Once Again, At Dinnertime

It was a late Sunday summer afternoon, so Papa was nowhere in the house, Mama was tethered to the kitchen, and Grandfather and I were prematurely seated at a dining table without food. And still, all four ceramic plates were in their place, overturned on rectangular cloth mats, flanked by a knife and spoon on the right, a fork on the left, and a teaspoon above, with faded rose-red napkins tucked in metal rings resting on top of each. They were artisan pieces: expensive, heavy, and golden, though inauthentic — since twenty-four karat plates would be dented and shapeless and deformed after just one meal. They were also wedding presents, from fifteen years ago — which doubled their preciousness — so I made sure to set the table with extra care, complete with all utensils, including teaspoons, which we wouldn't even use tonight, unless someone decided to make coffee or else cut up a slice of the cake waiting and drying in the fridge.

All was silent, except for the crackling, bubbling oil from the kitchen and subsequent hissess: they were either sizzles escaping from the unthawed meat recklessly submerged in angry oil, or (more likely) expressions of pain from my Mama's lips. Her hands weren't yet hardened and calloused, unlike our recently-dismissed maid's who had formed a second and third layer of skin around hers, numb to all sensations, including accidental oil splashes from a heated pan. Mama's were delicate and soft, so they were all the more prone to painful, red blisters; when they were assaulted by even a stray drop from a careless splash, she did all she could to hold herself back from cursing. Then after came the quiet, steady stream of water from the faucet which went on uninterrupted for more than a few minutes; I imagined her fingers, salmon-pink

from the heat (since I hadn't heard shouts, only hisses), underneath this cooling bath, the soothing, rushing, cooling flow undoing the cooked or fried finger.

I stuck to my seat; I made no attempt to speak because Grandfather was hard of hearing — understanding a single sentence required his utmost attention and effort (I knew this since he always had the same pained expression whenever someone spoke to him), and I didn't want to be a burden right before dinnertime. We relaxed in the quiet. And there was also that I wouldn't know what to say. I sensed, through his rhythmic breathing, that Grandfather was undergoing one of his deep meditations, though his eyes were open. He didn't want to be interrupted. We both stared — not at each other — but at the most mundane things around us: the chipped legs of two unoccupied wooden chairs (for Mama and Papa); at an empty space on the wall between a technicolor portrait of a young woman and a wooden closet filled with white, decorative plates — more plates, unused, family heirlooms; and at a yellow-green mango sitting in a bowl among other fruits, waiting to be a golden-ripe.

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The dining room and the kitchen were separated by one, thin wall and a door — through the slits, thin spaces between the part that swung and the part that stayed, came the hisses and the pops, and only now, a series of curses that she couldn't hold back. She must've set the rice cooker to *Warm* and not all the way down to *Cook*. Though I hadn't checked the device myself — I only deduced when she entered bearing a tray of fried chicken legs and a platter of vegetables (sautéed carrots and corn kernels in butter) without a steaming bowl of white rice — the dish, in any household, that completes all meals. And she didn't then sit down with us but returned to the kitchen — what else had she to cater to if not the rice? The overfilled serving platters left in the

middle of the table joined me and Grandfather in our waiting game; and as they released heat in the form of steam upwards, we let out our own sighs.

"There was once a girl named Ria, you know," came a low voice when we were once again alone — I wasn't sure if someone was speaking or if I had imagined the sound and invented the words and filled in the gaps with my own thoughts — "Her parents called her Marites since her full name was Maria Teresa, but I always thought of her as Ria, my wife."

I saw his lips move and his eyes straining, focused. I was not his audience; he spoke to the golden plate before him; and that inert piece of ceramic must have heard him and understood him and bade him to continue because he did so after a prolonged pause, in the same confiding whisper:

"There she is on the wall — rendered more colorfully than in any memory I have of her —," and at this I resisted the urge to look over and fixed my eyes decidedly on the same mango whose burgeoning sweetness had now attracted some flies, "but you know that it wasn't her fault, nor was it mine. If anyone at all was to blame, it was my parents — but you wouldn't know them: you were placed into this world too late."

