

Hunger

a short story by DOREEN BAINGANA



MORGAN CAUFIELD

My PRIVATE Diary
Patti Mugisha
Gayaza High School
Kampala, Uganda, Africa, the Universe

Sunday, April 10, 2 P.M.

Boarding school is like purgatory, or prison — being sent away to wait. That's mainly what I do: wait for time to pass. There are five more hours to supper, and I'm hungry already. I'm up here in an empty classroom, writing in my diary when I'm supposed to be studying, 'cause it's one week till finals. Three more long weeks, then home, home at last. Please, God, help me concentrate on this stupid history book. I don't want to study at the dorm with the others. I prefer to be alone with the leftover scribbles on the blackboard and the disorderly desks and chairs abandoned by the last class of girls on Friday. The scratched and beaten-up furniture looks like wreckage after a riot, it's so old.

We had sweet potatoes and peas for lunch: not as bad as the usual mash, but not enough. It's never enough. There is no privacy in the dining room, nowhere to hide. That's what I hate about school. No moment to myself. Even my thoughts feel exposed. We are squashed fifteen girls to a table, girls from all grades, so that we can learn from our "elders." Thank goodness for the wide windows along both sides of the room with their wooden shutters flung open for air and light. At least I can take in the flourishing trees outside.

There's a mural at one end of the room, which I have stared at for three long years now, to avoid looking too hungrily at

the food being served. I need to disguise my greed. Nobody remembers which art class painted the mural or when. It's one of those paintings that show every activity under the sun: a church with musical notes sailing out the window to heaven; a school (ours) with classes full of round, dark heads; an airplane flying over cows in a field; a red-orange (but fading) fire in an office building, with fire engines and ambulances and running figures around it; a street with small children crossing, holding hands; angels flying in place, stuck in the sky; and the yellow sun above it all. Only the sun isn't shining yellow anymore. All the colors have faded to a grayish-creamish-brown that matches the dining-room smell of burnt beans, rotting cabbage, oily plastic plates, and about two hundred sweaty girls. I study the busy picture's comic details while wishing and praying for enough food to satisfy my stomach.

Today at lunch it was Joyce's turn to serve my table. As usual, she gave each of us so little I could have cried. After we quickly clean our plates, there's a long wait while the seniors gab on forever about nothing, when they know very well that the rest of us are waiting for seconds. But the dishes are placed at the head of the table, where the older girls sit. So even though they are fat enough already, they get second helpings first and finish all the food, leaving us younger ones staring at our empty, dirty gray dishes that look like shapeless, open mouths. Even now, after lunch, my stomach is growling. Oh, God, I pray for something good today instead of all this suffering. You promised to fill our cups to overflowing, told us to "bring your vessels, not a few." Amen!

Worst of all is watching Linette not eat because back at the dorm she can slowly munch a whole packet of biscuits or a loaf of bread. Her father is minister of agriculture; she can afford to play with her dining-room food, mashing it into a creamy mess that she stirs round and round her plate. I can't stop staring. Linette brings hot sauce, margarine, or mashed avocado to the dining room — anything to make the weevil-filled beans and *posho* taste like food. Even then, she doesn't eat much of it and makes disgusted faces as we gobble down ours. Oh, I wish I could eat her leftovers. I'd lick the avocado right off her plate. No, no. My Father in heaven fills me. He satisfies my spiritual hunger. Yes, Lord, I do believe.

I think I'll stay here. There's no point in going back down to the dorm for tea at four. That sugarless, milkless, so-called tea is just bitter black water.

5:30 P.M.

It's so hard to believe in God sometimes, when I think about what He puts me through. And He says He loves me. I went back to the dorm at teatime anyway, because I was so hungry. I trusted God for a miracle. Why not? I am His child, His chosen one. Maybe I could ask Linette to lend me some money, I thought. Just five shillings to buy a few oily *kabs*.

