

A DINNER PARTY

I sat at the dining room table rolling the seasoned ground pork into lumpia wrappers. They were like over-sized cigars, with edges nicely tucked under, and sealed shut with egg yolk.

“Not too tick,” my mother warned from the kitchen, dropping the “th” blend in the word thick. After fifteen years in the States her Filipino accent was still sealed tight as the lumpia in front of me. The aroma of all the foods that were served only at Christmas or Easter floated through the house and out the windows, mixing with the scent of the damp summer breeze coming off the lake. It was standard Filipino faire: your meat, your fish, something soft, and something sour or spicy. And there was always rice, lots of it. My mother even made two kinds, steamed and fried. On most occasions, we’d roast a pig but for this party it would probably be too much food to eat, in not enough time. Instead my mother served tapa, which she marinated overnight and Dad barbequed an hour before the party. It wasn’t a fancy dish but it was delicious. Mom also made noodles with a tangy orange sauce with clams, oysters, and shrimp. Then there was a crispy fish she fried first then baked in the oven in a rich brown sauce. This all took a significant amount of planning. Getting the ingredients alone meant driving at least an hour to Fargo or five hours to Minneapolis to find an Asian grocery store.

My father insisted we have a party outside while the weather was warm enough to stroll down to the shore, but cool enough to not be stifled by the humidity. Our house sat on five acres surrounded by woods and farmland, twenty miles from the closest town, which had only one traffic light. We had lived there almost a year but it still felt like we were on an extended vacation. The move from New York to this small town in Minnesota was still sinking in, as if at any moment we were going back. The summer we arrived, all we did was fish and swim, and

then the winter was filled with more snow than any one person could imagine. Weekends were spent figuring out somewhere to go that didn't require filling the gas tank twice. It was real country living, a far stretch from the suburbs of Manhattan that took a lot of getting used to. I guess this party meant we were staying.

Mom didn't appear as though she were up for it; she wasn't much for being a guest, much less a hostess. Dad didn't mind as long as it was only once. He wanted to have people from the hospital come over. He and my mother were both doctors and felt obligated to entertain those who employed them. My parents were often invited to town for dinner parties and church gatherings. So it was time they invited some townspeople out to the lake to "break bread," which we never ate.

I knew this was not going to be like other parties my parents had. There wouldn't be kids running through the house, loud laughter from the men, and giggles and whispered tones of gossip from the women. The musical sound of Tagalog wouldn't fill the house and intermix with English words, "taglish" as they sometimes said. None of us kids spoke Tagalog. We were the children of Filipinos who, for some reason, chose not to teach their kids the language of their roots. There were a few words here and there that were universally understood, and we had the same customs at home, like taking off our shoes at the door, or eating with a fork in our left hand and a spoon in our right. We were raised in one culture, speaking the language of another. At this party Dad wouldn't play mahjong all night long, and Mom wouldn't spend the afternoon cooking with all the other ladies in the kitchen. The cooking never seemed to stop during Filipino parties. Dish after dish after dish was made, brought, garnished at the last minute, and then introduced with no rhyme or reason. Well, the reason was to keep eating. You could eat all

day while listening to the women chopping and stirring, or run around with a sparerib in your hand chasing the other kids in the yard.

No, for this party all the food had to be ready in advance, Dad would have to stock the bar, everyone would be speaking English, and there wouldn't be any children. At least it was still buffet, and not a sit down dinner. That would be too brutal for my mother. We didn't have the kind of help we had in New York. There was no *yaya*, or live-in housekeeper, or any aunts or cousins that would come to help. We were the only Filipinos within a hundred mile radius, if that. I often wondered if people here even knew exactly where in the world the Philippines was. So my mother planned for the party to begin late afternoon, to give us time to prepare. We did a lot of the prep the night before but still had to get up early to polish the silverware, and iron the linens. And unlike Filipinos, these people would be punctual, which made it doubly tricky to get the lumpia cooked and keep it crisp, and have time for the house to air out from the smell of the fryer. My hands were already sore, and my fingers wrinkled from rolling so many. I'd been rolling these babies since I was six and you'd think I'd be used to it. Not yet, I got bored of it very easily.

