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# When

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## When

*Sydney Rose Quintana*

**2<sup>nd</sup> Place Winner**

In most Hispanic families, making tamales is an all-day affair. A formal occasion. A holiday, if you will.

Many hands, small and large, busied themselves clearing off every surface in our small kitchen, pushing away decades of knick-knacks and forgotten notes-to-selves into every open space. The piles gathered were impressive. Just one look could topple this delicate balance. Generations circled the tall, aged table that had survived the test of time. Step stools and sturdy boxes became chairs, crowding around a table like an industrial assembly line.

While I waited for the jobs to be assigned, my small fingers lightly traced every imperfection in that table's surface, traveling down from the marker stain remnants of our childhood to the unique collection of dings and blemishes. The kitchen came alive with a noise long-forgotten in our busy lives: an entire family laughing and screaming and existing at once.

My mother and her sisters readied the filling and the masa, under my grandmother's watchful eye. My favorite job was soaking the leaves, because then I got to be the first in line. Even so, I always got distracted by the way my cousins would carefully spread the masa inside the husks, rowdy boys working with the delicacy similar to unearthing an ancient fossil or cracking open a locked safe. My grandmother worked hard to teach them how to do it right the first time.

*Calmate, mijos, calmate. You have to be gentle.*

My eyes wandered between my family members, always landing on my grandmother and her shining eyes. Even when I was too young to see that expression over the table without a little help, I knew it filled her with such happiness to see all of her family in one room, filling it with life instead of angry words. In those moments, I saw her count her blessings instead of her regrets.

In my grandmother's prime, she did the work of a small army without asking for any recognition. Her children would come home to dozens of tamales, homemade tortillas or large batches of caldo, appearing like magic while they looked away. But the years have not been entirely kind to my hero, twisting her tired bones with arthritis and stealing away the energy that used to bring every room she entered to life.

*You'll all need to learn how to do this someday. I won't always be around to help.*

Even more so than that first bite, I miss the smell of my grandmother's cooking. It filled the house, from the kitchen all the way upstairs to my bedroom. Grandma never had to call everyone down for dinner because we knew. I was always amazed by the way her recipes were recalled not through cards and cookbooks but muscle memory.

"How much do I add, Grandma?" I asked with an unsure tremble in my voice, looking up at her movements. I always looked at

my grandmother with stars in my eyes, in awe of the way she moved with purpose behind every step.

*That's enough. You'll know when.*

I'm in my twenties now, Grandma, and I still don't know when. I wish I could tell you that.

When I moved away, I didn't know that the food here would never come close to yours. I didn't know that I wouldn't be able to recreate the flavors of my childhood, no matter how many spices I added or how much love I poured into the mix. The thought that we won't even be able to sit around the kitchen table again like we used to fills my mouth with bitter remnants, and I don't think any amount of my own food will replace that taste. The family hardly talks anymore, too wrapped up in our lives to put the pieces back together.

Sometimes I wish I could forget how your food tasted, how your thin arms felt around my shoulders when I cried, or how your laughter always began with a gasp and ended with you taking your glasses off to clean them.

I wish I knew when the hurting would stop.