

IN MY FATHER'S KITCHEN

My father is gone. The man who gave me life lost his own to cancer.

Three years ago, we were told by his doctors that he had stage four lung cancer. Attacked by malignant cells, his blood, bones and brain had deteriorated into an irreversible state. He needed help to do the things we all take for granted -- breathe, walk, talk and eat. In the next thirty-six months, my father was a prisoner of his own emaciated body; his spirit slowly being raked over coals of agony. It was a terrible, terrible thing to witness.

After his chemotherapy treatments, the burning pain that emanated from his bones turned his eyes glassy and his mind wandered, escaping to seek solace in some distant happy memory. When he was lucid, he would softly whisper to me where he went during these moments. Sometimes, he would be back in Tigbauan, his hometown in Iloilo, flying a kite while eating *pinasugbo*, thinly sliced fried banana coated with syrupy brown sugar, sprinkled with toasted sesame seeds and encased in a piece of white paper cone. His imagination also flew him back to Davao where he used to have fresh *durian* hacked open at the Bankerohan market. But often, he would imagine himself cooking in his kitchen where he was king once.

In his kingdom of pots and pans, my father would use fire and water to command the flavors to bend to his will; he used his wisdom of herbs and spices to make fish and fowl follow his bidding; and he ruled over each ingredient because he respected it. He always used only what was needed.

When I turned thirteen, he taught me how to make *Laswa*, a humble vegetable broth that my grandparents taught him to cook when he was my age.

Ang Laswa Ni Papa

Ingredients

- 1/2 cup fresh shrimps (*hipon*), shelled and deveined
- 200 grams squash (*kalabasa*), cut into 2-inch squares
- 200 grams string beans (*sitaw*), cut into 2.5-inch lengths
- 200 grams okra, cut into 1-inch lengths
- 1 piece eggplant (*talong*), cut into 1/2 inch thickness
- 2 cups jute (*saluyot*) leaves
- 1 piece onion (*sibuyas*), quartered
- 3 pieces tomatoes (*kamatis*), quartered
- 4 cups water
- salt to taste

He first prepared the stock. Plucking the shrimp heads off, he boiled these in water with the onions because its pungent sweetness eliminated the fishy stench of the seafood. Once the shrimp heads turned pink, he dredged them out and pounded them using a mortar and pestle. When I winced at the sight of the dark shrimp juice that he returned to the broth, my father explained that the shrimp head contains the digestive gut of the shrimp that tells you its history, where the shrimp came from. Saltwater shrimp are sweeter than freshwater shrimps. The best ones to use are those caught at the mouth of a river, where

the freshwater ingested by the shrimps wash away the salt of the sea, giving your broth a clean, hearty flavor.

He then peeled and chopped the vegetables and put them in the boiling water. The starchy sweetness of the *kalabasa* counters the grassy, slimy flavor of the *saluyot*. Contrasting textures come from the slimy okra and the crunchy *sitaw*. The meaty, tender flesh of the eggplant adds color and volume to the broth. For tartness, he would add the tomatoes last, together with the shrimps to further enhance the flavor of the broth.

As we shared the *Laswa* at dinner, he pointed out that every piece of vegetable on my bowl was put there for a purpose. He said the same was true with all the choices we make in our lives.

That was how it was for him, every dish had to have a meaning. Dinner time was always time for him to impart some quote that provided insight to how you made use of all the ingredients of your life.

At that very moment, I was clueless as to why he shared this nugget of wisdom. I eventually realized that it was his way of warning my thirteen year old self about boys. I was the only daughter, you see. I was what my *titos* and *titas* would joke as “*pambayad-utang*,” The daughter born to pay for the sins of the father.

I don't know what it is about him but apparently, my father attracted the opposite sex like moonlight to anchovy. Before I turned six, I never witnessed my parents fight over the women who became enamoured with my father. Until that one day when he was showing me how he cooked my favorite, *Daing na Bangus*.

Daing na Bangus

Ingredients

- 1 piece milkfish (*bangus*), cleaned, descaled and deboned
- ¼ cup cane vinegar
- 1 teaspoon black pepper, ground
- ½ head garlic, crushed
- ½ teaspoon sea salt
- ¼ cup cooking oil

This was my very first memory of my father in the kitchen. Him standing in front of the stove, frying the *Daing na Bangus*. Smoke and the sound of sizzling oil filled the kitchen. Bubbles of hot oil danced around the fish turning its milky flesh golden brown. When it was ready, my father smiled to himself, pleased that the fish was cooked to perfection. He let me taste *bangus* belly's buttery fat on top of succulent meat and crispy skin dipped in soy sauce and calamansi. Paired with a mouthful of steaming rice, it was simple and comforting. So unlike the next complicated moment that would disrupt our lives.

