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Following the Recipe

“If your hands aren’t wet, you aren’t doing it right, *Mijita*.”

My grandmother continued repeating herself as she dredged her hands through the speckled blue casserole dish that once belonged to my father’s father’s mother. The pan was heavy with toasted white bread and cornbread drenched in stock from the hen she had roasted. As she ripped the wet toast and broke the cornbread into granules, I dug my fingers into the cold, wet flesh of the hen, searching for the little bones that had softened and cached themselves as the bird cooked. It felt strangely lucky that I had repaired her food processor. The celery and carrots, already chopped by the steady whirl of blades, were no longer my responsibility. Now I could stand next to her, our sloping shoulders brushing as I sometimes held up a piece of white meat to the kitchen light.

Thanksgiving would arrive in five days, and my grandmother was relishing the last week of pop music on her kitchen radio, whose sole programmed station would soon devote itself to Christmas music for one excruciating month. Her scarecrow on the patio, which I had fastened to the bench outside only a month ago, was to be hauled in as soon as I left. The trees in the yard of my grandparents’ garden home were freshly bare. It was officially Mimi’s least favorite time of the year. Not to say that my grandmother doesn’t enjoy the holiday season—she certainly does, as long as she can stay indoors. The cold is antithetical to her existence. She lives her life with the heater on, with all four burners operating on the stovetop, a new recipe in the oven, and an

episode of *Martha Stewart's Cooking School* or *The Pioneer Woman* on the living room television.

Also antithetical to her existence, I had decided, was the recipe we were making. My great-grandmother's dressing recipe, passed down anxiously on an index card marked by a typewriter, is central to Thanksgiving with my father's-father's side of the family. It is also deeply bland. The casserole of bread and tender hen is seasoned only with salt, pepper, and rubbed sage. Getting Mimi to add more sage to the recipe is like wrenching rawhide from a possessive dog, though she confesses that the dish would benefit from another heaping teaspoon. This is the only tasteless thing I have ever known her to make. This is the same woman who asks for Tabasco at every restaurant, who brings down a gargantuan jar of pickled jalapenos at most meals she hosts, who turned me on to chile pequins as a child by growing them by the garage and bringing them into restaurants in her purse. This is the woman who can't bear to add a thimble more of sage into the casserole pan.

"Aye, honey," she said. "We should just let it sit."

This is one of the reasons that, now that I am older, Mimi and I struggle to cook together. The joy she finds in reading and printing a recipe is unintelligible to me. Mimi likes order in the kitchen: onions cut to a particular shape and size, rules followed, suggested brand of flour bought. She seasons meals with hemispheres of spices that fall from upturned teaspoons and tablespoons, or else with a flick of her wrist straight from the bottle. I season from the palm of my hand, tasting until everything is just right. When Mimi handed me a spoon to taste the cold, wet dressing, I swallowed my disappointment. It was vaguely salty, more from the inclusion of the hen stock than any later seasoning. A tickle at the back of my throat told me that the required dash of black pepper was in there somewhere. The piney brightness of sage eluded me. The

dressing was still no more than the sum of its parts, broken bread and fatty hen swimming in a pool of cooking liquid. We pulled aluminum foil over the pan and put it in the fridge.

The first thing Mimi taught me to cook was chorizo and eggs. I had half-heartedly stirred boxed brownie batter in my grandparents' kitchen for years, but now I was tall enough to see into the old cast iron skillet that she cooked breakfast in. I cut the red sausages out of their plastic casings and watched them sizzle and darken in the pan, breaking them apart with a flat wooden spoon. When the chorizo was just cooked, I whisked and salted the eggs with a fork and poured them over the sausage. As I watched the eggs cook, Mimi turned on the iron griddle to heat tortillas sent from her brother and sister in San Antonio. The chile oil rendered from the chorizo colored the eggs a rich, roasted orange. The curds of egg were peppered with flecks of red seasonings, paprika and chili powder and cumin. I couldn't stop watching the way that they changed under my thick bamboo spatula. Finally, Mimi leaned over me and cut the burner off.

“They're ready, *mija*.”

On the evening before Thanksgiving, Mimi arrived at my parents' house with my grandfather and bachelor uncle in tow. I made room for her dressing on the stovetop and put her gravy in the microwave. The counters were so full that the kitchen itself seemed a cornucopia. Bowls of compound butter, baskets of bread, pans of macaroni and cheese, a Dutch oven full of garlic mashed potatoes, a platter of lemony broccoli, a crock of green beans, chilled cheesecakes on pecan shortbread crusts, hot tarte tatin, room-temperature pound cake. Before we ate, my grandmother pulled the foil from the blue speckled dish and held her hand millimeters away from the surface of the dressing. It was still hot.

I had my serving of dressing on one of the sectioned foam trays that my mother had bought for the occasion. My first bite—the perfect balance of bread and hen—was rich with long

marinated flavor. Salt bursted from the hen; black pepper sparked against my soft palate. On the back of my tongue, the orange-y spice of the sage settled and hummed there for the remainder of the meal. The recipe, to my chagrin, had triumphed.