

HUNGER PANGS

On my twenty-first birthday, friends took me out for the first actual meal I had had in several months. We went to a restaurant whose name I have forgotten, a fancy place that had won many of Florida's Golden Spoon awards. I remember what I ate in vivid detail: an appetizer of oysters on the half-shell, a salad of mesclun greens and citrus, an entrée of crabmeat au gratin, and finally a slice of cake with a candle in it. We also had white wine.

Because I had not eaten in so long, the food made me nauseous and dizzy. My friends still joke about how they had to walk me up and down the street afterwards, as I groaned and staggered. They did not know my situation. "She ate too much!" they laughed then. They laugh about this still, remembering. They are even now unaware of what my circumstances were at the time, unaware that I had not had food in a long time. But they are right about one thing—my shrunken stomach and atrophied digestive system were completely incapable of handling such a large and rich meal after months of deprivation.

For several years after that, my weight dwindled. There was a time, in my mid-twenties, when I weighed less than seventy pounds, less than a young dog I sometimes cared for. I should hasten to add that I was not suffering from anorexia or bulimia or any other terminal or wasting disease, nor was I living in the aftermath of a famine or earthquake; neither was I incarcerated or otherwise being victimized by institutional or interpersonal abuse.

No: I was, quite simply, starving, because I did not have enough money to buy food.

It was the first time in my life I had found myself in such a predicament. I had grown up in a middle-class family (father a research scientist, mother a schoolteacher) and had never before experienced any lack of nourishment, nor of anything else, as my life with them had been festooned with modest luxuries of all sorts. I recall that, in my early adolescence, I had even been a tad on the plump side, a development my brothers had teased me mercilessly about. Learning to subsist without food—or rather, with very little food—was therefore an acquired skill, like swimming or needlepoint. Paradoxically, it was a technique of survival, although I realize now that I might have perished in the learning process.

I do remember being ravenous, at first—eyeing menus with desperation and longing and then ordering the cheapest thing I could find, like a roll or a small paper bag of French fries; making lemonade with the free water and lemon slices at cafeterias; drifting through grocery stores with five dollars clutched in my fist, fiercely calculating how I could make it through the week. Most vividly, I remember how much my stomach hurt. There are clichéd words for this pain, like *gnawing* and *throbbing* and *paroxysmal*. Those work. After a while, though, the pain subsided, and with it, my appetite. I could no longer eat very much. I am told that this happens to starving persons: the stomach shrinks. In one clinical study of long-term starvation, the subjects developed intense hunger pangs, and even though “they were aware that they would suffer from abdominal pain or vomiting if they ate... their appetite sensations were so strong that they were prepared to suffer the consequences,” as I was the night of my birthday. Some chewed and spat out food to try to relieve their hunger less disgustingly. About two-thirds of them lost their hunger over time. This is what happened to me.

2 Before my appetite faded completely, I improvised cheap ways to trick my body into thinking it was eating. Like many poor people, I discovered junk food—food-like fare that cost very little and served to satisfy my hunger in the short-term. This was the first time I had ever tasted such forgeries. My parents, who are Indian and strictly vegetarian, had insisted on fresh and local ingredients long before such quibbling became trendy. My mother is an accomplished cook, of the sort who whips out complex and delicious dishes without apparent effort or guidance. For a variety of complicated reasons, mostly involving misdirected feminist zeal, I had never learned this repertoire from her—never ventured into the kitchen when I lived at home. So when I found myself on my own, only preprocessed and packaged goods could meet my need for basic sustenance.

I remember that for breakfast, I would have half a Pop-Tart (breaking it carefully, to make sure the box lasted longer) and a cup of instant hot chocolate, the powdered kind that you make with water. I usually skipped lunch, and for dinner I boiled up ramen noodles, which at the time cost ten cents a package. (I have since read that the inventor of these instant noodles actually manufactured them with the intention of making affordable food for poor people, and I remain abjectly grateful to this man, Momofuku Ando.)

As a result of this nutritionally bankrupt diet, my clothing started becoming looser. I cinched my pants with makeshift belts and layered my T-shirts,

because I was always cold, even in Florida's calescent summers. At some point, I discovered I could buy children's clothes at the Salvation Army for pennies; once, I remember fitting into a camisole in a toddler size. No doubt it was designed for an average, chunky, American three-year-old. But it was fine on me. Later, I spoke with a friend about this, and she exclaimed, "So that's why you always wore baggy clothes! I thought it was some kind of fashion statement." It is interesting that the physical marks of my starvation were invariably interpreted as volitional, even as chic. My cheeks were hollow, and my collarbones protruded, and people told me I was beautiful.