We were preparing to cook some more *Daing na Bangus* when my mother came charging in, her face filled with rage. She had found out about my father's other woman, a secretary who had indiscreetly revealed her affair with my father

to the other people in the office. I could barely understand the long argument peppered with expletives. My father had forgotten about the fish frying in the pan until it burst into flames. Somehow, the fire had spread and I was stuck in a corner surrounded by fire. My father jumped over the flames, grabbed me and flung me to the safety of my mother's arms. The kitchen fire was eventually put out but the raging fire of contempt and discontent between my parents never ceased.

When they separated, my charmed existence came to an end. My father moved to Davao to find a new job and my mother joined a religious cult to renew her faith in humanity. My brother and I had to live with our grandparents.

Their house had a backyard full of fruit trees. My brother and I climbed like monkeys on *aratiles* trees, caught *salagubang* nestled in *sampaloc* trees and picked the sweet purple fruit of the star apple for our *merienda*. It was a better life than most children had, except that we didn't have our parents with us. It seemed to my seven year-old self that they had forgotten about their children. My grandmother would only mutter excuses for her son but never really spoke to us about it. She just made sure that we were taken cared of, that we had our school uniforms ready and that we always had a decent meal. During my birthdays, my grandmother would cook fried chicken and the Birthday Spaghetti.

Birthday Spaghetti

Ingredients

- 1 kilo spaghetti pasta
- 1 kilo ground beef
- 1 kilo hotdog, sliced into 1/2 inch thick diagonal pieces
- 1 cup cheddar cheese, grated
- 1/2 cup cooking oil
- 1 kilo tomato sauce
- 1/4 cup soy sauce
- 4 tablespoons brown sugar
- 4 pieces onions, finely chopped
- 8 cloves garlic, finely chopped
- 1/4 cup water
- salt and pepper to taste

My grandmother was an uncomplicated cook. She would simply sauté the beef, onions and garlic in oil. Then she would add the tomato sauce, water, soy sauce and brown sugar. Once the sauce simmered, the hotdog was placed in the pan to cook. The pasta, boiled with a dash of salt and a little oil, would be topped with the red sauce and cheese. My grandmother's birthday spaghetti, though simple to make, always makes her bust a sweat because she never cooked in small amounts. Having raised thirteen children (and a few more grandchildren), for her, every meal should always be good enough to feed a whole *barangay*.

By the time I turned eight, nobody remembered my birthday. My grandparents had gone stateside, living in San Diego with my aunt who married a Filipino in the US Army. I took it upon myself to celebrate.

Under the stairs, I feasted on make-believe spaghetti and fried chicken, filling myself with nothing but air, bite after bite of my imaginary birthday meal which I capped by making a wish before I blew the imaginary candles on my imaginary cake. I wished one of our parents would come and get us.

Later that year, my father came back. He seemed different to me, older and worn out. He also didn't look me in the eye after I embraced him. He wouldn't talk about it at that moment but I found out that he had a difficult life while he was away, pursuing the one big surprise he had for us- his new wife. I was confused. But it didn't matter, my birthday wish had come true.

It was a difficult reunion in our new home, a two-bedroom apartment in Quezon City. My father had missed out on our growing up years and suddenly he had to be a parent again. This time, to two kids on the cusp of their rebel years, adjusting to a life with a new mother-figure and a father who was a stranger to them.

Food was my father's expression of love and somehow he planned to win us back by making magic again in his small kitchen. He cooked all the time for us. Though he never said it out loud, I knew that it was his atonement for abandoning us. Most Sundays, he made *Pancit Molo*, his version of chicken soup for the soul.

Pancit Molo

Ingredients

- 1 whole chicken
- 4 cups water
- ½ kilo ground pork
- ¼ kilo shrimp, minced
- 2 pieces onion, minced
- 1 head garlic, minced
- ½ cup spring onions, chopped
- 50 pieces wonton wrapper
- 2 pieces eggs, beaten
- 2 tablespoons achuete (annatto) oil
- Salt and pepper to taste

He boiled the chicken in rolling, hot water. Then, my father would turn the fire down, allowing the simmering heat to cook the fowl until it was tender and its flavor turned simple water into warm chicken broth. The chicken would then be drained and shredded. He would then mix in the juice from the shrimp heads along with the achuete oil. Painstaking effort was put into creating bite-sized balls of *Molo* wrapper filled with lightly seasoned ground pork, minced shrimps and spices. Each ball was sealed with egg wash and left to dry on the kitchen table. The extra molo wrappers were hand-cut into strips and added along with the *Molo* into the broth. This treat was always served piping hot and topped with spring onions and crunchy garlic bits.

