

## THE OFFERINGS

*This isn't a ghost story ... this is a love story. I didn't know it was a love story in the beginning, when the offerings started to disappear.*

Another sweltering morning in an unseasonably hot autumn. I shuffle into the kitchen and take two mugs from the cupboard. Then—remembering—I put one back. It's been a month since he went missing, and I'm still making coffee for two. Pushing aside the stack of cards and bills on the kitchen table, I slump into a chair with my mug, staring ahead with bleary eyes, seeing nothing.

My coffee has gone cold for I don't know how long when the doorbell intrudes on some random thought. The doorbell sounds like squawking birds fighting over crumbs. The chime broke weeks ago. I haven't been able to force myself to care enough to contact the apartment manager and have it fixed. I decide to ignore the squawking, then I hear the rumble of a heavy vehicle departing.

The UPS delivery on the doorstep is a square cardboard box from “Sylvia Hernandez, El Paso, TX.” My sweet mother-in-law, Danny's mama. Squinting against the unforgiving Florida sun, I scoop up the box and duck back into the darkened apartment. As long as the curtains are closed to block out the light, I can handle being alone. I wonder if this is what it's like to be cradled in a womb.

Tucked inside the box is a note, handwritten in Sylvia's neat printing. I can hear her voice, the warm melodic twang of her birthplace in Sonora, Mexico:

*Hola mija. You don't answer your phone. I worry about you.  
For Día de Muertos, I have here an ofrenda,  
that would be nice if you set it up for Danny. Call me.  
Your mama Sylvia*

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The *ofrenda* packed inside is a small wooden altar in a black matte finish glowing with luminous skulls and marigolds, and two tall votive candles in glass holders. I'm familiar with the tradition: offerings of cherished items and favorite treats are placed on the altar to welcome deceased souls to return to the living world during *Día de Muertos*, the annual Day of the Dead celebration.

Thank you for trying, darling Sylvia. It's a charming tradition, but I don't believe the spirits of the dead return to us, no matter how tempting the offerings. In the foster care homes where I grew up, there were no prayers for the dead *or* for the living. I don't understand how anyone finds comfort in religious beliefs. The Bible stories I've read are depressing tales of suffering and sacrifice. Then there's the notion of forgiving "those who trespass against us." Long ago, I decided there are trespasses that can't be forgiven.

I close the box with the altar still inside. Then, thinking of Danny, the memories tumble around me like a surging tide ...

After I aged out of foster care, I completed a year of community college in Arizona before running out of money; then I bounced around the country with a boyfriend, who left me after we arrived in El Paso. And there I was, waiting tables one night at Julio's Café, when a cute—really cute—guy walked in to order takeout. He said something to me in Spanish, and I replied with my usual one-liner, "Sorry, I don't speak Spanish. But I speak English pretty well."

"Okay," he nodded, "we can do that." Then he smiled, a wide smile that crinkled the corners of his dark eyes and deepened a single dimple in his left cheek. I smiled back. And then, right then, we were the only two people in the world.

He waited for me to finish my shift and we sat in his car, talking and sharing his cold takeout, until after 2 a.m. He told me all about himself. Raised in El Paso with his two older

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brothers by a single mom; a scholarship to Texas Tech; then enlisting in the Navy to pursue his dream: helicopter aviation training at NAS Whiting Field in Florida. He was home on leave to see his mother. I gathered she was having health problems.

He asked me to talk about myself. “What about you? Goals and dreams?”

I’ve always been a better listener than talker. My answer seemed to bubble out in a self-conscious stream, “Oh, I don’t know. Something with kids, I guess. Maybe a social worker.” Funny thing was, I didn’t know I had a dream until the moment he asked me, and I heard myself saying the words out loud.

He translated what he said in the café when he first saw me, “Hey beautiful, why don’t you quit this job and marry me?” I was pretty sure that *wasn’t* what he said that night, but what he *did* say a few weeks later was, “Come to Florida with me.”

And that was the beginning: how a shy white girl with no family, no traditions, and no culture of her own fell in love with an outgoing Latino boy from a family rich in culture and traditions.

Later, I teased him that I fell in love with his mom before I fell in love with him. Sylvia welcomed me to her home with cinnamon-spiced hot chocolate and homemade *pan dulce* shaped like conch shells. She brought out albums of baby pictures and shared stories about Danny’s youth, a few of them embarrassing, all of them endearing. I overheard her whispering to him in the kitchen, “She’s tiny as a bird and quiet as a mouse.”

Sylvia went through breast cancer that year, but it didn’t stop her from helping me plan a lovely intimate wedding in the chapel of an old Spanish mission. I didn’t mind that it was a religious ceremony; I knew how much it meant to Danny and his family.