"You are not done?" My mother was often exasperated by any lack of follow through, and unlike Tita Cory or Tita Beni, our Filipino family friends, she didn't have that cheery, doting, disposition in the kitchen. There was at least a third of the ground pork left. She would dismiss me because she could bang the rest out in ten minutes, whereas I would take at least another hour.

"Yeah," I said, wiping my hands on a towel then throwing it down. I got up hoping to get a swim in before my next assignment but no go.

“O.k., now,” she said, as if controlling her temper. “Go clean the chairs and table outside.”

“Can’t the boys do that?” I said it with a little more attitude than I intended. I didn’t want to get her pissed so early in the day. “They’re out there anyway, throwing the ball.” I toned it down a bit, offering some logic to my argument.

“Then get the vacuum,” she said, not looking up from her lumpia. She was already done rolling three. The woman could throw together a five-course meal in two hours but couldn’t make a left turn at a four way stop to save her life. For once, I didn’t argue, and I’m sure she appreciated me not “talking back.” I was often told that “for a girl” (which really meant a Filipino girl) I talked too much; always disagreeing, asking why, never doing what I was told the first time. I was expected to be quiet and to keep still, as if in church. Talking back was disrespectful. So most of the day I tried to keep it zipped, so as to not get targeted at the party.

When people started to arrive you could sense my mother’s anxiety. She was kind of nice to me out of desperation, but wanted to ignore me at the same time. I wasn’t quite sure how to help her so I just waited in the kitchen for any orders, only for her to say, “why don’t you do something?” I pretended to be filling cups with ice from the ice bucket. I watched the people drive up in their fancy Fords and Chevys, and file into the house. There were the Andersons, the bank owners, Mr. Hansen who ran the pharmacy, and his wife Sandy who was a nurse. Mrs. Hansen had fire red hair and wore lots of make-up. Dad said he was sometimes afraid one of her false eyelashes would fall into a patient during surgery. The Bishops sold real estate and lived on the other side of the lake. We got to know them pretty well because they helped us find our house, and they had a daughter who’s a year older than me. Dr. Nagel was the dentist. He was an old man who always seemed like he was watching you eat and drink. His wife Carol, who

worked at the jewelry store, was draped with gold around her neck and wrists. The last to arrive were the Simons. Mr. Simon was the hospital administrator and his wife taught tenth grade English. I never really thought of Mr. Simon as my dad's boss but I guess that's what he was. My father was the only surgeon and the chief of staff, and to me that meant he *was* the hospital. No one was ever filling in for him, and much of the time he'd cover for my mother when she was on call.

Mr. Simon had dark hair and a beard. His eyes were always hidden behind his tinted, aviator eyeglasses. He had two sons who he always bragged about to my dad, but made fun of when they were in earshot. I'd see them once in a while hanging out at the hospital waiting for a ride home just like me. They were nice to me but always fighting with each other. Mr. Simon would come and tell his kids to sit in his office and not say a word. Then he'd smile at me and compliment my sweater as he moved close enough to smell my hair. I was always glad I didn't have to ride home with him.

Many of the ladies wore white pants, with little knit tank tops with matching cardigan sweaters they tied over their shoulders. There wasn't a lot of variety among these women when it came to what they wore. Back in New York, the moms that came to pick us up at the junior high came in all colors and shapes. Mrs. Taylor, for instance, who was French, always looked stylish with a scarf tied around her neck, or her hair, or somewhere. Mrs. Marshall was like a hippie throwback, with a long braid, wearing a flowing dress and ankle bracelets. Some moms came straight from "the Club" wearing their tennis skirts and visors, but still dripping with gold bracelets and diamond earrings. My mom was the standard Chanel suit, ready for the office, only to drape the white coat over it. I think she was thankful for the coat though, thinking she didn't have to clean the suit as often. She'd never pick me up from school because she worked

all day in the city, but my best friend's mom would pull up in her big silver Cadillac wearing a Puce dress and listening to jazz music. None of that was happening on Little Pine Lake, Minnesota.