My father recalled that this soup was often a salve during bad times in his younger years. Sick children and elderly relatives were often served *Pancit Molo*, its nutritious broth helped nurse them back to good health. Crying spells and farewell dramas stopped during *despedidas* when the soup was brought out of

the kitchen. Its aroma prompted guests to talk of happier times and goodbyes were deemed less painful.

So it was Pancit Molo on our table when my father announced he had to leave us again to work in the Middle East.

My brother and I would listen to the voice tapes he sent us where he talked about how the days were extremely hot and the nights exceptionally cold in the desert. We would make our own voice recording to send to him. I never really knew what to say then and I don't remember now anything that I told him except to bring home *pasalubong*.

A year later, he came home and brought with him a Sony Betamax player. My brother and I rented tapes from the neighborhood video store. Our favorite was a collection of music videos that featured Michael Jackson's "Thriller" which we watched over and over again to copy the King of Pop's moves. But when my father started cooking, I stopped dancing to help him in the kitchen. Not because I was obliged to but because I was fascinated with his culinary rituals.

First, he would make an inventory of all the cooking implements he needed. Pots and utensils, check. Knives and chopping board, check. Bowls and plates, check.

Then, he would turn the tap to clean the main ingredient – beef, pork, chicken or seafood. He then carefully cut these into the appropriate size, his fingers guiding the knife as it quietly sliced through flesh and cartilage. Thumb-sized cubes of pork were for *Menudo*, it was a palm’s width of beef for *Pochero*.

The vegetables came next. Tomatoes were separated- the red, plump ones to be used for cooking; the green, firm ones for salads. Eggplants and leafy greens were checked for squirming worms. These would be washed and peeled then cut into even sizes to make the cooking time for each piece uniform. He would painstakingly chop and mince the fresh spices. The thumpa-thump-thump cadence of the knife was like the percussion of a mad jazz musician.

The stove was then turned on, heating the oil in the pan. If it was the right temperature, it was time to start cooking. Onion, garlic and tomatoes sizzled as he sauteed them. Flavorful smoke accompanied the crackle from the pan when he added the meat. The sound of cooking meat subsided when it was browned. The aroma that wafted in the kitchen would thicken as he added herbs and spices, mixing the ingredients into a flavorful fusion. He would taste a spoonful before letting the fire die down. He worked food like magic. Every slice intentional, every stir a necessity. His body seemed to have an internal clock that told him when to put in the ingredients or when to turn down the fire. It seemed to me too that hot oil or boiling water did not hurt him. In his kitchen, my father was invincible.

It was during this time that he introduced us to soup that stood for happy days, *Kansi*, a beef broth made sour with *batuan*, a pebble-sized fruit that flourishes in the lowlands of Panay Island but seldom found in the wet markets of Manila.

Kansi	
Ingredients	
• ½ kilo	beef brisket
• ½ kilo	beef bone with marrow
• ½ kilo	young <i>langka</i> , sliced
• 8 cups	water
• 1 piece	onion, quartered
• 1 stalk	<i>tanglad</i> (<i>lemongrass</i>)
• ¼ kilo	<i>batuan</i> (Binucao)
• 2 pieces	<i>siling haba</i> (finger chili)

He would boil the beef first. As we waited for it to become fork-tender, my father and I would have bonding moments. Not really talking. Just being together. Watching TV. Sometimes, he would make model planes with my brother. Other times, he would read Time Magazine while I giggled at the jokes in the “Laughter is the Best Medicine” page of Reader’s Digest. When it was time, he would add the *langka* slices and *tanglad*. And when the *langka* became tender, my father would put in the *batuan* and the finger chili.

He stopped cooking *Kansi* when my mother came back into our lives. My brother and I commuted between our parents’ houses during weekends. I resented this arrangement. My father knew it and he tried to make up for it.

On weekends when we didn't need to go visit our mother, he would take us to the *estero*, a row of grimy riverside restaurants in Chinatown. It fascinated me. It was there that I had my first taste of exotic food- oyster cake, sea cucumber and frog's legs. While I enjoyed the meals, I was upset that our family was so unlike the ones I read in the books and saw on TV. I was one of the few kids at school who had to explain why I had two mothers and one father. So there I was, a teenager who enjoyed weird food and an even weirder family life. At thirteen, I became a rebel. I learned how to drink and get drunk on *lambanog*. I was caught cutting classes several times. And thanks to a cold-hearted teacher, I failed physics on my senior year. It didn't seem like I would, but I got through high school.

