

GRANDMOTHER

Maria struck a match against the rough strip on the matchbox. The smell of sulphur filled the air, followed closely by a warm, yellow glow. She lit the series of small candles, one after the other, until the altar glowed. Nervously, she rearranged the ofrenda (plates of sweets, biscuits and aromatic drinks), just like she'd watched her grandmother do before. It was her favourite time of the year: Dia de los Muertos, the Day of the Dead.

The sound of plates clattering in the kitchen, as her mother and father prepared their own offerings, barely broke through Maria's concentration. Their murmurous whispers were nothing more than background noise. She glanced up at the clock on the wall for the thousandth time. It was old and worn with the hour marks barely visible anymore. The hour hand was in place, the minute hand was waiting idly for the second hand to chase it around one more time. The small girl watched it eagle-eyed, her eyes tracking each tick and every tock.

With the second hand finally creeping into place, the clock struck midnight. The sound of the gongs seemed muffled, distant somehow. Maria stood up slowly and turned around. Her grandmother was stood with open arms, a faint blue glow fizzing around the outline of her body.

"Mi Princesa," her grandmother whispered. My princess. It had always been her grandmother's favourite nickname for Maria.

"Abuela," Maria said with a smile. "It is good to see you!"

Maria raced over to her grandmother's spirit and hugged her. Her eyes closed in the moment. It was like embracing a warm cloud. "My angel," her grandmother said, "I have some people for you to meet."

When Maria opened her eyes, she gasped. Her bedroom had disappeared and been replaced by a throng of people, all dressed as skeletons. Except, they weren't dressed up. She spun on her heels and laughed at her grandmother's skeleton, grinning in the way only a skull can.

"Abuela!" she whispered.

"My darling," her grandmother said with a wave of her arms, "let's visit the dead in style!"

"Am I dead?" Maria asked.

"Not at all. You always loved adventure. I remember our trips to the cenotes, and how you used to laugh

so hard watching me climb down into the lakes at the bottom of the holes. Consider this one more adventure!”

All of the skeletons were heading in the same direction: over a stone bridge that disappeared into a white mist. Musicians of all kinds mingled amongst the dead; their songs melting together into one long celebration of life. Every skull had been decorated. Each one was seemingly more bright and colourful than the last. Flickering candles were scattered across the ground, their lambent light softening the darkness.

“Every year, we travel this path to visit our loved ones,” Maria’s grandmother said, and snatched a pair of maracas from a passer-by. With a click of her heels, she picked up the tune and danced her way into the bustling crowd.

Maria screamed with delight and followed her grandmother onto the bridge. She felt the music enter her soul and her feet start to move of their own accord: the dancing had always been her favourite part of the festival.

“What is through the mist?” Maria asked, glancing over the bridge.

“That is the land of the dead. Only those who have died may pass beyond the bridge.” Her grandmother gently held Maria’s chin and turned her head the other way. Another white mist hung in the air. “Through there, you may go home.”

“I’m not ready yet,” Maria said, suddenly desperate for her adventure to last as long as possible.

“We have all the time in the world,” her grandmother said softly. “This is our time.”

INFERENCE FOCUS

1. Why was Maria checking the clock so often?
2. Why do you think Maria hugs her grandmother?
3. Why does she gasp when she opens her eyes?
4. What evidence is there in the text that Maria’s grandmother cares for her?
5. Why does Maria panic when her grandmother shows her the way home?

VIPERS QUESTIONS

E

How does the author’s use of imagery to describe the clock hands help the reader?

V

Which word or phrase tells you that Maria held on to something tightly?

V

Find and write definitions for the words “lambent” and “murmurous”.

R

What did Maria prepare as an offering for her grandmother?

P

Write a paragraph describing what happens next. Remember to keep it in the same style.

Answers:

1. She was desperate for her grandmother to return/she was nervous
2. She has missed her
3. She is surprised/shocked with where she is
4. She takes her on an adventure/she has a nice nickname for her/she turns her head gently
5. She isn't ready to leave yet

E: It gives an impression of the clock hands being living things that are moving slowly/more slowly than Maria wants them to

V: Embracing

V: Lambent: glowing or flickering

Murmurous: Low and indistinct noise

R: Sweets, biscuits, aromatic drinks