I was going to get my tea when Linette asked me to fetch her some tea too, because she was busy getting her hair done. She was sitting between Mary's legs on a sisal mat on the floor, surrounded by the bright black metal frames of our bunk beds. Every week Mary plaits Linette's hair in complicated *biswahilis*,

and Linette gives Mary grub, hair oil, Cutex, even Colgate.

Mary is basically a *koty*, a servant who works for food, though she would never admit it. Her family never comes to see her; she's from some village deep in Busoga. The teachers give her shoes and clothes and money to get home at the end of the term. You'd think Mary would be a nicer person — you know, grateful and humble — but no, she refuses to tie anyone else's hair but Linette's and acts as if her father's a minister, too. She even talks fake like Linette and tries to walk like her, throwing her bum this way and that. But Mary has none to throw; she is as sharp and tall as a stick, a proper easterner — not like Linette, who is short and plump, with the soft, round cheeks of the pampered, as if her mouth is stuffed full of bananas. Together they look ridiculous, although I suppose I shouldn't say so, since that's how God made them. I'm sorry, Lord Jesus. Actually, I pity Mary because Linette pretends to be her friend only when she needs her clothes washed and ironed and her shoes polished. Linette's real friends are the posh girls of Sherbonne House; who doesn't know that?

Anyway, as I went to fill my cup, Linette asked me, "Patti, fetch me some tea, please?" As if I was her *koty*, too.

Then, of all things, Mary reached for her old, stained plastic cup and chimed in, "Me too, Patti?"

"But I've only got two hands!" I said.

They both made faces. Then Linette said to Mary consolingly, "We'll share mine; it's OK." She gave me an ugly look, as if I, who was getting her tea, was the mean one.

But I'm a child of God, so, even though I didn't want to, I picked up Linette's cup. It wasn't plastic, of course, but a hard, shiny white cup decorated with Mickey Mouse pictures. Heavy, too, with a handle that burned when the cup was full. But we will be known by our good deeds. Amen.

When I got back with the tea, I decided, in desperation, to shame myself. "Please, Linette, can you give me just one spoon of sugar?"

Mary smugly watched me beg, knowing she was going to get sugar and dried milk and bread and bananas and everything.

Linette didn't even look at me. She just took her cup of tea from my hand and went outside our room to her locker, which is always bursting with grub. She called back, "Mary, *bambi*, my bread has gone stale. Do you mind just having biscuits? Oh, wait, here are some groundnuts."

My stomach growled cruelly, like a dog. "Please, Linette?" My voice squeaked.

She turned around, annoyed, as though I was a dirty fly she couldn't shrug off her shoulder. "Patti, you're always begging. Am I supposed to look after the whole dorm?"

She spoke intentionally loud, right there in the corridor, while girls passed by, going to and from their rooms and lockers. Everybody heard her, and she knew it. My head suddenly clogged up with hate, but I was trapped by my own groveling need. I couldn't look at Linette. Mary's high, mocking laughter trilled out of our room. Why didn't I just walk away? I couldn't. More than anything, I wanted the sugar.

"Just a spoon?" I pleaded.

Linette took my cup from me roughly, spilling some of the tea and exclaiming, "Eh! Now look what you have done!"

"Sorry, Linette."

"Don't 'sorry' me. Here's your sugar."

She poured *four* spoons into my cup, not bothering to stop the precious silvery grains from trailing down to the floor. *That* was pure malice. She knew I could have put some of it away for tomorrow, at least. I climbed onto my top bunk and buried my face in my history book. I still feel it. The shame. The frustration. I have no energy for anger.

My tea now was lukewarm and so ghastly sweet it hurt my throat, but I forced it down. I wasn't reading, but thinking, Oh, God, how unfair You are! How can You give someone this evil all the food and things she has? Why did I torture myself by going back to the dorm for tea? I should have stayed in the empty classroom till supper, chewing on my tongue, swallowing saliva.

