

Reading Homework 1 – *Como agua para chocolate* by Laura Esquivel

This text is the first half of the first chapter of the book that we study in Spanish at A-Level. It is set in Mexico during the Mexican Revolution (around 1910) and tells the story of a girl called Tita who lives on a ranch with her family. Read the text and answer the questions set by your teacher on Google Classroom. **You will find some vocabulary help at the bottom of the text to help you if you need it.**

CHAPTER ONE

January - Christmas Rolls

INGREDIENTS:

1 can of sardines
1/2 chorizo sausage
1 onion
oregano
1 can of serrano chillies
10 hard rolls

PREPARATION:

Take care to chop the onion fine. To keep from crying when you chop it (which is so annoying!), I suggest you place a little bit on your head. The trouble with crying over an onion is that once the chopping gets you started and the tears begin to well up, the next thing you know you just can't stop. I don't know whether that's ever happened to you, but I have to confess it's happened to me, many times. Mama used to say it was because I was especially sensitive to onions, like my great-aunt, Tita.

Tita was so sensitive to onions, any time they were being chopped, they say she would just cry and cry; when she was still in my great-grandmother's belly her sobs were so loud that even Nacha, the cook, who was half-deaf, could hear them easily. Once her wailing got so violent that it brought on an early labour. And before my great-grandmother could let out a word or even a whimper, Tita made her entrance into this world, prematurely, right there on the kitchen table **amid** the smells of simmering noodle soup, thyme, bay leaves, and cilantro, steamed milk, garlic, and, of course, onion. Tita had no need for the **usual slap on the bottom**, because she was already crying as she emerged; maybe that was because she knew then that it would be her **lot in life** to be denied marriage. The way Nacha told it, Tita was literally washed into this world on a great tide of tears that spilled over the edge of the table and flooded across the kitchen floor.

That afternoon, when the uproar had **subsided** and the water had been dried up by the sun, Nacha swept up the residue the tears had left on the red stone floor. There was enough salt to fill a ten-pound sack—it was used for cooking and lasted a

long time. Thanks to her unusual birth, Tita felt a deep love for the kitchen, where she spent most of her life from the day she was born.

When she was only two days old, Tita's father, my great-grandfather, died of a heart attack and Mama Elena's milk dried up from the shock. Since there was no such thing as powdered milk in those days, and they couldn't find a **wet nurse** anywhere, they were in a panic to satisfy the infant's hunger. Nacha, who knew everything about cooking—and much more that doesn't enter the picture until later—offered to take charge of feeding Tita. She felt she had the best chance of “educating the innocent child's stomach,” even though she had never married or had children. Though she didn't know how to read or write, when it came to cooking she knew everything there was to know. Mama Elena accepted her offer gratefully; she had enough to do between her **mourning** and the enormous responsibility of running the ranch—and it was the ranch that would provide her children the food and education they deserved without having to worry about feeding a new-born baby on top of everything else.

From that day on, Tita's **domain** was the kitchen, where she grew **vigorous** and healthy on a diet of teas and thin corn **gruels**. This explains the sixth sense Tita developed about everything concerning food. Her eating habits, for example, were **attuned** to the kitchen routine: in the morning, when she could smell that the beans were ready; at midday, when she sensed the water was ready for plucking the chickens; and in the afternoon, when the dinner bread was baking, Tita knew it was time for her to be fed.

Sometimes she would cry for no reason at all, like when Nacha chopped onions, but since they both knew the cause of those tears, they didn't pay them much mind. They made them a source of entertainment, so that during her childhood Tita didn't distinguish between tears of laughter and tears of sorrow. For her laughing was a form of crying.

On Mama Elena's ranch, sausage making was a real ritual. The day before, they started peeling garlic, cleaning chillies, and grinding spices. All the women in the family had to participate: Mama Elena; her daughters, Gertrudis, Rosaura, and Tita; Nacha, the cook; and Chenchá, the maid. They gathered around the dining-room table in the afternoon, and between the talking and the joking the time flew by until it started to get dark. Then Mama Elena would say:

“That's it for today.”

For a good listener, it is said, a single word will **suffice**, so when they heard that, they all sprang into action. First they had to clear the table; then they had to assign tasks: one collected the chickens, another drew water for breakfast from the well, a third was in charge of wood for the stove. There would be no ironing, no embroidery, no sewing that day. When it was all finished, they went to their bedrooms to read, say their prayers, and go to sleep. One afternoon, before Mama Elena told them they could leave the table, Tita, who was then fifteen, announced

in a trembling voice that Pedro Muzquiz would like to come and speak with her. . . .

After an endless silence during which Tita's soul shrank, Mama Elena asked: "And why should this gentleman want to come talk to me?"

Tita's answer could barely be heard: "I don't know."

Mama Elena threw her a look that seemed to Tita to contain all the years of repression that had flowed over the family, and said: "If he intends to **ask for your hand**, tell him not to bother. He'll be wasting his time and mine too. You know perfectly well that being the youngest daughter means you have to take care of me until the day I die."

With that Mama Elena got slowly to her feet, put her glasses in her apron, and said in a tone of final command: "That's it for today."

What will happen to Tita? Will Pedro come to the house to ask if he can marry her? You'll find out in your next reading homework!

Vocabulary Help

amid = amongst / during

usual slap on the bottom = In the past, if a baby was born and did not cry immediately, doctors would hold the baby and do this action to help clear the baby's airways. This is not something that happens any more when babies are born.

lot in life = someone's general situation in life

subside = decrease / lessen

wet nurse = In the past, if a woman was not able to feed her baby herself, a woman may have been employed to breastfeed the woman's baby

mourning = the expression of sorrow for someone's death

domain = another word for kingdom

vigorous = full of strength / energy

gruel = a thin liquid food of oatmeal or other meal boiled in milk or water.

attune = adjust or adapt

suffice = be enough or adequate.

ask for your hand = to request permission to marry someone