

Health Topics



This packet includes...	Two chapters from an original forthcoming <i>New Life Café</i> novella (with the back-story you never knew...)
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New Life Café

a novella

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What follows are the first two chapters
for distribution on June 18, 2010.

Chapter One: A Love Letter

“Rosa! Rosa, where are you?”

“I’m in the kitchen, Fernando.”

“Get out of the kitchen, Rosa! I’m taking you out to dinner! Your wonderful husband is going to take you to dinner!”

“Stop shouting, Fernando!”

Fernando entered the bright yellow kitchen. “Rosa, beautiful Rosa, let me take you away from all this – what are you doing? You are sitting at the table! You aren’t cooking!”

“What does it look like I’m doing?”

“Hmmm – many pages of writing all over the table. Let me guess. Are you making a new menu for the New Life Café?”

“No.”

“Are you writing down your recipes, finally?”

“Well, not really.”

“Okay, this is my last guess. Are you writing a love letter to me, the wonderful husband who is going to take you out to dinner?”

“Yes, I am writing a love letter, but I am not writing it to you. I am writing a love letter to another man.”

Fernando backed away from his wife. “What?” he asked. “Who?” His face was very pale and his voice shook.

“No, no, no, my love, I’m sorry. I was just teasing you. Here…” Rosa kissed Fernando eleven times. After the eleventh kiss, he looked much healthier. “No, Fernando, I am writing a love letter to Eduardo.”

“You are writing to your grandson?” Fernando sat down next to Rosa. He put his arm around her shoulder and spoke into her ear. “Don’t you want to know why I’m taking you out to dinner?”

Rosa gave Fernando a twelfth kiss. “I’m writing to Eduardo because he asked me to write to him. He wants me to tell him the story of my life.” She picked up the papers that were all over the kitchen table and placed them in a neat stack. “Are you taking me out to dinner because you got the job?”

“Yes!”

“Don’t shout, Fernando.”

“Yes,” Fernando whispered into her ear. “I start building a new restaurant on Monday.”

“That’s very good news,” said Rosa.

But Fernando could tell that she wasn’t really paying attention to him. She was reading the top page on the neat stack of papers. He decided it was his turn to tease. “Yes, the new restaurant will be much better than your restaurant. Maybe the New Life Café will lose customers to the new restaurant.”

“Mmm-hmmm,” said Rosa, turning to the second page of the stack.

“The cook is a beautiful woman,” said Fernando. “I enjoyed talking to her. She knows how to listen to a man.”

“Mmmm?” said Rosa, adding a few words to the third page of the stack.

“I’m taking her to Coney Island tomorrow for a long walk on the beach,” said Fernando.

“What?” said Rosa. She rolled a sheet of paper into a tube and began to hit Fernando on the top of his head with the paper tube. “If you take another woman to Coney Island, I will follow you. I will tell her that you never put your socks in the laundry. I will tell her that you can never find clean socks in the morning. I will tell her about how you snore and —”

“Okay, okay!” Fernando held up his hands. “I surrender! Besides, she is not as beautiful as you are. I am sure you are a better cook, too.”

“Okay, then I forgive you,” Rosa said. She gave Fernando a quick kiss on the cheek. She unrolled the paper tube. She placed the sheet of paper on top of the stack. “Because I forgive you, I will tell you what I am doing. You know that Eduardo is in our native country now.”

Fernando nodded. “Perhaps I heard something about this,” he said. “Perhaps Eduardo’s grandmother told me about this two or three hundred times. It is possible that my wife told me that her grandson, Eduardo, is studying in the Dominican Republic this semester.” Rosa rolled a sheet of paper into a tube and held it over her head. Fernando continued, “Perhaps my beautiful wife told me that Eduardo was accepted at Macaulay Honors College last year, and perhaps ...”

Rosa interrupted him. She hit him on the head with the piece of paper.

Fernando laughed and embraced her. He said, "Perhaps my wife tells every customer at her restaurant that Eduardo is making a documentary film in the Dominican Republic this semester because he is such an excellent student." Fernando stroked his wife's hair. He whispered into her ear, "I think these things are possible. Am I wrong?"

Rosa whispered into her husband's ear, "No, you are one hundred percent correct." She sat down and unrolled the paper tube. "So I forgive you again. Eduardo's professors want him to make an excellent film. They say he should prepare by writing a story. They say he should write the story of one immigrant from the Dominican Republic to New York City."

Fernando nodded. "Well, he is studying at the City University of New York. It makes sense that he should write about an immigrant to New York City."

