

# Molli

**By Mercy**

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The smell of toasting almonds always takes me back to my childhood. I remember my grandmother's house in Oaxaca, as I pour a half cup of almonds into the hot oil sizzling inside my largest cast iron skillet. I can again feel the cool terra cotta tiles beneath my bare feet as I peer over the edge of her table while she makes preparations for Guelaguetza, watching her strong brown hands move the worn stone tejoleté of her giant mocajete in fast even circles.

When I was a child, I believed her sinewy, wrinkled hands could work magic. She knew literally hundreds of recipes, an unbroken thread of knowledge stretching half a millennium back into Oaxaca's pre-Columbian past, conjuring everything from the richest stuffed quail in a pomegranate sauce, fit for a new bride's table, to a smelly poultice for the old cow's stiff knee. I would watch her make her velvety molli's while she told stories of an ancestress, an herbalist, who turned back an epidemic with her bitter teas and was denounced as a witch by a jealous neighbor's son, a boy she had saved from the fever. My grandmother had a reverence for the ancient power of the earth to heal and unite through food -- a power I have come to respect over the years. For I too have used her magic to push aside ignorance and prejudice. A plate of chilaquiles or pollo de la naranja is a great equalizer. It is hard for a man to hate someone with whom he has broken bread.

Sighing, I add a chopped plantain, sesame seeds, peanuts, walnuts, and raisins to the skillet. Slowly, I sprinkle in a couple of cloves, a pinch of cumin, thyme and cinnamon. As the mixture hisses and exhales sweet fumes, I look up.

Chet is sitting at the kitchen table half-heartedly seeding and deveining the roasted chiles. He is still shaken by yesterday, otherwise he'd be complaining about just how many chilies are in a pound. And I don't blame him.

During last winter's cold and flu season, we harassed Johnny and Roy endlessly about sharing their patients' germs with us. Roy let it roll right off, faulting our "feeble" immune systems, but John got angry. Naturally, we blamed every sniffle or cough on Johnny, laughing as he ranted. Now, it doesn't seem so funny.

I stare at my hands and remember supporting Johnny's head, as he lay on the roof deck shaking and sweating in the throes of Kokie fever. Even as he weakly struggled, I had been glad of my gloves, a thick leather barrier separating me from his damp and virulent skin. After we loaded John in the Stokes and attendants carried him off, I watched the truckies from 110's back away from us, leaving Chet, Mike, and I to breakdown and stow the gear ourselves. Roy's stricken expression told them -- and us -- all we needed to know.

Chet throws the last pepper into the heavy stoneware bowl full of warm water and rubs the purple bruise forming around the puncture left when the nurse drew a sample of his blood. His face is tight with worry, fatigue, and concern. Yesterday, The-Powers-That-Be at Rampart made it very clear they didn't want a bunch of potential Typhoid Mary's hanging around their ER. By mutual agreement Chet and I had headed to my empty apartment, away from his family and mine. Now we sit in self-imposed quarantine waiting: for our test results, for news, for one or the other of us to drop.... And all the while, I undertake the casting of a spell from my ancestress' repertoire: ward off an epidemic, try to pull Johnny back to us with a favorite recipe. Unexpectedly, the futility of it catches up with me; my legs begin to shake. I turn off the flame beneath the skillet and drop into a chair beside Chet.

He crushes a chile seed between his fingers. "Are you sure that thing is working?" he asks, jerking his head toward the silent phone on the kitchen wall.

I frown and nod, pushing a bowl of baking soda dissolved in water across the table, for Chet to wash the burning chile oils from his fingers. "No news is good news. The doctor's are very busy, they'd only take the time to call if something had come up." Even as I speak, I know I am lying. We had left Roy sitting in a treatment room surrounded by nurses and Health Department officials, unless he too has been struck down, he could have -- should have -- called.

"Marco," begins Chet, studying his fingers immersed in the soda solution. The usual joking tone with which he holds the world at a distance is gone. "Do you ever think about dying?"

For an instant the image of the paper machete skeleton in a top hat and tailcoat, with which my sister adorns her table on Dia de los Muertos, floats behind my eyelids, a grinning death's head, the face of plague. Uncomfortable, I push the chiles beneath the red-tinged water, inhaling their earthy bitter odor. The phone rings, sparing me the necessity of answering. Chet jumps, spilling water all over the table.

I scramble for the phone. "Hello?"

"Marco." Roy sounds utterly exhausted and his words echo oddly.

An icy fist clenches tight around my heart. "Johnny?" Chet stares at the receiver in my hand, as though he can conjure some good news by sheer will power.

"He's..." Roy's stops and the silence stretches. I can't breathe. "...Hanging in there -- for now." Roy finally continues, having forced his voice back to something close to its normal register. But, I can hear fine cracks in its contrived smoothness, like tiny fractures spidering through an expensive crystal vase. "Marco, Tim Duntley's dead, the... damn... virus has killed him."

Chet's eyes are the size of saucers. I hate to think what expressions must be playing across my

face. I cover the receiver and repeat Roy's message about John. Chet slumps.

