HOME COOKING

IT WAS ALWAYS TIME TO EAT

MISS DONNA NEVER MADE ME FEEL LIKE AN OUTSIDER

by Von Diaz

MY FIRST BRUSH WITH CHEESE GRITS was nearly my last.

That morning, my parents dropped me off, half-asleep and grumpy, at the La Petite daycare in Mt. Zion, Georgia. A teacher sat me down at a long table with a dozen other preschoolers and served me a plastic bowl of white, wiggly mush with an orangey-yellow cheese square melted on top.

I was six years old, the only Latina in my class. Breakfast at home wasn't particularly Latino—I was a connoisseur of Trix cereal and strawberry Quik at the time. I poked at the wiggle with the edge of my spoon to investigate. I frowned. A teacher noticed and exclaimed, "What? You don't like guh-ree-its?!"

"Nuh-uh!" I said, frowning and shaking my head.

"Well you'll just have to go hungry, because that's what we got," she said, fist pressed firmly against her hip.

I surrendered and scooped a bit of the cheese square and mush out of the bowl, letting it slide off the spoon into my mouth. My disgusted expression brought on more giggles and snickers from teachers and other kids—many wondering aloud what on earth my parents fed me at home. Humiliated and nauseous, I quit eating and went hungry for the rest of the day.

This was my first foray into (bad) Southern food, and for most of my early childhood it impacted how I ate. And so it went until I ate grits done right by a sweet mama who showed me just how good the food of my new home could be.

I WAS BORN IN RIO PIEDRAS, PUERTO RICO , to twenty-year-old college students. My dad was studying accounting, my mom, landscape architecture. They tried to pursue their studies and raise a tiny baby, but my dad ultimately went the way of so many other young fathers with mouths to feed: He joined the Army.

My first home on the U.S. mainland was Fort Gillem, a small Army base just south of Atlanta. Our neighborhood in suburban Forest Park was made up of identical brick townhouses with white doors and trim, with playgrounds of rusting metal and slides that burned your thighs in the summertime. I learned to swim on that base, when Sergeant Swim-Instructor threw me in the deep end and told me to get to the top. I lost my first tooth on-base, when I tripped and fell on aluminum bleachers during a baseball game.

We had a small Puerto Rican enclave there. The kids ran around past dark, rolling in our Fisher Price cars and catching lightning bugs. Our families cooked out on the weekends, making arroz con gandules (rice with pigeon peas) and costillas (pork ribs marinated in adobo). These events—where our parents danced salsa, drank rum, and spoke Spanish rapidly—were how they stayed connected to the island. My friends and I just ate our fill and began refusing to speak Spanish. During the summer the nights were hot, just like in Puerto Rico. We would sit outside long after our bedtime, waiting for our drunk parents to take us home.

The first Southern foods I ever ate were in daycare and public-school cafeterias—lima beans, fried okra, and peach cobbler. That's also where I had Frito pie and Mexican pizza. A classmate once asked me if that's what my mom cooked, and I stuck my tongue out at him. At home, Mami never cooked anything remotely like these foods. Nothing was as offensive to her as collard greens, which she thought smelled like toilet. Cornbread was too dry, fried chicken too greasy, biscuits and gravy too babosoor snot-like.

My mother was a secret vegetarian. When she was growing up in Puerto Rico, my grandmother Tata cooked everything from scratch with lots of love and lard. That meant Mami often came home from school to a giant beef tongue in her sink, or a pot of stewed pig's feet and garbanzos on the stove. All she wanted was fresh greens. Instead, she got vegetables stewed to smithereens in pork fat.

I realize now it wasn't just that Mami thought Southern food was nasty and smelly. This way of eating, the pigs' feet and smothered greens, was part of her past, and she wanted a better future for me. Mami mostly fed us simple American foods like baked chicken and veggies—made Puerto Rican with adobo seasoning, or Puerto Rican foods such as picadillo—lightened up by substituting ground turkey for beef. But for me there was always something lacking in her cooking.

Every once in a while, the lunch ladies would get it right. I'd go through the line and smile as they served me a pulled pork sandwich with pickles on a soft white bun, and coleslaw that was still crunchy. By then, I could tell the difference between those stale daycare grits and food made with care.

I got curious. The greens braised in broth and ham hocks, fluffy biscuits in peppery white gravy, yellow layer cake slathered in chocolate buttercream: These were my dream foods. But because my mom wasn't down, they were out of reach. Except when I went to the home of Arica Slaughter, my childhood best friend.

The Slaughters lived in Rex, the next suburb over from us, in one of those nice neighborhoods with a name. It had houses with two-car garages, long driveways, brick mailboxes, and flowerbeds. Their house was in a cul-de-sac, and their yard stretched an acre, bordered by a small creek, a line of pollen-y pine trees, and a chain-link pen where Bosh, the Slaughter's Doberman, lived. The house had three bedrooms, a den and a living room, and a kitchen with a giant sink, a double-wide stove, and one of those big refrigerators that opened like French doors.

Arica's mother, Miss Donna, was a skinny white lady from Tennessee with graying sandy-blonde hair, a pointed face punctuated by a delicate nose, and bright blue eyes. She wore gold-rimmed bifocals and dressed in sweatpants, button-down men's collared shirts, and slip-on shoes.

