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Cover Page Footnote

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Nic Suarez

Call it Christmas Eve, call it Noche Buena, call it the holiest of days, or call it whatever you'd like—frankly, we call it an excuse to get fuckin' lit. For Anglo readers, Noche Buena is the way we Cubans refer to Christmas Eve. It's a chance to cut loose and kick back after a year's worth of pain, an excuse to roast a pig. However, don't mistake that revelry for peace. We would always try to check our emotional baggage at the door, but that's not how family functions work.

Obama and Cuba, D Wade or Lebron? Does this metal rod go up the pig's ass this way or that way? You name it, we fought about it. The chisme (gossip) would fly, the backhanded compliments would hit, and the judgmental gazes would last for an eternity. This was the Gomez family Christmas. This was our life—this was our Noche Buena.

Lechón is one of the strangest, and certainly one of the least problematic, conse-

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quences of colonization of the new world by the dastardly Spanish and Portuguese empires. Because the vast and insidious armies of Iberia spread out across the known world; suckling pig is a staple dish across a significant number of Spanish- or Portuguese-speaking countries. As with an untold number of other issues in Latin America, there is little agreement about the dish. You could put a

Cuban chef, a Colombian chef, a Chilean chef, and a Filipino chef in the same kitchen and they would each provide you with a different kind of rotisserie pig for a different season. From my perspective (the Cuban one), Lechón has always been a dish served during the warm winter month of December in Miami—a central aspect of our celebration of Christmas. Lechón is probably

the dish every Cuban associates with Noche Buena. Across every holiday season in South Florida, Cuba, the Philippines, Puerto Rico, and an untold number of other countries, whole generations of pigs are slaughtered to service our industrialized need for carnage. This is not that story, though I'm sure someone will soon write an excellent treatise on the subject. Instead, this is the story of my family's modest role in Latin America's war on pigs—a brief survey of our many nights celebrating Noche Buena in South Florida.

It was always an all-day affair. At our last Christmas, which ended up being our *last* Christmas in our family home, my Tía Elsa and my abuelo got up at 5:30 a.m. to pick up the pig from our local Sedano's, one of the larger Hispanic supermarkets in the United States. Personally, I wouldn't conflate its cultural heritage with the quality of its products. It's certainly on the lower end of supermarkets in South Florida, but the local one in Westchester, the neighborhood my grandparents lived in, usually had some decent deals with some of the hog farms around Florida. The particular pig they were buying was held in the back of the deli section. The pig—whom I would ceremoniously name Officer, as I had the past four pigs—was hung right next to a box of uncut deli meat right at the front of the freezer. By this time, our Noche Buena had shrunk from a raucous riot of a celebration with a few dozen people in attendance to a quiet affair with the six of us (my aunt; her boyfriend; my brother, Alex; my grandparents; and me). But the small number of participants did not stop my abuelo from putting in an order for a 70-pound pig. From what I heard, it had taken my poor aunt's boyfriend, Rich, three

shopping carts to get the fallen beast out of the store.

I had woken up much later than 5:30 a.m. By the time I rolled out of bed (at the much more reasonable hour of 10:30 a.m.), the pig had already been hung by the hair of its chinny-chin-chin. Its back was stamped with the name of the farm it had come from. Its ass was draining blood into a bedpan my abuelo had placed on a plastic foldout table beneath it.

The conversation I had with my abuelo while the pig drained still sticks with me nearly a year later.

"She is one ugly motherfucker, eh, Papito?" he said to me.

"When your father-father [his broken English failed to verbalize the possessive "father's"] was here, we used to fill up this entire driveway."

He gestured to our long concrete driveway. Today it was wet and empty, aside from a couple of dogs offering stern warnings to an Amazon driver. However, I could almost see the commotion my abuelo was trying to describe to me in a language that was foreign to him. From the way my tía described it, the parties that had occurred during my generation's life had never quite reached the heights of those that had taken place when my other abuelo was alive, but some nights had certainly gotten close. I had fond memories of the parked cars that extended well into the street itself, the people who hid between the cars to smoke cigarettes along with other things that could be smoked, and a litter's worth of critters that were around to pick at any food that was left over. These were the memories I had of rambunctious Noches Buenas from my youth. From what

my aunt said, you had to amp that shit up to 100 to get to the energy of their youthful Noches Buenas.

