I was nine years old, sitting stiffly at the dining table in my blue-and-white school uniform, and across from me sat my mother, who had come home from work at the university registry, elegant in her swishy skirt, smelling of Poison perfume and saying she wanted to watch me eat. I still do not know who told her that I was skipping lunch before school. Perhaps it was the houseboy, Fide. Perhaps it was my little brother Kenechukwu, who went to school in the morning and came home just before I left. The firm set of her mouth told me that I had no choice but to eat the garri and soup placed on the table. I made the sign of the cross. I plucked a morsel from the soft lump of garri. I lightly molded it with my fingers. I dipped it into the soup. I swallowed. My throat itched. I disliked all the variants of this quintessential Nigerian food, whether made from corn, cassava, or yams, whether cooked or stirred or pounded in a mortar until they became a soft mash. It was jokingly called “swallow,” because one swallowed the morsels without chewing; it was easy to tell that a person chewing garri was a foreigner.

“Hurry up,” my mother said. “You will be late for school.” We had garri for lunch every day except Sunday, when we had rice and stew and sometimes a lush salad that contained everything from baked beans to boiled eggs and was served with dollops of creamy dressing. The soups gave some variety to lunch: the yellowish egusi, made of ground melon seeds and vegetables; onugbu, rich with dark-green bitterleaf; okro, with its sticky sauce; nsala, with beef chunks floating in a thin herb-filled broth. I disliked them all.

That afternoon, it was egusi soup. My mother’s eyes were steady behind her glasses. “Are you playing with that food or eating it?” she asked. I said I was eating. Finally, I finished and said, “Mummy, thank you,” as all well-brought-up Igbo children were supposed to after a meal. I had just stepped outside the carpeted dining area and onto the polished
concrete floor of the passage when my stomach churned and recoiled and the garri and soup rushed up my throat.

“Go upstairs and rinse your mouth,” my mother said.

When I came down, Fide was cleaning up the watery yellowish mess, and I was sorry he had to and I was too disgusted to look. After I told my mother that I never ate garri before school, that on Saturdays I waited until nobody was looking to wrap my garri in a piece of paper and slip it into the dustbin, I expected her to scold me. But she muttered in Igbo, “You want hunger to kill you,” and then told me to get a Fanta from the fridge.

Years later, she asked me, “What does garri really do to you?” “It scratches my throat,” I told her, and she laughed. It became a standing line of family teasing. “Does this scratch your throat?” my brothers would ask. Following that afternoon, my mother had boiled yams, soft and white and crumbly, made for my lunch; I ate them dipped in palm oil. Sometimes she would come home with a few wraps of warm okpa, which remains my favorite food: a simple, orange-colored, steamed pie of white beans and palm oil that tastes best cooked in banana leaves. We didn’t make it at home, perhaps because it was not native to our part of Igboland. Or perhaps because those we bought on the roadside from the women who carried them in large basins on their heads were too good to surpass.

I wish I ate garri. It is important to the people I love: My late grandmother used to want to have garri three times a day. My brother’s idea of a perfect meal is pounded yam. My father once came home from a conference in Paris, and when I asked how it had gone he said that he had missed real food. In Igbo, another word for “swallow” is simply “food,” so that one might overhear a sentence like “The food was well pounded, but the soup was not tasty.” My brothers, with affectionate mockery, sometimes ask whether it is possible for a person who does not eat swallow to be authentically Igbo, Nigerian, African.

On New Year’s Day of the year I turned thirteen, we went to my Aunt Dede’s house for lunch. “Did you remember?” my mother asked my aunt while gesturing toward me. My aunt nodded. There was a small bowl of jollof rice, soft-cooked in an oily tomato sauce, for me. My brothers praised the onugbu soup—“Auntie, this is soup that you washed
your hands well before cooking”—and I wished that I, too, could say something. Then my boisterous Auntie Rosa arrived, her wrapper always seeming to be just about to slip off her waist. After she had exchanged hugs with everyone, she settled down with her pounded yam and noticed that I was eating rice. “Why are you not eating food?” she asked in Igbo. I said I did not eat swallow. She smiled and said to my mother, “Oh, you know she is not like us local people. She is foreign.”

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie has published three novels, including “Americanah,” which is being made into a film. Read more »