Melting, Left in the Pot

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The kitchen was always too hot for my liking. Not just because of the warmth from the stove, but heavy steam thickening the air, oil, and the smell of powder sofrito blooming in a pan. Remembering the fresh garlic and onions sweating aggressively in olive oil irked me but calmed my spiral. Standing near the white, sharp salt of adobo as it rubbed into chicken. Patiently waiting for the plantain's sweetness to soften in a skillet. Expected — someone was always stirring something, always tasting something, always standing. The women stood, and I felt it.

My cousin, Celly, would lean one hip against the counter, one small hand resting unconsciously on her swollen belly, the other moving a wooden spoon through gold arroz con gandules like it was instinct. Elly never measured. She didn't need to. The rice would swell perfectly. The pigeon peas would soften up but not split. The steam, the heavy heat, fogged up the kitchen window, blurring my view of the outside world into something smaller, distant, and unimportant.

The men were in the family living room. The television was loud from the latest episode of *The Guadalupe*. Laughter, tears, and excitement burst out in often short explosions. The boys ran between rooms, leaving prominent fingerprints on freshly wiped counters, thanks to Jito. Plates were set on the table, silver forks placed carefully, and napkins folded. Someone in the house would always call out, "Ya está listo!" and everyone would come running to catch a seat. Everyone, except the women. So, the mothers hovered. Attentive to refilling glasses before they were empty, passing more rice to the unsatisfied stomachs of my cousins. Watching as they were tending extra pieces of chicken. Asking, "¿Quieres más?" before anyone could say they were full. This was comfort installed by consistent care, filling out plates with more colors.

I didn't really notice it at first. Really, I just thought this was how dinner worked for everyone. The women fed. The men ate. Is this fair? The children absorbed. It wasn't until I was older that I realized something else: the women in my family rarely sat long enough to finish their own plates. Escaping to pretend to fill up a glass of water. Sometimes they would eat standing up, between tasks. Sometimes their food went cold while they cleaned some more. Sometimes they even forgot to serve themselves at all. And somehow, this felt normal, not just for me.

Growing up, I learned how to eat quietly. After arguments, especially before/after voices rose and doors shut and silence spread through the house like something suffocating my spirits. I would wait until the kitchen was empty. I would scoop rice into a bowl, scrape the crispy bottom

layer from the pot — my favorite part — and retreat to my room. The spoon hitting the ceramic sounded louder in isolation. When I was little, rice tasted like comfort.

Like family. Like noise and cousins and heat and laughter. When I was older, rice tasted like something else. It tasted like safety.

Food didn't argue back. It didn't raise its voice. It didn't question whether I was being dramatic, ungrateful, or too sensitive. It just existed. Warm. Reliable. Predictable. In a house where emotions could shift without warning, the pot of rice on the stove was constant. I began to understand hunger differently. There was the physical kind — the rumbling stomach, the lightheadedness when I hadn't eaten enough. But there was another kind, too. A hunger that settled deeper, somewhere under my ribs. A hunger to be heard without interruption. A hunger to sit at the table and not feel like I was waiting for something to go wrong. Sometimes I ate because I was hungry. Sometimes I ate because I was lonely. Sometimes I ate because the act of chewing gave me something to focus on besides the noise in my head.

The women in my family always made sure everyone else was full. I learned that hunger meant waiting. Waiting until everyone else was satisfied. Waiting until everyone else was calm. Waiting until it was safe to take up space. There was one night I remember clearly. My cousin was pregnant again. The kitchen was hotter than usual. She moved more slowly this time, her back aching, her feet swollen. Still, she cooked. Fried sweet plantains until the edges caramelized and crisped. Stewed chicken until it fell apart under a fork. Rice, always rice. I watched her from the doorway.

"Sit down," I told her.

"In a minute," Elly responded, smiling in that way women do when they don't mean it.

The men had already filled their plates. The television was blaring. Someone shouted for more chicken. A child cried in the hallway. She handed out seconds before she made her own plate. By the time she sat down, most of the food was gone. She laughed it off.

"I'm not even that hungry," she said.

But I saw the way she ate — fast, distracted, half-standing already before she'd finished. That was the first time something shifted in me. I didn't have the language for it yet, but I felt it: this pattern of women pouring themselves into pots and plates and people, leaving themselves last. Food was love, yes. But it was also labor. Expectation. Sacrifice. And I wondered, quietly, who fed them.

As I got older, my relationship with food grew complicated. There were seasons where I tried to control it — measuring, restricting, structuring. Seasons where I convinced myself discipline meant ignoring hunger. Seasons where I told myself strength meant needing less. I thought if I

could master my body, I could master everything else. But hunger doesn't disappear just because you ignore it. It changes shape. Sometimes it became guilt after eating. Sometimes it became shame for wanting more. Sometimes it became pride in saying no. And sometimes, after arguments or disappointments or feeling unseen, it became that same quiet ritual from childhood: a bowl of rice, eaten alone. Only now it carried more weight. It wasn't just comfort. It was a memory. It was an inheritance. I began to see how deeply I had absorbed the women around me. The way they minimized their needs. The way they swallowed frustration. The way they convinced themselves they were fine with less. I had learned to feed others emotionally before feeding myself. To anticipate needs. To stay small at the table.

Even in my own life — friendships, relationships, classrooms — I noticed the pattern. I listened more than I spoke. I gave more than I asked. I made sure everyone else was okay before checking in with myself. Just like the kitchen. Just like the rice. The realization didn't come all at once. It was quieter than that. It happened the first time I cooked for myself and sat down immediately to eat. No hovering. No waiting. No refilling someone else's glass. Just me. A plate.

A chair was pulled out intentionally. It felt almost wrong at first. Indulgent. Selfish. But as I ate — slowly this time — I felt something unfamiliar.

Permission. The rice tasted different when I wasn't rushing. When I wasn't listening for raised voices. When I wasn't bracing for interruption. It tasted like choice. I thought about my cousin, pregnant and standing. About my mother, reheating her food after everyone else was done. About the generations of women who equated love with depletion. And I understood something new: feeding others is beautiful, but not if you are starving. Hunger is not weakness. It is information. It tells you what you need. It tells you when you've been running on empty. It tells you when something inside you has been ignored for too long. For years, I was confused between being needed and being nourished. They are not the same.

Now, when I think of the kitchen, I don't just remember the heat. I remember the sound of oil crackling. The rhythm of knives against cutting boards. The laughter that sometimes, despite everything, filled the space. I remember how food carried our culture — how rice and beans held history, migration, survival. How plantains reminded us of an island, even when we were far from it. How seasoning was passed down without written recipes, just instinct and trust. Food was never just food. It was identity. It was gender. It was silent. It was love. But it was also a lesson. The women in my family always fed everyone else first. I am learning to feed myself, too. Not just with rice or plantains or chicken, but with boundaries. With rest. With honesty about what I need. With the understanding that sitting down at the table is not selfish — it is necessary. I still love the smell of sofrito blooming in oil. I still associate rice with comfort. I still feel something sacred in the act of cooking for people I care about. But now, when I set the

table, I pull out a chair for myself first. And I sit with grace. And I eat quickly while the food is still warm. Every time.