



CELESTE GRECO

Funeral for Mario, a diver who died of the bends, in the village church in Yelapa, Mexico, 1982

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Day of the Dead: Death takes a holiday

THE DEEP, erratic sound of the conch stirs memories as Aztec dancers, costumes glimmering in the sun, march into the Oakland Museum plaza for Day of the Dead festivities a year ago. I am hoping for good photos and also for some healing from the loss of my husband, Buddy, and a place dear to us.

This Mexican celebration, derived from traditions in the state of Oaxaca, is new to me. In the remote fishing village where we lived for a decade in the state of Jalisco, families observe *Día de los Finados* with prayers, the lighting of candles and a visit to the graveyard to lay flowers on the tombs of relatives.

The Aztec dancers spin around the flagpole, their shields and feathered spears a swirl of color, their feet flying in time to hypnotic clicks from hundreds of shells on their anklets.

I am transported back through time to 1977 in Yelapa, our village home for a decade, and the words of a friend:



"You must come and photograph Domingo now, Celeste. He'll be enterrado (buried) soon."

I'd met Domingo a few weeks before, nearly stumbling over the can he was filling with rendered fat from a pig slaughtered in Juan Cruz's corral. The Sunday before, Domingo's knife slipped as he stabbed at an animal, severing an artery in his own leg. His funeral was the first time I saw death up close, peering through the lens on my camera.

Rain soaked the Chacala trail as villagers snaked upward to the cemetery, where mourners bitterly threw dirt on the casket and sprinkled it with mescal.

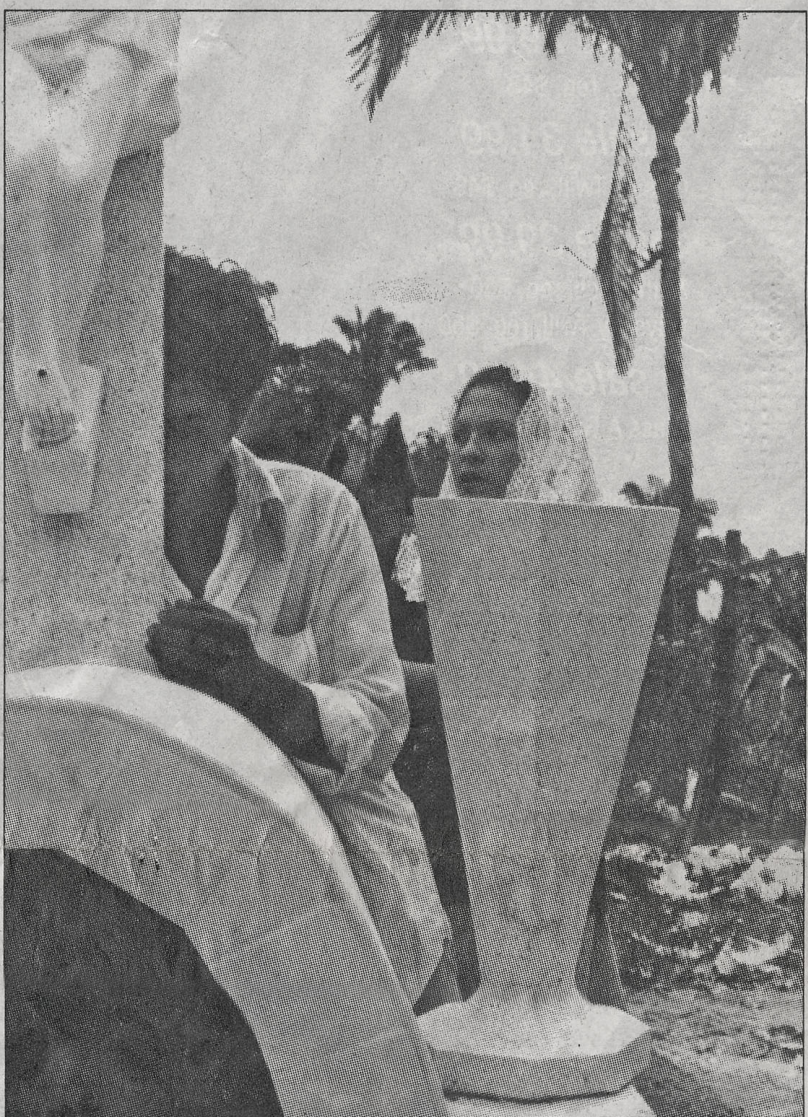
I felt untouched by the scene, as though La Muerte were a movie I could safely watch from a middle-row seat. I had liked and respected Domingo. I felt sympathy for his childless widow. But to me as a young woman, newly in love and living in a serene paradise, death held no meaning.

My husband Buddy would sometimes chastise me for what he considered voyeurism as I loaded film for other untimely deaths — a child dehydrated from dysentery, her little coffin laid out in her grandfather's store, and the diver Mario, in a satin-lined coffin, surrounded by villagers unable yet to understand this new disease called "decompressionado" (the bends).

"But they want to remember this day," I'd say. "Many homes have pictures of their dead relatives. It's traditional."



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Mourning at the village cemetery, above. Below, Domingo's wife pours mescal on his grave, 1977. Photos by Celeste Greco. Illustrations from "La Calavera de Cupido" by Jose Guadalupe Posada.

In the plaza in Oakland, I write Buddy's name on a paper slip and add it to a cross of marigolds filled by now with hundreds of names.

"Rest in peace," I say. "You are in good company."

The cross is carried to an altar made on the spot by Billie Quijano. Offerings of beautiful breads, candles, feathers, fruit, corn and sage are brought to her.

Now the unity circle begins. As the sky darkens, Roberto Vargas leads us in a prayer to the four directions. Together, we turn east, where the sun rises; north, where the cold comes from; south, where light is born, and west, to the setting sun.

The crowd is moved by Roberto's incantations. Even the littlest ones are still. And I am again back in Yelapa, remembering my last visit earlier this year.



Teodora's palm-thatched home has disappeared, but the clay comal where she taught Manuela to make tortillas still stands, as well as the grindstone — all that remain of her long existence on that piece of earth. Her sons knew well the spot, however, and had plans to build a concrete rental house there soon. Have they lit a candle by her picture of the Virgin today?

Where was One-Eyed Luis, who earned the nickname "El Carro" by carrying a stove on his back to Chacala? I missed watching him pound husks from the coffee beans in Juan Cruz' courtyard and roasting them over a charcoal fire.

Where were you, my dearest? I could no longer deny your absence from the world. Who will now climb the ladder to our loft in the morning with Orange Juice Delight, go to sea and return with a garlopa fish for



lunch, read stories aloud to me about the mulla Nasrudin's antics? If my tears could run quick and hard like the stream by Don Pepe's house in summer, would I feel any better?

The villagers have honored you by adding one of your expressions to their everyday talk. When they feel chagrined about something, they say, "Como Bari decia, ¡Está cabron!" ("As Buddy used to say, it's tough.")



Está Cabron, dearest Buddy. You are dead and I live on, in good company too, I think, as Roberto leads us in a final tribute to Father Sun and Mother Earth.

The crowd disperses in the twilight hour. My heaviness is lifted, floating above us like fog.