

Single Mama Pesto

Jose Victor Z. Torres

(from the poem “Single Mama Pesto”
and the essay “Sapay Koma”
by Jhoanna Lynn Cruz)

Character:

Racquel - 40 years old. A single mom with two children, Dani (12 years old) and Richie (8 years old)

(The lights open onstage. There is a small kitchen table at center stage. There is a small pile of fresh and dried basil leaves on the table, a bottle of olive oil, a canister of Parmesan cheese, a small jar of pine nuts, some bulbs of garlic, and salt and pepper grinders. There is a closed cookbook on a wooden bookstand. An electric blender is standing empty on one side of the table. Beside it is a ceramic mixing bowl.)

(Racquel enters carrying a pasta maker pot full of drained spaghetti noodles. She pours the noodles into the ceramic bowl. She puts the pot aside, tests some of the noodles for firmness then faces the audience.)

Racquel: Pesto. I've been planning a small party with this as the main course for several months now. It's my first time to make it. I'm going to mix it from scratch following a cookbook. (pause) Well, at least part of what the cookbook says. I already have an inkling on what to do. (pause) I think. (looks at the ingredients) Basil leaves. Garlic. Olive oil. Parmesan cheese. Pine nuts. (pause) Very expensive pine nuts. I could've substituted cashew nuts. Even peanuts. But the taste would be different. (pause) No substitutes. That's my rule. Especially for a first time.

I was going to surprise the kids with this dish. It's their first time to try pesto. They're at school now. But I guess Dani, my twelve-year old daughter, already suspected what I was going to make. I mentioned it to her before. She saw the picture in the cookbook and even checked it out on the Internet. To this day she can't understand how something—to use her words—"icky green" could taste good. She is sharp that child of mine. We usually do the groceries together and she saw me picking out the ingredients from the shelves. She popped the question when we went to the market to get basil leaves. "You're going to make that pesto, aren't you?" she asked. (pause) Who am I to lie to an observant kid?

"So, when are you going to make it?" she asked.

"Next week," I said, "To celebrate our third year in our new home."

"Did you invite friends?" she asked. I said yes.

"Do you think they will still be your friends after they taste your pesto?" she said. (pause and smiles)

The sarcasm she gets from her mother. And yes, she can be infuriating. Just like her mother. Then she asked, "What did Richie say?"

Richie. Ricardo, after his father. The spitting image. And at eight, a handful. And the other third of any family decisions we make. But before he could say anything, I just told the two—quite forcefully, in fact—that it will be the best pasta they will ever taste. Icky green and all. They have to agree because they know their mom is a great cook. (pause) But they just rolled their eyes. Dani then turned to her brother and shrugged. "We can always have *lechon manok* from the corner if it fails, right?" (pause) Smart kid.

(Racquel opens the bottle of olive oil and pours a little on the pasta then mixes it in.)

Their father knew how to cook. (pause) He wasn't better than me. I taught him to cook from scratch. (laughs) That is, if you can call cooking things out of a can cooking from scratch. (turns to the audience) This is a secret that I kept from the kids. I taught him to cook. Well, it was more of a challenge. I challenged him to cook. When he succeeded, I knew, that in a crazy sense of things we would end up together. (pause) I gave him everything. Until I forgot what was mine.

(Racquel exits. The lights change. Racquel enters again as a young live-in partner, twelve years earlier. She is carrying a chopping board. She is talking to her partner.)

Glad you're home. (pause) I was just going to make dinner. (pause) Corned beef. You can peel the potatoes, if you like. Yes, corned beef with potatoes. (pause) Yes. It's edible. (pause) Where did you get the idea that I can't cook? That was the assumption when we started living together a month ago, right? That one of us can at least cook. Yes, beyond canned stuff, I can. (pause) I *can*. Can the canned. (pause, then smiles sarcastically) Yes, funny. Just peel the potatoes. Thank you. (pause) Don't complain. (pause) Yes, you are. (pause) Oh, you can do better? The last time I heard, you could only boil and grill. (pause) Ok! I dare you. (takes the cookbook from the stand and slams it down on the table.) If you can cook every dish in this book, I will consider the question you asked me before. (pause) Yes, the one you asked before we first agreed on this living-in arrangement. (pause) Ok. At least five dishes. Prove it and maybe... just maybe, I will say "yes".

