, locked it. Two men who had been waiting to do their job approached. They quickly gathered the flower arrangements and wreaths, these last tokens of our love that had surrounded her at the Funeraria Santa Rosa. They placed them on her coffin and it was lowered into the earth.

One of the men jumped into the grave, and the other handed him the four concrete slabs that would seal in my aunt's bones. When those were in place, he poured the wet concrete into a plastic bucket, once, twice, and then his partner in the grave sealed the vault with the gray, sticky mixture.

Finally, when both were standing above the grave once more, one of them said, "Whoever wishes to throw in soil may do so."

I leaned over and picked up a clod of dirt still held together by a snarl of grass roots. Too hard, too solid. I let my fingers work the pile of dirt, this soil that would be transformed into an earthen blanket to keep my aunt warm. Finally, I had a handful that I could hold loosely, that would slip between my fingers freely, and I tossed it into the grave. I watched my uncles, aunts, cousins

do the same.

And now, the sight that shakes my soul.

Adolfo and Arnaldo pick up the shovels. Another cousin helps, too. Pushing their spades into the dirt, they each pick up a pile of soil, set their legs, their hips, their backs, and they lift. Time after time, I hear the gravelly scrape of metal against earth. Time after time, I watch the soil leave the shovels in a low arc and land in the grave until it's full. And then my cousins pat the earth down carefully, lovingly, over their mother.

I am awed and humbled by their strength, by that inner steel that permits them to do this. I am awed that I carry in my veins the same blood that these men carry in theirs. Mostly, though, at this moment, I am awed by conflicting feelings within my heart.

Conflicting worlds

A part of me wants to keep this pain at a distance, much as it wants to shield itself from anything that makes it too uncomfortable. It wants to value the self, the individual, the me, above everything else.

This part of me says that burying your mother is too old-world, too morbid for me to bear. There are others who can do this; letting them do so will make it easier, less painful. That is the way of the new world, where we pad the sharp corners that might split a heart in two. Isn't it?


But even as I consider the way my cousins' hearts must heave with pain as they give their mother's grave a final pat, that ancient part of my soul rejoices in the absolute perfection of this moment.

This final act of love has made a woman's life complete. She should be buried by loved ones, not strangers who don't know that she once had a candy store, that she didn't like to wear makeup and that her mother-in-law revered her.

Suddenly, I can't imagine doing this any other way. This simple act - a set of sons holding shovels, patting down their mother's grave - transcends borders and nationality. It transcends time. It transcends the self - my self.

It comes from a people whose very blood slipped through my fingers in a handful of dust tossed over my aunt - a people who, though long buried, will always call me back. To deny their calling would be to disown a land and a heritage that has been eternally mapped onto my soul. It would be to disown myself.

So I stand at the grave in this Mexican cemetery and allow my heart to break. I take a piece of it and leave it there, alongside the



bones of my aunt.

Eventually, they, too, will call me back.

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