

## Days of the Dead: I See Superman Flying In My Eyes

I was five years old when I pretended to ride the rail on the steps of the front porch of our family's house. As I climbed up the cement shoulder, straddling the square wooden pony, my weight shifted a little too quickly and I lost my footing. At ten feet from the ground, with a burst of fear pulsating through my body, down, down, down I went, headfirst onto the bricks below. As life gushed from three dirt-filled jagged wounds on my face, I cupped the red swirl of darkness, tried to stand, then finally collapsed into the arms of my big brother [REDACTED], who seemed to materialize out of nowhere.

Although I came close to killing myself, all I have to remind me of that blood-filled day are three faint scars on the upper left side of my face, and the memory of [REDACTED] rushing to my aid, rescuing me. He was my hero. My Superman.

\* \* \*

There's a saying in Mexico that one can die three deaths: The first when the last breath is taken and life ends; the second when the body collapses into the earth or becomes ashes; but the third is when one ceases to exist in the memories of those still living. In Mexico, an altar is built every year for the November 2<sup>nd</sup> Day of the Dead celebration as an offering, in remembrance of the dead, and to prevent this third and most tragic death.

An altar has three levels: one symbolizing birth, one denoting life, and one representing death. The first level, the one closest to the ground, is usually composed of flowers, sand, and candles (though any of these can be found throughout the altar as well). This is the foundation on which everything else is built—the solid, strong, common and connective tissue that can be found in all altars.

**Commented [JP1]:** Is it "pretended" if you actually did the act? Maybe replace with decided, or wanted...

**Commented [JP2]:** This expression could use some clarification. It means several things. Were you balancing on the top of the railing that goes across the porch?

**Commented [JP3]:** Is this the railing?

**Commented [JP4]:** This seems incredibly high for the railing on a bungalow. Could it have been five feet? Either way is dangerous for a child, but most homes of the bungalow era have three steps up to the porch or front door which would only be about three feet up (not including the railing)

**Commented [JP5]:** Love that!

**Commented [JP6]:** Planter? Walkway? Pile of...?

**Commented [JP7]:** Why darkness? Isn't blood bright red when it first appears?

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**Commented [JP8]:** Nice!

**Commented [JP9]:** This is a quote from David Eagleman, an American neuroscientist, and professor at Stanford. It may be a saying in Mexico, but I recommend removing the word Mexico as you follow this up anyway with the Day of the Dead.

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**Commented [JP10]:** This sentence is a bit clunky. I would consider breaking this into two sentences, and also making it more personal. Is it just for the "remembrance of the dead," or is the altar erected for special loved ones?

**Commented [JP11]:** Is this clarification needed? I would delete.

**Commented [JP12]:** Are flowers and sand solid and strong?

**Commented [JP13]:** To all the dead? Honoring the dead?

The second level includes all that the **honoree** loved in life, that which carried and nourished him/her physically, spiritually or emotionally: books, records, favorite foods, jewelry, and clothing. It also includes other reminders, which are sometimes **personal possessions** that establish the relationship between the loved one and the altar maker. This second level distinguishes each altar through personalizing, memorializing, and connecting the living with the dead in the cycle of life and beyond death.

**Commented [JP14]:** This sound very academic. Is there a better adjective?

**Commented [JP15]:** Of the altar maker?

The third, and most prominent, level is reserved for a large photograph of the honoree, which is the focus of the entire **offering**. This level creates the highest point, much like a pyramid and is considered the closest to the spirit of the dead. Family members and friends construct altars for those loved ones who have died, sometimes from accidents, sometimes due to illness or disease, but always unexpectedly, even when illness is terminal. As the saying in Mexico goes, **one almost always knows exactly when and where they were born but no one will ever know exactly when or where they will die**. The altar honors the dead despite how they may have lived or died.

**Commented [JP16]:** What is being offered?

**Commented [JP17]:** Is this Mexican in origin, or is it just a saying you remember hearing? If it has its origins in Mexico, cite the author, and possibly consider writing it out in Spanish as well. More impact.

\* \* \*

I vividly remember the day I fell from the front porch as I ready myself for the November 2000 Day of the Dead community celebration at **██████████**, a gallery in East Los Angeles. Looking at my reflection in the mirror I notice the scars left from that childhood accident so many years ago. Staring at them intently, I feel death's presence around me—a deep sadness and dread constricts my every breath. The nervousness I feel comes from nowhere. I've never felt it before. **While I see myself moving normally, I feel my heart beating through a tar pit of fear, slowly, deliberately, barely**. I swallow hard trying to push away the uneasiness that takes root deep inside of me. Using a black eyeliner pencil, I pull the skull from my flesh. Drawing

**Commented [JP18]:** You've identified this previously in the novel. If this chapter turns into a short story (which I recommend!) okay to leave, otherwise, I would delete.