A professor asked me to dog-sit his large and enthusiastic Labrador puppy, who outweighed me by at least a stone. Jogging beside the dog, clutching his leash, I knew there was something wrong with the algorithm. Adult humans are not meant to be outweighed by young dogs.

There is a discipline to starvation. My starvation was not exactly voluntary, but it was still akin to a religious fast or a hunger strike in its mechanisms. I had to adjust to it mentally, knowing I had little money for food, and therefore determined to resist its terrible, mouth-watering temptations. My goal was not political or spiritual: it was crassly material, in that I was bent on survival and solvency. I think that in this sense my starvation differed little from that of a person enduring a famine or enforced food deprivation. I had to make hyperrational decisions about how much money to spend on food, what portions to eat, how long I could go without eating, how much to hoard, and how much to consume. Perhaps people on dramatic diets have to do this as well. I had to think carefully about my eating and stick with my decisions in order to stay alive. I could not dive into a repast at sundown, as Muslims can during Ramadan or Jews during Yom Kippur. I could not tell myself that I would eat again once some political point had been scored or some social goal achieved. In the Bible, Isaiah fasted to "loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke." I—well—my fast was not noble or inspired or spiritual. And there was no end in sight to my starvation.

I felt stoic about this. Sometimes I even forgot about it. Eventually, once my appetite had dwindled, I did not think even about it very much. In her acerbic short story "Hunger," Jean Rhys writes of astonishment at being without food ("There must be *something* one can do"), of headaches and tearfulness, of arguing with invisible listeners. Finally she writes that one becomes "calm

and godlike.” But then she teases the reader: “I have never gone without food for longer than five days, so I cannot amuse you any longer.”

I went without food for much longer than five days. Looking back, I calculate that I was in a state of semi-starvation for about four years.

Perhaps I should have achieved some kind of preternatural clarity as a result of my detachment from the needs of the body; saintliness tends to follow from self-sacrifice or physical mortification. St. Augustine fasted to overcome sinful worldly temptations: “It is sometimes necessary,” he reminded us, “to check the delights of the flesh in respect to licit pleasures in order to keep it from yielding to illicit joys.” But my desires grew fiercer, sharper, more avid, as my hunger faded. I was not in a relationship at the time, but my dreams were fervid and carnal, like an adolescent boy’s; I would awake sweaty and filled with inchoate yearning. I flung myself into my work. It is startling to me to realize that I did very well in graduate school despite my starvation. I don’t recall feeling particularly weak or distracted, either: I participated in seminars, kept up with readings, wrote solid papers, made friends.

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In the preface to his great oeuvre, *Le théâtre et son double*, Antonin Artaud argued for the necessity of thinking of and past hunger: “What is important, it seems to me, is not so much to defend a culture whose existence has never kept a man from going hungry, as to extract, from what is called culture, ideas whose compelling force is identical with that of hunger.” Would he have understood, then, the displacement of my hunger onto art and other imaginary fires—the fierce longings to understand, to create, to write, to love, that possessed me?

I suppose I should have become ill, or weak, or even mentally unstable because of this lack of food, because of the intensity of my sublimations. Somehow, none of this happened. I must have been malnourished, though. My thick and shiny hair began to fall out in alarming quantities during this period. At the time and for years afterward, I blamed either the cheap shampoos I was using or the intense daily blow-drying I engaged in to combat Florida’s humidity. “Don’t ever blow-dry your hair,” I warned my daughters later. “It will make it fall out.” But in writing this, I realize for the first time that it was neither the blow-dryer nor the shampoo that wreaked the havoc: my hair loss was, of course, a symptom of my starvation. My hair has never looked the same since. Even once I began eating again, it never regained its luster or thickness. I wonder about other things that may have been affected:

bone density, muscle mass, organs. Will I one day have osteoporosis, liver damage, periodontal disease? I suppose I will find out, eventually, what the long-term impacts of my short-term hunger will be.