He might have still been referring to that plate: an expensive, custom-made piece, gifted to the young newlyweds, my parents, some fifteen years ago — my mother, too, had never met her husband's grandparents, she was wed into the family too late.

"But you know we must not speak ill of the dead — but even if they were living, a son still could not speak ill of his parents, so I've had a lifetime to practice holding my tongue."

A stomach grumbled — his or mine — either *he* was starving and that drove him to lunatic ramblings, or *I* was, and that made me imagine him rambling. It did not help that the platters in front of us tantalized our noses with the whiffs of umami and butter, our eyes with

juices oozing out of plump curves, and our mouths with nothing but tasteless air. A child shouldn't eat before their parents nor should a parent eat before their child, so they starved until they were all assembled, complete.

"Ria was only able to cook two things: raw fish and burnt eggs. I still ate them, since food was food and a man needed to survive, but more often I offered to cook instead and let her do the cleaning. 'No,' she said, 'I'll get better,' but all that became was charcoal-black fish instead of charcoal-black eggs, and pale-white-and-yellow eggs instead of pale-white fish. Still, I told her I could cook and she could still manage the household by cleaning, but her stubbornness outmatched my own — and we settled for burnt or raw food until the day she died. Our stomachs could've handled anything — mine, at least — and maybe that's why she died, slowly killed by her own cuisine."

Until then, the rice was still uncooked; though I never went inside the kitchen to check, Mama never returned. Even the white light inside from the fluorescent bulb, escaping through the slits on the sides and underneath the door, went uninterrupted — there was no movement from within, I thought. I imagined Mama sweating inside that windowless room, immovably staring at the rice cooker and counting the bubbles foaming at the top. Papa still wasn't home. And Grandfather persisted in talking in the same confiding whisper, as though what he recounted was an unspeakable secret.

"Then, there always was Emilio — remember him? — we were once the best of friends. He had large palms and thick fingers, but even the most fragile china never broke under his touch."

With his own, Grandfather feebly traced the elevated circular ridge of the plate and, underneath, the engraving I had not noticed until now: a tiny, flamboyant, calligraphic *E*.

"Those were his weapons, his hands, and with them he worked magic — he was an artist of all forms. In fact, he was overly generous with Ria, with her portrait — I tried to tell him off, put down the pink and the red and pick up the brown — but he was *more* stubborn than her — and I loved him all the more. But most of all, he was proud of being a godfather twice-over: first to my son and his wife in their wedding, and then afterwards to their child. I told him he should have also been someone's husband — he said, Ha! In another life! — And I said, how fast can we get there? And of course, he got there first, so did Ria, and I — and I — no, I shouldn't speak ill of the dead."

A short, curt blast from a car horn interrupted the entire household. Grandfather jerked his head in surprise, dislodging his dentures until it fell, along with a considerable dribble of saliva, onto his intended listener, the overturned plate. I jumped to my feet and made for the kitchen whose doors led to outside more quickly than the main doors in front. The rice cooker, as though it too were startled, softly popped, signaling its completion, and Mama hurriedly scooped the soft rice, like molding clay, into a serving bowl, accidentally scraping the metal insides of the contraption with her metal scooper.

I could feel the metal-grazing-against-metal, like scratches that sent shivers down my goosebumped skin, as I ran to the gate to undo its locks. The sky was cloudless, but the air was humid and cold, and the sweat I accumulated from my sprint did not evaporate but pooled on my shirt. I reached the gate, and since its joints were newly oiled, I had no problem pulling open the two metal walls, allowing the car to enter. I then hastily redid the locks, accidentally smearing some grease on my elbows. As it parked along the short driveway, I reentered the house through the main front doors while its wheels were still munching gravel and its engine still audibly revving. When I sat back down at the table, Mama was already waiting in the seat beside mine.

