THE LAST CALL

By Ángeles Conejo

I was born in Guanajuato, Mexico, a place where legends are not merely told or passed down... they are lived.

I grew up hearing stories about La Llorona, the mummies, women buried alive, and mysterious figures appearing in the streets after dark.

My grandmother used to say that we should fear the living, not the dead.

And for many years, I believed her.

Until I came to Utah.

I spent more than twenty years caring for older adults here. Five of those years were on the night shift at a nursing home.

Anyone who has worked nights knows that after midnight, buildings seem different.

Hallways stretch longer. Shadows move. And every little noise sounds like someone walking right behind you.

There was something I could never explain.

Sometimes, the residents' call lights would go on in completely empty rooms.

We would go check.

Nothing.

Just the hum of the fluorescent lights, the smell of disinfectant, and a silence so deep we could hear ourselves breathing.

We would turn off the light.

And minutes later...

Ding... ding... ding...

The call light would come on again.

We also heard footsteps above our heads.

One step.

Then another.

Slow. Heavy.

As though someone were walking on the second floor.

The strange thing was... that building didn't have a second floor.

We always looked for explanations: the pipes, the wind, some electrical problem.

It's easier to find an explanation than to accept that some things are beyond our understanding.

But there was another custom at that nursing home I never forgot.

When a resident was nearing the end of life and their family hadn't arrived to say goodbye, some of my coworkers said there was a way to help them wait.

You had to take a corner of the bedsheet, tie a very tight knot, and tuck it beneath the mattress.

They said that as long as the knot remained tied, the soul would not leave.

I did it myself more than once.

And although I never knew whether it worked or was just coincidence, I remember some people holding on until they heard their loved ones' voices.

Then... they rested.

But there was a second part to that tradition.

Once the family had said goodbye, you had to untie the knot.

Because asking someone to wait was one thing...

And keeping them from leaving was something else entirely.

I remember one night in particular.

We were caring for an elderly woman who had been very ill for several days.

Her skin was pale, her breathing was growing weaker, and her eyes stayed fixed on the doorway.

Her daughter was driving in from Idaho, but she was still hours away.

The room was nearly dark. Every time I went in to check on her, it seemed colder.

I remembered the custom.

I took a corner of the bedsheet and tied a knot.

I pulled it tight once.

Then again.

And tucked it beneath the mattress.

“Hold on just a little longer,” I whispered. “Your daughter is coming.”

I don't know if she heard me.

But she kept breathing.

One hour.

Two hours.

Until, shortly before dawn, her daughter finally arrived.

She came to the bedside, took her mother's hand, and whispered in her ear.

The old woman opened her eyes one last time.

And soon afterward... she died.

It was a peaceful goodbye.

We gave them some privacy.

Between the other residents' calls, the shift-change reports, and my hurry to get home, I forgot something.

I never untied the knot.

A few days passed.

One night, while I was reviewing my notes...

Ding... ding... ding...

I looked at the call panel.

Nothing.

Not a single light was on.

Then I heard it again.

Ding... ding... ding...

I looked down the hallway.

And there it was.

The red light outside room six was blinking in the darkness.

It was the old woman's room.

It was empty.

I went inside, checked the call button, and turned off the light.

But when I returned to the nurses' station...

Ding... ding... ding...

Again.

The same thing happened over the next several nights.

And then the footsteps returned.

Slow.

Heavy.

Directly above that room.

A coworker asked if I could hear them too.

I nodded.

Neither of us wanted to say another word.

Eventually, I stopped working there.

I thought leaving the building would be enough to leave its sounds behind.

But I was wrong.

One morning, while making my bed, I found a white sheet I didn't recognize.

It was old, yellowed, and had a knot in one corner.

It carried a faint, musty smell.

The very same smell I remembered from the nursing home.

I put it in a bag to throw away.

Days later, it appeared spread across my bed.

Perfectly smoothed out.

The knot was still there.

I put it away again, this time inside a closed box in the garage.

But that night, when I entered my bedroom...

The sheet was back on my bed.

And the knot...

The knot was resting on my pillow.

Then I remembered.

The old woman.

Her daughter.

That final goodbye.

And the knot I had never untied.

I realized that perhaps someone had been trying to tell me something for a very long time.

She didn't want to hurt me.

She only wanted to rest.

I tried to undo the knot.

I pulled one end.

Then the other.

Nothing.

The fabric creaked between my fingers, but the knot wouldn't give.

Ever since, the sheet has appeared in the strangest places.

In my bedroom.

In the closet.

Sometimes, beside the door.

Always cold.

Always with the same knot.

And lately, I've started hearing that sound again.

At first, far away.

Then, behind a wall.

Now, some nights, right beside my bed.

Ding... ding... ding...

Like a call from someone still waiting to be answered.

That's why...

I brought this sheet with me tonight.

[Slowly lift the sheet and show the knot.]

Because I want to witness the moment when that woman can finally rest.

[Try to untie the knot. After a few seconds, it comes loose.]

I did it...

After all these years...

[Spread out the sheet and take a deep breath.]

Maybe tonight, at last, we can all rest.

[Look at the sheet in silence.]

But there's something that still troubles me.

They said the knot kept the soul waiting.

They never said where it would go once it was free.

[Slowly look toward the audience.]

And now I wonder...

Are you sure her soul has gone... or has it stayed with someone here?

[Silence.]

THE END