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A Hearty Meal for Your Nourishment

Do you remember when the teacher looked into your lunch box and caught a glimpse into your entire life? The fights that shook those aching, thin walls that dared to spill the secrets of everyone in the house. The protruding ribs and bony arms you shared with your sister. Your confusion at the paper labeled “Petition for Divorce” tucked inside your mother’s tear-stained pillowcase. The money she spent on late-night phone calls and hidden bottles of cheap drinks rather than food for the table.

The teacher asked if you wanted to get a meal from the lunch line. It was not a question because she would have brought you a tray of slimy strawberries and questionable pizza even if you said no.

You walked down the aisle with pride. You paraded yourself, waved, and gave phony smiles to the little girls with fuller lunch boxes, dresses their parents got anywhere besides the clearance rack, and blonde, brunette, and red pigtails that hung down with the help of bows their moms crafted and monogrammed with letters the girls did not even understand. You were nothing like them, sporting carpenter jeans from a cousin you did not know and plaits tied with hair beads that clicked with every step. They did not look back at you.

What did the lunch taste like? Did it feel gross in your mouth? Did your saliva turn to paste the way it did when you heard him call her a slut? You wanted to intervene so badly, but you couldn’t because you were 6 and everything you said was a combination of random words

that barely even made sense to you, so you had to sit there and listen until it ended. Then she would go yell at your sister for drawing flowers on the wall and hug you for being the best daughter a mother could ever ask for.

Did you smile at your friends when you tasted the rotten fruit? Was it because you wanted to show them that you were happy and they did not need to ask any questions, or was it because you were happy? And the fruit tasted good because it was the only fresh fruit you had eaten in so long with the last taste being at your friend's house. You sat uncomfortably in the big home, dipped a strawberry in a container of whipped cream, and told your friend about your parents and their fights and the bruises and the new house and your sister and how she tormented you not because she hated you but because she was angry and you were the only one in the house who would listen.

Sarah was your friend's name. Sarah asked if you wanted to play with dolls, and you said yes.