She didn't speak — her bloodshot eyes and pale hands spoke for her. Papa too was silent when he walked in and conveyed everything he needed to say by loosening his tie and rolling up the sleeves of his formal shirt. And I secretly rubbed my elbows clean on my shirt, at the waist.

We ate, all of us ravenous, exerting minimal effort in chewing, except Grandfather who carefully mashed his rice and his chicken with a spoon, like a toddler playing with his food, until it reached the consistency of pureed potato, an artificial mastication, so that when he took a spoonful, he wouldn't overexert his feeble dentures, now reattached. I finished first — nothing was on my plate except a chicken leg bone, with left-over particles of meat unextractable through spoon, knife, or fork. Unlike my parents, I decided not to take the drumstick with my bare hands and nibble on the hard-to-reach crevices with my teeth — if I did, a stubborn piece would wedge itself somewhere in between and won't dislodge itself until hours later when it chose to do so, despite every effort of my reaching tongue. In a different time, on a different night, Papa would scold me for such a waste and snatch the morsel for himself to suck on until all that was left was inedible bone — he did the same with mango seeds: leaving one, fleshy cheek for me and the other for Mama and the seed for himself. Tonight, he let me go without comment, and I threw the bone in the trash can and left my plate, covered in a thin film of excess butter and oil, in the sink to soak.

Doing the dishes was my responsibility, but I preferred to do the entire batch at once. In the meantime, I retired to my room upstairs where everything was silent — I squeezed my head under my pillow, and all I saw was a steady black — sometimes flashes of red in time with my pulse. I had a sixth sense — apart from the usual set — in determining when I should revive myself and descend to the kitchen to do the dishes. I went when something in my body ticked or when my eyelids unconsciously fluttered, letting in light, or when my grip on the pillow

loosened on its own accord, and the reality of my room and the house entered my senses once again. The rest of the world, by then, was preparing to sleep.

The lights in the kitchen were harsher and brighter than what I remembered; I could tell even as I stood in the dining room, at the point furthest from the kitchen door, where the foot of the stairs were. Grandfather was still stuck in his place, immobile until someone generously pushed him to someplace else. His face was grim; his lips were as stagnant as his wheelchair; and even his eyes were now closed-off to the world. His hands were rolled up into a tight, unrelenting fist, so I decided he wasn't yet asleep — for if he were, his fingers would hand loose.

As I proceeded to the door, I heard a crash, the sound of thick china hurled onto the floor. I peeked inside: I saw Papa bleeding and Mama crying; his left cheek was cherry-red, and her blouse was ripped at the chest.

My intruding eyes were caught. Mama told me to return to my room since I had no reason to be here at this time of night — she said, "Papa had kindly volunteered to do the dishes for me tonight," — then she closed the door gently. On other nights, they made an effort to explain: the plate slipped through Papa's fingers since he used a copious amount of soap, or Mama's chest-buttons got entangled with one of the handles of the cupboards below as she bent down to return the washed-and-dried wok in its place and then the chest-buttons were dismantled when she straightened her back. Tonight, they didn't bother, as though they thought, after months of keeping up with this charade, the child should already have understood. Or else they thought, the child would think, "What clumsy parents I have," — a successful doublethink, and then with a peaceful, made-up mind, go to sleep, untroubled.

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In the mornings, Papa took his breakfast and left for work before anyone else had woken up — the waiting rule for parents during mealtimes was lifted on early mornings. I couldn't say why. When I had gone downstairs and peeked outside, his car was absent from the driveway; Mama was also nowhere to be found which meant she was still asleep; but somehow the table was holding platters of food on its back. Neither Papa nor Grandfather could cook. Yet the spread consisted of selections that did not need heat, nor serious preparation: a sliced loaf of bread and spreads (room temperature butter or coco jam), chopped fruits (papayas and pineapples, both overripe), and cereal (multiple boxes ranging from tasteless to obscenely sugary) accompanied by a chilled jug of milk. I took the mango I scouted the night before, hidden in the fruit bowl, which I felt, by now, was at its perfect sweetness. I had learned how to slice one for myself; I was taught by Mama — precisely for these instances when she was too incapacitated to do it for me. The knives on the table were too dull — more useful for spreading butter than for slicing mangoes — so I scurried to the kitchen to find the proper utensil.

