

## We Feed People What We Are Starving For

Rosy is starving. She is easily ten kilograms underweight. When I sit beside her on the sofa, her leg next to mine looks skeletal, frail, something to be snapped in half. She struggles to peel a tangerine. She doesn't have the strength to dig her thumbnail under the skin, to lift the peel away from the fruit, to separate it into sections. I peel it for her, knowing that I'll regret the sticky smell of orange on my hands here in the dust with nowhere to wash, but I peel oranges for her anyway, for the joy of seeing her slide the juicy pieces into her mouth.

Rosy has been waiting for this day. She put in requests for food for weeks now. It's her brother's graduation but she knows she is my favorite, and boldly asks for hotcakes for breakfast and hamburgers for dinner. In contrast to most days when she eats only an egg, some beans, a few tortillas, today she will be full.

When she asked for hotcakes weeks ago, I was terrified. Some days her family does not have propane for their tiny, two-burner stove and her father walks to the arroyo to gather firewood. I am terrified at the thought of making pancakes over a fire. The quantity of things I could do wrong here feels infinite. I bring a camp stove and a propane canister, and hope for the best. Cooking is hard. Cooking for others is terrifying. Cooking for fifteen people is panic-inducing. But Rosy wants hotcakes, and hotcakes she will have.

I added eggs, bacon, and orange juice to the menu. I wonder if the richness of the food or the quantity will make her sick. I butter her pancakes and cut them for her. She eats; I watch.

She is so thin.

Lifting the fork tires her. Chewing tires her.

She is hungry. She is starving. She is full.

I sit next to her, her bony arm cool and dry against my own. I tell her that we are both underweight, that we need to gain weight, that we will work on this together.

Her fork stops in mid-air. She stares at me. It is the first time I have seen her bitter. In her squeaky childlike voice, she is clear in her recrimination. "You can gain weight. You have the resources. You have money for food every single day."

She's right. I am starving through no one's fault but my own. I'm starving because my brain and my eyes and the mirror and the scale cannot come to an agreement about health and worth and the quantity of space I am allowed to occupy.

It is the height of privilege to share starvation with Rosy. It is the height of arrogance.

I dare not tell her that food feels like chunks of fat in my mouth, that I like feeling light and dry and in danger of blowing away. I force myself to match her bite for bite. The pancakes feel like cotton on my tongue.

We get ready for the graduation. Rosy is 17 but looks 12. She is one of the few people I know who is tinier than me. I am sure she does not menstruate. Helping her get ready is like helping a child. She wants a braided crown of hair pulled back to a ponytail. She wants her hair like mine.

I run my fingers through her dusty hair. I am so careful, more careful than I ever was with my own daughter, whose tight ponytails were meant to signal my good parenting. Rosy's hair is thin and dull, and I'm careful not to pull it too hard, scared I will end up with a handful of dark strands. In the sunlight, I see the reddish cast associated with malnutrition. It is the hair of a starving person. I'm glad there is not a mirror here. I'm relieved I cannot see my own hair.

I peel another orange for her, braid her niece's hair to match ours. There are so many things I wish I could change for this family, but I cannot give them back their dead mother, cannot peel back the layers of poverty, cannot make the world more fair for them. Instead I grin and tell jokes. I bring them things in the way that a cat brings lizards and birds and mice to its owner, hoping to be rewarded with a smile.

The air hangs heavy around us. The day is hot and I am dressed too warmly. Like Rosy, I am often cold, and my bones ache from it. Today the sun is merciless as we sit and chat listlessly, waiting for the hour we are to head over to the elementary school to watch her brothers graduate from 6th grade.

I don't know what illness Rosy suffers from. She has been diagnosed with and treated for tuberculosis. At various times, she's been thought to have anemia, lung cancer, liver damage. She has not attended school since 5th grade. In the US, I could intervene. I could call the authorities. I could accuse her parents of medical neglect, force them to take her to a doctor instead of the neighborhood brujo, whose prescriptions involve candles and powders and red thread. I could force someone to treat her, to feed her, to make her well. Here in her home country, a mere 90 miles south of my home, I can do nothing but watch her starve.

I brace myself for the day that I will receive the call to tell me that she is gone. In the meantime I bring her yarn, coloring books, crayons. I would bring her the moon and the stars if she asked me to, because I cannot give her what she really needs.

Today, I bring her food. After the graduation, I fire up the stove again to make hamburgers. I slice tomatoes, tear leaves of lettuce, set out catsup, mustard, mayonnaise, cheese.

I scoop potato salad onto plates, pour juice into paper cups. I've gone far over my budget on today's food, but as I watch Rosy and her family serve themselves again and again, I'm comforted by the knowledge that at least today, they are full. I'll spend less money on food for myself in the upcoming week to make up for the expense.

The thought does not make me sad. Nothing looks appetizing to me except for the lettuce.

The sun beats down on the packed dirt patio and the thought of choking down a hamburger nauseates me. I eat mechanically, willing myself to focus on the coolness of the lettuce. Again I match Rosy bite for bite.

It gives me joy to watch her father and her brothers and her sisters and nieces and nephews and sisters-in-law come back to the table for another hamburger, a tangerine, a cluster of grapes. Her younger brothers, freshly graduated from elementary school, stand off to the side, hunched over their plates, quiet as oak trees. Rosy and I watch everyone eat until they are full. We were full long ago and the effort of eating has worn us both out for different reasons.

At the end of the day, I pack up the camp stove, the cutting board and knives and spatula and pans. I don't want to dip into their meager water supply to wash my dishes, so I dread the two hour drive home, the smell of food permeating the car, my clothes, my hair. I roll down the windows, and hope that the breeze - ocean, mountain, and field - will erase the scent of food, and make me feel clean.