Inspired by our trips to Chinatown, my father made Chili Crabs in Oyster Sauce to celebrate my graduation.

Chili Crabs

Ingredients:

- 1 kilo alimango (mud crabs)
- ¼ cup oyster sauce
- ¾ cup water
- 1 tablespoon soy sauce (Japanese)
- 1 tablespoon honey
- 1 tablespoon sesame oil
- 2 cloves garlic, sliced
- 3 tablespoons ginger, julienned
- 1 tablepsoon salt
- ½ cup leeks

This dish involved sauteing heaps of garlic, onion, ginger, leeks, chilies, soy sauce, honey, cooking wine, oyster sauce and fresh crabs. The freshness of the crab was key. It had to be alive until the last minute. The crustaceans would usually be bound in straw ropes because their claws could turn feisty when they fought for their lives. One had to hold a crab from the backside to avoid being snipped by its strong claws. While still bound, the hard crab carapace is removed, then the softer apron and gills are removed from its underbelly. By this time it would be safe to break off the claws and halve what remains of the body that stores its juicy flesh. When a crab turned loose, it was mayhem everywhere. But no crab ever escaped my father's kitchen alive. They all got served, swimming in piquant dark amber sauce.

To this day, Chili Crabs are for me a pat on the back, a reward for doing something good with my life. When he started to become sick, I cooked every weekend for him. It was my way of returning the favor and give my father a simple pat on the back. He was not a perfect father but with all challenges he faced and the choices he made, I knew he always tried to be the best father he could be.

When it was time to take my college entrance exams at my father's alma mater, a throng of excited parents sent off their kids to the hallowed halls of the university. My father just gave me my allowance and directions. I felt bad that he didn't seem to care. It turned out, I did not need to be exonerated from any

imagined deprecation. There wasn't any on his part. When I broke the news of my acceptance, my father prepared grown up food for me— Sashimi and Filet Mignon, his version of surf and turf.

My father would buy the fish from his *suki* at the wet market, then clean and chill it before slicing just right before the meal. He would then season the meat with salt and pepper, letting it sit as he mixed the butter, garlic, parsley and *calamansi* juice. He would then sear the steak on a cast iron skillet and cook them in the oven for a few minutes, serving it topped with herbed butter.

It's easy to be fooled by the simplicity of raw seafood and grilled meat. The secret, aside from the freshness of the ingredients, is in the cut of the fish and the beef as well as the temperature in which you prepare the food. If you make a poor choice, you should expect less than stellar results.

On his prodding, I first majored in Food Technology and dealt with a lot of maths. It was Calculus that made me change my course, figuratively and literally. I took to the arts and forgot about food. This, I think was the first heartache I ever gave my father. He knew I had his instincts in the kitchen and he felt that by not pursuing a career that involved food, I was making a mistake.

His next heartache came when, fresh out of college, I decided to live with my boyfriend. I knew then that I had met 'the one' and decided that we should try

to see if things will work out between us if we lived under one roof. We invited my boyfriend's parents to meet mine for dinner. My father wanted to give a good impression and orchestrated one dish that his future in-laws would applaud, *Fetuccini Alla Carbonara*.

Fetuccini alla Carbonara

Ingredients

- 350 grams *fettuccine*
- 2/3 cup *panchetta*, cubed
- 4 pieces egg yolks
- ½ cup *Parmigiano Reggiano*, grated
- ¼ cup *tuyo* fillet, crushed into small pieces
- Extra virgin olive oil
- Salt and pepper, to taste

Like a musical conductor surveying his musicians, he inspected the table filled with the ingredients. His cooking began with a slow tempo, an *adagio*, as he seasoned a large pan of water with coarse sea salt. When the water was brought to a boil and the flat pasta carefully put in, the rhythm of his hands were now *andante*- steady, sure and constant. He diced *panchetta* and fried it in its own fat. Garlic was pressed, its essence infused into the olive oil that was added onto the pan. The *concerto* of sounds from the kitchen rose to an *allegretto* as he separated the egg yolks from the whites then whisked in the grated *parmigiano* and shredded filleted *tuyo*, which he used to season in lieu of salt. Exactly eleven minutes later, the movement raptured into *vivacissimo*. The pasta which was now *al dente*, was drained and thrown into the pan of sizzling *panchetta*. As soon as all of it was enveloped in warm garlic-infused olive oil, the noodles were tipped

onto a bowl and the *parmigiano*-flavored egg yolks added with a dash of freshly ground pepper. The heat from the pasta turned the eggs into cream, giving rise to a dish that was a symphony of gastronomic delight.