**Commented [JP19]:** Beautiful!

walnut shapes around my eyes, carefully following the bone structure of my sockets, I blacken the circles, hiding the scars and other reminders of my imperfect life. Soon all I can see are the whites of my eyes. Controlling my fear, breathing deeply, I steady my unsettled hands and continue. Following the hollow of my jaw, I draw a line from my ears to the corners of my mouth. Outlining my teeth on my face and blackening the soft tip of my nose, I cover my skin with a thick, opaque white. With my face, including the faint scars completely covered by the mask of death, I take a final cleansing breath, swallow hard again, and then leave.

\* \* \*

*On that very day, maybe even at the very moment I prepared for the celebration, somewhere in [REDACTED], where he lived, he was alone. Perhaps he was crying? Maybe he was thinking about his pain? He was reflecting on his life. What brought him here to this world, to this time? Did he have a good life? Perhaps he was smart? What happened? Did he look at himself in the mirror above the sink, and study his face too, perhaps? Maybe he noticed his wrinkles? Could the dark bags under his sunken eyes have carried his decision? In his solitude, he may have closed those eyes, breathed slowly, deliberately, heavily, swallowed hard and blinked back the memories.*

\* \* \*

I walk down the hall to the elevators that take me to my car. Wearing a yellow-orange Mexican peasant blouse and fuchsia skirt—the colors that represent life’s joys in the celebration—I drive the five miles to the gallery where the festivities are starting. Because of the uneasiness I feel, I really want to get there and be over with it. I’m weary this year. Since the beginning of 2000, death has been closer to me than ever before.

**Commented [JP20]:** Why do you identify the scars as a reminder of your imperfect life? Also, what are the other “reminders?”

**Commented [JP21]:** Do you know this for sure, or should this also be phrased as a question? Was he reflecting on his life?

**Commented [JP22]:** Poetic, but maybe too poetic for the other straight-forward questions?

**Commented [JP23]:** Why?

Walking toward my car, I feel it again, a distinct pull that slows me, photographs the moment, and horrifies me. I struggle with my soul—it wants to go home, yet I ought to be at this celebration. It’s a cultural tradition, and after all, I’m known locally as La Reina del Dia De Los Muertos, the default queen of the dead for the day. Still, I’m hesitant about attending.

*However brief, I must make an appearance. Everyone is expecting me, wants to see my costume this year, see how I’ll bring death with me.*

Once in my car, I adjust the crown of skeletons that dances on my head and turn the key to the ignition.

\* \* \*

*Alone in his apartment, perhaps he drew a hot bath to relax in? He disrobed, tested the water with his arm? Maybe he remembered his time at School, where doubt and hardship were pierced with hope and promise? Maybe his memories took him back to when he worked in the DA’s Office and he defended a young man with the same name? He believed in that young man’s innocence, wanted to give him a chance for a better life. The boy was a reflection, no, an extension of him. Back in that bathroom he returned to himself as the reflected light of the blade blinded him in so many ways. Is that what happened? Could that have been?*

\* \* \*

As I arrive at the gallery, I notice a group of protesters. They carry signs that read, “Christians celebrate LIFE not death.” I feel the crown of skeletons tighten and pierce my forehead, creating more distress. The protestors claim to be here for the salvation of souls and yet I am filled with fear at this grotesque display of religion. I rush through the throngs of walking skeletons and quickly hone in on my children and their father. Pulling them close I realize this

Commented [JP24]: Why default?

Commented [JP25]: End with this thought.

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Commented [JP26]: If you were to turn this into an internal dialogue with yourself, I think the impact would be greater. You have already introduced using the italics this way. I don’t feel the line I deleted below is needed, and distracts from the impact by saying too much.

Commented [JP27]: Nice!

Commented [JP28]: Why? Maybe consider deleting this sentence?

has never happened before—a protest against the Day of the Dead. This adds to my anxiety and I feel the mask of death I’m wearing suffocating me. I really don’t want to be here.

**Commented [JP29]:** Has this truly never happened before? Or, was it just in your experience? I love the idea of pulling the family close. The impact of that, however, is lost on me with the “realization.”