There, I found my Grandfather, stranded in his wheelchair by the island counter, stretching his arms and hands and fingers to the floor. Scattered around him, like breadcrumbs littered around a lake with no hungry fish to gobble them up, were the golden shards of last night's plates, some as big as my mango, others like pebbles in gravel. If he were limber enough to reach them, I was sure he would have wounded himself — their edges were jagged and crooked, like teeth. I set down my mango and took the broom and dustpan, gathered up the pieces, and disposed of them. Broken parts, no matter how expensive the whole from which they came, were worthless. And it would cost more to repair these artisan pieces than to buy new plastic ones which did not shatter easily and were readily replaceable if they did.

One plate, unlike the others, had cleanly broken down along the middle, creating equal halves, too big for my broom to sweep and for my dustpan to contain. I had heard a whimper when the metal trash can clanged shut to digest the goldest shards — Grandfather must have been shocked by the sound — and when I picked up the remaining two pieces with my own hands — they had smooth edges which seemed safe enough to handle, I heard the whimpers turn into pained cries. Grandfather was reaching out his shaking arms, fingers wide apart and trembling, like a child begging for his coveted toy. And like a responsible parent, I didn't give him the pieces — he would've dropped them again since his joints were too frail, and he would've cried louder. Instead, I wheeled him into the dining room, the broken pieces piled on one hand, my unsliced mango on the other, pushing him with my torso and guiding his path with my elbows. When I fixed him onto his place at the table, I set down the golden semi-circles in front of him. He easily slid one to the other, creating creases on the table cloth, as though mere willpower would mend the plate, fixing the plate, and fixing the curly *E* which you wouldn't recognize as an *E* without one of the other parts; and he caressed the vertical diameter, where the two halves met, with his finger, as though his hands could work magic.

I returned to the task of preparing my mango.

Only when I had my three slices — two cheeks and the central seed — did I realize that I had no plate to eat it from. There were none on the table, none in the cupboards in the kitchen, not even saucers nor bowls, and I saw none during my quest for a sharp knife.

I ate the yellow pulp with my bare hands, peeled by my fingers, and scooped by my tongue; its syrup trickled down my chin like tears or like sweat — I was too far gone to consider using a spoon. While I chewed, my eyes wandered around the familiar room. There still were the two unoccupied chairs around the table — I sat on one more, completing three — with chipped

legs; there was still the painting of my grandmother Marites (alias Ria) in technicolor hues; and beside her, after a space of bare wall, there was still the wooden closet with glass panels that revealed, within, twenty or thirty sets of dinner plates, salad bowls, saucers, and teacups — all unerringly white china with flower embellishments — locked away, never to be used, unless a huge party was thrown, at the next wedding (most likely mine, though far away in time) or at the next funeral (which may or may not be Grandfather's). It was said that Grandfather had lost the key one day and had never been able to find it again — and so when the time comes, we'll have to break the glass or slice through the wood, sacrificing the container for the treasures inside.

I left the dining room to dispose of the inedible seed and peels and to wash using the kitchen sink. I was satiated, I had nothing left to do downstairs, so I hurried to my room. As I passed by, I saw that Grandfather had not ceased with his mindless caressing, up and down, tracing the three curls that made an *E* until his finger bled; and all the way until I reached my room, I never saw Mama's door open nor heard any of her footsteps tapping on the wooden floor, either which would have signified that she was awake. She could be passed out all through the morning and the early afternoon; soon she would rise out of instinct, like I do, to begin her preparations for dinner.

And later, much to my surprise, I saw Mama taking out a tarnished silver key from her pocket, opening the creaking doors of the cabinet, running her hands through this set of plates then that, murmuring to herself, "How beautiful — the strokes of Ninong's brush — must save those for some other time — I'll bring out these plain white ones for now."