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On our wedding day, I stood in the chapel's dressing room, seized by sudden nerves, trembling, hands shaking with panic. I worried, were we too different to ever truly understand each other? Sylvia, somehow, knew. She thawed my icy fingers in her warm hands, soothing my fears with her soft voice, "*Mija,*" My daughter, "*El amor encuentra una manera.*" Love finds a way.

The flashbacks bring stinging tears. I'm fumbling for a Kleenex box when my foot brushes against something on the floor. It's a crumpled ball of paper, the notice from the *Navy Times*.

### ***U.S. Navy Ends Search for Missing Helicopter Pilot***

*PENSACOLA, FL, OCT 2 — U.S. Atlantic Fleet officials suspended search and rescue operations for the pilot of a UH-1Y Viper that crashed at sea during training exercises. The missing aviator's status was changed to deceased. The aircraft has not been recovered. Cause of the crash is still unknown.*

Three weeks later, the Navy buried an empty casket with full military honors.

Danny's family didn't make the trip from Texas to attend the service. Sylvia is terrified of air travel, a long road trip would have been too stressful for her, and Danny's brothers didn't want to leave their mother alone. I wasn't there, either ... still unbelieving, hoping against reason he would come home.

The days became a numb routine: stacking mail unread, eating food untasted, my thoughts haunted by an agonizing question: *Was it my fault?*

The pain of not knowing throbs in my bones.

And now I ache with the regret that I didn't attend the service to honor his memory. But maybe there's another way? I open Sylvia's box and unpack the altar.

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Searching closets and shelves, I sift through the remnants of our life together to choose the offerings: a framed photo, Danny looking handsome in uniform; the leather string bracelet he wore the night we met; the lacy garter I wore on our wedding day; and a handful of his favorite snack, shelled pistachios. I place the altar on the only uncluttered surface in our small apartment: the tall chest of drawers near the bedroom window.

Another warm night. Drifting into restless sleep, a crescent moon glinting through the open window, candles flickering on Danny's altar ... I dream of helicopter blades splitting the air like giant wings, whirring and fluttering.

I wake early in the morning, feeling the effects of too little sleep. My body is stiff, sluggish. Yawning and stretching, I climb out of bed with effort and cross the room to extinguish the candles on the altar.

The pistachios are gone.

That's strange ... they must have rolled off the altar during the night. I look around the dresser, floor, windowsill— nothing. Could it be ... a cold shudder runs through me ... could it be a mouse, or worse, a rat? I call the apartment manager and schedule an emergency pest control visit. Thinking about rodents inside my home makes me queasy.

The pest control service finds no evidence of rodent infestation.

I don't sleep at all that night.

The next day, I'm standing in the shower, dripping wet, looking at an empty towel rack. The laundry can't be ignored any longer. I dry off with the last clean towel in the closet, throw on some sweats, and grab the laundry basket. The basket bounces on my hip as I bend and lift,

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plucking clothes from the bedroom floor. Spotting a wrinkled T-shirt on the dresser top, I reach for it—

Danny's leather bracelet is missing from the altar.

My arms go limp. The basket lands at my feet.

I search for the bracelet everywhere; it's gone. What is happening? Is my mind playing tricks? My face flushes hot with dread. Has someone been inside my home?

The apartment is on the second floor. The only entrance is the front door, latched with a deadbolt lock. There is no other way to enter from the outside.

The room begins to whirl. Gulping air, I double over, fighting waves of nausea. After a few minutes, the worst is over.

I call the manager and confirm what I already know: she controls access to the passkeys stored in a lockbox. No one has visited my unit, and there are no reports of suspicious activity in the building.

My head is pounding; the nausea returns. If only I could shake this anxiety. If only I could sleep. I call the Navy Casualty Assistance Office and request a medical referral.

When I return from the doctor's office the following afternoon, all I want is a warm bath and a long nap. Dragging myself into the bedroom, I kick off my shoes—and freeze. My mouth goes dry. A scream starts to rise in my throat, but I can't draw breath.

The wedding garter has disappeared.

Danny's framed photo rests alone on the altar.

I don't know how long I stand unmoving, staring into the portrait's deep brown eyes, before my legs give way and I drop to my knees. I hear my voice, seeming to come from far outside

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myself, shaking, tearful. “Danny, I’m so sorry. Was it my fault? Can you hear me? I have something to tell you—”

The doorbell screeches. My body jolts at the sound. Rising groggily to my feet, I stumble to the door and pull it open.

It’s Sylvia.

Next to her is a blue suitcase. A long white label hangs from the handle. I recognize the “PNS” lettering. An airport baggage tag. Sylvia, petrified of flying, has traveled alone on two connecting flights to arrive on my doorstep.