"Of course it does. Guess what? Eduardo chose me! He wants to write about me! He plans to write about my life!"

"Of course he did," Fernando said.

"So I must write the story of my life for him. If I don't write it, he will fail the class." Rosa sat up very straight in her chair. "It is a huge responsibility," she said proudly.

"I am sure that you will write an excellent history of yourself," Fernando said.

"How do you say that in English? They call a history of yourself an autobiography, right? Will you put me in the autobiography?"

"About how you snore?"

“No, no, I’m serious – will I be in the story of your life?” Fernando wasn’t sure if he wanted to be in Rosa’s history or not. If he was in the autobiography, strangers might read about him. On the other hand, if he was in the autobiography, strangers might read about him! Fernando started to get excited about Rosa’s project.

“Maybe.” Rosa stroked his hair. “If you ever take me out to dinner, I might put you in the autobiography.”

Fernando leaped up. “Put on that dress with the red flowers, Rosa. Tonight I am taking you to dinner at *La Dominicana*.”

“Dominican food? You know I love the food of our country, Fernando, but it’s not good for my condition. You know that there are many foods I can not eat.”

Fernando embraced her. “We will eat salads.”

“The salads will have fried vegetables. They will put sweet dressing on it.”

“I will tell the cook to put in fresh vegetables. They have *some* healthy foods there. We will smell the forbidden foods but we will eat the healthy foods. It will be perfect.”

“Okay,” said Rosa. “I will be ready in ten minutes.”

Fernando sat down at the kitchen table. He pointed to the stack of papers. “Can I read this?”

“You won’t have much time. I’ll be dressed in ten minutes.”

“Umm-hmmm,” said Fernando. He knew that Rosa would not be ready for at least forty-five minutes. “Can I read a few pages while you get dressed?”

“Sure!” Rosa shouted from the bathroom.

Fernando turned to page one. He read:

Chapter Two: My Dear Eduardo

My dear Eduardo,

I hope that you are healthy. Are you eating healthy food? Of course I am proud that you are visiting the Dominican Republic, but it is so far away! Your mother and I worry about you. Are you getting enough sleep? I hope you are not working too hard. When you called last night, you said that you want to know the history of my life. You asked me to send you a letter about my life. So here is a letter about my life.

I was born in 1950 in a small village next to the ocean on the north shore of the Dominican Republic. My father's name was Eduardo Villa Diaz. My mother's name was Constancia Diaz Garcia. My father owned three acres of land, which is a lot of land in the Dominican Republic. We grew beans and corn, yucca and casava, and we had three pigs. My first memory is of walking through the corn with my mother. I ran away from her and I got lost in the corn. I ran and ran and I cried and cried. The corn was much taller than I was. At last, I found my mother. I was afraid that she would scold me, but she smiled and held out her arms. "Ah, my little girl, I am so glad that you are safe," she said. "Help me pick some corn for *Papi's* dinner, okay?" We took the corn home, where she showed me how to take off the husks. Then she made a little doll out of the husks, with yellow cornsilk hair. We boiled the corn for seven minutes. When my father came home, I shouted, "*Papi, Papi!* I made dinner for you!"

Life on a farm is very hard. You have to start working very early in the day, before the sun comes up. We carried water to the plants, we dug weeds out of the ground, we fed the pigs, we cleaned up after the pigs, then we carried more water and dug more weeds. In

the afternoon, it was too hot to work. We ate our big meal of the day at noon. Now, when I think about it, I have to shake my head. We ate sugar and rice and beans with so much fat in them! I understand why so many Latinos get diabetes. Look at our diet! But we all worked so hard that none of us had time to get fat. However, there were often times when there was not very much to eat. Then we would eat rice and beans for lunch and dinner, Monday through Saturday. After we ate the big meal of the day, we all went to sleep for an hour or two. When we woke up, the grownups had coffee and I had a spoonful of coffee, three spoons of sugar, and hot water. Then we worked on the farm until it got dark.

When I was eight years old, I went to school for the first time. The school was one mile from our home. At the school, there were forty students in two rooms. I started in the Junior Room, where we learned how to make our letters. The teacher would slap the back of our hands with a ruler if we made a mistake, or if our letters were not perfect. I worked hard because I did not want her to slap my hands. When I was twelve years old, I could read and write and do math, I knew Dominican history, and I could make chicken and rice, *arroz con pollo*. Although I could make many other dishes, my classmates agreed that my *arroz con pollo* was the best. Perhaps that is why I graduated to the Senior Room when I was only twelve! Perhaps the Senior Room teacher wanted to taste my *arroz con pollo* too!