Everyone enjoyed dinner except for my father. It turned out he felt slighted that my boyfriend's father, who was almost deaf, turned his face away during their conversations. Soon after the guests were gone, he quietly complained to my stepmother that after laboring over dinner, he was ignored and disrespected. He refused to give his blessings. Though I was of legal age and could do with my life whatever I desired to, I still wanted my father to accept my decision. With the help of my stepmother I explained the hearing disability of my soon-to-be father-in-law. He was placated. Still, when I finally left home, my father's heart was broken. It took years before he warmed up to my boyfriend who eventually became my husband. During family dinners my father would be civil, my husband polite. My stepmother and I would make fun of both men whenever we found them in the living room, hiding behind newspapers to avoid the task of talking to each other.

Their moment of acceptance came at low point in my life. Work had taken its toll and I was hospitalized for almost two weeks. My husband took care of everything and nursed me back to good health. That Christmas, my father gave us an odd gift, a *wok*. He said I should use it to cook for my husband who only deserves the best food. I have used that *wok* a thousand times not just to make

meals for my husband but for friends and family as well. From the lowly *Daing na Bangus* to the my grandmother's Birthday Spaghetti to my father's *Fetuccini Alla Carbonara*, the *wok* has been my constant kitchen companion. Today, it hangs in my kitchen, a reminder of the passion I share with my father.

Last Christmas, despite the pain, he made *Arroz Valenciana* for our *Noche Buena* and made extra to give as gifts to all the people who mattered to him.

Arroz Valenciana

Ingredients

- 1 kilo glutinous rice
- ¼ kilo chicken,
- ¼ kilo pork loin, cubed
- ¼ kilo chicken liver and heart, cubed
- ½ cup *chorizo de bilbao*, cubed
- 4 pieces eggs, hard-boiled and sliced
- ½ cup raisins
- 1 piece red bell pepper
- 1 piece green bell pepper
- 3 cloves garlic, minced
- 1 piece onion, chopped
- 6 cups water
- 3 tablespoons turmeric
- ½ cup spring onions, chopped
- salt and pepper to taste

He boiled the pork and chicken to make the stock. Then he cubed the chicken and pork before sauteing it with the garlic, onion, chicken liver and heart and *chorizo de bilbao*. To this he added the glutinous rice, broth, turmeric and raisins. Once it started boiling, he seasoned it with salt and pepper, covering the

casserole to let the rice cook. He would add the bell pepper for color and serve the Arroz Valenciana with eggs and spring onions on top.

Last Christmas was his last Christmas.

This year, when the carols come and the church bells ring, our *Noche Buena* table will be one dish short. I can always make the dish but it will never be my father's *Arroz Valenciana*.

In his last months, the chemotherapy treatment muddled his palate. Every morsel he put in his mouth tasted metallic; any flavor is magnified four times—salty, sour, bitter, sweet. A pinch of sugar becomes a bottle of caramel in his mouth, a grain of salt like dried sea on his tongue. When served with flavorless porridge, he sulked like a child. The illness also allowed him to eat only soft food, about two spoonfuls every meal. His lungs cannot bring enough oxygen where his body needs it. Without oxygen, even the jaw muscles that enable him to chew could not function. Smelling, chewing and swallowing his food were difficult. Eating, once his great passion, became an exercise in madness, a painful act of torture that slowly broke his spirit.

Three days before he passed, my father confessed to me that he wished to die. His request was something I expected having inundated myself with books, online articles, movies, and videos about people living with cancer. I

thought I was ready to face the difficulties my father's disease would bring but all the knowledge and vicarious experiences did not prepare me for that moment. Hearing my father's wish to end his life couldn't stop my heart from breaking into pieces.

In that conversation with my father, time stopped for a while and we were alone, and I was quietly drowning with him, in his sea of pain. He trusted that I would understand. His end was near and he'd rather that death came sooner than later. Not knowing what to say or do, I just stared at space. Looking but not seeing at the dying man in front of me. He held my hand. It was then that I knew. My father was saying goodbye.

Like all of the dishes I learned from him, he has never given me a recipe for his version of his *Arroz Valenciana*. He never made a list of ingredients and never wrote down any cooking process. I learned how to cook from watching him be the 'King of the Kitchen.' That was his way of educating me in the art of cooking and in life. That he wanted me to define my own existence is my father's greatest gift to me.

In my father's kitchen, there are many memories. Even if he is gone, I will continue to taste and smell and hear these memories. They will live on each time I cook in my own kitchen.