(The lights change. Racquel goes to the table and places the chopping board on it.)

And he did. And I said yes. Oh, getting married wasn't an impulsive thing. I *was* already thinking about it. And after that, I never had to cook a single dish for the next seven years that we were together... (pause) And there were so many dishes that he cooked. (pause) So many times we ate together in those seven years. There were so many cookbooks in that small apartment of ours that we had to buy one of those tiny shelves you see in the hardware stores in the mall to place them in. Then... when everything was over, he didn't want them. Or he probably didn't need them anymore. I packed them in boxes and took them with me when I moved away with the kids. (pause) There were so many dishes... but he never cooked this one.

(Racquel looks at the ingredients for the pesto sauce. She then turns to the cookbook, opens it, glances at the page then slowly closes the book. She takes a deep breath.)

(To herself) I know how to do this. (pause) I... know... how... to... do... this. (pause and more firmly) I know how to do this.

(Racquel looks at the pile of basil leaves then opens the blender.)

(To herself) Memory. Don't fail me now. (to the audience) Basil leaves. (pause) I have to confess something. The first batch I bought were dried ones. (laughs) Hey, it's my first time, remember? It turned out I need fresh leaves. (pause) Always knew it had to be fresh. (laughs) Yes, I did. (pause) Did you know there are several kinds of basil plants here? The other local ones have smaller stems but small leaves. The ones from Baguio—like these—(shows the leaves) have thick stems and you have to chop them off. Or else the pesto will be bitter. But the leaves are nice and big. It is best I use these ones.

(Racquel takes several pieces of paper towels and begins to pat the leaves dry.)

I don't know how many basil leaves should be used. (pause) I knew it always had to be fresh. It's because of the bittersweet taste... It's because of the smell. (pause) Have you taken a fresh basil leaf and crushed it between your fingers? (takes a leaf, crushes it, inhales and sighs) Sweet. Earthy, leafy smell. The scent of something good. Like the scent of a new life.

(The lights change. Racquel moves downstage as she folds the paper towels into a small diaper pouch. She is talking to her mother.)

We named her Dani, Mama. Danica. She's a lovely girl, your *apo*. *Singkit* when she smiles. (laughs) Well, I know you can't tell when a baby is smiling sometimes. Especially when it's just a month old. (pause) Me? I'm fine. I'm doing well. (pause) I'm living with him now. At his parents' house. (shrugs) He brought me home once the baby was born. (pause) I know. They say that it's always difficult to live with the in-laws. But we don't have much. Not yet. And I know this is just a step to something better. (pause) Yes, I believe that. I had always believed that. And I always believed in this marriage. Even though it came at a most unexpected time for you. Even for my in-laws. (pause) Everything seems to be always unexpected. (pause) But it will work. I am going to make it work. We'll make it work. Just you wait and see.

(The light changes. Racquel goes back to the table and continues drying the basil leaves and placing them in the blender.)

Bittersweet. That's the taste of basil leaves. Bittersweet. Like marriages. Like life. Especially when reality bites. Especially when reality checks in. (pause, she then stares at the remaining pile of leaves.) The recipe said that for every four cups of leaves there should be one cup of oil. (pause) I forgot how many leaves I have here. Couldn't find the measuring cups. (pause) It could be too much. Or too little.

(Racquel pauses and looks at the pile of leaves, then takes the recipe book and opens it. She looks at the recipe again then closes the book.)

Sometimes it doesn't take an instruction manual to make things work. Or to make things what you want them to be. Sometimes what is shown or said in the manual isn't exactly the same result. Like life. Like relationships that matter. Like marriage. Like the relationships that come with marriages....

(The lights change. Racquel goes downstage. She is talking to her husband.)

