

Second Helpings

The wake ended at three, prompting friends and neighbors to head home. Only the family remained, along with the leftover food and the strange quiet that settles over a house once everybody polite has left -- Ruth and her adult children, Garret, Becca and Diane. Lupita with her son Marteen.

The house had never been so full, not on any previous occasion the siblings could remember. Nor had their mother's dining table held so much food. One half filled with church food -- green bean casseroles, noodle dishes, sliced ham gone gray around the edges, potato salad and macaroni salad and deviled eggs, all sweating in the stifling heat -- all thanks to Ruth's "*Ladies Who Lunch*" church group. The other half held a dozen foil pans Lupita brought at nine-thirty because Ruth insisted she come early to help set up. Stuffed cabbage rolls. Cucumbers in sour cream. Empanadas baked golden brown. Little fried pastries dusted with powdered sugar. Even a sheet cake cut in the shape of a cross and covered with cocoa powder.

Becca stood by the sideboard holding a sweating glass of sweet tea, watching her brother eat his fourth cabbage roll.

"Too much garlic," Garrett muttered.

"Then stop eating them," Becca said.

"I'm hungry."

"There's ham."

Garrett glanced over at the ham. "That thing's been out since before eleven."

"And the cabbage rolls haven't?"

"They were covered."

Becca grimaced. "It's ham, Garrett. It's like ninety percent preservatives. It's not going to spoil."

"Says you." Garrett was fifty-four and angry. Not angry like their father. His had been your garden variety, frustrated in the moment kind of thing. A few swear words, a growl or two and he was done. Garrett chose to hang onto his anger – quietly making it part of himself till his overly developed sense of right and wrong walked a razor's edge. Which could be frustrating for Becca and Diane. Especially as adults.

"Maybe you should at least sit down and relax while you eat."

Garrett stood at one end of the table, tie loosened, sleeves rolled twice, sweating in the heat. Standing because he no longer felt comfortable in his father's house.

"I'm good where I'm at."

Their mother, Ruth, came in carrying another spoon. "This one's for the cabbage rolls."

"There's one there already," Garrett said.

Ruth replaced it anyway. "That one's bent."

Garrett stared at the new spoon, then at his mother. Then at his sisters. Then at Lupita and Marteen. Letting the silence fall again.

Diane nervously fidgeted in her chair. Smoothing out her black maternity dress so it covered her knees proper. "My doctor says sodium makes the swelling worse," she announced to nobody in particular. "But this heat has me really feeling like a beached whale. Way more than the food."

Nobody answered, so Diane continued. "Well, not too much longer now till this bundle of joy arrives, I think," she said rubbing her belly. "I say the sooner the better. Tom thinks so too. He's super excited to become a daddy, you know. And doesn't want me doing anything till after the baby arrives. Did you know, before I came down here this morning, he told me I was the most precious thing in the world to him? And that I should take it easy at all times. And if I had any problems, just call him and he'd

race right over to pick me up straight away. How sweet is that? He's such a sweet man, don't you think?"

On the other side of the table, Lupita sat beside her own son, Marteen, who was coloring silently in a little notebook with a blue crayon worn almost flat. Every now and then he glanced up at the adults in the room, deciding whether they were safe or not. Wondering if this quiet was normal. At his house, there was always lots of people around, talking and playing games and singing. Familiar noises.

Becca looked Marteen over, wondering how much he knew.

Ruth suddenly stood and went back to the kitchen, returning moments later carrying more rolls nobody asked for or needed.

Becca watched her mother, noticing her black funeral dress hung a little looser on her narrow frame than when she'd helped pick it out for her the previous week. And her pale blonde hair, usually pinned tight enough to survive a tornado, had slipped, letting strands of hair haphazardly fall around her face. A sure sign she was distracted. Compared to Lupita, who sat quietly, whose black hair flowed freely past the nape of her neck, and whose brown skin warmed against her gray blouse, showed a study in contrast. But despite their physical differences, Becca could see these two women were actually very similar in mannerism. Same capable hands. Same steady posture. Same habit of entering a room already looking for what needed to be done.

"For Heaven's sake," Becca spoke. "Really, Mom, more food?"

"What?" Ruth replied.

"There's enough here to feed an army already. We don't need more."

"Someone might come late. One of your father's old army buddies maybe. You never know. Besides, people need to eat after funerals."

"Why?"

Ruth looked at Becca like she didn't understand the question. Or her daughter for asking.

Garrett pointed his fork toward the white cake. "What even is that?"

"Pan de Muerto," Lupita spoke.

Garrett looked at her. Stared at her really.

