

# Hunger

When I was a boy, my mother used to heap spoonfuls of vegetables onto my plate whether I wanted them or not, and the rule was that we always had to clean our plates.

"But I didn't ask for them," I would say, staring petulantly at the chalky black-eyes peas or lima beans, my least favorite of all.

"You shouldn't have to ask to eat," my mother would say, motioning with her fork for me to get started. I rarely saw my mother eat the vegetables. She always served us first, and barely picked at a meal herself. She worked for a rich lady in a big house in town, and I always assumed, with jealousy, that her distaste for our bland and frugal meals were a result of her having spent her day eating rich meats and sweets in the rich lady's kitchen. Our meals were solemn, utilitarian, and usually unsatisfying, since there was never enough; except for once or twice a year, when my mother would chance to come by some blackberries, or when it was apple season, and she would surprise us with a pie. There were ten of us – my parents and eight children – so one pie didn't go far, but I remember how I would savor my sliver, teasing out its sweetness and its flavor, to make it last as long as I possibly could.

One summer afternoon my older sisters who were still young enough to be living at home were sick. I was by far the youngest child, with a gap of ten years between me and the next oldest, so my mother counted on my older siblings to take care of me while she and my father were at work.

"I supposed there's nothing else for it," she said, sighing, as she got dressed that morning. "You'll have to come with me. But you're to sit in the kitchen quietly all day. Do not wander around the house or make any noise. And if the mistress comes into the kitchen, you hide in the cupboard."

This particular day was at the end of what had been a long, lean winter. My father hadn't had much work, and we'd been subsisting on what he was able to hunt in the woods—winter-lean rabbits and sluggish birds—and on the potatoes and sweet potatoes we had stored up from the fall. I was only nine, and had seen very little except my own home and the school house, so when we got to the rich woman's house and my mother sat me in the corner of the kitchen, I was too enthralled with what I saw there to do anything but gape. I watched my mother, white up to her elbows with flour, rolling out pie crust. She set some meat to roasting in the oven, and by afternoon its aroma had filled the kitchen, and was making its way into the deepest crevices of my gnawingly empty stomach. I had not moved all day. I watched my mother snap beans and shuck corn and peel potatoes. If I were not here to witness, I imagined she would have been snacking all day, and I began to feel angry. I thought of the chalky vegetables she made us eat, of the bits of meat that she always tried to stretch with grits or rice. What would she be eating right now, I wondered, if I wasn't here? Why was the lady that she worked for so rich? What had she done that made her so much better, and so much more fortunate than us?



Name \_\_\_\_\_

**Structure's Contribution**

A bell rang in the kitchen and my mother wiped her hands on her apron and glanced over at me.

"Don't move," she said. And then she left the room.

At first I didn't move. But I was soon drawn to a table in the center of the kitchen where my mother had left a huge bowl of washed blackberries. What would it matter, I wondered, if I ate just one blackberry? Who would notice, when the lady of the house already had so much?

*You shouldn't have to ask to eat.*

I took a single berry off the top and put it in my mouth. It exploded with sweet juices in my mouth. I took just one more. The sensation of food actually hitting my stomach stirred to life a hunger that I was able to keep at bay most days, and before I knew it, I was shoving blackberries into my mouth with two fists. The dark purple juices stained my fingers and my mouth and still I ate, with a ravenous and vengeful appetite. It wasn't until I finished, and was staring, dumb and sated, at the empty bowl, that I noticed the empty, unbaked pie crust on the other side of the counter, waiting for the berries. I looked around in a panic for more berries but there were none. I flew to the window and looked out over the garden. Perhaps there were more berries on the bushes; there had to be; rich people, I knew, always had more. But I couldn't see any berries, and at the sound of footsteps approaching I scrambled into the cupboard as my mother had instructed me to do, the stolen berries threatening to make their way back up into my throat.

My mother entered the kitchen and on her heels was the most beautiful woman that I had ever seen. She wore a dark, sleek dress and high heels, and her hair was twisted up into a bun. Her eyes landed on the pie crust, and she looked at my mother, annoyed.

"I thought I was quite clear that I wanted a cobbler, and not a pie," she said. And then she saw the empty bowl, still stained with the juice of the berries.

"Arlene," she said crisply. "I see you've been snacking."

I peeked out through a crack in the cupboard doors. I could tell by the way that she caught her breath that my mother started to protest, but then stopped herself.

"Yes ma'am," she said.

What I heard next shocked me to the core, and was a sound I will never forget for the rest of my life. There was a loud crack, and the rich woman slapped my mother, hard, across the face. It brought tears to her eyes, but mother didn't say a thing.

"I have a mind to fire you," the woman said. "Or report you for stealing."

"Yes ma'am."

"You'll have to stay late, now, and make a cake."

"Yes ma'am."

"And I'm not paying you for today, to pay for those berries."

"Yes ma'am."

When the woman was gone, I crept out of the cupboard, tears rolling down my face. I was overcome with fear and shame. I wanted to apologize to my mother and comfort her; I wanted her to comfort me. I wanted her to slap me, to pass the punishment on to where it belonged. But she only looked at me, and I at her. Her face was drawn. She looked tired. And for the first time in my life, I realized that my mother was hungry; that she was probably slowly starving to death.

Name \_\_\_\_\_ **Structure's Contribution**

That night at our dinner table at home, I felt too sick to my stomach to eat, but when my mother ladled a spoonful of boiled potatoes onto my plate, followed by a spoonful of soupy spinach, I ate them without comment. My mother served all nine of us, finishing with my father, scraping the last of the potatoes onto his plate, even as her own plate remained empty.

"I hope you did your mother proud today, boy," my father muttered, as he finished what was on his plate and reached for the bowl of spinach. He offered it to my mother; she shook her head.

I couldn't speak.

"He did as he was told," my mother said, quietly.

She got up a few minutes later to clear the plates, and for the first time in my life I stood up to help her. I was bursting with frustration, with determination, with promises that I wanted to make to her—and with apology—for eating the blackberries, for getting her in trouble, for shaming her, for having cost the family money, for having been born, and for having been, from the get-go, little more than another mouth to feed. But I didn't say anything, because I understood, from my mother, that what we endured was unspeakable. So I did only what was in my power—I ate what meals my mother put in front of me, gratefully, every night, almost; from that day onward I always left something for my mother, because a person shouldn't have to ask to eat, and she never again scolded me for not cleaning my plate.

1. When a story begins and ends with a similar scene or setting, it is called *framing*. Explain the framing in this story. Why do you think the author framed the story in this way?

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2. A sentence in this story is repeated. What is the sentence? Why is it repeated? How does its repetition signify growth in the narrator?

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