Roy is babbling. "Mady's a wreck. No one's there with her; I don't even think anyone has called Captain Merrick, yet." Suddenly he is silent, drained.

"What do the doctors say about Johnny?" I ask futilely, praying for a good word.

Roy erupts with a spate of medical jargon. My head swims with electrolyte levels, p-something-or-others, and BUN's. I give up on understanding; I listen instead to the tenor of his recitation and recognize that no matter how alarming it sounds to me, I am nowhere near as frightened as Roy is. In the background, I hear Captain Stanley speaking, his words unintelligible but their firm, no-nonsense timbre all too familiar.

"Marco, I'm gonna try a get some sleep."

The phone line crackles. I imagine Roy shifting, running his hand through his hair, and touching his tongue to his upper lip as he slowly exhales.

"Let me give you my number -- just in case," he concludes.

I can't imagine why he thinks that he needs to tell me his number. But, as he recites the digits, I realize this is not his home phone. "Where are you?"

He sighs again. "A hotel. I've been here ever since... since Tim got sick. I didn't want to expose Joanne and the kids. Cap came over yesterday."

"OK, I understand. Sleep well and keep me posted." I hang up.

"Well?" demands Chet, half standing.

I sit. "Roy says, Johnny is holding his own." I gloss over the less than optimistic picture Roy had just painted.

"Damn it!" explodes Chet, slamming his fist down on the table. Spoons, knives, bowls, spices, and lumps of chocolate jump. He stalks out onto the balcony.

I stare at the blistered skins of the tomatoes, tomatillos and onions, still sitting in the pan in which they were roasted, and again see Johnny's face the last time I saw him. As I tried to calm him, while Roy pointlessly labored over the already dead construction worker, the bright red flush drained from John's face, leaving him a bloodless, bone-deep white. Abruptly he stilled, his head dropping back on the tarred roof. Uncontrollable, violent tremors shook him until I could hear his teeth chattering....

Shaking my head, I force my thoughts away from these images, choosing a happier time. I recall instead, the first time Johnny tasted my grandmother's molli.

It was just a few months after the squad was assigned to the station. John's reputation as a very young, very competent rescue man and an easy mark had proceeded him. He was possessed of a mix of naivete and prickly, cat-like defensiveness that made him an irresistible target -- particularly for Chet a.k.a. "The Phantom", who had been the youngest man and butt-of-the-jokes at his last two houses. We fixed endless hands of cards to make Johnny wash the dishes, short-sheeted his bed, laced his meals with enough Tabasco, garlic and salt to maim, causing John to sniff and poke his food suspiciously before eating.... It got so bad that Roy finally threatened to personally even the score with the next person who pulled something. This is when I drew the cook's chore for the next shift and brought in a batch of my grandmother's molli paste. Like Chet, whose idea of Mexican food is a pan of Texas-truck-stop enchiladas an inch deep in greasy orange cheese, Johnny regarded the Tupperware container of dark, nearly black goo with serious misgivings. He grew even more dubious when I listed the ingredients, a reaction I played to the hilt as I cooked dinner that night.

By the time I served the meal, John was all but dancing in his chair, hoping to be toned out before he'd have to eat it and fall victim to what he was sure was another elaborate joke at his expense. But the gods of Dispatch ignored his request. He tasted the first bite with all the reckless abandon of a petty dictator expecting a poisoned cup, especially after Stoker's white-boy, low tolerance for chiles set Mike sweating and coughing. But when the first bite finally entered John's mouth, the distrust slid slowly from his face. His eyes grew wide and he smiled. "This is really good!" he announced, sharing a clear view of his last mouthful with me.

Suddenly, it is important to finish the molli. I stand, push aside the blender, open the high cupboard over the stove, and pull my grandmother's mocajete from the shelf. The grainy volcanic stone is cool beneath my fingers. Slowly, I unwrap the tejolette from the oiled paper my mother had used to protect it. Even now I can see her, standing in the kitchen of our weary 1920's bungalow on 18th Street, making salsa fresca and watching for my father to arrive home from his work on the high steel downtown. She had painted the room a bright lemon yellow and trained a bougainvillea up the outside wall under the window so that its flowers appeared to bloom right out of the windowsill, but none of this seemed to lighten her mood any as she waited and worried. With each year, anxiety ground its lines deeper into her face and spirit, until finally it wore her away entirely, leaving an empty shell.

Deliberately, I pour the warm fruit and nut mixture, moist chiles, and roasted vegetables into the bowl and begin to grind. The tejolette hisses softly as it crushed the ingredients against the bowl. Behind me the door to the balcony slides open.

"Let me do that." Chet nods toward the mocajete.

"OK." I step aside.

He moves the stone in awkward circles, sloshing some of the paste out of the bowl. It forms a reddish-brown puddle around one of the legs. A trickle of sweat runs down the side of his face and he bites his tongue as he works.

Chet senses my eyes upon him. He looks up. "It's Johnny's favorite," he says as though this explains everything.

I nod and turn back to the stove.

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*The molli negro recipe was adapted to the author's taste from a recipe by Soledad Lopez on*

*www.foodtv.com*