

CRISTINA HENRIQUEZ

Lunch

Cristina Henriquez is an award-winning American author. She has published three books, including most recently, The Book of Unknown Americas (2014), which was a New York Times Notable Book and was nominated for the Andrew Carnegie Medal for Excellence in Fiction. Henriquez has also published both stories and essays in the New Yorker, the Atlantic, and Ploughshares, and her work has been anthologized in several collections.

"Lunch" appeared in the September 2007 issue of the New Yorker as one of a group of essays about food and family. As you read it, pay attention to the way a story about a meal is really about family and much more.

In Panama, family dinners happen at lunchtime. At least, in my family they did. This was something I learned as a young girl when we took summer vacations to the country where my father had lived until, with two worn suitcases and a student visa in hand, he left to study chemical engineering at the University of Delaware. There was never any discussion of alternative destinations, and I looked forward to the trips because of how different everything seemed from the United States and how, year after year, so much in Panama remained the same.

We stayed at my grandparents' house, a two-story building not far from Panama City's financial district with twisted pink columns like candy and a wavy red clay roof like the ruffled edge of lasagna. In the morning, I would lie in the small bedroom I shared with my brother and sister—a circulating fan perched on a wooden chair, hens in the back yard cawing, sunlight pouring in through the gauzy curtains—and inhale the sharp smell of garlic as it wafted through the house, the signal that my grandmother had already begun her lunch preparations. I would wander out in my nightgown and flip-flops to find her in a thin housecoat and a

baseball cap, hunched over the stove, stirring a gigantic pot of the meal she made every day: *sancocho*.

Sancocho is a traditional Latin American soup, and my grandmother crafted her version out of yucca, *ñame*, *otoc*, *culantro*, garlic, oregano, a stumpy cob of corn, chicken feet, a chicken neck, and chicken meat. Alongside it, she served plantains and rice that she cooked in a cast-aluminum *paila*, intentionally burning the grains at the bottom in hot oil.

Two aunts, two uncles, six cousins, and at least a dozen friends so intimate that we called them family also lived in Panama City, so every day my grandmother set two tables—one in the kitchen and one in the adjacent dining room—in case anyone should stop by. She dressed the tables with her best silverware, plastic placemats, plastic tablecloths, plastic napkin holders, plastic toothpick dispensers, drinking glasses emblazoned with worn World Cup decals, and salt shakers cut with dry rice to keep the salt from clumping in the humid air. She filled the glasses with water or Coca-Cola and covered them with coasters to keep the flies at bay. At every place setting, she turned melamine bowls, like miniature igloos, over packed mounds of rice on matching plates.

It was a boisterous time of day, with everyone talking across rooms, reaching for food, and laughing. It seemed all the more so because, until my Spanish improved, in high school, to me the noise was just that—noise—rising up around me like puffs of smoke. My grandfather removed his work shirt and cufflinks, and ate in a white ribbed tank, grinning underneath his silver moustache, regaling everyone with the news of the day and tales of politics, all of which I heard secondhand, translated by my mother. My grandmother went from one table to the other, making sure everyone was fed.

Much of this was the sort of thing we might have done at home in the United States, of course. My mother cooked dishes like pepper steak, Shake 'n Bake chicken, and spaghetti; we set the table, laid out silverware, ate rapaciously, and, with five people in the house, had our share of spirited conversation. But at home those activities were a cue to start winding down for the evening—to finish our homework, watch something on television, put on our pajamas. In Panama, it was still the middle of the day. By the time dinner rolled around, no one sat together at the table. We were expected to fend for ourselves.

My grandfather died five years ago, and since then our lunch-time ceremony has never quite been the same. My grandmother moved into my aunt's house, on the opposite side of the city. She cooks in a different kitchen now, and no one comes home for lunch anymore, because it's too far from people's jobs.

The last time I visited was also the first time I had travelled to Panama by myself. My grandmother and I sat together in the midday heat and shared Chinese food, the leftovers from my dinner at a restaurant the night before. The dog, who was our only companion, stretched out under the table, cooling his belly against the floor. I warmed two plates of mixed vegetables and tofu in the microwave and slid one in front of my grandmother. She studied it for a long time. Finally, she speared the tofu with a fork and tentatively put it to her lips. When she tasted it, she grimaced.

LANGSTON HUGHES

Salvation

Born in 1902 in Joplin, Missouri, Langston Hughes became a major figure in the Harlem Renaissance, a flowering of African American literature, art, music, and scholarship in the 1920s and 1930s. He was first and foremost a poet, incorporating the vernacular of the streets and the rhythms of the jazz clubs into his voice. He was also a playwright, a fiction writer, an essayist, and an autobiographer. In "Salvation" we can see the skills with which Hughes created imaginative literature; here, in nonfiction, he both tells the story of an important point in his life and makes his readers think about significant ideas, doing so poetically and with great economy and expressiveness. As you read, keep the essay's title in the back of your head, and think about why Hughes might have chosen it.

I was saved from sin when I was going on thirteen. But not really saved. It happened like this. There was a big revival at my Auntie Reed's church. Every night for weeks there had been much preaching, singing, praying, and shouting, and some very hardened sinners had been brought to Christ, and the membership of the church had grown by leaps and bounds. Then just before the revival ended, they held a special meeting for children, "to bring the young lambs to the fold." My aunt spoke of it for days ahead. That night I was escorted to the front row and placed on the mourners' bench with all the other young sinners, who had not yet been brought to Jesus.

My aunt told me that when you were saved you saw a light, and something happened to you inside! And Jesus came into your life! And God was with you from then on! She said you could see and hear and feel Jesus in your soul. I believed her. I had heard a great many old people say the same thing and it seemed to me they ought to know. So I sat there calmly in the hot, crowded church, waiting for Jesus to come to me.

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