

EL LLORÓN

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Of course he was not a perfect father. More than his imperfections, I remember his love of simple things: gardening, cooking, making people laugh. These are the things that nurtured us, and, together with his rituals, urged our little brown bodies toward growth. Every morning before he left for work, he'd prepare café con leche with a little sugar in a bottle that he would leave for me on the kitchen counter. (He did this for me well past my 9th birthday.) After work, he came home with a *Chicago Sun Times*, under one arm and an empty thermos in the other, arriving happy and ready to feed us:

“Hi monkey, whad arju doin? Ju hongri now, Nena?”

We loved the Puerto Rican meals he cooked after work and being greeted by the smell of sofrito. At the stove next to Mami's dark, curvy body, it was easy to see just how short Papi was, but the head of thick curls he carried added a full inch to his height. Plump olive cheeks framed a set of smiling eyes that laughed often and cried too quickly. The kitchen was Papi's performance space. For Mami, it was the place where she'd watch her daily novelas and layer coats of frosted burgundy polish over well-nurtured fingernails. Dinnertime marked her exit for another night of lotería with her friends. These departures lasted past midnight and extended beyond our childhood years.

On Saturday mornings Papi'd nudge us to crawl out of bed like baby cubs and follow him around the city, from lakefront parks to neighborhood markets.

He liked to form new friendships and sought a captive audience everywhere we went. Women seemed especially drawn to his humorous antics and unpolished charm. This made for long visits with Humboldt Park vendors, where we would spend many childhood hours. La carnicería was a gross little storefront somewhere on Division. We felt sad for all the live chickens. We'd wait outside and wave frantically from the murky window, to keep Papi on track for our next stop: la frutería. It was our favorite place because he'd let us buy our own mango and eat it in the store. I savored every second I held the sweet slippery seed against my mouth in a gesture that reminded me of my bottle of café con leche.

Papi's most creative cooking moments were staged around the wooden table in our bright yellow kitchen where he'd rigged a thirteen-inch television with a rabbit ear antenna, wire hangers, and aluminum foil so he could watch *The Frugal Gourmet* on Channel 11. Like perfect guinea pigs, we rushed home as the streetlights lit up. We raced into the kitchen smelling like wet puppies, super hungry, and starved for whatever we would find. Papi proudly waited with a meal at hand:

“Hey, Nena, ju hongri?”

In the summer time we spent endless hours in our backyard garden pulling orange carrot sticks and picking fresh cilantro, observing how these perfumed the heavy air. We soaked small beds of lettuce heads and played around them. Rows of golden cornstalks soared above a wooden fence reaching to catch the bright streetlights. Sticky basil leaves covered my pruned brown fingers, muddy water gushed between my toes. Gardenias kissed morning glories, crawling purple heathers slept, pansies bloomed smiles and sighs. We danced for summer rainfalls to wash over our faces. Papi brushed black beads of soil off our cheeks

as orange poppies swayed around our dirty knees.

We could never weed out Papi's true stories from his half-baked jokes, which usually started out as a tale about a friend from work and ended with his over-telling the punch line:

“No, mira, e'cuchame. And theng, the Shinees guy says, *soplise!!!*
Ju' no, coz he coodn't say, *soprise, meng.*”

His childhood tales about growing up poor in Puerto Rico were in constant question. As one of eighteen siblings, he said they all started out sleeping in a bedroom drawer. Once they outgrew a drawer, they'd eventually make their way to a bed, which was already shared by at least two other children. The oldest graduated to a space on the floor. Papi's father made it very clear that Cano, the youngest, was his favorite, by buying him candy as the other children watched. Papi always said he was lucky to be second youngest. He only complained about not owning his own shoes:

“Yeah, me and Cano walked to school wearing the same shoes every jeer. He wore one shoe. I wore the other one.”

