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Food for Thought

Essay 1/Draft 3

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From Boy to Man

My family visits our relatives in Mexico (Valle Hermoso, Taumalipas to be exact) about three times a year. This area of Mexico is only a few hours from the border and about a seven hour drive from Houston. Approximately half my relatives live in Valle Hermoso and we go to visit as often as possible, usually staying at my grandmother's house. We have done this as long I can remember. It has also been a ritual that on the first day when we arrived at my grandmother's house lunch would be fried fish that my father brought to the house from a local restaurant. From an early age my father always told me that as soon as I could eat fish with bones in the meat that he would take me with him to eat whole fried fish at the restaurant, just the two of us. When I could eat fish on my own I would finally be able to enjoy a meal with my father without anyone else there to take away from the time I could spend with him.

I love practically all seafood and this is intensified by my father's joy in eating seafood. My family ate fish fillets when we arrived in Mexico because my father loved to eat seafood so much. When my father would bring fish to my grandmother's house my mother would mash the fried fillet to feel for bones and remove them before I ate. She would give me a plate full of mashed fried fish with squeezed lime juice from my grandmother's garden stash and a bit of pico de gallo. I occasionally found a bone in my mashed fish and over the years learned to separate the bone from the meat with my

tongue. As I got older I improved at eating fish, bones and all, and finally proved to my father that I no longer needed my mother to separate the bones out of the fish for me. When I proved to my father that I could eat fish, regardless of whether or not it had any bones in it, I finally went to go eat at the restaurant with my father.

That day began like any other day when my family left for Mexico. We packed all of our luggage into my father's truck and left around 5 in the morning. As a young child I usually slept most of the way to Mexico but managed to stay up for the last two hours of the trip and watched the countryside roll by as we neared my grandmother's home. It soon became an agony to have to wait those seven hours before we could eat at my grandmother's. I usually only began to get hungry a few hours away from my grandmother's house and my father would say that eating so close to lunch would ruin my appetite and the taste of the fish. On this day, though, those last few hours nearly killed me; I could not wait to eat at the restaurant with my father. My hunger was gigantic and I felt my stomach grumble, but the only thing my father said was, "Solo espera un poquito mas"-to just wait a little longer. When I was seven, those few hours felt like Hell. They still do.

We finally arrived at my grandmother's house but only stayed long enough to unpack and drop off my mother and siblings. Then my father and I left to eat lunch. I walked into the restaurant behind my father and took in the entire ambience of the restaurant. I could smell the hot oil and fish; it was one of the most appetizing scents I had ever smelled. As my father walked in he headed directly for the rear of the restaurant to greet the man who was filleting the fish. As my father later told me after introducing me, the man filleting the fish was a long time friend of his from about the time he was my

age. As my father said hello I stood on a stepping block and caught a glimpse of the box that held that days catch. The bin always held a variety of fish. The image of all the fish in the bin is clear in my mind. I can remember how all of the scales of the fish glistened in the sunlight with hints of blue, red and green. I had seen bass and red snapper in that box. My father's favorites were also commonly in that box, flounder and "tambor," a fish for which I don't know the English name. My father picked out a fish for him to eat and laid out a sampling of which I could take my pick. I chose a fish and ordered it just like my father, fried whole and split down the middle.

My father and I then proceeded to find a table and sit down. The tables appeared to be patio furniture and you could feel the sawdust spread out all over the floor. My father informed me that the sawdust was there to prevent you from slipping and falling on the smooth floor. As we sat at the table waiting for our fish we talked as we would for years to come and my father would always talk to me before we ate. I highly enjoyed those time with my father. Those times were where I learned who my father was. He told me about his childhood and his own life and I discovered how much I shared with my father. It was during these lunches that I learned how difficult of a life my father had as a child. I also discovered the uncanny similarities we had such as, our love of fast cars, our mannerisms in eating and even our handwriting.

While we conversed I always agonized over having to wait to eat. We would always wait for what to me appeared to be an eternity before our fish were ready and then we would prepare the sides for our meal. Before we could delve directly into the fish we had waited so patiently, yet at the same time incredibly anxious, for my father would order a plate of onions and dress them with lime and salt. The onions were simply cut

into circular pieces. First he would take several limes and squeeze their juice over the onions then drizzle a slight amount of salt over the onions that would stick to the moist surface of the onion. Then, my father would flip all the circular pieces of onion and repeat what he had done for the other side; after this task was completed we would begin our meal.

The fish, of course, had to be properly prepared with lime juice, which we sprinkled all along the fish. As we ate we always conversed about the day and my father told me about his life as a child; always combining a story with a lesson that he wished to teach me. This ritual was one my father and I repeated every time we visited our relatives in Mexico.

As the years progressed, our ritual remained the same but my plate did not, the older I got the larger fish I ate that first day in Mexico. It had been a longing of mine to be able to eat as large a fish as my father ate and every year I grew closer and closer. When I was twelve I remember that I ordered a fish as large as my father's, but perhaps my eyes were larger than my stomach. That day I barely managed to finish my meal but my bloated stomach was calmed by the pride I felt for being able to eat as much as my father.

Over the years as I grew I ate a serving closer in size to one of my father's, and gradually began to overtake him; I saw myself becoming like him and no longer a boy but growing up to be a man. I could also see that my father saw me growing into a man; as I got older he talked to me concerning more mature topics and he told me about how he immigrated to this country at the age of 18 years and 2 months. My father always told

me stories about his life from the time he was my age; it was as if I grew alongside him as he told me about his life. My father told me about the problems he faced as he grew up and how he wished for my life to be easier than his; that was why he always told me stories with a lesson to them.

It eventually got to the point where I could eat a fish twice the size of my father's and he was then attempting to catch up to me. For a while, we played a game of cat and mouse where I would see how much I could eat and my father proved he still had the stomach he had as a teen. My father had told me during these lunches that when he was younger the portions he ate were identical to mine but that with age his appetite was satiated and curbed.

When I was sixteen my father ordered two beers. I thought nothing out of the ordinary, as he always had two beers with his fish. The only out of the ordinary fact was that my father had ordered the two beers at the same time; he had never done that before as he always waited until he had finished his first beer before ordering a second. That was when my father told me that the second beer was for me and that we would enjoy this meal not as "Hombre e hijo pero como hombre y hombre", that for the first time we would have a meal not as father and son but as two men. That day was the first day that I truly believed my father knew I was a man. He no longer spoke of the feats I would have to accomplish when I became an adult but of the problems I was currently overcoming and the decisions I was making then about what to make a career out of, what college to attend and the kind of life I was going to live. I hope my life will appear as magnificent to my children as my father's appears to me.