EDUCATION

WATCHING WHAT WE EAT

ON THE COMPLICATED POLITICS OF THE SCHOOL CAFETERIA

by Kat Kinsman

ANGELA HASSON PULLED ME ASIDE IN THE LUNCHROOM to tell me that everyone thought my family was poor. This was news to me. So far as I could tell, my sister and I didn't look anything like the barefoot, swollen-bellied children on the sides of the UNICEF cartons into which we slipped spare pennies. Nor did anyone attempt to gift us with sacks of half-eaten sandwiches, the likes of which our Grandmother Ribando said starving Armenian children would be most grateful to have. (*Clean your plates, girls. Clean your plates.*)

I pressed her for evidence and she relished the words, tumbling them around in her mouth like a disc of butterscotch before spitting them out on her Jell-O dish: "My mom says it's weird that your mom wraps your sandwiches in Saran Wrap instead of a Ziploc. And why do you always have carrot sticks and a couple of potato chips when we all have cookies? Did your dad lose his job or something?"

I bought my lunch for the rest of sixth grade, making sure to spring for the chocolate milk instead of white — extra nickel be damned (and sorry, faraway UNICEF urchins). It's not that I especially enjoyed the grey-meated burgers and leathery green beans slopped on my plate by a rotating cast of conscripted parents, but I loathed the notion that my peers thought they could infer anything personal from my lunch tray.

This was not a luxury afforded the students of my husband's public high school in High Point, North Carolina. Each morning, as homeroom teachers called roll, students were forced to make a public declaration of the state of their family's finances.

"Jasper?" "Present."

"Jenkins?" "I get a free lunch."

"Johnson?" "I ain't getting milk."

The milk refusal, it should be noted,

was not a proto-PETA stance or a finger in the face of classroom posters touting the bone-building benefits of dairy. It was an almost punitive jab at the poorest kids who couldn't afford the ten cents for a beverage to accompany their school-provided lunch. And a good morning to you, students. Happy learning.

THE SCHOOL CAFETERIA IS A NOBLE CONCEPT that has often failed the young people who visit it each day. In theory, a communal feeding space for children should be a breeding ground for well-nourished bon vivants of the future. In my utopian dreams, the wee bairns would populate a different round table each day, busting up any chance of cliques, accommodating eaters of all paces and family income levels and celebrating the cuisines of each eater's people.

"Today, we're all going to have Isabelle's family's favorite American chop suey. Yes, Justin, I know it looks like your family's Johnny Marzetti, and Ashleigh, like your mom's chili mac, but Izzy's dad puts paprika in theirs just like his mom and her mom did, and that's OK. Try it."

But that's not how it works—or at least it didn't a few decades back, and that's why my friend Devna Shukla ended up eating her lunch in the bathroom. She wrote in an *Eatocracy* essay that, as the only girl of color at a school in an otherwise blonde-and-blue Ohio suburb, Indian food was for home enjoyment, and PB&J was for public consumption. That is, until the day that her mother packed a kachori in her lunchbox.

Savoring her favorite "outside of school" treat in front of friends would further the cultural rift she was so determined to seam, but she could not deny the deliciousness of the spicy little balls of mung beans and gram flour that were her birthright. So she made a decision she regrets to this very day: Rather than sharing this small taste of her culture at the cafeteria table with her friends, she crept to the girls' room and ate it in a stall.

Given America's current obsession with—and fetishizing of—many cultures' cuisines, the irony of that cafeteria clash was not lost on Devna or on the dozens of commenters who shared their own school eating experiences on that story and a follow-up post I wrote called "The Kid with the Stinky Lunch."

A self-identified "American Hispanic citizen" told of being too poor to afford bread, peanut butter, or jelly, and being taunted at school for bringing tacos as lunch. "We were embarrassed so we used to hide the taco in the brown paper bag, small bites so no one could see the taco. They would make fun of us."

Another commenter, Lisa, recalled bringing Greek salt-cured olives to school with her salami-on-rye sandwiches, wrapped in waxed paper instead of plastic baggies. "The kids would scream, 'You're eating prunes, *ewwwww*!'" In her house, the word for mustard was "senapé," a colloquial northern Italian term, so she asked for that on the first hot dog day at her Catholic school. Her peers took note. Again.

Diana experienced similar taunts from her schoolmates. Not only did she grow up feeling like a bit of an outsider for bringing Macedonian baked goods like zelnik with leeks and feta cheese to school, but her father worked at a paper bag manufacturing company and was allowed to bring home the "irregular," slightly oversized, waxy white bags. "I didn't think anything of it until one day someone joked that I brought a big bag of donuts to lunch. Oh how I wished for a bologna sandwich and a juice box in a brown paper bag!"

Maybe cafeteria politics and proclivities have changed in the decades since I've been in school. I'm a forty-one-year-old mother of none and would be hard-pressed to find an excuse to manifest in a lunchroom without it being kinda creepy. I know, as a journalist and a follower of food politics, that the most pressing current issue for children is one of healthy caloric intake. I also know, as a human, that I want cultural and economic acceptance at the lunch table wrapped into the meal and served up alongside the rest of the day's lessons.

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PHOTO, PAGE 34, *by Mark Steinmetz*.