We knew that wasn't true, but we listened through to the punch line, until Papi laughed himself to tears. Of our family history, we learned that as a child Papi had endured beatings, which his father dispensed whenever Papi gave Cano's candy to the other children. With such acts of kindness and rebellion, it was hard to imagine that Papi would eventually become a damaged version of his own father. There was a side of Papi that he reserved for family alone, the opposite of his public persona that shaped Mami's stoic mask.

During family parties, our living room became a transformed space infused with cuatro guitars and congas beating softly to Afro-Cuban rhythms that weaved en clave between Spanish conversations. We sang in crying salsa rhymes of Hector Lavoe,

*Vamos todos a bailar, al estilo Africano.
Si no lo sabes bailar, yo te enseñaré mi hermano.
A ti te gusta la bomba, y te gusta el baquiné,
para que goces ahora, Africano es el bembé.
Che che colé, que bueno e' Che che cofriza, muerto 'e la risa....*

At these family gatherings, Papi's love of stories, those both told and performed through jokes and music, quickly led him to the kitchen. With a few Old Style beers behind him, Papi ended up producing most of the cooking. Among his signature dishes were arroz con pollo guisao y verdura de yucca con tostones. We did our best to snag plates of platanos maduros while he was busy delivering mocking compliments about Titi Meri's bundled hairstyles. Then he'd walk behind her pretending to hide a huge metal spoon in her mounds of hair. He also teased my gangly uncle about his ankle-length slacks:

“Mira, salte de la cocina con esos brincacharco, vete pa'lla a pescar.”

We all caught on laughing:

“Ha-haaaaa, what a burn, Tio, your pants are floods, we didn't know you were going fishing!”

Then we faded behind the rhythmic space:

*Oye tú sentado allá, pareces venezolano
Ven aquí vamo' a bailar, que todos somos hermanos.
Lo bailan en Venezuela, lo bailan en Panamá.
Este ritmo es Africano y donde quiera vá acabar.
Che che colé, que bueno e' Che che cofriza, muerto 'e la risa....*

Of these memories, Noche Buena remains our favorite holiday. After two nights of making pasteles, Papi cooked lechon y arroz con gandules for everyone expected to gather at our house on New Year's Eve. On these occasions, Mami and Papi actually danced together and sang duets to old trullas. It was rare to see them affectionate with one another, acting like one imagines married people should. It made us happy to see Mami openly laughing and hugging us. Papi was, as always, freely laughing at his own jokes, except around midnight. Every year, as far back as I can remember, as soon as midnight struck, Papi would begin crying. My sisters, cousins, and I ran around hugging and kissing everyone in sight screaming, "Happy New Jeer!" By the time we reached Papi, he was slumped in a chair, ready to burst like an overfilled water balloon, with Mami by his side, fully unmasked, joining him in the ritual of crying. Like his laughter, Papi's tears appeared contagious. Within minutes, every adult in the house joined the ceremonial midnight cry. We'd sneak away with cups of coquito to huddle and complain about the crying adults, "Dang, we gotta swear we're not gonna cry like that when we grow up. God, everyone was just laughing and dancing merengue ten minutes ago!" We'd eventually feel bad about our refusal to participate, and so we'd go sit with Papi for a while, petting his big hair. He wasn't like the other men in our family. He cried about anything, including White Sox games. At Noche Buena, Papi seemed to give everyone permission to openly cry with no reason needed. All would laugh, and eat, and cry some more.

Papi is like cilantro en el arroz con pollo. A touch of him shows up everywhere in my life: my lazy little garden, my daughter's laughter, midnight tears on New Years Eve.

*Ya yo sé que te gustó, quieres bailarlo otra vez,
Bailalo en la punta del pie y veras que bueno es.
Ya yo sé que te gustó, quieres bailarlo otra vez,
Pues ponte bien los zapatos, que los tienes al revés.
Che che colé, (que bueno `e.....)
Che che cofriza, (muerto `e la risa.....)
Che che colé, (que bueno `e.....).*

Through Papi's tears y testimonios we healed small wounds, me finding my voice en trullas viejas de año nuevo y aquel Che che de mi niñez.