**Dinner and a Movie**

**Or, How to Not Feel Poor for One Night**

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I remember the smell of the damp wad of bills fished carefully from my father’s front pockets: concrete-sweat-cigarette. The same stench that permeated his work boots and hard-washed denim, leaked into my parents’ bedsheets and the brims of his Oakland A’s baseball cap. It was the stench of adulthood, patriarch, poorness.

She was careful to retrieve the money, his body supine and still, passed out from heat exhaustion and Bud Light. After a long, hard day of work, he’d go down without a fight, most times. But not always. It was a risk to pinch the wad of cash and pull it out, a tiny snore of movement a thrown landline phone, a domestic disturbance 911-call. On those not-always-evenings it was worth that risk for an escape—to joy, fullness, and safety—at the cost of twenty bucks.

Twenty bucks is a precariously working-class measurement of value. It could be discarded change, or it could feel like so much money it might as well be a million dollars. There is no in between. For a family of five (and then six, then seven, then eight) kids, there wasn’t an in between for most things. Twenty bucks was a tank of gas or hitching rides to do errands. Twenty bucks was my friends’ weekly allowances, or a week’s worth of groceries. Twenty bucks was a 30-rack, or an emergency stash. Twenty bucks was a contingency plan, or a night out on the town. Twenty bucks was paying with bills instead of paying with couch-collected change.

On those not-always nights, midweek glitches when my mother transformed tragedy into fortune. The always-summer California sunsets were a fusion of mild and fire sauce painted behind swaying palm tree silhouettes—twenty bucks bought us four hours of happiness. That sweat-stained bill would feed us like kings for half of what it was worth: ten dollars for the drive-in movies, ten dollars for the Grande Meal at Taco Bell. An indulgent paper-wrapped dinner; the back of our 1986 Suburban our kingdom.

We were shamelessly money-savvy. Or, as the middle class might call us, “freeloaders.” We’d save a whole ass admission ticket by me remaining 9 years old and free well into adolescence—I’d sit in the passenger’s seat, the Grande Meal resting on my lap, heating my stick-thin legs as my younger siblings packed in the back rows, buckled in atop puke-blue upholstery. My mom would hand the attendant the change from our dinner proudly: a crisp, $10 bill. One adult ticket, two movies.

In the mid-90s, movie tickets weren’t double digits. Slowly, we’d bear witness to ticket prices climb throughout the decade, listen to people complain, but we never felt empathetic—it was a rich-person grievance. Like mandatory tipping or checked luggage prices. We might as well plan a trip to Disneyland, to Fiji, the moon. And so, the Drive-In and Taco Bell nights were our constant. Our American right to middle class luxury: dinner and a movie.

Midweek, the Van Buren Drive-In was slow enough to roll our blue-striped tank in reverse, close to one of the three screens. I’d roll down the windows and clip the radio to driver’s door. We’d choose the screen that played an animated movie for the kids first, a movie for me and my mom to watch together second—*Sabrina, Twister,* oranything starring Meg Ryan. Anything to sit next to my mom, to catch her smiling, develop an inside joke to pocket and remember later when she’d need it. More luxuriously, sometimes I’d unhook and drag the back bench outside to face it backwards toward a *teen movie*. I’d get to slam bean burrito after bean burrito into my mouth as I dialed in a different screen’s frequency into my handheld radio, enjoying a rare sliver of solitude, of richness. It didn’t matter either way—these warm, special nights were ours to devour. We were free, then. Of everything.

That distinct smell of hot beans and melted cheese, the thin-plastic sauce packets like Scrooge McDuck’s gold medallions in our small hands—like the drive-in, the Grande Meal’s price was comfortingly constant. This cardboard treasure chest provided 10 items: basic hard-shell tacos or bean burritos. So simple, so dependable. For us, it was always burritos—*so* many burritos. Once parked, dusk falling, headlights illuminating the huge, white projector screen as the snack shack played its fading, forty-foot advertisement with dancing cartoon concessions, I’d toss everyone their bounty. My siblings’ child-smiles wide, hands open. Can you imagine it? A bottomless paper bag of food. Food un-rationed, designed to be consumed recklessly, joyously. We could have been offered steak tartar, oysters Rockefeller and would have brazenly denied the offerings in our bare-feet and cheese-chins. This was our momentary bliss: a safe haven of escape with my mother, our family.

Our Taco Bell location predated Baja Blasts and Crunchwrap Supremes by decades. My mother worked her first job under the 91-freeway as a teenager, stirring vats of pinto beans when the small chain of franchises still used in-house recipes. Even after the many re-brandings, the stone archway of our location survived, as did the actual bell. I’m old enough to remember the change in sauce packets, in the bean recipe—the way it tasted differently, marking a wedge in childhood, a gap in time I can’t leap over. Eventually, our Taco Bell was torn down. What remains now is an empty dirt field protected by chain link fencing—no one in, nothing out.

Later, I’d crawl on a traffic jammed commute to and from grad school and glance at the exit, a soft waft of home defying the present by bringing my memories forward, the scent of cigarette-stained upholstery ripe in the air.

Now, post-drive-in childhood, Taco Bell is less a meal, and more of a debauchery. A nod to deserved simplicity. I still order my bean burritos the same, the creases of folded tortilla leaking extra mild sauce, spilling into my palms as I devour memory, and safety, and luxury.