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The quilt enchiladas

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The Quilt Enchiladas

They say smell is a powerful sense that can trigger memories long forgotten. When I smell onions, bell pepper, and smoked jalapeños I see my grandmother—a vivid image of a woman, who has worked all her life and has never had it easy. As a child I would play in my grandmother’s backyard with my other cousins making mud pies and stuffing up all the ant holes that poke out of the ground. My grandmothers’ kitchen window overlooked the backyard and the aromas from her cooking would tickle our noses and made our mouths water until we ran inside to eat.

My culture revolves around music family and food. My grandmother was known for her potato enchiladas, a family recipe that has been perfected through generations. As a child I would play outside and she would cook all day and as I got older I began to master the art of cooking family recipes. As I pour the oil into the pan I see a reflection of generations of women stirring spices and onions in glossy oil. My grandmother doesn’t use measuring cups or teaspoons. She cooks by taste and texture, and she taught me to do the same. *I wait to hear the distinct sound of the onions sizzling before I add the potatoes.*

My sophomore year of college I was given an assignment: a project of oral history, interviewing and recording somebody’s interpretation of an important time in history. I decide to interview my grandmother; I entitled it *World War II Through The Eyes of A Child*. I recorded her story of how she grew up in a small town in Texas that bordered Mexico. My grandmother showed me how to pick the best jalapenos by slightly pinching the sides, “If it is too soft it’s old not good and if it is to hard its not

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ripe. The jalapeño's skin must bend to the touch of your fingers popping back into its shape when you release your grip. Those are the best to cook with."

As my grandmother started to set up the spices, I push the record button down and was taken back through time. "I was nine years old when my oldest brother was drafted off to the war, I had a happy childhood and plenty of kids to play with. I grew up in a poor neighborhood, and we grew everything we ate. *We both share a giggle when she says she never knew she was poor because everybody else around her lived the same way. There was nobody rich with whom compare their life styles.*

My grandmother leaned over my shoulder telling me to slice the potatoes in big rectangular pieces and cut away from myself. "My brother would always send letter to her father written in Spanish, nobody else except my father could read Spanish. I was only taught how to read English all of our cousins were and my dad would never tell us what he wrote. My mother was never the same after he left and our father would tell us to leave her alone." When the potatoes began to brown I add more oil, shake red chili powder over all the potatoes, and add garlic powder until the smell of onions began to smell like garlic.

I held her hand in mine her skin is rough with age, her blue veins poke through her skin, and her knuckles buckle with arthritis. I try to gently rub her hand putting warmth back into her icy fingers. "He was eighteen years old when he left, he was my hero I remember thinking he could do anything, he was so tall and strong, and his face was covered with freckles just like mine. I was the youngest child we were only nine years a part. I don't remember the day he left for the war, but my oldest sister said I wouldn't stop crying, and I wouldn't let go of him."

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As the potatoes began to get crispy I started to squish them with the spatula and drained away as much oil as I could. My grandmother would use corn tortillas mixed with oil to roll the potatoes in.

“The tortillas must have oil on them before you set them on iron pan otherwise they will break apart as soon as you try to roll them” Her shoulders rose and fell before she continued her story, “I think he was gone for about two years I think my dad would receive letter from him every six months. He would only read certain parts of the letter to us, but I was too little to remember what my father said. Then one day as I was outside playing and we saw this, I think it was black car drive up, and it had the U.S symbol on the side of the car door. I remember they had these type of suits on. I ran back inside before they reached the door. They said my brother died in France. I don’t remember anything else after that I just walked into my room and lied down. My mother she... she took it harder than anybody.”

The corn tortilla begins to puff up on the pan. I flip it over and quickly put the smashed potatoes on one side of the tortilla, sprinkle cheese and, roll the tortilla as tightly as I can and put it on the plate. *My fingers were clumsy compared to the rapid speed of my grandmother’s. Her enchiladas were perfect, but mine were uneven and the cheese kept falling out.* “We had to wait a long time before we could get my brother’s body back; six months went by and we received a letter from my brother and for some reason I thought he must be alive. He would come back to us. I was too young to realize how long it takes to get mail delivered from my brother. He must have written the letter just a couple of days before he died.”

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“Just keep practicing. Try to mash down the potatoes more before you start to roll.” As I stand next to my grandmother my mind begins to wonder how such a little lady could be so tough and yet so gentle. My grandmother is only five feet tall (but don’t let that fool you she can hold her own). “My mother was taught [to make enchiladas] by her grandmother and so on and so forth. Growing up we had limited ingredients. If we wanted to eat cheese or butter we had to milk the cows, scoop up the foam, and make cheese curds by using cheese cloths tide up tight.”

“It was I think a year after the war was over and we finally got my brother’s body back. He was in a coffin, but the lid was nailed shut. And it was our culture to see the dead to say our last goodbyes. But the military wouldn’t let us look at him, they wouldn’t permit us to open the coffin. Then it struck us: it wasn’t the right body inside, we weren’t putting my brother to rest. Everybody was upset my brother could be in some hole in France for all we knew. Then my father calmed everybody down by saying in Spanish: *At least we have a place to put the flowers, we can ask for nothing more.*”

So the tradition of family recipes continues to be taught; generation after generation the women in our family past, present, and future have their own piece of fabric to add to the quilt. Up close you can see the difference in each piece; but take a couple steps back and you can see the great picture of our family tree. That day my grandmother did more than just teach me how to cook enchiladas, she taught me how to make quilt enchiladas.