

Come and Eat

AT ROADSIDE STANDS FOR beans and rice and pounded yams, patrons held up their bowls. “Come and eat!” they called. “Come and eat!” called the *tanti* frying up dough. But I would just wave, say thank you, and keep walking. When I got home, my neighbor was on her shady terrace, cracking peanut shells and punting the nuts into a basin. Her children were at school, her husband at the cotton factory, and we said hello. They were the Sotindjos. We shared a well, a yard, and an outhouse. When I moved in, I thought we would be cordial but otherwise keep to ourselves.

In the early evening, when I was getting ready for dinner, I could hear the father come home on his putt-putt scooter, rounding into the gate as he sounded his cartoonish horn. A commotion of giggles flew out to the yard. I was drawn to the window and watched from a distance as all five children clung to his arms as he teased them. I wondered what that was like. Family was their joy, not mine.

In the morning, I loved the sounds of sweeping. *Hush-hush, hush-hush*. Neighbors swept their yards, etching row upon row of S-curves in the dust. I listened from indoors. I listened, too, for footsteps going to and fro outside, for the clang of a basin on the lip of the well. Someone was drawing water, and every few minutes I would pad to the front of the house and look through the louvered window to see if the yard was clear. I didn’t want to disturb anyone. Then one morning I felt silly about my self-consciousness, and without thought of who I would encounter or what on earth I would say, I stepped outside. Mr. Sotindjo was at the well with his boy, and they taught me how to draw water. I had never done it before, but I learned the rhythm of dunking the rubber drawer, letting it bob and sink and fill underwater, then tugging it up, pull by pull, looping each stretch of rope from my elbow to the notch between my forefinger and thumb, and I began to feel strong. When I got up in the morning, I wondered, who will I see today?

One night, as I was reading by my lantern, a small voice called from outside: “Ko, ko, ko!” I got up and padded across the floor, and there on the other side of the door was six-year-old Chantal. “This is from Mama,” she said, holding up a small, lidded casserole. She was trying hard to be composed,

but looked so blushy and wound up that I couldn’t help but make a grand show of thanking her as she squirmed and tried to hide her bright face, so I curtsied, and she curtsied back, and then she sprang into the dark, calling “Mama!”

And so the casseroles began. They came in Chantal’s hands, they came in her brother’s; sometimes Chantal and her brother came together, standing side by side, holding casseroles like cupped prayers. Under those lids were maize meal and savory sauces, yam fries, and the occasional guinea fowl, one day squawking about the yard, the next a roasted drumstick. That I was vegetarian mattered less and less. Under the starry sky, casserole in hand, I would sit out back and listen for Mama to call her children’s names, to hear them say, “Na?” Is it me you call? To hear their niece scrape the pots clean, singing, “This is my bluh-uh-uhd, given up for you. This is my bah-ah-dy, given up for you . . .” And then one night I called out to her and said it was beautiful.

The Sotindjos liked my pancakes. When the rains returned and the land sprouted green again, Mama and I made over a hundred pancakes on my two-burner propane stove for their niece’s First Communion. *Gateaux*, we called them. Cakes. The celebrants ate them plain, not with honey like me. The West African diet tends to be starchy: maize, millet, sorghum, and yams, served with sauces hot enough to make your head sweat and your hands grab water. Not many sweets—a discovery I made when only months into my two-year service I attempted to feed honeyed pancakes to a carpenter who had just installed my ceiling. After a few reluctant bites, he put the dish down. “Madame, they’re too sweet,” he said gravely.

Peace Corps volunteers commonly ask, “What’s the first thing you’ll eat when you get back?” In Benin, I dreamed of ice cream, wrote odes to creamy sweets. When I pictured the day I would sit with spoon poised over a mound of whipped cream, arias soared in the distance.

And then the day came. During the layover on my return to the United States, I wandered Charles de Gaulle in a sleepy fog. It was only six in the morning, the airport nearly deserted, and then I spotted a Häagen Dasz. My heart swelled. The angels sang. I bolted toward the storefront and scanned the



ABOVE: Neighbor Celestine Sotindjo deep-fries the rice she will put in plastic baggies with roasted peanuts as a puffed rice and peanut snack, popular in northern Benin. Her son Charles often sits out on the terrace, helping her to ready the snacks for market.

glass. 10. They opened at 10. I'd still be here. O, the Amens! And yet, I appeared perfectly calm. Hands at my sides, head held straight, I turned and found a seat at a nearby gate where I read my book like a nun, not some lusty wolf, clawing at the entrance for dulce de leche.

When the hour of glory arrived and the door to Häagen Dasz opened, I did not move immediately; I did not beeline for the entrance, clapping my hands giddily. I circled. Circling calmed me, and patience, and handling hunger as if I had no hunger at all. I looped through the crowded gates, and when I returned, it was as though I just happened to be passing by when it dawned on me that ice cream could be a wholesome breakfast. And there was a line of customers, so apparently others thought so too. I gaped at the tubs behind the glass: pistachio, vanilla bean, double cream, coffee, chocolate chocolate chip — more than I could take in. When my turn came, I ordered dulce de leche and coffee topped in hot fudge, marshmallow, and peanut butter cups. My spirits were jacked. Decked sundae in hand, I strolled to the nearest, least-crowded seats and huddled the dish close to me. Together at last.

I thought I knew the way to bliss. I thought ice cream could be a kind of homecoming, clearing a path back to what I loved. The first bite came as a punch, the hot fudge so dense my lips pursed. I dug in again. I'll adjust, I thought, but the second bite was just as cloying. I hovered over the bowl, and dipped the spoon in, cautiously skimming the surface, then tried again, slowly moving the flavors around my mouth as I looked out at the halls, travelers striding by with rolling suitcases. Everyone in suits seemed to know where they were going. Within spoonfuls, I put the bowl down and gazed at the mass in my lap, confused. What had happened to us?