My sole income then was my graduate teaching assistantship, which totaled \$3,500 a semester; it came to about \$625 a month. My rent was about half of that sum, and I also had to pay in-state tuition and student fees, as well as buy books and so on. If you do the math, you will see that very little money remained after those necessary expenses. Fortunately, the institution I was attending was located in a warm place—Gainesville, Florida—so clothes were not an issue, and I bought a bicycle for \$35 at a campus auction, which was sufficient for trundling about the town.

I lived in a tenement called The Starlight, across the tracks from a crack house, whose ragged denizens often wandered into our parking lot and foraged in our dumpster. I was afraid of them, yet I felt a weird affinity for them, too, recognizing their condition as kindred to mine. There were bars on the windows of The Starlight's grubby flats, and the police patrolled often. I did not linger outside my door, and I brought my bicycle indoors rather than risking its dismantlement by jonesing addicts looking to sell parts, a thriving industry in Gainesville.

The nearest source of food was a gas station on the main drag—University Avenue—that offered shriveled hot dogs and radioactively bright cheese puffs, as such places are wont to do. There was no nearby grocery store. This did not really matter to me or to the crack addicts, as in some sense groceries were immaterial at that point in our lives. Nonetheless, we were denizens of what sociologists now call a “food desert,” a geographical area without access to fresh and nutritious food. These deserts are First-World phenomena. Their boundaries are those of urban slums, of housing projects, of *barrios*, of student ghettos. Basic foods—milk, fruit, bread—are available only at thievery high convenience-store prices in these neighborhoods. So, like me, most people who live there learn to get by without such luxuries, subsisting instead on instant soups and candy bars and Funyuns (or Schedule-One drugs, which also kill the appetite. Whatever works).

In retrospect, I wonder why no one noticed; and I am also glad that no one noticed. My poverty and resultant starvation were ignominious secrets that I wanted no one to discern. At social gatherings in restaurants or bars I often refused to eat or drink, hoping that I would not then have to contribute

to the bill. Sometimes this happened; someone would notice and say kindly, “She shouldn’t have to put in anything—she didn’t eat.” But at other times, I would be asked to chip in regardless of my consumption, and I would pony up, parting with my precious five or ten dollars, money that represented perhaps a fortnight’s grocery budget, secretly agonized by the unfairness of the situation, yet unwilling to protest it and call attention to my penury. My hunger demanded dignity.

6 At this point, you may wonder why I did not take out a student loan or get a Pell Grant or use some other such subsidy to supplement my meager income. I could have qualified for food stamps, surely. But here we come to the crux of the matter. I was a foreign student. Although my parents had immigrated to the United States and then to Canada when I was a baby, they had returned to India to live during my adolescence, and I had retained Indian citizenship despite our various relocations. They were living in India at the time I entered the PhD program at the University of Florida. Despite their relatively affluent lives on the subcontinent, they could not afford to finance my education, as the exchange rates were then abysmal: the rupee was worth some pitiful sub-fraction of a dollar. As a foreign citizen—an “alien,” as the INS puts it—I was not eligible for loans or grants or even for paid off-campus work. I was, then, restricted to my \$625-per-month income. It was not something I questioned, as I had left India voluntarily and was determined not to return until I had achieved fame and fortune in America. If living on a pittance was what it took, I would do it. Besides, I had many romanticized visions of artists and writers who had starved in garrets on their way to greatness. I saw myself as a Dylan Thomas or a Picasso; dreams, I knew, often had to be paid for with suffering.

It is ironic to me now that I left the Third World healthy and happy, perhaps even a little too plump. For Indians who can afford it, the subcontinent is an omnivore’s dreamworld—its welter of cultures and castes and topographies has yielded a cuisine that is delectably varied and infinitely interesting. Throughout my adolescence, I gorged on sweet-and-sour *chaat* from street vendors’ smoky stalls and crisp *masala dosais* in corner cafés, savored freshly roasted coffee with syrupy sweetmeats, dawdled for hours in bakeries redolent with curry puffs and rainbow cupcakes. My mother’s kitchen was a cornucopia of South Indian delights. And my parents, even on their Third-World salaries, had taken us on jaunts to Europe, where we had tried pastas with

kinky-sounding names (“Venus’s bellybuttons” in Bologna, “pumpkinheads” in Abruzzo), *mille-feuilles* in Paris and Weiner schnitzel in Köln. I had loved food, as I love it now; I had never known what it was like to go without it.

