Manzanilla

"¿Te hago una manzanilla?" Marisol asks.

"Sí," I reply.

"Con o sin?" she counters, poking her head, which reaches barely five feet above the ground, into my bedroom doorway. She already knows what my answer will be. I shoot her a smile, as if to say, *"I know I shouldn't, but…"*

"Con," I answer. Minutes later, I hear her voice again.

"María." It's not really a question, or even a request. But I don't have to ask what it means. Obediently I pad down the dark hallway in slipper-clad feet, trying to shrug off the fact that I am a 21 year-old woman, being served a late-night snack by my mom. That's how I had come to think of her, at least—my mom and my grandmother and my zany aunt all rolled into one. She and Eduardo were the only family I had in Madrid, halfway around the planet from anyone who actually shared my DNA.

I enter the kitchen and she's standing in the doorway, teacup rattling dangerously on the plate she holds in her arthritic hands. "Gracias, Marisol," I say, relieving her of her cargo. We repeat this ritual nightly, until she learns that I prefer galletas to magdalenas, and that I can usually be persuaded to eat two of the former instead of just one. I help her arrange what can hardly even be called a card table, but which effectively blocks the passage of anyone trying to move from one end of the kitchen to the other, a space whose two walls I can easily touch by just stretching out my arms.

"Vivir en Madrid te cuesta mucho, pero vale la pena," Marisol reminds me night after night. Cold linoleum tiles and a fluorescent light that makes us squint accompany our

evening tea, yet somehow with a too-hot-to-drink cup in my hands, teabag anchored by a tiny spoon and sweet galletas going to crumbs with every bite, these details seem not to matter. As we sip our chamomile teas, Marisol tells me about her childhood, how her mother, who taught her how to sew, had died suddenly when she was young, leaving her to care for her ailing father and younger siblings on her own. We talk about the world outside of the apartment's thin plaster walls, Marisol calling all of Spain's politicians ladrones and telling me about the bargains she secured on the day's trip to the panadería on our block. I tell her about my classes, and about my life back home, the one that I had put on hold. I ask her why everyone is so pushy when it's their stop on the metro, why everything is closed between two and five each afternoon, precisely the times that *I* want to be let in. Excitedly I tell her the name of a new café or bookshop I had discovered that day, which she always receives with indifference. "En Madrid, hay de todo," she says with a knowing look. And we drink our manzanillas.

More than anything, we talk about food—an appropriate topic for the kitchen, I guess. Yet Marisol finds a way to talk food anywhere, with anyone—sometimes I think she makes calculations in terms of liters of olive oil, in loaves of bread, sees people not as humans but as person-sized repositories for her cooking. She is intimately preoccupied by others' likes and dislikes. On the day we met, in the taxi ride from the airport to 11 Calle Murcia (I, jet-lagged, bewildered, and wondering if I shouldn't just get back on my plane and head home), food was our first topic of conversation. I should have known. Once I managed to assure her that no, I wasn't a vegetarian, I think she finally began to breathe. But it didn't stop there. Yes, I liked seafood. Chicken, too. Yes, I'd eat cauliflower, tomatoes, and rice. No, whatever you have prepared for today is fine, no need to make anything else.

Of *course* I liked paella. I'll have coffee with breakfast, thanks. Green beans? Absolutely. Bit by bit, Marisol filled in her mental inventory of my food preferences.

I was mortified when she discovered that I was less than enthused by her artichokes. For weeks, I thought I had kept my secret hidden, discreetly quartering the bud into indistinguishable pieces, camouflaging its waxy leaves under other bits of food. But she saw through the ruse, and swore never to let the offending vegetable touch another plate of mine, piling the excess onto her own dish on artichoke days. "¿Por qué no me dijiste?" she scolded. It wasn't that she minded whether I liked artichokes or not—in fact, I think she accepted it as a challenge, this making of accommodations (she spoke with a martyr's proud triumph at a former host daughter who—so she claimed—ate nothing but boiled carrots). She was only disappointed that I had let a meal pass without allowing her to satisfy my stomach as much as she possibly could. I never made the mistake again.

We drink our manzanillas, and talk of food wafts over our steaming cups. Soon, Marisol begins to share her precious recipes, pungent concoctions of garbanzos and bay leaves and ingredients I know I'll never be able to find back home, but which I commit to memory with hungry relish all the same. She tells me the stories behind her recipes, which friend or cousin had introduced them to her, and the tricks she's discovered to ensure they came out perfectly every time (when making torrijas, let bread slices soak in milk before they're fried; a pisto's flavor is best if simmered for four hours, at the very least). Of course, none of these formulas are written down; Marisol works her craft by sight and by taste, which never poses a problem for her but which severely hampers my desperate need to bring order to a world in which so many of the simplest things are beyond my comprehension. On the infrequent occasions that Marisol actually allows me to help her,

she watches with tender, closed-mouthed exasperation at my work as I fumble while cutting potatoes, turning out ragged hunks to her perfectly pared ellipses. I'm soon relegated to risk-free tasks like peeling oranges, while Marisol assures me that someday, someday I'll learn to cook—after all, how else was I going to find a good husband?

"Lo importante es que practiques," she tells me, un-drunk tea long gone cold in our cups. I assure her that I will. We rinse off our dishes and return them to their places in the cupboard, ready for the next evening's feast.