Something is very wrong. I’m having a hard time focusing, breathing. I gather my two sons. I build the strength to pass through the verbal assaults, as I make my way out. If I felt normal I would give them a Day of the Dead life lesson. I would tell them how they are protesting a celebration of life, not what their narrow minds assume, but instead I leave to find sanctuary in my home.

**Deleted:** of the Christians

**Commented [JP30]:** Maybe: “If I wasn’t suffocating...”

\* \* \*

*In his bathroom 500 hundred miles and a lifetime away from Los Angeles, he took a knife in his right hand. He remembered he learned to say “knife” because it rhymed with life. A knife takes a life. He learned how to speak English pretty quickly. Yes. He ran track and was the student body Vice President in high school. He could have been president but supported his friend instead. He came to the United States as an immigrant child of Mexico with nothing but smarts and the drive poverty afforded. He was the seventh son, the prodigal child that had made it through so many obstacles and succeeded. And he was the sacrificial lamb that was placed on an unrealistically and dangerously high pedestal. He became a self-crucified martyr, who carried the countless dreams of his family and ignored his own yearning only to be blamed for their shortcomings and his success. And I, I was his devout worshiper, who believed despite it all. This is true.*

On Day of the Dead 2000, I enter the bathroom at home, looking for peace and quiet.

*On Day of the Dead 2000, he faced the mirror looking for rest and peace.*

I begin to wipe death off my face.

*He slashed his left arm with the knife.*

I slowly see my life mask re-emerge.

*He submerged himself in the hot water—the better to bleed.*

With hot water, I wash my death face off and return to life.

*He embraced death and let his blood run.*

In the split second before he passes, a memory flashes.

**Commented [JP31]:** Maybe phrase as a questions? "In the split second before he passed, did he remember?"

■ was nearly five years old when he pretended he was Superman. He put a red cloth around his neck and climbed a tall wooden pole. He leapt off the top, believing he could fly.

Down, down, down he went, on the Day of the Dead.

**Commented [JP32]:** I would add to mirror your experience in 1<sup>st</sup> graph.

**Commented [JP33]:** I might end here. The date of his death and the fact that he committed suicide has already been established.

**Deleted:** , November 2000. In a blood-filled day, never to be forgotten, my brother Ben took his life....

\* \* \*

The months pass. In October of 2001, I buy the desk that will serve as the skeleton for my altar. I decide on the colors—red and white, the colors of his alma mater. All that month, I collect objects that will fill the three levels and the wall above it.

**Moved down [1]:** On the morning of the event, I drive to the vast flower market in downtown Los Angeles, where I buy red and white roses.

My two sons and I build the altar one week prior to the celebration at the same gallery in East Los Angeles that we attended the year before. As ■ work on the desk that will form the second and third levels of the altar, I climb up a tall A-frame ladder and start hanging the black honeycomb material that serves as a background. On the material I hang a painting that depicted a figure wearing a skull-face mask with a question mark on the forehead. A swirl of bright orange and red emanate from the torso in the painting, toward the top of the frame, to two small butterflies that appear to be flying away. Beside the painting, I hang a batik, the tie-dyed textile ■ gave me during the height of my hippie days in college and next to that, the image of *La Virgen De Guadalupe*, a symbol of hope as well as family, and our mother's namesake patron saint.

**Commented [JP34]:** Backdrop?

Finally, with the background finished and the desk completely built and in place, I begin to fill in the gaps. I add the law books [REDACTED] used to study at [REDACTED] School. There are pictures of us as children reading books together, studying for college and sharing Christmas dinners. A candle on the desk illuminates a book on Mao Tse-tung, the Chinese communist who inspired [REDACTED] revolutionary ideology—which he then taught me.

The clothing, (a red [REDACTED] tee shirt and red sweatpants) are the last things I saw Ben wear when he stayed with me for a couple of days the summer before his death. We hiked up the winding trail to the Griffith Park Observatory in the Hollywood Hills. Looking out toward downtown Los Angeles and East L.A., we felt so alive and empowered and we swore we'd always be strong. His promise seemed like it could last forever.

I add a small wicker basket with god's eyes made up of turquoise beads, the semi-precious stones that we both loved; and partially flattened glass marbles, pieces of a game we played as children. They hold our spiritual truths. With every item I place on the altar, my offering to [REDACTED] spirit, I feel the connection between us strengthen, even beyond death. This is his Day of the Dead.

