



8th Grade Best of the Best, Round 4

Mi Familia (My Family)

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The air is thick with culinary fumes and Spanish accents. My grandmother (*abuela*) mans the stove, her worn hands grip the handle of the frying pan as its contents simmer.

The Vasquez family reunions are not for the claustrophobic. We encompass almost four generations of Cuban women and loud voices and quick tempers seem to be hereditary.

Crammed into a tiny kitchen, everyone is in your face, and as much as I love all of them, sometimes it can be overwhelming. My aunt, *Tia* Elena, waltzes into the room, carrying the pot of clams we raked from the bay earlier this morning. Everyone had bobbed in the freezing water, teeth chattering, and we were all surprised we had caught anything at all.

It had been my first time on a boat, and after the sharp wind licked my face the first time, I knew I would never forget it. Upon returning, I threw myself on the beach, vowing never to go back.

"*Mi hija*," my mom had said, smoothing my hair. "Of course you'll go back," and she pinched my cheek. Cuban women are strong-minded and determined. I know when it comes down to it, I'd have to do anything she wanted. And I would do it willingly. Being surrounded by my family evokes a sense of strength, pride, and eternity, that burn within me, right below my heart.

We would later sit on the beach, and talk, and laugh. My great grandmother (*mi bisabuela*) likes to tell stories about when she was young, living in Cuba. My grandmother is there to point out minor details that have been forgotten with age, and I struggle to keep up with the rapid flow of Spanish words.

I scoop sand in my hands and let it seep back between my fingers slowly; then faster and faster until my hands are empty again.



My family, my Cuban heritage and lineage, is ongoing, simple in its continuation. My great grandmother seems old to me, but there will always have been generations before her, perhaps sharing stories on the sand, on the beaches outside Havana.

I look around me, and I am proud to be part of my family. Each of us has a story, and if you listen carefully and brush up on your Spanish, you can hear each and every one.

Now, back in the kitchen, I get up from the table, and help spice the black bean soup, and watch the *empanadillas* fry. These recipes go back long before the oldest generation in the room was my age.

The laughing subsides, and my aunt Margaret (*tia* Margarita) is quick to point out that I have overcooked the *empanadillas*. Again, she clucks her tongue.

"With time," she says. "You will learn with time." With time I'll be teaching this recipe to my children. Maybe grandchildren and great grandchildren. Our history, as well as our recipes, will continue, handed down from generation to generation, for eternity.