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Essay #1

Becoming a Fresca Family

We were never a “soda” family. My parents weren’t the Cleavers who offered bottles of Sunny D or Minute Maid lemonade to guests. It was always, “Well, we got water, OJ, or milk—take your pick.” Our friends would pick through our expired salsa and mayonnaise containers and say, “Well, I guess I’m not thirsty.” And that was fine. Our house was clearly not the place to veg out, unless you wanted Cheerios or saltines with peanut butter. But this summer, my parents completed a kitchen renovation that turned into *Extreme Makeover Home Edition*. New kitchen, new bathroom, new family room with a giant stuffed bird on the mantle, new toilets with a powerful flush (pew), new bar, new everything. And with that full bar installed, we officially became a Fresca-serving family.

I came home for Thanksgiving break last year to find a giant wet bar glaring at me from the pages of Architectural Digest’s Palm Beach edition. My dad installed a wet bar to house his “extensive” liquor collection (the man rarely drinks). Underneath the liquor cabinet sits the mini fridge—stacked with Diet Coke and Heinekens—for guests only. He also bought an icemaker and giant containers of cashews and almonds for *all those guests*. My younger brother and two sisters have taken to sneaking Frescas and guzzling them outside the back door like alcoholics.

This “Fresca family” feels out of place. Growing up, my parents banned soda, sugar cereals and TV throughout the week (which explains the Fresca guzzling and sneaking of *Saved by the Bell* episodes when my mom was gone). When we went to friend’s houses, we would spend most our time gobbling up their Fruit Roll Ups or wanting to watch more *Boy Meets World*. I remember sitting cross-legged in my best friend Annie’s family room, enthralled with Zach

Morris on TV. “Don’t you want to go outside?” Annie asked. “Nope,” I replied, and kept my stare on Zach. We never drank soda, as my Maryland-bred mom made us say. We rarely ate junk food, except on Junk Food Fridays, when we packed Doritos, Ho Hos and Ding Dongs in our lunches. And that was a treat. Deprived? Maybe. But I wouldn’t have had it any other way.

To buy our Junk Food Friday lunches and stale Cheerios, my mom would drive us to Nino Salvaggio, the grocery store farther away from our white little bubble. The grocery store entertains far more Chaldeans and Indians than the nearby Kroger, where blue Ford minivans line the parking lot. My mom took other steps to “diversify” us too. We attended church in an area closer to Detroit. And for most of my childhood, I carried around a black baby doll wrapped in a black and white flowered cloth named Didi (I still have her, cornrows and all). No life-size Barbie for me. My mom opened our eyes beyond our white neighborhood, and I will always appreciate that.

And so why, I would like to know, do we have these Frescas in the wet bar? I squeezed my youngest sister’s head after I got a tour of the new house and pleaded, “Please don’t get spoiled by this!”

“I won’t,” Anne Marie smiled.

But that is my main worry. Anne Marie, who is eight-years-younger than I, wasn’t around during Junk Food Fridays. She’s mainly witnessed the “Fresca-stage.” I don’t want her, or the rest of my family to think these new gadgets are standard or necessary. The icemaker, the iPod speaker system, the six showerheads installed in my parents’ bathroom—these things come to be expected. Once you get going, where do you stop? Who needs water shooting up your bottom anyway?

I've prided myself on the balance my family has struck between my mom and dad's families. My mom grew up in a lower middle class home with 10 siblings and an alcoholic father. My grandfather ordered his 11 children around like he taught his Naval Academy classes—making them do flag day parades and comb their hair 100 times before going to bed. Deeply religious and brilliant, my grandpa would constantly say the family finances were on “pins and needles.” Now gruff and delicate, he intimidates his 50+ grandchildren. My grandmother is a twinkly-eyed, hardworking mother who managed to still keep her sense of humor (she always told us we were related to John Wilkes Booth and just recently admitted she made it up) while getting all 11 kids through Catholic schools and on to college.

Whenever I visit the house, my grandpa is always sitting in his favorite, lumpy blue chair, next to a stack of religion and physics books. I smell a whiff of cigarettes, although both my grandparents quit smoking years ago. His rosary and a statue of an angel are perched on a ledge above him. His cane is propped against his chair. He asks, “What kind of grades are you getting?” although he can barely hear. My grandma will usually emerge excitedly from the kitchen, which looks the same as it did thirty years ago when 11 kids clamored around the creaky table. The upstairs sewing room/closet still has the boogers my Uncle Charlie stuck on the wall when he lived in it. All remains the same.