It was only in the First World that I learned what it meant to be destitute and hungry.

Immigrants come to America with visions dancing in their heads: we imagine we will become rich, famous, and happy here. Mostly rich. We come seeking fortune, willing to toil for it but anticipating a life of ease and mountains of things, as the singer Tracy Chapman once keened. But when we come, we find ourselves trapped in the murky nooks and crannies of America’s gilded terrain—the food deserts, the housing projects, the sweatshops and the slums, the crack houses and the homeless shelters. We find ourselves in another Third World, perhaps even more tyrannized and destitute than we were in the Third Worlds we left, even though we have arrived in the land of freedom and plenty. “A Third World in every First World,” wrote the filmmaker and scholar Trinh T. Minh-ha. She’s right about that. There is hunger in this First/Third World: more than forty-nine million Americans live in “food insecure” households. There is abject poverty in this First/Third World, too: many millions of Americans live below the poverty line, which in 2011 meant \$10,890 a year. (And I made much less than that during my starving years. So, I’d imagine, did the people in the crack house.) I spent a relatively brief time in this First/Third World. I watched the junkies and the prostitutes as they went about their business not ten yards from my front door, and they watched me, each of us acknowledging the other’s marginal claim to a lifestyle and an identity. Once, I saw a skeletal young woman pull a half-eaten pizza from the dumpster, and my mouth watered; she saw me looking and clutched her prize to her chest, glaring. I looked away, abashed. I could not reassure myself that I was somehow superior to her or above eating from a garbage can, though I had never done it and never would. Still, for a moment as I watched her, the thought crossed my mind. Even now, I cannot allow myself the conceit that there are no conditions under which I might scavenge for food. I don’t know what they are—war? homelessness? environmental apocalypse?—but I recognize the desperate possibilities that lurk inside me.

Walking to and from my university classes, I picked my way past street people and panhandlers, some of whom admonished me with familiar jocos-

ity: “Smile!” one of them said once. “It can’t be that bad!” I was incensed and astonished by how very wrong he was, and then nearly brought to tears by the recognition that his life, at that moment, was marginally less unhappy than mine.

I grew to know the First/Third World very well as I balanced on a tight-rope between respectability and the rubbish heap. And I came to realize that most First World people refuse to admit that this liminal zone exists: we First/Third-Worlders are invisible to them.

But I was merely a squatter in those environs, a day-tripper; I was, in fact, slumming, though at the time I wondered if I would ever escape the squalor of that existence. I was pursuing a doctorate, and my trajectory was upward and outward: there was a light at the end of my tunnel—not so for the prostitutes and pushers in the house across the street. In theory, someday I would be able to live differently, according to a lifestyle that was more familiar to me; I would be able to afford clothes and perhaps a house. And food. Real food. But at the time, this rosy future seemed hopelessly conjectural. I did not know when, or if, this would actually happen. This is why, now, when I give money to panhandlers, when I dish out food at soup kitchens, I deliberately make eye contact. When hungry people look back at me, I am stilled by their emotions: sometimes I am confronted with sorrow, sometimes fury, sometimes shamefaced gratitude, and sometimes with a chilling blankness. Always, I recognize things I felt when I was hungry. The hungry are never invisible to me, though I no longer inhabit their spaces.

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One day while I was in graduate school—in the way that colors and shapes shift into dazzling new configurations with a single, sudden twist of a kaleidoscope to reveal a startling new world—I met the man I would eventually marry, and he introduced me to cooking. As poor as I, he nonetheless had better survival skills. He knew—while I didn’t—that there was a health-food store within easy biking distance of The Starlight, where we could buy brown rice and lentils and mustard greens. He showed me how to make a stewing chicken last for a week, until on Sunday we used the bones and back for what we called “chicken-butt soup.” The first meal he made for me featured the red beans and rice of his native New Orleans, sparkled with Tabasco and redolent with rosemary. I watched in amazement as he stirred a roux on his tiny apartment stove, sprinkled spices into the bubbling pot, washed lettuce and tomatoes for a salad. The taste of those beans and the fresh vegetables,

after years of fake food—their textures, pungency, rich aromas—remains with me to this day.

It took me a long time to learn to eat again. And as it happened, regaining my appetite and falling in love coincided, the two so intertwined that I cannot, to this day, separate or make any distinction between the passion and joy and overwhelming sense of safety that came with both.