ESSAY

Caskets

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Brother,

I stood in front of your casket on a Friday morning. Mom and Dad were behind me making sure I did not cry. The casket was a temporary fix for your decomposed body awaiting freedom.

It was simple, the color of henna. Not dark but not light. It was close to caramel. It reminded me of our wooden floors but without the cracks. The gloss gleamed under the artificial light, making the room look gray. I knew you were in a mesh bag. I wanted to see you, but I followed the suggestions of the medical examiner and the funeral coordinator that the last viewing of you should be the memory of you alive.

When your wake began, I remembered the death of our great-grandmother, Mama Chella. I had seen pictures of her body being viewed, the pale-blue color of her casket. The flowers were all bright, all magical. El Salvador's earth was surrounding her.

At your wake, Mom and I placed photos on each side of the rented casket. We did not need to bury you in it. Mom and Dad were against their son being cremated but that is what you decided on. You said so one Saturday afternoon a few months ago. You and I were sitting on the couches of our living room. The couches met in the corner of the room by the window. They were in the shape of an L, covered in tan cloth embroidered in gold. We talked about the future. We talked about death. You said you wanted to be cremated. I did too. We knew cremation went against our parents' wishes. Still, we hoped to become ashes, to not feel our decay. The thought of our bodies slowly disappearing terrified us.

"Los católicos no creen en la cremación," Mom said.

Cremation is not the natural way to leave this earth. The family agreed with her. Many of that family stayed in El Salvador. They were not able to make it to your wake. The rest of the family that agreed with Mom had come from different states, driving to your wake and staying for a couple of hours. Some of them even joined in the search for you when we realized you were missing.

I argued with them. Mom and Dad had no choice but to accept cremation. It was your final wish after all. I do not think they ever told the family that stayed in El Salvador.

You and I were raised to be católicos but we were not churchgoers. Not even believers. We accepted the language, the food, and our family of El Salvador. We never accepted the religion, even though we were baptized. I was two and you were seven when we were taken to El Salvador, to a church in San Alejo, Mom's favorite one. We were born in the States, but the country of the savior was the country of our parents, our family. Mom wanted us to stay close to the land of our ancestors. Religion could do that. But even our parents, born and

raised as católicos, were not religious people. They did not go to church every Sunday. They did not follow rules such as no meat on Fridays, or practice rituals like praying before each meal. But when it came to praying in bad situations, or death, they were fully Catholics.

I purchased the urn your ashes will be in, a pale-blue one with doves on it. At first it made me chuckle; I could see you laughing at my choice because it is so unlike you. At your wake, a dozen bouquets of blue, red, white, and yellow flowers surrounded you. Some were on the right side of the casket, some on the left, some below the stand, and just one on top. Collages of photos and stickers on red, black, and yellow boards were attached to easels with tape: three on each side of the casket and one beside the biggest picture, the photo I chose of you. These collages were meant to show the visitors what your life was like. Everyone commented on your smile, your outfits, your talents, and even your childhood. People talked about how long your hair was and how your beard was not patchy like the rest of the men in our family. “He was a humble and wonderful man,” they said.

I glanced at those pictures whenever I felt I needed to cry. I knew that after the wake, I was getting rid of the photos of your friends, the ones that left you that night. You were out with them for a birthday. You told the three women with you that you wanted to walk home. That was not unusual, but they left you three hours away from home. The next morning, your best friend, who did not go out that night, texted me saying he had your phone. When I stepped outside to grab it, your phone was not alone. Your hat and glasses were with it too. I knew then, you were missing, and I knew then, you were gone.

The photos in the collages brought out the walls of the room. The walls of the room were cream colored, but you were the rainbow. It felt just as bright as the flowers that surrounded Mama Chella.

I never understood how a wake was supposed to be held. The last wake I attended, I was young, and the deceased was a six-year-old boy. It was gloomy and all I can recall is the constant screaming and painful cries of the mother. Your wake was less sad, less gloomy. It felt more salvadoreño than americano. I kept connecting the land to you.

After the search was over and your body was found by the cops and identified by me, our Salvadoran family washed into our home. I asked for permission to navigate through the narrow hallway to go into the kitchen, dining room, and living room.

“Permiso,” I said. “Permiso.”

I went shopping with our cousins just as people started walking into our home and we came back with quesadillas, pan dulce, and semitas. Pastries filled with jam, covered in sugar, and decorated with pie-like patterns. I was not sure why we were buying and eating all this

Salvadoran food, as if traditions could protect us from our grief. Mom and Dad did not tell me to buy all of it; our cousins insisted on the food because *this is the way it is done* when family gets together for a death. So, we put all the food on our dining room table that we had pushed against the wall to make space for chairs and standing room. People ate, talked, and drank. I vaguely remember greeting everyone who came into the house, and then I hid in my bedroom with my boyfriend of four years and two cousins who kept me company through most of the weeks. My boyfriend had spent the ten days we searched for you keeping me sane. He searched with me, by himself, or with others. He made sure that if I needed to sleep, he was there to comfort me. He watched me break down and then pick myself up to make sure everyone else was okay. I know you accepted him. I know he made you happy because I was happy. I know this loss made Mom, Dad, and the whole family see him as my future. They complimented him for being there, for being so kind, and for taking care of me and our parents. But he was always there. Even before you died. That is why you, Mom, Dad, accepted him even before any of you said you did.