Everyone sat outside, ate and drank until the sun went down and the mosquitoes became too much to take. The party moved indoors to our finished basement that stayed cool in the summer and had a pool table, and a big screen television. I hung out in the kitchen, nibbling on leftover lumpia and rice, every once in a while sampling the wine. I was barely thirteen and my father would slap me back to twelve if he ever caught me seriously drinking. He had a terrible temper and threatened to make me eat a cigarette if he ever found me smoking one. But tonight he was in good spirits and let me have a little sip of wine. "Like in church right?" he'd say, but then in a firm voice "that's enough" whenever my mom was around. He'd then stroke my hair and tell me not to forget the dishes.

While my parents and their guest enjoyed their leche flan and coffee, I stayed in the kitchen and cleaned up. There actually wasn't all that much to do since the guests had eaten everything. The plates barely needed rinsing. It was a novelty for most people in town to eat something other than hot dish and fried chicken. There were no leftovers, or half-eaten portions. This made my mother feel good I thought, as I loaded the dishwasher. That she could still cook a decent meal, all from scratch, with ingredients she had to have shipped from the East Coast, and at the same time be able to diagnose skin cancer was quite an achievement. I'm sure she never saw it that way; she was a Filipino woman first and foremost, always serving somebody, cooking or cleaning or raising something. If not, she was shopping.

I left the few pots to soak in the sink, wiped down the counters, and swept the floor. I was tired, but knew I wouldn't hear the end of it if I didn't help clean. After I finished my slice

of leche flan, I submerged the sticky dish in the sink of warm soapy water and quietly went off to my room. I could hear the crowd of adults laughing and talking so I put on some music to drown out the noise. As I began to take off my jewelry the door to my bedroom slowly opened. It was Mr. Simon. I thought that he might have mistaken my room for the bathroom, they were right next to each other, but when he came in I realized he hadn't made any such mistake.

"What are we up to?" he asked in a jovial voice. I stepped away from the door and leaned against the dresser behind me. His face was flush and he suddenly seemed so much larger than me. He went on about the football team doing well this fall and then something about the movies being shown at the drive-in, but I was too busy wondering what he was doing in my room that I didn't catch the gist of anything he said. No adult besides my parents had ever been in my bedroom before, let alone a man I hardly knew.

"You wanna be a doctor like your dad? Or your mom for that matter?" He seemed amused at remembering my mother had a medical degree.

"Maybe, I don't know." I slipped my hands behind me, clenching the dresser. The hard, cold texture of the wood gave me comfort. I noticed he had a drink in his hand, from which he took a sip. He moved around the room like a threatening animal, a snake or a wild cat maybe, sniffing around, blocking escape routes, but not quite ready to strike.

"You'd have to work hard," he said in a bold deep voice. I nodded, acknowledging his authority. He seemed to be eyeing my arms, then my shoulders but avoiding my face, which was good because I felt a little sweat on my upper lip.

"You like baseball?" I shrugged, and gave a weak smile, wishing he would just end this conversation and wander off the same way he wandered in. "I played ball in school." He continued, "Nothing like throwing the ball as fast as you could into the glove of the catcher." He

tried to imitate the motion of a pitcher, but stumbled back against the frame of the closet door, spilling some of his drink on the carpet. I didn't move.

"Mike?" a woman's voice called out in the hallway. Mrs. Simon came into the room. I stood still, not saying a word. What was there to say? That he came in and started rambling about nothing? That he thought this room was just another extension of the party? She'd never believe me and I suddenly felt like I should apologize for standing in my own bedroom. Mrs. Simon looked as confused as I was, but tried to act casual and friendly.

"Mike it's late. We should go." She clasped her hands in front of her, waiting for him to acquiesce. Her eyes darted around somewhat suspiciously.

"It's early," he said loudly, waving his arms.

"Well Christina's tired. At least let her get some sleep." Her tone changed to that of a preschool teacher. I wondered if that's how she spoke to her tenth graders.

"You're not tired are you?" Mr. Simon looked at me. I didn't answer.