On the other side, my dad and his two siblings grew up in the same city, Bethesda, Md., in a 5-bedroom colonial on the edge of a country club. All three kids went to Catholic grade schools and universities too. My grandfather is a suave Cary Grant-kinda guy who started his own business from scratch and now slips us \$20's when my parents aren't looking. My grammy took care of the three kids at home while my grandpa was often away on business. My grandparents

split their time between Maryland, their Florida house and a cottage in northern Michigan, where cocktail hour and shrimp appetizers are daily.

My grandpa, or Big Joe as we refer to him, is never in one place for very long. Golfing, doing business, driving, reading mystery novels, he's always somewhere. Yet we get to see him often enough when he appears suddenly in our living room to discuss politics and watch Fox News. My grandma, who smells of Estee Lauder's "Beautiful" and wears a gold lion necklace, is usually in a spinning armchair, sipping wine while doing a crossword. Their kitchen was just redone. Their family room houses the latest flat screen. Something is always new.

I love both sides equally and do not mean to demean either of them. It's just I've seen the privileged, I've seen the lower middle class, and I feel a tug. I feel as if I have to choose one lifestyle. I've grown up visiting my grandparents up north and feeling indulged. When we visit my mom's side, it's a different story. I've liked the way the two sides counteract each other, like opposing magnets. It keeps our family balanced.

When I was in eighth grade, we went to Alaska with my dad's family to celebrate my Grammy's birthday. I remember being very surprised at age 13 by the amount of money my cousins would drop on chocolate fudge, Alaskan lip gloss, fake totem poles, a "Juneau" sweatshirt. I was shocked that my cousins ordered Diet Cokes with lunch instead of just water. I was even more taken aback by the South Pacific waiters on board with names like "Superman" and "B-Cat." They would entertain fancy white customers nightly with their napkin origami tricks. We would return to our guest rooms, they to their shared rooms the size of dingy bathrooms. I felt guilty seeing such a juxtaposition of wealth on the same ship. Why do we have so much and they so little?

That same summer, my grandfather took my cousin, Jenny, and me shopping. Jenny and I drifted through Nordstrom racks, my eye on two Lily Pulitzer Polos that Jenny wore. I couldn't bear the thought of getting both, but my greedy 14-year-old self still wanted them. "They're too much and I don't need them," I told her. I didn't *need* any of this. She and the pushy saleslady said, "It will make your grandfather happy. He wants to do this." Big Joe forced the salmon and white colored Polos over the counter. I cringed as the saleslady announced, "\$112, please." A huge pot of guilt stewed in my stomach. When would I wear a salmon polo? When I got home, I tried to hide them from my mom, thinking she would disapprove (which she did).

This summer, we visited my mom's side at Bethany Beach in Delaware. Three families and my grandparents cram into a four-room bungalow. My grandma buys plastic cups to save water for washing dishes. We do not go out to eat every night. We take quick outdoor showers to conserve water, and hang our towels and bathing suits on the line outside in the woods. My grandpa sits fussily on the couch, his tissue box in reach and a detective show on the TV. He no longer can see who I am or hear me. He grabs his cell phone, made for seniors, and tells us we better all answer our phones. "This is the only thing between me and death," he croaks. It is a trial to feed him and get him to the bathroom every day. Just to bring him to the beach to sit in a wheelchair took six people and about two hours. We do not go on shopping trips with him; we don't stroll the beach buying Diet Cokes and "Bethany" sweatshirts.

The difference in lifestyles always stands out to me when spending time at the beach or at my grandparent's lake house. I feel my mom's side keeps our family grounded, while my dad's can lift us high into the sky. It's always difficult to be with my dad's family up north, surrounded by Juicy Couture cover-ups and J-crew bathing suits, and not covet these things. But my immediate family has done a fine job of braiding together these two sides in moderation. I've learned to

appreciate the luxuries in life, but know they're not important or necessary. Desires to help others top Alaskan vacations any day. The families may differ in monetary statuses, both they share a diligent work ethic. My grandfathers started out with little money and no fathers. They worked hard, joining the army and navy, and built themselves up to respectable positions. Both sides place importance on having a strong sense of humor, a tight-knit family and a willingness to help others.

While I have trouble reconciling the two sides, I remind myself that we're all family. We love one another, and we're related for a reason. I still feel torn between choosing a side, or leaning too heavily toward one. Maybe I always will. Of course I don't have to choose, but the impulse is there. In my immediate family, however, I want to keep staying grounded, to strike the healthy balance. We may not have Junk Food Fridays anymore; we may actually serve guests lemonade from a silly minibar. Yet our family is still the same stale Cheerios family, no matter how many Frescas we have.