It's been two years now. All I want you to do is to stand up for this. *This*. Our marriage. Our family. Stand up for what you have right now. I'm tired of being quiet and silent about what is happening around us. (pause) Don't give me that explanation of what your mother... (pause) *Our* mother... your... mother said. I'm not blind. I can feel and see how much I am disliked by your family. In this house. (pause) Ok, not dislike... if you don't want me to use that word. How much I don't conform... does that sound better? (pause) Now I make it sound like I'm a social deviant. (pause) Why do I have to be treated this way? What must we do to be accepted? (pause) If you can't do it for me... do it for Dani. For our child. (pause) Do it for our children. (pause) Children. (pause) I'm pregnant. (pause) And I hoped that everything would be better before this one would be born. Everything would be fine by then... wouldn't it?

(The lights change. Racquel goes back to the cooking table and finishes placing all the basil leaves in the blender.)

Richie always had a good appetite. It never was a problem to feed him. (pause, she then checks the leaves in the blender again) I guess this would be enough. I had to mix some of the young leaves with the mature ones. (pause) Their father, I must admit, was younger than me. But people

change as things come along. (pause) I did. (pause) He didn't. (pause) It was probably the reason for what happened next. I became a mother taking care of three children—two young ones... and an adult one. And... it was too much. (she looks into the blender and nods) Garlic.

(Racquel takes a head of garlic and pounds it with the blade of a cleaver. The bulb slightly splits. She pounds it again, stronger this time. Nothing happens. Racquel curses under her breath, inhales, then slams the cleaver a bit too hard. The bulb breaks into several cloves. Racquel gets six cloves then crushes them with the side of the cleaver blade. Each blow becomes stronger and stronger until she slams down the cleaver, removes the skin from each clove, and then drops them into the blender. Her eyes have noticeably become red and teary. She sniffs then wipes her nose with the back of her hand.)

Too little. Too much. (pause) I always liked garlic. It's the smell that gets to me. (motions to her eyes and nose) You see? (pause, she then sniffs again) I always give the lousiest excuse when I cry. (pause) Cheese. And the other ingredients to cut the bitterness. (pause) Parmesan cheese.

(Racquel takes the canister of Parmesan cheese and begins to sprinkle cheese inside the blender, then checks the mixture.)

Too little.

(Racquel is about to pour a little more cheese when the lid falls off and a large amount of Parmesan cheese falls into the blender. She shrieks and covers her face.)

Nooooo!

(Racquel walks downstage. The lights change. She is talking to her husband)

Too much! Too much! Too much of this! Too much of that! (pause) It was just too much... Now you come home like this! Spending more time with your friends. (pause) It was a weekend? (pause) It was happy hour? Why? What are you happy about? No one is happy in this house. (pause) We... us. We were supposed to be happy. We. Us. (pause) Weren't we? WEREN'T WE? (pause) This was a marriage we agreed on. Everything just has to mix together... to be together to make it right. To make it work. To make it better. Even if it was too much. Or too little. Or even just right. (pause) What went wrong? It wasn't supposed to end up that bad. I mean... when ingredients are mixed badly... it can always be remedied.

Can't it? That should happen. Shouldn't it?

(Pause. The lights change back. Racquel takes a spoon and fishes out the canister's lid and most of the cheese from the blender.)

There are always remedies. That's one thing about cooking. Before something goes really wrong, you try to remedy it. But when it really goes wrong... (pause) You just have to look for solutions. Sometimes the most difficult decisions to make are the simplest solutions. Not that it was a simple way of escaping. But ... it was the only thing that could be done.

(Racquel finishes spooning out the excess cheese. She gets the bottle of olive oil. She measures out some olive oil in a measuring cup then pours it in the blender.)

No. I don't remember the leaves swimming like that. (pause) Oil soothes they say. Quiets. Calms. In a sense, it's the calm after all the tumult one can think of. It makes you think clearly. It cuts the bitterness. Like in pesto.

(The lights change. Racquel moves downstage and faces her husband.)