The visiting of family was strange for me. In El Salvador, it was the most common thing to do. Everyone came and told stories, prayed, ate food, specifically pastries and coffee. A wake takes place at home, the body is viewed for one day and then there's the burial. The casket is hand painted with bright colors along with many flowers neatly placed on it. People sing songs of comfort and prayer. After the burial, a memorial space is created, and a candle is lit. The candle shines day and night for forty days. The family gathers for nine days, no music or color is allowed, many prayers are said, and natural remedies are created for those weak with grief. After the nine days, tamales and coffee are served. After sixty days and then after the first year, a mass is done.

We did not do exactly that, but we did keep some of the traditions. Your wake began at three o'clock on a Friday afternoon and ended at eight o'clock the following morning. This was normal to salvadoreños living here in the States. We lit the candle for forty days after your burial. Instead of waiting nine days, we served tamales and coffee whenever the family gathered. At your wake, there were nine hundred tamales. There were trays of pastries, like the ones at home. There were no vegetarian options; salvadoreños are not vegetarian. The aroma was so strong that people from the other wake came down to our area and ate our food.

I watched people come in and out of the rooms, with a cup in one hand and the other moving to the conversation they were in.

I stepped outside of the funeral home and breathed. I wanted you there.

When we were searching for you, Mom had prayed. She prayed for you to be found, she prayed you would be alive. She said a prayer every night in your room and we sat on your bed and she cried and softly recited the words of many different biblical verses. Then she went to her bedroom and read the Bible under a small light while Dad slept.

In the morning, after having a nightmare, she made me read sections of psalms before the breakfast I never ate. I remember reading Psalm 91 in English and Spanish. I did not feel at ease. I did not feel better. I felt like I was praying and praying with no result. I felt like I was not going to be heard regardless of the language I prayed in. I wanted to believe but I had seen so many loved ones leave and never return. I only believed that God wanted them, selfishly.

Prayer was the biggest part of wakes and gatherings. After a few hours passed during your wake, I sat between our parents, hugged them, and made sure they were okay. Mom said that a cousin of hers, a pastor, was going to say a few words to bring spiritual guidance. He was not Catholic but that did not matter to Mom. He started preaching about music being satanic, God forgiving you for your sins, alcohol being the devil's water, and other things I blocked out. I tightened my fists, nails clawing into the palms of my hands. Dad apologized to me and said, "Esto es lo que tu mami quiere."

I wanted to leave, but I could not. No one talked about the fact that you did not believe in God. Mom was afraid that, if it was known, you would not go to heaven. She prayed harder and harder to make sure you did. I watched the closed casket gleam under the light, full of rage. I wanted to shout. Instead, I looked at your photographs and inside my head, all went quiet.

I have feared death ever since I learned what death was. I was probably seven or eight when our great-grandmother, Mama Chella, died. Every summer we went to El Salvador for at least two weeks. We spent some time in Ahuachapán, Dad's hometown. We also spent time in Santa Cruz, Mom's hometown. There, Mama Chella used to sit outside her home holding a cup of black coffee in her hand. Her home was the last on the street. To get to it we walked through rocky areas. She lived on a hill, with a view of the river. She was thin, bones visible through her wrinkled and sagging skin. She was opinionated. She often told her daughters how they needed to raise their kids, or how they needed to prepare food. My godmother, Madrina Vilma, lived with her, so she often heard the cursing. She said things like "mierda" or "puta." She cursed at the air. One time she was sitting on the balcony of her house, with her cup of coffee on a small plate in her hand. The plate fell to the floor and broke. She cursed at the floor.

Because you were born five years before I was, you had five more years to know her. You were 12 when she died. You were a boy who cared about family. You bonded with all the cousins, and you cherished quality time with Mama Chella and our grandparents. You liked playing in the dirt and Mama Chella yelled at you to wash your hands before you ate. When we found out she was getting ill, you prayed in the bedroom we shared in our old house. Your bed was near the window. You looked at the sun and prayed she would not die. When she did, you stopped believing in God.

When I prayed, I was in your room, I looked at the sun and prayed you were not dead. When I found out you were dead, I did not know if I believed in God or not. I knew you were gone from the moment I realized you were missing, but the small hope I had was my way of coping. At least that was my excuse.

One day, it was 93 degrees out, and you and I decided to walk over to Mama Chella's house. Madrina Vilma still lived there and our cousins often hung around. We watched the river. It was shallow, and we could see the rocks lined up in a path between its banks. The trees hid whatever was over there. Sometimes we saw the cows crossing the river to reach a farm somewhere on the main road. I never found out where it was, only heard them mooing.

I remember asking you where Mama Chella was. You said she was far away, in another land. I asked if she was coming back.

"Maybe," you said, "someday."

I did not believe you.

But at your wake, I thought of Mama Chella and I thought of you, and that your "someday" meant you knew you would be with her. Maybe that is what I believe in: not that you would end up in heaven because Mom prayed to God but that you would end up meeting the rest of the family that had left us, and the rest of us here at your wake were just waiting. Over five hundred people came to your wake. They filled the halls, the outside, and the room you were in that only had seats for one hundred and fifty people. Many came and left, some returned, and some stayed. By the end of your wake, on that Saturday morning, over a hundred people stayed, taking naps, eating, and talking. I smiled politely for seventeen hours. I stared at your casket for seventeen hours. I did not want to be a host, a daughter, a family member, a friend, or a representative of you. I wanted to be your sister.