I wanted to cry. I couldn't ignore those two, who were eating, talking, and laughing as if nothing had happened. Linette usually did all the talking while Mary listened and applauded, acting amazed and impressed by everything Linette said. Being a *koty* isn't easy. Or does it come naturally to her, the — No, please, God. No bad words. But Mary was the one gobbling down handfuls of groundnuts, not me. Dear God, what sort of lesson am I supposed to learn from this?

I walked back to the classroom, past the dining room and the other dorms, where clusters of girls sat on the verandas, eating all sorts of nice things — *kabs*, roasted maize, biscuits — as they talked and laughed. The cement path up the slope to class was bordered by severely chopped, stifled grass that moved me to pity. It was too neat to be natural, like a newly pressed army uniform.

God says we suffer for a reason. What reason? Maybe, just maybe, God will answer my prayers and Mama will come see me this evening. Or what if Jesus comes back? I mean, *what if?* Oh, the promised Rapture! I would be lifted up with the holy ones, leaving Linette and Mary behind to burn in hell as they screamed and pleaded for mercy. No, that's silly. And evil. Forgive me, Father. Give me a heart to love them no matter what, because right now I don't; I don't love them. All I can think about is my stomach.

I'd better get back to history, which to me sounds like lies: the past reheated as moral tales of good versus bad, strong versus weak. "Shaka Zulu was a man of humble origin," and so on and so forth. It's all about how he fought and killed everybody and became king. All I have to do is quickly cram it in for exams, and then I can just as quickly forget it. But I can't concentrate; I'm so hungry, so empty. What do I want? I wish a prefect would come running in right now and announce that Mama's here. A miracle! Please, God, please.

7 P.M.

There goes the supper bell, breaking the silence of this long, dreary evening. The clanging means food at least, as bad as it is. And I've finished with Shaka; he's dead. The bell also means the end of visiting hours for the week. That's it. At

least another five days of hunger without hope. My Jesus, You alone know what's best for me, but it's getting harder to wait for Your will. It really is.

8 P.M.

We had *cas-kat* for supper: starchy white cassava cooked with fat brown beans. The cassava was hard to chew, but there was a lot of it. Thank you, Jesus! I ate it hungrily. Everyone stared, but what did I care? Shame disappears when hunger arrives. The bell rang before I finished eating, but I wasn't going to leave my food behind. I pretended to ignore the gaggle of girls as they scraped back their benches and streamed out into the cool evening air, carefree and confident, comfortable in the company of their friends. They had nothing to worry about, except maybe a few pimples cropping up.

Only two other girls remained in the huge, darkened dining room. We bent over our plates, and our private hungers, silently. It's only the most *malo* girls who stay behind: the villagers, the greediest ones, the ones who desperately and completely clean their plates of the so-called food. Everyone else stares and snickers at us as they walk out. Us versus them. *Malo* versus posh. How can we not care what they think of us, as we expose our poverty and greed? We are ashamed of having no shame.

The worst of it is, I think I'm better than the villagers. I'm not really *malo*, not from the village. I grew up in Entebbe. My father used to be the deputy director of public health services. Tata went to England and Europe many times for work and brought us back dresses and shoes you couldn't find in Uganda. I mean, we used to have a Benz! But when his drinking became a day-and-night obsession, he lost his job. It was announced on TV that he'd been retired "in the public interest." I don't want to describe that shame.

Now Mama has to dig in the evenings after work and on weekends. She plants beans, maize, *doh-doh* — anything to save money. Poor Mama. She doesn't have a car or the time to come and visit, or the money. Sure, everybody's worse off after Idi Amin's regime, but *we* shouldn't have been. Anyway, why am I writing about this? I'm tired of thinking about these things, chasing what might have been round and round in my head, looking for someone to blame. Why can't I be happy and chatty and simple, like the other girls? Life would be so much easier. Maybe it's because I am a child of God. He says we are different. We are not of this world. We should not want to be part of it. But I can't help it; I do.

(end of excerpt)