The Senior Room was quieter than the Junior Room. We studied marching, we marched and sang the songs of our country, and we read poetry and novels. We were taught algebra and geometry, although I never really learned those subjects. I am afraid that my mathematics never improved after I learned to add, subtract, multiply, and divide.

Also, we began to study English. At that time, there was a famous singing group from England that all of us loved. Maybe you know them? They were called The Beatles. *Love, love me do / You know I love you / So please, please / Love me do*. That is one of the first songs I learned in English. As my girlfriends and I walked home from school to our village, we sang that song. We imagined that The Beatles were singing to us. When the government came to inspect our little school, they were impressed by the good English of all the girl students. “How did they learn so quickly?” they wondered. We giggled. We never told them.

My mother and father wanted me to get a good education, but they needed help on the farm. I had four younger brothers who needed to get an education, too. Since they were boys, education was more important for them than it was for me. Remember, this was long ago. That is how everybody thought fifty years ago. Girls would grow up to be wives and mothers. Boys would grow up to work hard. My father planned to give the farm to the oldest son, my younger brother Rafael. The other boys, my brothers Hugo, José, and Victor, needed to learn a profession, or at least a trade. So, when I was fourteen, my parents took me out of school to work on the farm. My brothers went to school all day and I stayed home, carrying water to the plants, digging weeds out of the ground, feeding the pigs, cleaning up after the pigs, and so on.

I worked very hard to become a good cook so that I could stay indoors and make the meals instead of working outside all the time. Cooking is easier than farming, Eduardo! By the time I was fifteen, I cooked so well that my mother permitted me to cook dinner twice a week. Sometimes she even let me prepare the Sunday *arroz con pollo*. On

Saturdays, I visited my aunts and uncles and cousins in the village. Sometimes, my girlfriends and I walked to the next village to visit other aunts and uncles and cousins. We sang as we walked.

You know that a girl's fifteenth birthday is an important birthday. It is her *quinceañera*. My mother made a beautiful dress for me, the color of a rose, with long ribbons for my hair. My *abuela*, my grandmother, came from the big city to help prepare the celebration. For several days, my grandmother and my mother and my mother's sisters, my aunts, talked and laughed and sang and argued and laughed some more as they cooked. Finally, my birthday came.

That day was the beginning of my life and it was also the end of my life. I will explain this in my next letter.

Eduardo, my dear, I hope this letter helps you with your school project. Remember to get plenty of sleep and eat healthy food, okay? Everybody here is healthy, and the New Life Café is doing well.

Love and kisses from,

Buela

PS: Here is my recipe for *arroz con pollo*. I'm giving you the recipe for the healthy way I make it now. If you find a girl who makes it as well as I do, keep her!

Arroz Con Pollo

Chicken

3 Tbsp olive oil

1 broiler-fryer chicken, about 2 1/2-3 pounds, cut into serving pieces, or 2 1/2 to 3 pounds of chicken thighs or breasts, bone-in, with skin on, rinsed and patted dry

Salt

Freshly ground black pepper

Paprika

Rice

2-6 tbsp

1 medium yellow onion, chopped

1 garlic clove, minced

2 cups of medium or long-grain white rice

3 cups* chicken stock

1 heaping tablespoon tomato paste or 1 cup of diced fresh or cooked tomatoes, strained

Pinch of oregano

1 teaspoon salt

Directions

1. Heat 3 Tbsp olive oil in a large skillet (a skillet that has a cover) on medium high heat. Sprinkle the chicken with salt, pepper, and paprika, then put the chicken in the skillet. Cook a few minutes on each side over medium-high heat. Remove from pan and set aside.
2. Add the rice to the pan to brown. Add a little more olive oil if necessary. Stir first to coat the rice with the olive oil in the pan. Let it brown a little, then add the onion and garlic. Cook the onion, garlic and rice mixture, stirring frequently, until the onions have softened, about 4 minutes.
3. Place the chicken pieces, skin-side up, on top of the rice. In a separate bowl, mix together the stock, tomato, salt, and oregano. Pour the stock mixture over the rice and chicken. Bring to a simmer, reduce the heat to low, and cover. Let cook for 20 minutes, until the rice and chicken are done. Fluff the rice with a fork. If you want you can sprinkle with some peas. Add more salt and pepper to taste.

Serves 4-6.