Her face lights up with a dimpled smile ... Danny’s smile.

She opens her arms. “This is the Day of the Dead, *mija*. I wanted to be with you on this day.”

I collapse into the embrace of the only mother I have ever known.

Later that evening, Sylvia sits beside me, placing her hand on mine. “So, tell me.” As always, Sylvia knows. She knows there is so much for me to tell her.

Hesitating at first, then nodding, I tell her everything ... about the morning Danny said, “Let’s have a baby,” and I said, “Is this the right time to start a family? We have so many bills, and my hours at the Community Center were cut back. When you leave on deployment next month, I’ll be all alone.”

“Got it. You don’t want a kid.” I felt the hurt in his voice, the disappointment, and—I realized with a chill—an anger I had never heard before.

“Danny, that’s not it. Let’s talk—”

That *wasn’t* it, not really. And we *had* talked about it so many times. But I could never find the courage to tell him the truth. The truth is, I am terrified of being a mother. No, I am terrified

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of being a *bad* mother. I'm ashamed I won't know how to nurture a child. I'm ashamed of the broken parts of me, broken and lost when I was a kid, moving from place to place, losing more of me each time. I could never find the words to tell him. How do you tell someone who is fearless how afraid you are?

When I turned to face him that morning, to try to explain, he had already gone. Danny—who always had so much to say—left without saying goodbye. That night, two uniformed Notification Officers came to my door.

I tell Sylvia about the guilt crushing me with unbearable weight. Was he upset, distracted? Did he lose focus at the controls? If I hadn't said the things I said, would the crash have happened? Would he still be alive?

I tell her about the disappearances from the altar. Sylvia's eyes widen, then close. Her lips are moving slightly, but there is no sound.

I know what I must do next.

Taking a long breath, I tell her the news Danny will never hear. "Sylvia, I'm pregnant."

As soon as I say the words, I'm overwhelmed by a dizzying mix of emotions: joy and sadness, comfort and heartache. And relief. The relief of sharing the moment with the only other person who can help me find a way to move forward without Danny.

Sylvia's eyelids flutter open. She reaches out, lifts my chin gently, and looks into my eyes. When I see the tears streaking her cheeks, my own tears well up and flood. Then she sighs, smiling and shaking her head. "Ah, no, *mija*. This is a happy time. This is a blessing. I am so happy."

Folding me tightly into her arms, she says, "Tonight, we will keep vigil at the altar. We will tell him he will be a father."



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Exhausted now, I manage to lift my head from her shoulder to whisper, “Yes.”

I need to understand. I need to know.

The altar candles are the only illumination in the room. We sit on the bed, propped upright with pillows. Time passes, minutes or hours. My head is heavy, falling and rising, resisting sleep, when I hear faint stirrings, whirring and fluttering, coming from the window. I turn toward the sounds.

Rubbing my eyes, struggling to focus my vision in the low light, I see a quivering apparition emerging from shadows shimmering in the candlelight. Gloved fingers are parting the curtains, black gloves like Danny’s flight gear—then, the image wavers, changing shape, transforming into a bird’s wings, fan-shaped tail, shiny black feathers.

A large black crow lands on the altar, clutching a small silver object in its beak.

Sylvia switches on the nightstand lamp.

At the sound of the light switch, the bird hops and flaps, drops its cargo, and darts behind the curtains. Scrambling to the window in pursuit, I find the escape route: an opening where the screen mesh has torn away from the frame. I watch the bird winging away into the brightening sky.

Sylvia slips out of bed and stands beside me. “Your visitor brought you an offering.”

The bird had dropped a metal bolt fastener, a hexagon nut, on the altar. Grasping it between my thumb and forefinger, I roll it back and forth, feeling its weight, the smoothness of the metal.

In that moment, marveling at the crow’s visits...searching for meaning in the bird’s gift... my mind calms with understanding and acceptance.

Nuts and bolts keep an aircraft aloft. Nuts and bolts could bring it down.

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I breathe the words, “It wasn’t my fault.”

*Forgive us our trespasses.* Maybe the key to forgiveness is to forgive yourself first. And that’s how you start to put the broken pieces back together.

Sylvia rests a hand on my shoulder. “Mija, of course, it wasn’t your fault.”

A sliver of early morning light breaks through a gap in the curtains, casting a slender beam on Danny’s altar.

Sylvia reaches around me toward the window and opens the curtains.

*When my son asks me about his father, I won’t tell him a ghost story. I’ll tell him a love story. I will say, “Love finds a way.” I will tell him, “Your father was an aviator, and once upon a time, he sent me a messenger with wings.”*