



“Little Bellies Full”

By

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I placed all of my MREs [Meals Ready to Eat] on the floor and watched the little kids’ eyes grow even bigger, almost like they would pop-out of their big heads. The effects of malnutrition and disease had left the poor kids looking like freakish little aliens.

Half of them covered by the rags I could make out to be much worn, torn-up, dirty clothes. Others were completely nude.

All of them barefooted.

Some had blondish hair, another sign of malnutrition, along with sunshine vitamin D deficiency clearly manifested in its most distinctive signs – bow legs, or rickets.

The oldest of them was perhaps five or six, but I couldn’t be sure. They could be older, suffering from stunted growth. All I know is that they were all looking fragile, sickly, hungry, and looking forward to what was probably their only meal for the day.

Boko Haram soldiers had ransacked the village, taken all the food.

My thoughts were interrupted when someone placed a large bowl on the floor next to us. The children quickly gathered around it and started to look at the content of the bowl filled with the

white, dry manioc flour. Surely, it would not be enough for the 13 kids who now sat patiently and motionless around the bowl, all staring, as if willing it to grow.

Teacher Amina fetched some water, which she poured into the bowl, just enough that the flour was submerged below about two fingers of water. Then turning to me, she pointed to the MREs and other sachets, asking me which one contained the sugar. She found it before I even answered, and took one, opened it and poured it into the bowl. Her hands, burned by the fire that had killed most of her students, were looking better.

“Just one? Here, why don’t you put some more to really sweeten it? I asked, but saw her shake her head. In spite, I opened two more sachets and poured the sugar with one hand, while I held her back with the other. The kids laughed.

“This should be enough. Let us save some for tomorrow.” She said, fuming.

I could see now why the kids were staring at the bowl, and it wasn’t just because they were hungry. They were watching the flour soak in the water, which was making it expand in size. What had seemed a small portion of the flour was now almost reaching the bowl’s full capacity!

I saw Amina place a package wrapped in newspaper on the floor, and could perceive a smell that reminded me of smoke, or perhaps it was charcoal, and something like fish. As she unwrapped it, slowly, carefully, the kids began to smile expectantly, some vividly salivating

“Have you eaten smoked fish with *garri* before, Mr. Brazil?” She asked, as she finished unwrapping the fish, to everyone’s delight. She then began to break the fish into little portions, careful to make sure that everyone had an equal share. She then gave the head to me.

I didn’t like eating fish head, fried, baked, smoked, or whatever. But I had been told by a fellow Nigerian soldier that the head of any good meat was reserved to the eldest or most prestigious person on the table.

So I took the fish and forged a smile that seem to make everyone happy, but did not really convince Amina, who just shook her head in amusement. And as the kids began to eat, I felt guilty about it and decided to dig into that strange manioc flour they called *garri*, soaked in water.

I noticed that they were all very interested to see if I would like it. Perhaps, I would disappoint them if I did, which meant I would eat more, and there would be less for them to eat.

Embarrassed at myself for thinking such little kids would entertain such selfishness, I introduced the spoon into my mouth and allowed the stuff to interact with my taste buds.

Bland, lightly sweetened by the sugar, grainy, coarse.

I did not have an opinion of it yet when Amina pushed some of the smoked fish into my mouth, which I resisted initially, but seeing that everyone was doing the same, I ended up doing it. I

had already swallowed the first spoon of the stuff though, and could only taste the residues that were blending with the fish. Some of the kids also had tiny wrappings of roasted groundnut. Hum! Interesting. One offered me some, which I accepted.

I savoured the contrast of the smoked fish, with the sweetened, wet texture of the manioc flour, and the roasted groundnuts.

I closed my eyes.

I had never tasted anything like it before in my life.

It was different, simple, and tasteful.

Perhaps because I was hungry, starving, which would have perhaps made most edible things taste like heaven.

To be fair, this stuff, with the fish, the groundnuts, really did taste good!

The kids laughed, and I joined them.

At the end of the meal, they chanted a song in their traditional language, which I tried to sing along, causing more laughter in the process.

For a few minutes, Boko Haram, war, hunger, death, none of these things mattered.

Their little bellies were full!