

THE GIRL AMONG THE MARIGOLDS

BY MICHELLE GUTIERREZ

EVERY year, on the first of November, the village of San Amaranto turned into a glowing sea of gold and orange. Bright marigolds, the cempazúchitl, the flowers of the dead here lined the streets and covered the doorways. Their sweet scent filled the air, soft and warm like a memory. The whole town came alive. Families lit candles, placed pictures on alters, and shared food with the ones they had lost. Music played in the background, and the scent of pan de Muerto and tamales drifted through the streets.

In the middle of it all, a little girl named Isabela wandered happily through the marigolds. She was no older than eight, with dark braids tied with yellow ribbons and a smile that lit her face. Her dress twirled as she ran, and she giggled as flower petals brushed her arms.

Every Dia de Muertos, Isabela came back to visit her family's altar. It was always the same. Her mamá would be lighting candles with care. Her abuela would sing soft songs,

and her papá would place her favorite things on the altar: sugar skulls, her toy bunny, and a chocolate bar half unwrapped, just the way she used to leave it.

Isabela loved the marigolds the most. Their bright petals always seemed to dance in the wind, and their smell filled her heart with joy whenever she would press her face into a bouquet to breathe in deeply. It made her feel safe, as if the flowers were speaking to her in a language only she could hear. One year, the air felt cooler than before; the sky darkened while candles flickered like tiny stars. Even still, Isabela rushed toward her house, her bare feet soft on the stone path.

"Mamá! Papá! I'm here!" she called as she ran inside. She wrapped her arms around her mamá in a tight hug. But her mamá didn't move. She didn't look at her or speak. Instead, she stood silently in front of the altar with tears in her eyes.

"I missed you," Isabela whispered. Her mamá brushed a tear from her cheek. "Oh my sweet Isabela," she said quietly. "You always loved marigolds." Isabela smiled. "Of course I do! They smell like home!" But when she reached for her papá, her hand passed right through him. Like smoke. Like air.

Her smile faded. “Papá?”

Her abuela gently placed a photo on the altar. It was a picture of Isabela, smiling wide, with marigolds in her hair. The frame was decorated with paper butterflies and petals. Isabela looked at it curiously. She didn’t remember the photo being taken.

She also didn’t remember the accident. It had happened five years ago, but her mind didn’t hold onto that part. A stormy day. A bicycle ride. A moment too fast to change. Her memory, like the petals in the wind, had floated away.

Still, the truth didn’t make sense to her, not really. Instead of feeling scared or sad, she turned back to the flowers. The marigolds seemed brighter than ever, their glow wrapping around her like a soft blanket. To Isabela everything felt right; she believed she was still alive because the flowers made her feel happy, that her family’s hugs could reach her due to their love in the air. The candles, the music, the food, it all felt like a part of a beautiful dream.

Outside, the village was full of laughter and music. Kids

carried lanterns shaped like animals and skulls. Dancers in skeleton costumes twirled in the streets. But inside her house, everything was quiet and still.

Her family never saw her, not really. But sometimes they felt her in the flicker of a candle. An impression in the soft breeze that passed through the room or the warmth that filled their hearts. They didn’t need to see her to know she was there.

As the night grew deeper and the candles burned low, Isabela stood by the site one more time. She looked at her photo, smiled at her bunny, and picked up one last marigold. “I’ll come back next year,” she whispered.

Then, like the petals floating on the wind, she slowly faded away. Her small figure became part of the golden light that filled the room while the marigolds swayed gently as if saying goodbye. Every year after that, her family made sure to build the altar with extra care. Her mamá placed her favorite candies in the same spot. Her papá brought home the biggest, brightest marigolds. Her abuela sang the same songs, the ones Isabela used to love. And each year they never saw her, yet still felt her in their hearts.

Isabela didn't need to know everything. She didn't need to understand. In her world of marigolds and memories, she was happy. She was alive. Surrounded by flowers that smelled of love, family, and forever.