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Chinua Achebe

Sugar Baby

I caught the fierce expression on his face in the brief impulsive moment of that strange act; and I understood. I don't mean the symbolism such as it was; that, to me, was pretty superficial and obvious. No. It was rather his deadly earnestness.

It lasted no more than a second or two. Just as long as it took to thrust his hand into his sugar bowl, grasp a handful and fling it out of the window, his squarish jaw set viciously. Then it crumbled again in the gentle solvent of a vague smile.

"Ah-ah; why?" asked one of the other two present, or perhaps both, taken aback and completely mystified.

"Only to show sugar that today I am greater than he, that the day has arrived when I can afford sugar and, if it pleases me, throw sugar away."

They roared with laughter then. Cletus joined them but laughing only moderately. Then I joined too, meagrely.

"You are a funny one, Cletus," said Umera, his huge trunk shaking with mirth and his eyes glistening.

Soon we were drinking Cletus's tea and munching chunks of bread smeared thickly with margarine.

"Yes," said Umera's friend whose name I didn't catch, "may bullet crack sugar's head!"

"Amen."

"One day soon it will be butter's turn," said Umera. "Please excuse my bad habit." He had soaked a wedge of bread in his tea and carried it dripping into his enormous mouth, his head thrown back. "That's how I learnt to eat bread," he contrived out of a full, soggy mouth. He tore another piece—quite small this time— and threw it out of the window. "Go and meet sugar, and bullet crack both your heads!"

“Amen.”

“Tell them about me and sugar, Mike, tell them,” said Cletus to me.

Well, I said, there was nothing really to tell except that my friend Cletus had what our English friends would call a sweet tooth. But of course the English, a very moderate race, couldn’t possibly have a name for anything like Cletus and his complete denture of thirty-two sweet teeth.

It was an old joke of mine but Umera and his friend didn’t know it and so graced it with more uproarious laughter. Which was good because I didn’t want to tell any of the real stories Cletus was urging. And fortunately too Umera and his friend were bursting to tell more and more of their own hardship stories; for most of us had become in those days like a bunch of old hypochondriac women vying to recount the most lurid details of their own special infirmities.

And I found it all painfully, unbearably pathetic. I never possessed some people’s ability (Cletus’s, for example) to turn everything to good account. Pain lasts far longer on me than on him even when– strange to say—it is his own pain. It wouldn’t have occurred to me, not in a thousand years, to enact that farcical celebration of victory over sugar. Simply watching it I felt bad. It was like a man standing you a drink because some fellow who once seduced his wife had just died, according to the morning’s papers. The drink would stick in my throat because my pity and my contempt would fall on the celebrator and my admiration on the gallant man who once so justly cuckolded him.

For Cletus sugar is not simply sugar. It is what makes life bearable. We lived and worked together in the last eighteen months of the war and so I was pretty close to his agony, to his many humiliating defeats. I never could understand nor fully sympathise with his addiction. As long as I had my one gari meal in the afternoon I neither asked for breakfast nor dinner. At first I had suffered from the lack of meat or fish and worst of all salt in the soup, but by the second year of the war I was noticing it less and less. But Cletus got more obsessively hinged to his sugar and tea every single day of deprivation, a dangerous case of an appetite growing on what it did not feed on. How he acquired such an alien taste in the first place I have not even bothered to investigate; it probably began like a lone cancer cell in lonely winter days and nights in the black belt of Ladbroke Grove.

Other tea and coffee drinkers, if they still found any to drink at all, had learnt

long ago to take it black and bitter. Then some unrecognized genius had lightened their burden further with the discovery that the blackest coffee taken along with a piece of coconut lost a good deal of its bitter edge. And so a new, sustaining *petit dejeuner* was born. But Cletus like a doomed man must have the proper thing or else nothing at all. Did I say I lost patience with him? Well, sometimes. In more charitable and more thoughtful moments I felt sorrow for him rather than anger, for could one honestly say that an addiction to sugar was any more irrational than all the other many addictions going at the time? No. And it constituted no threat to anybody else, which you couldn't say for all those others.

One day he came home in very high spirits. Someone recently returned from abroad had sold him two-dozen tablets of an artificial sweetener for three pounds. He went straight to the kitchen to boil water. Then he brought out from some secure corner of his bag his old tin of instant coffee—he no longer had tea—which had now gone solid. "Nothing wrong with it," he assured me again and again though I hadn't even said a word. "It's the humidity; the smell is quite unimpaired." He sniffed it and then broke off two small rocklike pieces with a knife and made two cups of coffee. Then he sat back with a song in his face.

I could barely stand the taste of the sweetener. It larded every sip with a lingering cloyingness and siphoned unsuspected wells of saliva into my mouth. We drank in silence. Then suddenly Cletus jumped up and rushed outside to give way to a rasping paroxysm of vomiting. I stopped then trying to drink what was left in my cup.

I told him sorry when he came back in. He didn't say a word. He went straight to his room and fetched a cup of water and went out again to rinse his mouth. After a few gargles he tipped the remaining water into a cupped hand and washed down his face. I said sorry again and he nodded.

Later he came where I sat. "Do you care for these?" He held out the little tablets with palpable disgust. Strange how even one attack of vomiting could so utterly reduce a man. "No, not really. But keep them. I'm sure we won't need to go far to find friends who do."

He either was not listening or else he simply could not bring himself to live with the things another minute. He made his third trip outside and threw them into the same wild plot of weeds which had just received his vomit.

