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Warnings We Do Not Heed

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Second Helpings

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

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 tin 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 smoking, 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. Eat the ham."

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

“And the cabbage rolls haven’t? 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, whose southern baked anger generally burst forth in your typical, heat of the moment way – yell, a few curse words, and be done with the matter. Garrett’s angers held quietly, making it part of himself, till his overly developed sense of right and wrong walked a razor’s edge. Then he seethed with white hot contempt at any he felt unworthy. Which could be frustrating for Becca and Diane when it came to the men in their lives. Especially as adults. No one had ever been good enough for his baby sisters.

“Maybe you should sit down at least and relax while you eat, Garret. Better for your heart.”

Garrett stood at one end of the table, tie loosened, sleeves rolled twice, sweating in the heat, letting his gut spill over his loosened belt. Which, along with being fifty pounds overweight, a three time a day cigar habit, and recent medical history – pushed him point blank to six of the eight markers for a heart attack on the CCS-AMI scale. Garrett standing was the least of his problems. He no longer felt comfortable in his father’s house.

“I’m good where I’m at.”

Their mother, Ruth, the matron of their little Cajun family, came in carrying another serving fork. “This one’s for the cabbage rolls, y’all.”

“There’s one there already,” Garrett said.

Ruth replaced it anyway. “It’s bent.”

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

Deena nervously fidgeted in her chair. Smoothing out her black maternity dress so it covered her knees proper, and gently caressing her growing belly. “I’d like to try one, but my doctor says sodium makes the swelling worse, y’all,” she brightly

announced to nobody in particular. "But I tell you what, it's this heat that has me really feeling like a beached whale. Way more than all that salt in the food."

Nobody answered, so Deena felt the need to continue. "Well, not too much longer now till this bundle of joy arrives, I think," she said rubbing her pregnant, swollen belly. "I say the sooner the better, too. Tom can't wait either, y'all. He's super excited to become a daddy. And doesn't want me doing anything till after the baby arrives. Did y'all know, before I came over this morning, he called me long distance from California. All the way from Fort Ord out in Monterey, wherever that is. He said he'd just dropped off a load and would be returning soon. Said that he was awfully sorry he couldn't be here, being our Daddy died and all. But that 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 run every stop light to get home, no matter what. 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, listening. Marteen colored silently in a little notebook with a blue crayon worn almost flat. Every now and then he'd glance up at the adults in the room, trying to decide whether they were safe or not. At his house, it was safe. And there were always lots of people around, talking and singing and carrying on. Familiar noises. Not quiet like this house where you could hear the clock ticking.

Becca looked down at Marteen, lighting another cigarette and wondering how much he knew.

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

Becca watched her, noticing her mother's black funeral dress hung a little looser on her narrow frame than last week when they'd picked it out. And her pale blonde hair, usually pinned tight enough to weather a tornado, had slipped a little, letting strands of hair haphazardly fall across her face. A sure sign she was distracted.

Compared to Lupita, whose black hair flowed freely past the nape of her neck, and whose brown skin warmed against her summer gray blouse, these two women were a study in contrast. But despite their physical differences, Becca could see they were actually very similar. Similar mannerisms. Same capable hands. Same steady posture. Same habit of entering a room already looking for what needed to be done.

“For Heaven’s sake, Mom,” Garrett spoke. “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 perhaps. You never know. Besides, people need to eat after funerals.”

“Why?”

Ruth looked at Garrett, like she couldn’t understand his question. Or his need to ask it.

Garrett pointed his fork toward a white cake at Lupita’s end of the table. “What even is that?”

“Pan de Muerto,” Lupita spoke.

Garrett looked at her. Stared really.

Lupita continued unperturbed, “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. Okay. If you say so.”

“You don’t have to eat it,” said Becca.

“I didn’t say I was,” 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 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 and 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.

Deena broke the silence. "I actually think the cabbage thing is really good."

"Nobody asked," said Garrett.

Deena blinked, a little hurt. "I was just saying."

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

"Well, sorry for talking."

"For heaven's sake, Garrett," muttered Becca.

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

"You said they needed salt earlier. Which is it?"

"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 his father and family. He finally said, "The whole damn house feels different now."

Nobody spoke. Or answered.

In the kitchen the faucet shut off. Lupita returned and sat, putting a hand on Marteen's shoulder. Marteen switched from blue crayon to green.

Looking toward the kitchen where his mother was still fussing, 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. Always the same. 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?" Deena awkwardly asked, looking back and forth between her mother and Garrett. "I don't remember."

"Casa Adelita. On Clement." Garrett replied.

Deena 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 maître de greeting their father by name. Seating them right away without menus.

Always the back booth, always the same waitress, whom their father would order from immediately for the table. Appetizers and drinks and main dishes and desserts for all to share. Then insisting staff join them for every toast before, during and after the meal. Deena 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. Looking across the table at her adult 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 returning to the kitchen.

Everybody sat with that for a second.

Garrett watched her retreat. Realizing his mother had just condoned another woman 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 stood and started pulling the food trays off the table, taking them to 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.

