On the last day of her life, my grandmother called me at ten in the morning. The purpose of the call was to review with me the last rites she wished to have carried out. She explained that her dead husband’s spirit was waiting for her at the end of the bed and that she would be leaving with him that evening. So we had to go over the rites right then. After she died, I was to take her rings off her fingers, put them on mine, and then put the rings that she had given me years before on her fingers. She also wanted my first three published articles to be buried with her. At her sister’s insistence, when she was in her eighties, she had an audience with the pope and received a paper that exculpated her from the sin of having married a divorced man. She asked me to put the document under my articles: “God will have to read you before he gets to the decision of the Catholic Church.” We went over all the details of her funeral: the kind of coffin she wanted, what she was to wear, and how I was to perfume the petals that were to be gently scattered over her body. I was to give the eulogy and make it as
powerful as one of Eva Perón’s speeches. She wanted her favorite Broadway tunes playing at the moment when the mourners started to gather so that they would not be sad. She entrusted my mother and me to choose the right tunes for the tape. The service was to be held outside the mausoleum she had built for her husband when he died, and where she, too, was to be buried. She wanted to make it clear that this was not our last goodbye. She promised to visit me regularly and asked me to greet her spirit every year on the day of her death. She had set an appointment with the manicurist, and got off the phone as soon as she arrived: no one in my family dies with a chipped nail. Later that afternoon, she put on her makeup. We do not die without makeup either. She had a nurse the last months before she died. She told her she would not be having a meal that evening because she would be going to Warren before dinnertime. The nurse did not pay attention to her and made dinner anyway. At 5:43 P.M., with perfectly done nails and makeup, my grandmother suddenly sat up in her bed and reached out in front of her. When she fell back, she was gone. The nurse was so surprised that she dropped the dinner tray. The doctor said she did not really die of anything, just old age. On the death certificate, he wrote that she died of the flu. I carried out the last rites as my grandmother had told me. Since then I have always worn her rings, and for the eulogy, I tried to give as stirring a speech as I could.

My grandmother had to be laid out so that I could personally take her rings off, put mine on her fingers, and put the reading material in the coffin in the order she had requested. I was not quite sure how to go about finding someone to do a ceremony so as to greet her spirit on the anniversary of her death. I knew a woman I thought might be able to help, who had been one of my closest friends in our consciousness-raising group, Las Greñudas. Her name was Muriel. During the years of our time together in the consciousness-raising group, one of the tragedies that struck the whole group was the death of Muriel’s mother, Miriam. Miriam had been a longtime activist and fighter for justice. She had been in the Communist party and one of the organizers for the union 1199 at the Harlem Hospital, where she worked for many years. Miriam had also been an activist in the civil rights movement. The vigil after her death was run not only by a minister, but also by another woman, Henriette, a longtime friend of Miriam’s. I thought that some of the rituals and prayers in which Henriette led the mourners were not Christian. I was impressed by the beauty of the rituals, but too sad to question Muriel about them. However, Muriel thought that Henriette might be able to help