Would you take care of them by yourself? No. Not their grandparents. You. Yourself. As a father. Can you? (pause) Can you? (pause) If you cannot handle the job of being a husband, can you handle the work of being a father? (pause) I can do this. Alone. Without you. And the kids will like it. Because I have to show them that I can manage to live my life without you anymore. (pause) But I won't take them away from you. No. I won't. I cannot change the fact that you are their father. (pause) But everything will be under my terms. My conditions. My instructions. Because I know that I can raise them even without you. This is my life now. (pause) No. You will still be their father. No matter what. (pause) It is unfortunate. That no matter what we try to make together, one ingredient seems to have failed. (pause) Love does expire. It can lose its flavor. And spiciness. And sweetness. And what remains is just ... a tasteless ingredient.

(The lights change. Racquel goes to the blender and stirs the olive oil and cheese a bit, then takes the bottle of pine nuts.)

Pine nuts. The recipe said half a cup of pine nuts. Pretty expensive for just a small bottle... but I guess it's worth it. Especially for things that you do for the first time. (holds up the bottle) This looks too little for half a cup. But I guess it will do. (pause) It's funny. I had to look up what pine nuts were when I decided to make pesto. They actually came from pine cones.

Those little things where the trees came from. They're seeds... And from these seeds come the tree. A new tree. (pause) A new life.

(The lights change. Racquel goes downstage. She is talking to her mother.)

I decided to leave him, Mama. I'm sorry. (pause) I'm sorry that it turned out this way. (pause) You weren't a bad mother. And I'm sure as hell wasn't a bad daughter. It was no one's fault. It's just that... things simply didn't work out. (pause) I'm moving to a new place. To a new life with the children. I know you may not understand this, but... It was the only solution I knew if I were to get my life back. And the life I wanted for the children. (pause) What did Dom say? (pause) Nothing. I guess he also saw that it was hopeless. (pause) The children? They would understand soon. Richie is still too young. But Dani... (shrugs) I guess there's some explaining to do.

(The lights change. Racquel goes to another part of the stage. She is talking to Dani.)

Dani... do you know what a leap of faith is? (pause) It is something that you do when you see things are hopeless and when you discover that some time, some place, you can start all over again. Once you know that the time or place exists, you take that step... a leap... if you like to start something new. (pause) The thing is... you don't know what is beyond that place. What lies ahead. (pause) That is where faith comes in. Faith in what? (pause) In God? Or to whoever is watching over us. (pause) I have decided to take a leap of faith. With both of you. Richie and you. (pause) Well, it's more of a where. (pause) Do I know the place? I've been there. It's a nice place. And I'm sure you and Richie would like it. (pause) No, I don't know anyone there. (pause) That's where the leap of faith comes in. (pause) There is one person. A friend. And this friend has friends. And from these friends we can have more friends. (pause) And you and Richie will have places to go to. And it will be such a wonderful place... Yes, your father can always visit. (pause) Do you understand? (pause) Leap of faith. (pause) Oh, baby... don't cry. Don't cry. I know you're scared. Please don't cry. I'm scared, too. But it's the only way. It's the only thing I know we can do. (pause) And if we do this together, it will all work out. You will see. And remember, when we take a leap of faith... someone will always catch us. (pause) You will see... You will see...

(The lights change. Racquel goes back to the table, takes the bottle of pine nuts, opens it, then pours the contents into the blender. She looks at her watch then at the blender.)

They're arriving anytime now. The guests are arriving soon. Guests. Friends. It's been three years. And there are lots of friends who are willing to lend a helping hand. Who support you. Who will always be there. (pause) They're going to expect a good dinner. (looks into the mixture in the blender) It looks ok. I mean, beyond all that ... stuff... something good might come out of it.

(Racquel places a finger on the "On" button of the blender)

Here goes. (inhales deeply then exhales) Leap of faith.

(Racquel presses the button. The blender begins to whirl. Slow at first, then faster. The mixture inside the blender turns into a yellowish-green liquid mass. After a while, she stops the blender, removes the lid, and pours the pesto sauce onto the hot pasta. She inhales the aroma and licks a bit of the sauce that has stuck to her fingers)

That taste of another year. A new year of a life that I shall live. Live and enjoy.

And I will never lose ...

I swear.

(Racquel begins mixing the pasta as the light slowly fades out.)

(Blackout)

CURTAIN