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A Recipe for Life

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Cooking, for author Laura Esquivel of Like Water for Chocolate, is the lens through which we, the readers, are allowed to peer into the De la Garza family. As she sharpens her focus on the family, we perceive their relationships, lifestyle, and the times in which they lived. She begins each chapter with a recipe that becomes the medium for developing each family member and the backdrop for their romances. In each family, there is function and dysfunction. The author deftly uses the preparation of recipes to mirror the family's joys and sorrows. A meal created in happiness was declared delicious. Crying into a soup had devastating results. In real life, our emotions have a great effect on the outcome of our accomplishments. This is reinforced by the plethora of positive thinking books and seminars in our society today. Just be happy!

My own family closely resembled the De la Garza family in structure. Like Tita, the main character, I was the youngest daughter of a family ruled by a strong mother. My oldest sister left home like Gertrudis, Tita's older sister, desperate and determined to find her own happiness. Tita was at the mercy of tradition of old Mexico, where the youngest daughter was not to marry but to remain at home to care for her mother. My role did not stem from tradition, but was silently communicated to me, sealing my position in the family hierarchy. For both Tita and me, an unreasonable assertion was made upon our lives without regard to self, feelings, or desires. No opposition was tolerated. Suffering was to be done in silence and grief left unexpressed. Loyalty was ingrained. We became victims of gravity, orbiting our mothers, helpless satellites within the confines of their unnatural laws.

All creative abilities were the reserved domain of our mothers. Like Tita, I was allowed creative expression through cooking. Chopping onions was an acceptable reason for crying. Our food revealed ourselves. Tita found her joy for living in the kitchen—a region uninhabited by her mother.

Tita states . . . "the right to determine the course of one's own life would take more effort than she had imagined." Anytime a river overflows, seeking a new course, it is considered a crisis! People galvanize to prevent the inevitable. Tita boiled over her banks "like water for chocolate." Frustration from constricted boundaries, like too-tight shoes continually pinching her soul, propelled her over the edge in search of her own riverbed. This conscious stepping outside unconscious boundaries is a scary

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act. The known has been left behind, and the now becomes uncomfortable, uneasy, and unsure: a crisis mixture of anxiety and hope.

Born into the river of life, the riverbed of our families cuts deep channels into our unconscious behavior. Channels of normal events of births, deaths, and weddings are repeated year upon year, forming the path of our lives. Tita and I were predestined to empty ourselves back upon our mothers in fulfillment of their needs and desires.

Like water for chocolate, the process of boiling is part of the preparation, the recipe for our rebirth. The efforts to resist family controls and restraints are enormous. Tita did not release herself until years after her mother had died, those controls stretching beyond the grave. Tita finally broke free of her restraints, super-imposed as a child, later self-imposed as a woman. She denounced her mother's ghost, and it promptly left, like an uninvited guest. After her liberation, she gave value to her feelings and married her first and truest love—a magical ending to an excellent novel.

This book has helped me to see that as children, we are innocent and helpless, needing our family's direction. However, as adults, we are to decide our pathways. I understand. More importantly, I can forgive. When I stopped giving permission to the unnatural controls over my life, I set myself free to follow my own course and give it value. Tita is fiction, but I am real.