Miss Donna spent her days watching daytime TV, smoking cigarettes, drinking gin and tonics, and cooking. She was fascinated that I'd never had foods that were everyday to her, like hoecakes with corn syrup, chitterlings with hot sauce, and black-eyed peas. Anytime she learned that I hadn't eaten a certain food, she'd cook it for me immediately.

Miss Donna never made me feel like an outsider. Other adults asked me questions like: What does your name mean? How spicy is your mom's cooking? Do your parents speak English? These questions

made me feel as though I couldn't fit their idea of Latina, nor did I quite belong in the South.

Arica's house was a sanctuary. My parents were in the throes of a divorce. They were either in a fight, or my dad just wasn't around. But Miss Donna always greeted me at the sliding glass door with the biggest hug, clutching the back of my head and pulling me close to her chest.

When she called us in from the yard, where we were either digging something up or jumping on the trampoline, her cigarette-strained voice would crack.

"Aaarica, Von Marieee, time to eat!"

At Miss Donna's house, it was always time to eat. Her cabinets buckled with name-brand snacks—the kind my parents could never afford: Nabisco, Keebler, Lay's, Aunt Jemima, Kellogg's. She kept three extra freezers on the back porch, equally packed with steaks, roasts, whole chickens, gallons of milk—abundance in response to the profound poverty Arica's dad had grown up with.

Benjamin Slaughter, or Mr. Benny, was a six-foot-tall black man built like a football player, with a lazy eye he'd gotten after one of his brothers accidentally hit him in the back of the head with a mace. His eyeball had popped out of the socket, and his mom had pushed it back in with Vaseline.

Some days I'd come in from playing outside, sweaty, my hair full of pine straw from rolling down hills, shoes filthy from mucking around in the creek, and find Miss Donna sitting at the table staring at the wall, cigarette in hand, another gin and tonic in front of her in a rocks glass beaded with condensation.

"You alright, Miss Donna?" I'd ask.

She'd look over, sadly. "Yeah baby. You hungry?"

She never went back to Tennessee after marrying Mr. Benny. She had been his secretary at the construction company he founded and ran. Benny worshipped Miss Donna, and Miss Donna adored him. He'd come in late from work, quiet and reserved, and in his deep, gentle voice, he'd say, "Good evening, Miss Donna." "Good evening, Mr. Benny," she'd reply, looking back at him over the top of her glasses. I never saw them kiss, or even embrace. But when Mr. Benny was home, he and Miss Donna sat side by side.

Her father disowned her when she married Benny. A strong believer in the teachings of the Klan, he never forgave Donna for marrying a black man. Arica was born two months premature. Miss Donna said she was the size of a Barbie doll; small enough to fit in a shoebox. Two years later, Arica's older sister, Stacey, died in a car accident on a rainy morning. Stacey was twenty years old. Somewhere in her mind, Donna always wondered if her father had cursed her. After he passed away, she said she could feel his presence roaming the house, holding on strong to his hate, but never able to let her go.

When I was twelve, Miss Donna had a heart attack and died suddenly of multiple organ failure. They suspected that her heavy drinking was to blame, that she also might have had colon cancer. It was my first funeral, and I went dressed in an oversized Tweety Bird T-shirt and black leggings.

"Are you sure you want to wear that?" Mami asked, one eyebrow raised.

I didn't know what else to wear. When I got to the church, I couldn't speak to Arica or Mr. Benny. I sat in the back with my mom and stared at Miss Donna's face peeking out of her casket. People hugged and cried, a pastor led the group in song. We left fifteen minutes later. Arica and I were never the same. I didn't comfort her, as a friend should have. And I never went back to that house. Arica was my best friend, but maybe I was visiting Miss Donna all along.

I THINK OF HER OFTEN: when I see a Doberman, or drink a gin and tonic, and especially when I make grits. I once told her the story of the La Petite grits. She listened intently, brow furrowed, and quickly went to work to replace that bad memory. I watched as she warmed water and milk in a saucepan and slowly poured in white corn grits, stirring and simmering until they thickened and sputtered. She filled three bowls halfway and sat them down in front of me along with a jar of grape jelly (Arica's favorite), a stick of butter, a bowl of sugar, and salt and pepper.

I wish I could say that they were amazing, and that my obsession with grits started that day. Instead, we scooped three mostly uneaten bowls of grits into the trash. Perhaps it was the memory of those first grits: I still didn't like them. Miss Donna didn't give up. We tried maple syrup, strawberry jam, Tabasco...and ultimately hit a sweet spot with cheddar cheese and lots of pepper.

Today, when I make cheese grits, I use half-and-half, sharp white cheddar, and Parmesan. I often serve them with sautéed greens, hot sauce, and a poached egg. On my wedding day, we had a grits bar with a dozen or so toppings—including scallions, tomatoes, crumbled bacon, cheddar, and pernil (Puerto Rican roast pork shoulder.

Miss Donna always seemed to understand that I needed to be coaxed and prodded, guided slowly, and given a chance to adjust my tastes to match my tastebuds and my background. She helped me find my home in the South.

Von Diaz is a food writer and radio producer who explores Puerto Rican food, culture, and identity through memoir and multimedia. This piece is adapted from her forthcoming cookbook, Coqui, Cordita: Craving Puerto Rico .

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