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MEMORIES

Love Conquers All

In a Brooklyn barrio, one Puerto Rican grandmother was a force of nature

BY ERICK S. SIERRA

Mama Cruzita is the first on her feet in the morning darkness. By five o'clock—about the time roosters would be crowing in Quebradillas, her native village in Puerto Rico—my grandmother is rushing around our Brooklyn apartment, setting the coffee to boil in the *colador* and rousting me and my siblings from bed with her daily wake-up call: *"¡En un minuto se quema una casa!"* ("It takes only a minute for a house to burn down!") It is her way of saying that you have to rise early and seize the day if you want to make it in this country. *"¡Tú no te criaste con leche pedi'a!"* she admonishes. "You weren't nursed on charity milk." It is 1982; I am eight years old.

By the time the sun comes up, the chicken for tonight's dinner—my grandmother's famous rendition of arroz con pollo, or chicken with rice—has finished marinating in Mama Cruzita's special adobo, and her homemade stock, made from the tough and tasty meat of a hen purchased at a live-poultry market down the street, is already simmering on the stove. Throughout my unhappy third-grade school day, I will daydream of Mama Cruzita in our kitchen: she'll be sautéing salt pork, releasing its flavorful fat, before stirring in cilantro, sweet little ajicito peppers, and manzanilla olives to make her sofrito, the seasoning mix that will give tonight's dish its Puerto Rican character. By the time I come home from school, she'll be blending in the achiote, or annato seed, which will turn the rice a golden yellow. At five o'clock, she'll add the chicken and stock to her sofrito, and a rich, spice-filled aroma will waft down our building's hallways and through the streets of our barrio.

Our neighbors will know that Mama Cruzita is cooking—people in the barrio talk about her arroz con pollo with reverence—but no one will dare interrupt her to ask her for a taste, for my grandmother is a *brava*, a fighter. Her feet tell tales of years she spent walking barefoot. When she was a young woman, men sparkling with promises eventually lost their sparkle, forgot their promises, and disappeared. In 1951 she left her seaside village for New York's "streets of gold"—the run-down blocks of Williamsburg, Brooklyn. Life has toughened Mama Cruzita. Brow furrowed, head raised high, she inspires biblical fear. Even the local cops are afraid of her. She reserves her love for her cooking and her grandchildren.

Cruz Deida Seda with the author, her grandson, at an amusement park in New Jersey, circa 1975.

When I was five months old, I'm told, Mama Cruzita came early to pick me up at the babysitter's. She found me alone, flapping about on the floor, abandoned amid crumbs and dust. The babysitter trailed in: "Oh, I just went to the corner bodega to buy a can of sofrito." Mama Cruzita's nostrils flared. *"¡Cómo te atreves!"* ("How dare you!") Swooping me up, she crushed a ten-dollar bill into the babysitter's hand and said that from this day on she would take care of me herself. *"¡Ningún nieto mío!"* ("No grandson of mine!") With a flourish, she slammed the door behind her.

Brava.

But that is not the woman I come running home to after school on that spring day in 1982. I find Mama Cruzita working tranquilly in the kitchen, enveloped in the scents of Caribbean cooking. In the wooden mortar that she brought with her when she left Puerto Rico, she grinds more ingredients for her sofrito: garlic, peppercorns, oregano. She pounds in beats of four: up, down, around, down. Cilantro, cumin, salt. Up, down, around, down. She pauses and gazes at a pigeon resting on the fire escape but directs her words at me. "Papito," she whispers, "I see in your eyes how you suffer." Resuming her work: "But this will make you better."

It does. The chicken, infused with the intricate flavors of the adobo and sofrito, is vibrant in my mouth, an intimate connection to the Puerto Rican countryside that my grandmother left behind. Mama Cruzita tosses some extra pieces of the crisp, savory skin of the salt pork onto my plate. I crunch into them eagerly. She reads my silences like emotional Braille and tells me what I need to hear. *"M'hijo,"* she whispers. *"Tú eres el amor de mi vida."* ("My child, you are the love of my life.")

Now, years later, I write down these memories just feet from where Mama Cruzita once cooked, in the apartment where I grew up and now live. The kitchen is empty. A flash of recollection: her eyes connect with mine; she smiles. Mama Cruzita, I tell her, you were a *brava* to them, but to me you are the tender embrace that holds who I am and never lets me forget.

Erick S. Sierra *teaches English at Rutgers University; this is his first story for* SAVEUR.