

An Altar for Raquel

by Melody M. Nuñez

Her name was Raquel, and she died many years ago. Mother of seven, including my mother-in-law, she died shortly after giving birth to a final daughter. She left her husband and children to struggle on without her, her friendly manner and happy disposition just a pleasant memory tinged with a sense of loss.

I'd heard bits and pieces about Raquel over time, but there was little information about her life. My mother-in-law was about 12 when Raquel died and couldn't remember too many details. Nevertheless, I'd always held Raquel in high esteem, wondering about this woman who died so young. What was she like? What were her dreams? I'd created a simple scrapbook page in her honor three years ago, but was recently inspired to do something more.

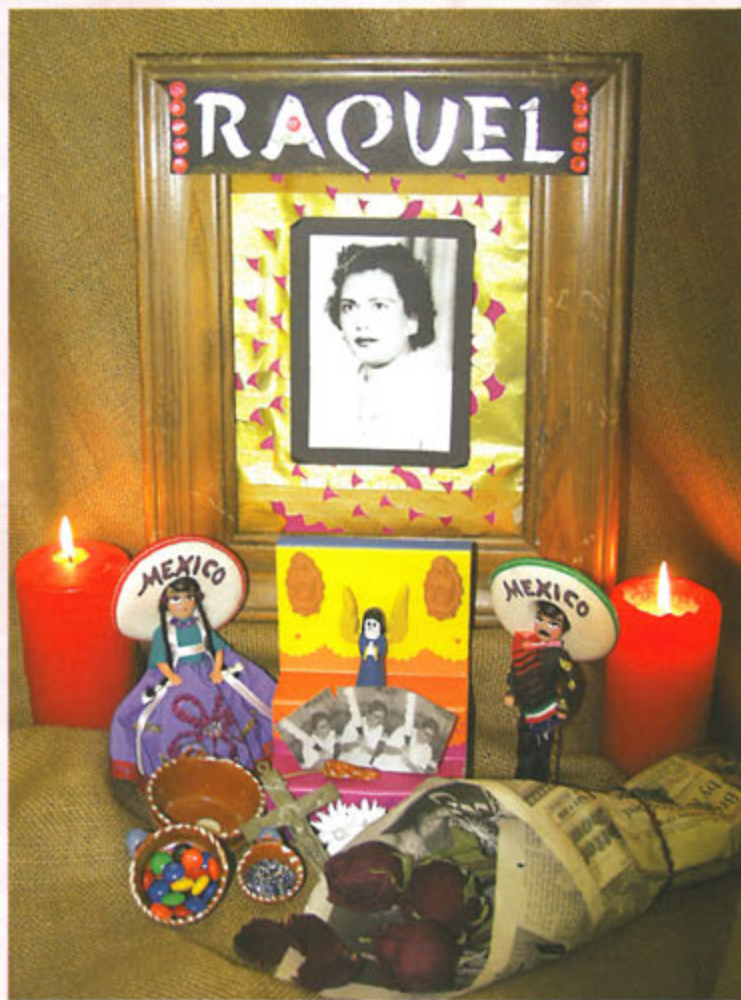
Always on the lookout for interesting ideas and cultural practices, I stumbled upon a gift set dedicated to the Day of the Dead, a holiday observed yearly in Mexico. The set included an informative book, a figurine and packaging that cleverly converts into a starting base for a shrine. I was quickly drawn in by the intriguing nature of the holiday.

Celebrated in Mexico from Oct. 31st to Nov. 2nd, these three days are used to pay respect to relatives or friends who have passed away. Families create elaborate shrines, called *ofrendas*, in the home or at the cemetery. These offerings are made in hopes that departed loved ones will be lured back to earth to be with their families once again. Families are careful to incorporate favorite things of the departed – how better to lure them back?

The family starts the altar by placing a holy image in the center, followed by photos of the loved one. Subsequent additions might include items of their clothing, things they used in their work, their favorite food or drink, and candles. In addition, the altar is commonly decorated with marigolds and colorful cut paper (*papel picado*).

Wanting to celebrate this holiday, I decided to build my first *ofrenda* for Raquel. She was a beautiful choice. My husband's family is originally from Mexico, and his mother is an absolute angel. This seemed like a wonderful way to honor their heritage and Raquel, a woman who helped bring life to many people I love. The tricky part would be creating a shrine for someone whose favorite things were lost to time.

I started with the shrine base and figurine that came in the set. Next came candles, her picture mounted on my unskilled version of *papel picado*, and a cross from my husband's family.



In loving memory of Raquel Limas Guzman.

From there I made some educated guesses, and figured she'd like flowers, chocolates and chile peppers. The roses I purchased for Raquel were a gorgeous and vivid red, and the flowers remained beautiful even when they'd dried. The chocolate was intended to reflect the sweetness she embodied, and most women love chocolate! The chile was sure to be appropriate. My mother-in-law loves chile peppers, and I surmised she was her mother's daughter in that respect. Over time I added other trinkets I thought she might like, and topped off the altar with her name cut out of metal and rhinestones, hoping it would do her justice.

My offering was simple and on the small side, but I have to believe it caught Raquel's attention. Somewhere, out of the corner of her eye, she saw something for her back here on earth and took a closer look. She saw me, a *gringa* who wasn't even born when she passed from this world. She saw the things I laid out for her, hoping to please her. She knew she was remembered, honored and celebrated, and I hope it made her laugh and smile, just as she did years ago. ♡

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