My abuelo continued reminiscing with me.

“Your abuelo always bought the pig. He was never asked to do shit. He always knew—he buys the pig, and I cook the pig.” He spoke with a smile before quickly finishing with, “That’s what I want to do today.”

All I could muster was a chuckle, because I knew that man was not fucking around.

For as long as I could remember, my abuelo had ruled our Noche Buena celebrations with an iron fist. From what I’d heard from my dad—along with other folks from that generation—my Abuelo Obillio had been dominating the Noche Buena celebrations for as long as anyone could remember. Not that he was a cruel tyrant, mind you; my abuelo’s being in charge of your party meant that everyone was going to get copious amounts of alcohol and everyone would be fed to their heart’s content. The late-night parties my grandparents threw on Christmas Eve were, by all accounts, the stuff of legend. People would crowd our lovely Westchester duplex from 12 p.m. to 12 a.m., and the most hard-core followers of my abuelo would usually stick around longer. Some of my most endearing memories of my childhood came from these kinds of celebrations. Drunken domino games in my abuelo’s garage, Celia Cruz blasting from our house speakers as we tried to talk over one another, and the inevitable moment when I had to carry a drunk family member to their room. Mom? Abuelo? Abuela? Aunt? Didn’t matter! Over the years, I had to carry each of them to their

bed at least once.

That revelry came with a price for all of them. However, one family member needed her guardian angels when she was drunk more than most: Abuela Mirtha. Abuela Mirtha was a small old Cuban lady who loved to drink—as all old Cuban ladies like to do. Her drinks of choice had always been Heineken beer and white wine, but that did not mean she was picky. My abuela loved to make other people happy, and she loved to do it her way. She was constantly making sure everyone had a full glass or a full plate. At times, it had gotten so rough that my aunt would shout “Food pusher!” any time she would fret about my brother’s or my not having any kind of food in our hands. There was a really sweet, but incredibly firm, stubbornness within my abuela. That could often result in arguments with my occasionally short-tempered aunt, but their arguments were usually about practical things. My abuelo’s arguments with my aunt were true knock-down, drag-out boxing matches, but my abuela’s arguments really had the tenor of a pickup basketball match in the park. Sure, people might say heated things in the moment, but neither of them really took it beyond that moment.

Admittedly, there were more than a few moments when I had to gently guide my abuela into her bed. The one I always think of happened around the time I was in middle school. My abuela had been up since 6:30 a.m. preparing all the side dishes that were required for such a large meal. She did not get to take her victory lap for another 12 hours from that moment, but when she did, she went hard. My brother Alex and I each had to get on one side of her to make sure

she had enough balance to get through the long hallway of the duplex to her bedroom.

The hallway in my grandparents' house was narrow, and I definitely ended up scraping by some of our family pictures while we tried to get my abuela to bed. She had spent the brief walk mumbling, and everything I could make out was pretty funny.

“So nice to see everyone...I loved the dancing...the food, que bueno Nic!”

When we finally got her into bed, she began to realize she was going to sleep. The next morning, she slept through the exchanging of Christmas gifts for the first time in my lifetime. In hindsight, I think this might have been the first time I recognized drinking as the cause of a hangover. Still, my abuela's rock star status should not be underestimated. Even though she had slept through the morning, Abuela Mirtha made sure she saw us before we went to spend the afternoon with our dad's side of the family. My mom had a weird rule about us having three gifts on Christmas—it was something about the three gifts the baby Jesus was given when he was born—but that did not stop my abuela. She would always make sure to palm us a twenty when my mom was not looking. “It's just a little something from me and your abuelo,” she would say. To this day, she always whispers whenever she gives my brother and me a Christmas gift.