Lupita spoke anyway – softer but without apology. "It's ofrenda. A memorial food we make for funerals. Wheat, walnuts, honey. We bring it for the soul of the person."

Garrett grimaced. "Un-huh. I see."

"You don't have to eat it," said Becca.

"I didn't say I was going to," he snapped. Ten minutes later he'd eaten two pieces. "It's dry," he said, scraping the last crumbs off his plate.

"You're literally licking the plate."

"I'm trying to figure out what's in it."

"Orange peel," said Lupita. "Very little. And vanilla."

Garrett looked irritated. "Well. It's sweet."

"Yes," Lupita replied. "Desserts usually are."

Becca looked down into her tea to hide her smile.

Marteen spoke without looking up from his notebook. "Abba puts more walnuts in hers."

Lupita caressed the back of his head gently and smiled. "My mother thinks more walnuts make everything better."

Ruth started gathering plates from the table. Lupita stood to help without either woman having to say a word.

That's the thing, isn't it? Becca thought, underneath it all these two have some kind of unspoken agreement between them. How is that even possible? Becca realized it was the way Lupita moved through the house without hesitation that bothered her most. The way she knew where the dish towels were. And which drawer held what utensil. The way

Ruth handed her things without looking, and seemed to defer to her. The way they were suddenly two women in the kitchen acting as if this was an everyday thing.

Diane broke the silence. "I actually think the cucumber thing is really good."

"Nobody asked," said Garrett.

Diane blinked. "I was just saying."

"You've been 'just saying' all day."

"Well, sorry for talking."

"For heaven's sake," muttered Becca.

Garrett grabbed another cabbage roll. "They're salty now," he said.

"You said they needed salt earlier," Becca replied.

"Abba says gringos salt their food because they're afraid of garlic," Marteen commented as he switched to the purple crayon.

Garrett looked at the top of Marteen's head before turning back to Becca. "I didn't say 'needed' salt."

"You absolutely did."

"I said they could use something."

"They're literally the only thing you've eaten."

Garrett pointed his fork at her. "You know what your problem is?"

"No," Becca said turning to face him. "Please tell me."

"You're always acting like everybody else is crazy for noticing what's right in front of you."

"And what exactly is right in front of me, Garrett?"

Garrett looked down at his plate – a war of thoughts arguing in his head -- trying to reconcile his new paternal realizations against his once-upon-a-time understanding of family. After a while, he simply said, "The whole damn house feels different now."

Nobody said anything.

In the kitchen the faucet shut off. Lupita returned.

Marteen switched from blue crayon to green.

Looking toward the kitchen where his mother was, Garrett shook his head. "He used to insist on going to the same restaurant. And sitting in the back corner booth. Every birthday. Every anniversary. Every special occasion." Then at Lupita. "Every time. Guess now we know why."

Everybody looked at Lupita.

Ruth came to the doorway drying her hands on a dish towel.

Garrett stared at her. Holding the room in silence.

"What restaurant?" Diane asked, looking back and forth between her mother and Garrett. "I don't remember."

"Casa Adelita. On Clement." Garrett replied.

Diane sat up straighter. "Wait. That's your restaurant?"

"My family's, yes," said Lupita. "My brother owns it now."

The memories came flooding back -- all those dinners at Casa Adelita. The waitresses greeting their father by name. Seating them without menus. Always the back booth, where he ordered immediately for the table. Appetizers and main dishes and desserts for all to share. Then insisting staff join them for toasts before, during and after the meal. Diane thinking the whole time her father must really love this restaurant.

"You worked there," she said slowly.

"Yes, of course. My parents owned it. I worked there since the day I could stand."

"And Dad knew you from there."

"Yes."

"How long?"

Lupita was quiet for a moment. "Long enough."

Nobody spoke.

Ruth walked over and stood next to Lupita. "Lupita, where'd you put the foil?"

"On top of the microwave."

Ruth then looked across the table at her children, but there was no anger in her face. That somehow made it worse. "Your father liked trying new things," was all she would say before heading back into the kitchen.

Everybody sat with that for a second.

Garrett watched her retreat. His mother who'd just asked another woman where something was in her own house. That seemed to land harder than anything else. Garrett cut himself another piece of cake. "Still too sweet," he muttered despite eating every bite.

Lupita started pulling the food trays off the table and taking them into the kitchen to wrap up. "If anyone would like food to take home, now would be a good time. Otherwise, I'll just drop the leftovers off down at the VA."

Nobody moved to help.

Garrett dropped his plate heavily onto the center of the table and didn't reach for anything else. "I think I've had enough," he said.

The End.