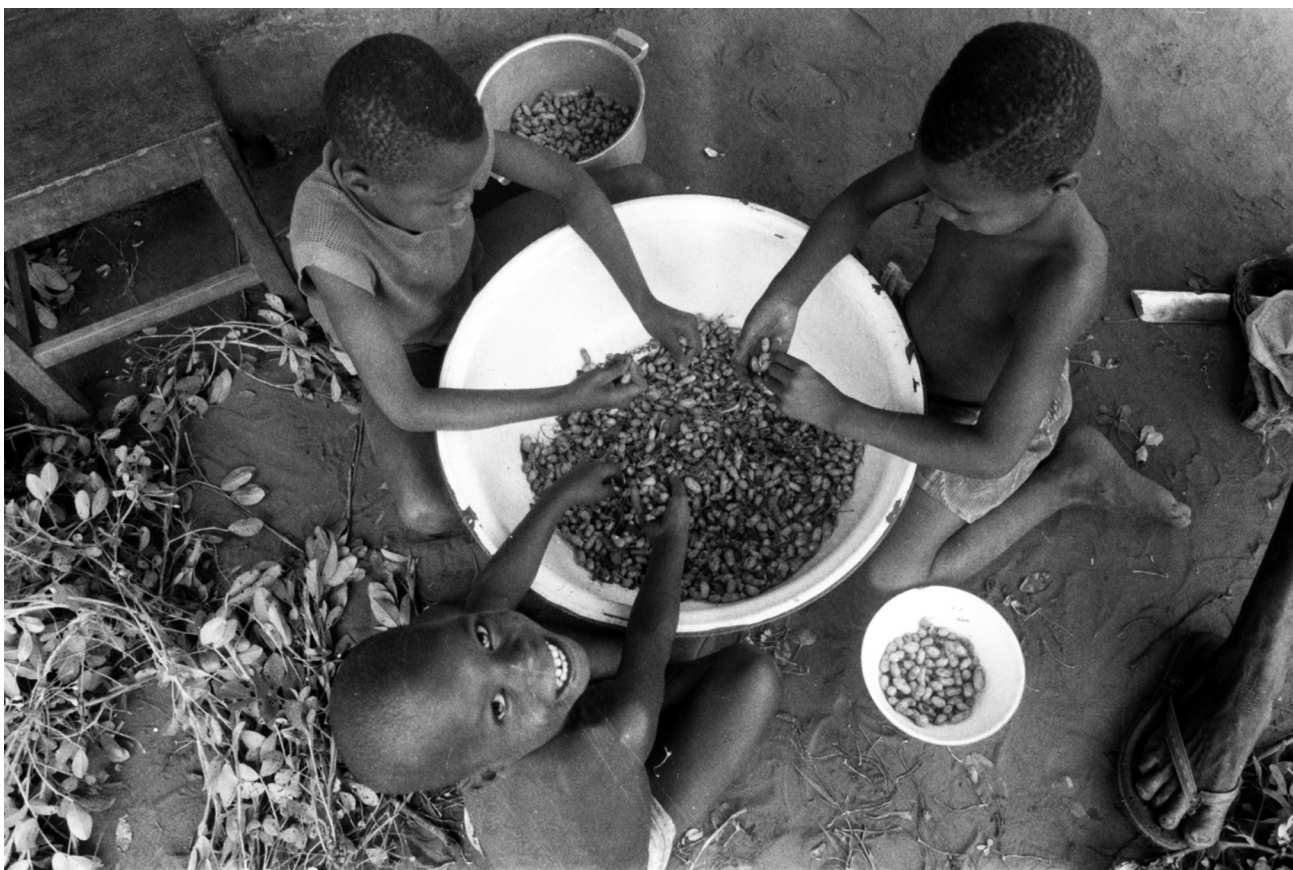
Meanwhile, the ice cream was melting. I looked around. An American mother and daughter were chatting nearby, something about someone's dress. Over and over, I could hear myself turning to them and saying, "Would you like the



ABOVE: Fati and Amina eat shea fruit at a women's cooperative gathering in Bembèrèkè, Benin.



LEFT: Women at the Ouassa-Péhunco market eating porridge and selling leafy greens. Every five days, locals and Beninois from outlying regions flock to the outdoor market to sell, shop, flirt, and commune.



ABOVE: Mathilde and Modeste Gounon crack peanut shells from their family farm in Allada with the help of their neighbor Lukia, looking up at the camera.

rest of my sundae?" I couldn't bear to throw it away. But whenever I moved to speak, my throat tightened as I imagined their discomfort, or their concern, and I could bear that even less. I wasn't ready to see, from their eyes, that I was already lost.

Over those first months back, I sat on my bed each morning, a mattress on the floor at my father's. Get up, I told myself. The light in the window was overcast. Get up. Instead I stared, thinking, what for? What would I do? There was no well, no Papa, no drawing water.

I cooked. At night I made soup and savory pies for my divorced father and teenage sister, who often didn't eat together. The house was tense. I washed the dishes. The water

hummed, and when I was done, I put away the leftovers with an ache. All I wanted to do was go next door with a covered dish. "We thought you might like some," I'd say. But we didn't know our neighbors, not well, and I didn't want to disturb them. I missed the Sotindjos terribly. I missed Mama and Papa and the children. I missed neighbors who sat outdoors and walked through the neighborhoods saying, "Hello! Come and eat!" These were the habits of love from another world. This was the grace my neighbors taught me. ©