To my way of thinking, my Abuela Mirtha was the sweetest person ever to grace the Earth. Very few people who've met her would disagree with me on that. She would spend the entirety of daylight during Noche Buena making sure everyone had enough food, drinks, and just about anything else they needed. By the time the sun set and the

pig was out, she would abandon her hosting persona to be the coolest person around. The Heineken, wine, and salsa dancing flowed, with my abuela at the center of it all. When the dancing happened, she was usually about two hours away from needing assistance to get to her bedroom—assistance we all were, and still are, thrilled to give her.

Roasting an entire pig over the course of a day is a long, tiresome process. It requires getting elbow-deep in a dead pig, hanging that pig upside down, and inserting numerous metallic objects through the pig's anus to ensure that most of the meat stays within the pig while it's slowly roasting inside a metal box. It's a grotesque ritual, but it results in some of the best pork you could ever imagine. My abuelo always took the lead in this process, and God help you if you weren't doing things his way. Not a single person could escape his wrath. Everyone had, at some point or other, had to face my abuelo when he was furious. Sometimes he'd get so pink-in-the-face mad that you couldn't distinguish his face from the pig's ass, but these blowouts were no laughing matter. The worst arguments by far always occurred with my Tía Elsa. My Tía Elsa and my abuelo had always had a tense relationship, but cooking food for a large crowd had a tendency to make that tense relationship ungovernable. It was always teetering toward an argument they couldn't walk away from, the kind that they would carry with them for the rest of their lives. But whether because of the magic of the season or because of the sweet allure of the scent of roasting pig, the arguments always managed to die down just before they hit the point of

no return. Then again, maybe there were other reasons. These daylong affairs of cooking a pig meant folks had time to cool down between arguments. After we'd lowered the pig into its hot metal box, there was not really much else to do than refill the coal at the bottom of the box and make sure the pig was spinning properly. This meant warring parties could find solace in not being around each other. My aunt would go drink with her friends, and my abuelo would go drink alone by his small shed and grumble. By the time the pig was done hours later, both had drunk enough to forget their torrid arguments. The end result was a huge spread and a pig cooked to golden-brown perfection. My abuelo loved eating the eyeballs, and he would generally claim the head of the pig for himself, though he always let me have the ears.

After Noche Buena 2022, my abuelo's dementia began to progress rapidly. Now I find myself writing about our home in the past tense, because our home is no longer ours. My abuelo never settled down. His rapid deterioration meant that he began talking to folks he should not have trusted. The poison in his mind consumed all. After a significant number of decades, I saw my grandparents' relationship deteriorate into a vicious cage match. My abuela tried to maintain guardianship over my abuelo; he sued to maintain his competency, and he won. By that point, the damage was done. My abuela had to accept that the man she had married was gone—consumed by an inability to let go and let the people around him take care of him.

My grandparents sold their house in Westchester at the beginning of this past

December. The house would change ownership halfway through the month. In the new year, my grandparents would be divorced. My abuela is now living with my aunt and her boyfriend at a place they're renting near Downtown Miami. My abuelo is planning to live in an efficiency on the property of some of his shady-ass cousins. His plans, at various points, have included going to the Dominican Republic with the half million dollars he got from his half of the proceeds from the house sale; visiting France, the United Kingdom, and Spain to track down distant relatives he knew when he was young; staying in Miami and renting an efficiency from the aforementioned cousins; and about a million other things, I'm sure. Regardless, I'm not certain I'll be seeing much of him.

I'll be heading back to Miami soon. After the year we've had, I would not be shocked if my family decided to sit out this year's war on the pig. I certainly wouldn't blame them. The Noches Buenas I knew as a kid are gone. In some ways they've been gone for a while, but I feel as if the past year has emphasized that reality. The space may be in the hands of some shady doctor from North Florida, but we didn't go with it. The honest-to-God truth is that I don't need the creature comforts of the place where I grew up to celebrate my family. South Florida, Central Florida, North Florida, or, God forbid, some place that is not Florida—it does not make a difference to me! My home is where my family is, and Noche Buena will always be celebrated in my home. So, what if it moves out from under me? It will not be the first time that has happened in my life. I'm just happy to be around my family.