An orange Tootsie Roll pop rests next to a photo of [REDACTED] and me with our two sisters [REDACTED]. My oldest sister [REDACTED] gave me the candy, a favorite treat they shared as children, to add to the altar. As a young boy, [REDACTED] would shine shoes or collect bottles to make money. He'd walk to the liquor store by himself just to buy a Tootsie pop for them to share. He would take a few licks of the candy, then give her the rest.

My younger son contributes a painting he made of tamales on a serving dish, the last food he remembers || eating, and adds it to the altar. I put a three-legged bowl for burning sage and copal, to cleanse the area and welcome his spirit. ||Next to the bowl, I place the statement I have

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Commented [JP35]: You concentrate on East LA throughout the novel. I might leave it to this view. It might also help describe why you felt so alive and empowered.

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Commented [JP36]: His uncle?

Commented [JP37]: I'd break into two sentences for more effect.

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written for the community to read in order to know more about the person who inspired this altar.

This is a cultural tradition.

On the morning of the event, I drive to the vast flower market in downtown Los Angeles, where I buy red and white roses. It is exactly a year since Ben died, and I've left the most prominent spaces for his photograph, the roses and a white, potted orchid.

Orchids are very beautiful and fragile flowers. They need warmth, sunlight, and to be nurtured with lots of love and attention. If left by themselves for too long, they won't survive. I place his high school graduation photograph next to the orchid.

I add one last small Polaroid photograph of us as children sitting on a sofa, me with bandages still on my face, in a superman tee shirt. He comforted me, knowing the pain of an abrupt fall and accidental wounds. I sit with the altar, reconnecting with each object, and feeling his presence in each. Finally, I add the red and white roses throughout, strewing the floor with pools of red petals.

On the Day of the Dead in 2001, I am finally able to publicly honor and remember my beloved brother. Although he requested there be no end of life service, no memorial for him, I need to come to terms with his death. To have closure, and find resolution.

And so the celebration becomes his funeral.

"I knew him."

"He was such a good man."

"He was so smart."

"Oh my, he was such a young man."

"Did he have children?"

"What a waste."

**Commented [JP38]:** Is that all it is? I would add something short that punctuates what this means to you. i.e. "This is a cultural tradition that the community expects, but my heart commands to honor his life."

**Moved (insertion) [1]**

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It is now November 2, 2001, the day of the celebration.

**Deleted:** from the fall I took off the front porch

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“He worked so hard.”

“I feel bad for his family.”

As the visitors to X's altar read the words written about him, they become aware of the man he was. Their responses overwhelm me.

He was so much more than his final moments.

He was so much more than my brother.

As my family and I approach the altar, taking in the candles, incense, and reverently whispered comments, we are brokenhearted once again. Any type of wound may scar over and heal, but the pain of his suicide will exist as long as I remember. I know I will always hurt for X.

Life, in the only form it could take, has returned. I now know that I didn't make his choice or final decision. I've accepted the fact that I'll never truly know why. I couldn't rescue ■, but I can carry his memory with me. ▼

I often visit ■ in my memories to find comfort in what I can relive and relearn. I constantly search for his spirit in my life, as well as in the lives of my sons. And when I'm strong enough, and want to feel his presence, I study my reflection in the mirror carefully. I allow myself to feel the anguish when, in that bittersweet flash of red, I once again see Superman flying in my eyes.

Moved down [2]: The responses overwhelm me.

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Moved (insertion) [2]

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Commented [JP39]: I might delete this line as you have already referred to the “pain” of his suicide.

Commented [JP40]: Not sure I understand. Maybe: “Life, without Ben, has returned.

Commented [JP41]: Maybe influence?

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Deleted: learned to accept partial answers, but mostly that

Deleted: I always acknowledge his death, but more importantly, I honor and celebrate his life daily. ...

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Commented [JP42]: I love this, but would like to see it somehow incorporated above other than in the title. Maybe this could be built into the scene where he pretends to be superman? It would be much more powerful and make more sense to tie it into an earlier statement about your brother. Why was he “flying in your eyes?”

Commented [JP43]: Consuelo, I mentioned in my editorial letter that I feel this could be broken out as a short story. It is very powerful. I took some liberties with rearranging some of the words, and moving a couple of sentences. Obviously this is YOUR story, not mine. To that end, I hope my edits will potentially help, and not distract from your message. Use what you want, and toss the rest! With respect, Jerry Parent