

The Saga of My Eating Habits

1.

If my mother were writing this essay, she would probably start by sharing the challenge of raising a child like me. Not just because of the natural difficulties involved in the raising children process, but also because I didn't like to eat.

My mom breastfed me for only five months – I didn't want it anymore – from that month on, she rarely got a full night's sleep. Not just because of the tireless hours I spent crying, but also because of the pain of the milk hardening in her breast.

My pediatrician? He even knew the frequency and wavelength of my crying while my mother waited for her weekly appointment. It was like I was a horn alerting our arrival in the hospital area.

She tried everything imaginable to satisfy my hunger – milk, powdered milk, porridge, milk flour, and other plausible baby meal options. All were rejected by me.

To try to get rid of her pain, she started donating her own breast milk.

I don't know if you have children – I don't – but I find myself imagining the despair of a mom when her five-month-old baby doesn't want to eat *anything* – and the worst, she can't even have a dialogue with that baby – it's all based on feeling.

Although sometime later, a neighbor recommended *cremogema*, a type of cornstarch-based pudding mixed with milk, sugar, and vanilla, and then cooked on the stove until it thickens into a pudding-like consistency, – the only food consumed by me for the next year – the saga with my eating was only in its first movie.

The long red sofa for four, upholstered in a not-very-comfortable fabric in our living room, became my bed for the afternoons when my mother had to watch me while she was busy

with her chores around the house. Despite being only two years old, I vaguely remember the struggle it took for me to open my eyes and stay awake. That year, I was diagnosed with severe anemia –

"Sweetie, you need to help me! You need to eat! You can ask anything ... Mommy will make it for you! ANYTHING! Tell me, huh? What do you want to eat?

...

You know... If you eat, you'll be able to grow, get strong, and you'll be able to go back to school, you will have the energy to go to the playground and play with the other kids...you'll be able to run, and dance..."

...

This time, I could understand her request –

"Caldinho de feijão!"

A traditional Brazilian soup made from black beans. And so, the cremogema was replaced by beans becoming my favorite food.

My mother took advantage of this new opportunity that I had given her, to use beans with other sides – rice, pasta, and potatoes. Along with this new diet, for the next six months, I would also be taking *Biotônico Fontoura* – a popular Brazilian tonic, known as a dietary supplement to help promote health. It contains a combination of vitamins, minerals, and herbal extracts, including iron, calcium, vitamin B12, and caffeine. It is marketed as a tonic to help improve appetite, digestion, and overall well-being. Also, it is often taken by people who feel run down or those recovering from an illness. The biotônico is something that Brazilian children have in common, and the iFunny Brazil page even made the meme "I've taken so much biotônico in childhood that hunger no longer goes away" – even though I recovered a few months later, and

raised my mother's expectations to believe that this was just a phase – my appetite remained unchanged.

2.

Waking up in the morning has never been my forte – despite being necessary to go to school. My mother used to leave my bedroom door semi-open and from there, I could hear the *Bom Dia Rio Grande* giving the news and announcing the weather forecast. Although this was a sign for me to get up, what really pulled me out of bed was the smell of black coffee coming from the kitchen. At the age of 11, I was already addicted to caffeine. No black coffee in the morning? Lifeless for the rest of the day, still followed by a headache.

When I got home from school for lunch, my mother and brother were already sitting down waiting for me with their beautiful and colorful plates of rice, beans, meat, and salad. At the end of the table, a plate of processed chicken ramen was waiting for me. I remember that stage well. The smell of rice and beans made me nauseous, and the only thing I could eat for lunch was that bucket of sodium with water.

"Honey! Don't you get tired of eating this every day? You know you can ask for anything, *anything!* Mom can do..."

At that point, I already understood that my mother would do anything to get me to eat – but this time, nothing came to my mind.

Still, when I reached adolescence – my mother was hopeful that some things would change – and indeed they did – the variety of choices expanded, but they still weren't the healthiest ones.

I went through the phase where I only had frozen lasagna for lunch with a can of Coke. The microwave pizza phase.

The McDonald's french fries for breakfast phase.

The headaches by the lack of caffeine phase.

And also the phase when I started to deny food again, simply because I was sick of all types of food.

My body sweating cold, blurred vision, wheezing, and weak legs were some of the symptoms I felt before passing out in the middle of the metro at 4 pm for not having ingested anything but water all day. Firefighters rescued me and took me to the station's emergency room. "What's your name? ... Where do you live? ... How old are you? ... Do you suffer from seizures? ... Are you allergic to any medications?"