"Michael, let's go." He shook his head then sat down in the middle of the floor, trying to cross his legs in front of him, crisscross applesauce as they say. He was like a child, stubborn and pouting, saying "no" over and over again. Mrs. Simon stepped toward him, then stood above her husband as he rocked back and forth. I wanted to offer to help, maybe get someone from the party to talk to him, but my mouth wouldn't open. I could tell she was frustrated, as if this wasn't the first time he acted this way.

I slipped outside the door and went into the bathroom. After a while, I peeked out to see if they had left my bedroom. Mrs. Simon was stooped down next to her husband trying to take his drink away and talk him into leaving. I figured it might be a while, so I went down the hall to my brother's room and went to sleep on the rug at the foot of one of the twin beds.

The following morning my mother was in the kitchen scrubbing the pots and pans. I didn't look at her so she wouldn't ask me to take over.

"So did you have fun?" I tried not to sound too sarcastic, assuming that in her mind it wasn't worth the work.

"It was o.k. Everyone seemed to have enjoyed it." I looked in the refrigerator for some orange juice.

"Some more than others, huh?" I pulled out the carton and poured myself a glass.

"Ya, I tink Kathy was so embarrassed by Mike."

"He didn't seem drunk at first but then she couldn't get him off the floor of my room." I hadn't really thought through the events of the past night. The words just flew out of my mouth in a stream before I could think about how they sounded. I had never really been around anyone drunk, so I was sorting it out in my head and thinking out loud at the same time. I often forget that my mother isn't interested in my thoughts or conversation like other moms might be with their kids. She's not a friend, she's my mother: practical and unemotional. She wouldn't get that I was trying to make sense of what happened, she just heard the words and got mad.

"What do you mean?" she asked, accusingly. "He went to your room? The shock in her accented voice made me think I should've felt afraid last night. I nodded. She walked out of the kitchen, went into her bedroom and started speaking tagalog to my father in a very stern tone. I could hear the conversation rolling fast as a run away train, their tongues spitting words I didn't know the meanings of but felt like hot, sparks exploding in the air. My father came storming into the hall bellowing now in English.

"That is the last time they come here!" He then pointed a finger at me. "And you, you are not to be walking around when people are here. You shouldn't be up late like that, you

understand.” My mother said something in tagalog and the discussion slash argument resonated throughout the house. Like most Filipino crises there was a trickle down effect to the offense and the blame. My mother was clearly offended and only had my dad to blame, who in turn had to throw his temper down onto his children. I retreated to my room, hurt and pissed.

Walking into my bedroom, I noticed Mr. Simon’s half empty glass sitting on my desk from the night before. Hot tears welled up in my eyes, and my throat ached. It was his fault not mine. It was his fault that my parents were fighting; his fault my father felt obligated to give the party in the first place. Because of him and his mousy wife, we got up at the crack of dawn to prepare the whole house, cook all the food, and clean inside and out just so he could get so drunk he embarrassed everyone. And he was probably snoozing away a hangover in his little house in town, while my father blamed me for his own misjudgment of character. I wanted to yell, to scream that it was bullshit; this town was bullshit and all the people in it. But that would be talking back, not too unlike hitting on an employee’s daughter. I was so sick of keeping quiet.

I heard a soft knock at my door. My mother walked in and I pretended like I didn’t care. She sat on the bed next to me. I inched away. She leaned in to me.

“He did not do any ting, right?” she asked in a low voice.

“So what if he did, would that be my fault too?” my voice cracked as I tried not to cry. I resented her always thinking I was to blame. She stroked my hair and shushed me.

“It’s not your fault. You just have to be careful, hija.” She smelled my head as if I were a baby. Whenever she said “hija” it showed her heart was really in it. Her concern that I wasn’t a baby anymore became all too apparent. She could forbid me from wearing short skirts, or from going on dates, but she couldn’t protect me from how people looked at me, or from the thoughts in a man’s mind, not even in her own house; to think they had invited them. I threw my arms

around her; overwhelmed by the fear I couldn't identify the night before. She hugged me back but not for too long. I could hear her trying to fight back her own tears.

“O.k. Come on,” she tapped my knee and stood up, her signal to stop being emotional. My mother picked up Mr. Simon's half empty drink on her way out and said to me, “Let's have some ting to eat.”