

Free Lunch

By Tony Beckwith ©2003

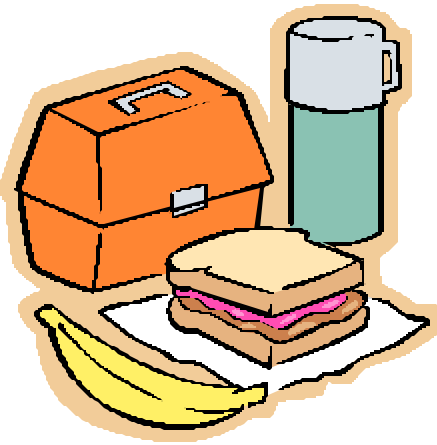
ALICIA'S MOTHER SENT HER to school every morning with a packet of sandwiches. Mine gave me money to buy lunch at the cafeteria. One day Alicia and I experienced a minor revelation: it dawned on us that we could share her picnic and split my cash. It was a magnificent plan—the mythical free lunch, in fact—and our mothers had no idea what we were doing.

A touch of flu kept Alicia at home one day, and as lunchtime approached I wondered what to do. I could have (should have) gone to the cafeteria, but it was a beautiful spring day so I decided to go out for lunch. This was something I had never done before. I was about ten years old at the time, and of course it was absolutely forbidden to leave school without permission, so I was amazed at how easy it was to saunter through the front gate, turn left, and disappear.

I had no idea where I was going, and no plan of action. My parents often took me along when they went to restaurants, and I vaguely thought I'd do what I'd seen them do: find a nice place, walk in, sit down, look at the menu and order something. It seemed simple enough, and I felt very grown up and excited.

As I walked past a construction site a few blocks later a delicious aroma wafted over me and brought me to a dead stop. I looked through the chain link fence, my forehead pressed against the wires, my fingers hooked into the loops. In Montevideo in the fifties there were no fast food places, no convenience stores with meals to go. Some construction workers surely brought their lunch from home, but most preferred to resort to the more traditional *asado*, or barbecue. Towards the end of the morning, one of the men went to buy meat, bread, and a couple of bottles of cheap red wine,

then collected odd pieces of lumber from around the job site and built a fire. He'd rub a little coarse salt into the meat, which was never an expensive cut, as the wood burned down to a bed of hot coals. Then he laid the meat on a grill made of rebar and wire, balanced across a couple of bricks. The smell of meat cooking over an open flame has tantalized mankind ever since we discovered fire and, like any little cave boy, I stood



transfixed, sniffing the fragrance on the wind. One of the workers saw me and called out, "*Che pibe, ¿querés asado?*" Hey kid, you want some barbecue?

My face must have shown my consternation because the men in the group laughed. They spoke amongst themselves, then the one who had called out got up and opened the gate in the fence. As if in a dream, I followed him back to the circle around the fire and, at everyone's invitation, sat down on an upturned bucket. It must have amused them to see me perched there in my school uniform: a grey flannel suit with short pants, white shirt, green tie, long grey socks and black, somewhat scuffed shoes. All the men wore clothes that were even dirtier than my father's gardening

pants—and he wasn't allowed to wear them inside the house.

The one who had invited me in, whose name was Gervasio, took his knife and sliced off a piece of meat, put it on a chunk of bread, and handed it to me. His hands were spattered with cement, and the bushy hair on his forearms was thickly matted with brick dust. My mother would have been horrified, but I didn't care. The meat smelled even better than it had from the street and I took a huge bite right away, then closed my eyes in ecstasy. I thought I had never tasted anything so good in my whole life, and tried to say so, mumbling through a very full mouth. There was more laughter, and I suddenly realized that I felt completely comfortable and strangely at home. I say strangely because at that sheltered stage of my life I had never had any contact with construction workers, or in fact anybody from what my grandmother called "the working class." The men would no doubt have defined my family as *ingleses*, and they had probably not had much to do with people like me either. I'd give a great deal to be able to remember what we talked about over lunch that day.

After giving me one more piece of heavenly bread and meat, my generous hosts indicated that it was time to get back to work. Gervasio walked me back to the fence. We said goodbye, a little stiffly, and shook hands. Mine felt plump and tender against his rough, calloused skin. He smiled and patted me on the back, then closed the gate.

On the way back to school I wrestled with a dreadful dilemma. If I told my parents about my excellent adventure—which I certainly wanted to do—I'd have to return the money. They'd undoubtedly ask all kinds of questions, and my lunchtime scheme would probably come unraveled. I didn't realize at the time that I had just learned how easy it is to get used to a free lunch. But what was one to do? I wondered if Alicia was going to hate me in the morning. ★