I UNDERSTAND THIS IS YOUR F JOB! BUT COULD YOU FOR A SECOND LEAVE ME ALONE? I DON'T EVEN KNOW WHAT'S GOING ON! HOW DID I GET HERE? WHERE I AM? AND WHO TF ARE YOU?

"No sir, I'm just hungry! I haven't eaten anything today!"

As soon as he went quiet, no further inquiries were made. He turned his back to me and picked up his walkie-talkie to babble some words that I could not understand. A second firefighter arrived handing me a bag with a *coxinha* – or "little thigh" a popular Brazilian snack that is typically shaped like a small chicken drumstick, made by shaping a dough made from wheat flour and chicken filling it with a mixture of shredded chicken, spices, cream cheese, and deep-frying it until golden brown – and a can of Coke. I wasn't allowed to leave until I finished all of it.

In 2019, I was diagnosed with gastroenteritis – popularly known as stomach flu – an inflammation of the stomach and intestines caused by a viral or bacterial infection from

contaminated food or water. Which caused me to have 10 consecutive days of diarrhea, vomiting, and fever.

3.

Before we continue:

At this point, you might think that I'd spent my entire life in the hospital or sick, which I didn't.

Even though I had several eating problems, I still managed to live well.

I knew and was aware, year after year, that I wasn't eating right and that it would have both short and long-term effects.

4.

Even before I officially moved to the United States in August 2021 for college, I knew I would face many challenges – not only due to the nature of living in another country and being away from family and friends but also due to cultural differences. And, as you may already imagine – the food. When COVID started, I was still in Brazil and my brother decided to use the pandemic to change his habits – he started seeing a nutritionist and buying equipment to exercise at home. Inevitably, my mother and I started to get on the same page, and my lunch became – rice, beans, chicken, and salad. Finally, my revulsion for these foods had passed and I was able to acquire healthier eating habits. At that point, I was eating 4 to 5 meals a day; all carefully thought out by my mother with schedules defined by my brother's nutritionist. Honestly, that was a good initiative coming from him.

When the month of my departure arrived, I made sure to do all the health appointments possible – and I was perfectly healthy and prepared to start this new chapter of life.

It is a well-known fact that the daily schedule of a college student can be incredibly tiring – classes, work, extracurricular activities, the social life that implies making new friends, seeing new places – and for us, international students, cultural barriers such as language and new habits.

For the first few days, and dare I say the first month, I did my best to continue eating healthily. I tried to cook my rice and beans for the whole week, and I tried to eat my daily protein, but the exams and assignments started getting there and with them, the burnout. I had to choose between cooking or studying and soon found myself eating hamburgers, pizza, and all kinds of easy, fast, and greasy food. Gradually, I saw the physical changes in my body, and I felt the psychological ones. All this started to accumulate and in the first break opportunity I had, I went to Brazil.

For international students, the break time in their home country is the perfect opportunity to schedule appointments – dental checkups, haircuts, and routine exams. Unfortunately, during this time, my blood test results were a cause for concern. Having a family history of high glucose, none of the doctors expected my glucose to be under 100, which would be the normal level – however, they didn't expect it to be 109 either, indicating a prediabetes. My cholesterol was reaching the limit. Also, my newly hired nutritionist didn't expect my body fat percentage to be 23% for my BMI, where the normal would be 19%. Not to mention iron and vitamin D deficiency.

As the Fall Semester began, I set a new goal for myself – to focus on my diet and cultivate healthier eating habits. Although following my diet consistently was a daily challenge, I have made a conscious effort to consume more salads, eliminate unhealthy fats and sweets, increase water intake, and most importantly, prioritize my workouts.

5.

Honestly, I'm a big fan of eating. But just some years later I started to understand that what I eat needs to be tasty. I appreciate flavors, textures, and most of all, that feeling when food matches the palate – I know the things I don't eat, and there are many – but I also know the things I like – and so do my nutritionist, and my mom – and that is why I've been fighting to keep my focus on food reeducation without restriction.

At the end of the year, during the Winter Break, there I was – setting all my appointments again – but this time, a bit different. Glucose within the expected range, healthy cholesterol, body fat reduced to 17%, and iron and vitamin D within the correct range.

For years, I believed that my real problem was with the action of eating. Sometimes, I believed I was the problem. In reality, I got to the understanding that my taste preferences developed in different ways due to the food traumas from childhood to adulthood. I love to eat, I just don't like certain foods – which is fine – most people have their preferences. I am still in the food reeducation process, and I believe I will always be – I eat the things I like, avoid the ones I dislike – but with caution, always thinking about my health.

Sorry Mum, for all the pain and the bad nights of sleeping.

I am really excited to have your food when I get home for the break.