He must have worked himself to such a pitch of expectation over the wretched sugar substitute that he now plummeted headlong into near nervous collapse. For the next two days he kept to his bed, neither showing up in the morning at the Directorate where we worked nor going in the evening as was his custom to see his girl friend, Mercy.

On the third day I really lost patience with him and told him a few harsh things about fighting a war of survival, calling to my aid more or less the rhetoric for which his radio scripts were famous. “Fuck your war! Fuck your survival!” he shouted at me. All the same he got better soon afterwards and suitably shamefaced. Then I relented somewhat myself and began privately to make serious inquiries about sugar on his behalf.

Another friend at the Directorate told me about a certain Father Doherty who lived ten miles away and controlled Caritas relief stores for the entire district. A well-known and knowing Roman Catholic, my friend, he warned me that Father Doherty, though a good and generous man, was apt to be somewhat unpredictable and had become particularly so lately since a shrapnel hit him in the head at the airport.

Cletus and I made the journey on the following Saturday and found Father Doherty in a reasonably good mood for a man who had just spent six nights running at the airport unloading relief planes in pitch darkness under fairly constant air bombardment and getting home at seven every morning to sleep for two hours. He waved our praises aside saying he only did it on alternate weeks. “After tonight I can have my beauty sleep for seven whole days.”

His sitting-room reeked of stockfish, powdered milk, powdered egg yolk and other relief odours which together can make the air of a place uninhalable. Father Doherty rubbed his eyes with the back of his hand and said what could he do for us. But before either of us could begin he got up sleepily and reached for a big thermos flask atop an empty bookcase harbouring just one tiny crucifix, and asked if we cared for coffee. We said yes thinking that in this very home and citadel of Caritas whose very air reeked solid relief one could be sure that coffee would mean with sugar and milk. And I thought too that we were doing excellently with Father Doherty and set it down to our earlier politic admiration of his dedication and courage in the service of our people, for although he had seemed to wave it aside, judicious praise (if not flattery) was still a weapon which even saints might be vulnerable to. He disappeared into a room and

brought back three mean-looking fading-blue plastic cups and poured the coffee, a little on his little finger first, into the cups apologising for the incompetence of his old flask.

I began politely to swallow mine and watched Cletus with the corner of my eye. He took a little birdlike sip-and held it in his mouth.

Now, what could he do for us, asked Father Doherty again covering three quarters of an enormous yawn with the back of his hand. I spoke up first. I had a problem with hay fever and would like some antihistamine tablets if he had any in stock. “Certainly,” he said, “most certainly. I have the very thing for you. Father Joseph has the same complaint, so I always keep some.” He disappeared again and I could hear him saying: “Hay fever, hay fever, hay fever” like a man looking for a title in a well-stocked bookshelf, and then: “There we are!” Soon he emerged with a small bottle. “Everything here is in German,” he said, studying the label with a squint. “Do you read German?”

“No.”

“Nor do I. Try making one thrice daily and see how you feel.”

“Thank you, Father.”

“Next!” he said jovially.

His short absence to get the tablets had enabled Cletus to transfer most of the coffee from his cup to his mouth and, moving smartly to the low window behind him and putting out his neck, disgorge it quickly outside.

“Name your wish. Joost wun wish, remember,” said Father Doherty, now really gay.

“Father,” said Cletus almost solemnly, “I need a little sugar.”

I had been worrying since we got here how he was going to put that request across, what form of words he would use. Now it came out so pure and so simple like naked truth from the soul. I admired him for that performance for I knew I could never have managed it. Perhaps Father Doherty himself had unconsciously assisted by lending the circumstance, albeit jovially, a stark mythological simplicity. If so he now demolished it just as quickly and thoroughly as a

capricious child might kick back into sand the magic castle he had just created. He seized Cletus by the scruff of his neck and shouting “Wretch! Wretch!” shoved him outside. Then he went for me; but I had already found and taken another exit. He raved and swore and stamped like a truly demented man. He prayed God to remember this outrage against His Holy Ghost on Judgement Day. “Sugar! Sugar!! Sugar!!!” he screamed in hoarse crescendo. Sugar when thousands of God’s innocents perished daily for lack of a glass of milk! Worked up now beyond endurance by his own words he rushed out and made for us. And there was nothing for it but run, his holy imprecations ringing in our ears.

We spent a miserable, tongue-tied hour at the road-junction trying to catch a lift back to Amafo. In the end we walked the ten miles again but now in the withering heat and fear of midday air raid.

That was one story that Cletus presumably wanted me to tell to celebrate our first tea party. How could I? I couldn’t see it as victory in retrospect, only as defeat. And there were many, the ugliest yet to come.

Not long after our encounter with Father Doherty I was selected by the Foreign Affairs people “to go on a mission.” Although it was a kind of poor man’s mission lasting just a week and taking me no farther than the offshore Portuguese island of Sao Tome I was nevertheless overjoyed because abroad was still abroad and I had never stepped out of Biafra since the war began—a fact calculated to dismiss one outright in the opinion of his fellows as a man of no consequence, but more important, which meant that one never had a chance to bask in the glory of coming back with those little amenities that had suddenly become marks of rank and good living, like bath soap, a towel, razor blades, *etc.*

On the last day before my journey, close friends and friends not so close, mere acquaintances and even complete strangers and near enemies came to tell me their wishes. It had become a ritual, almost a festival whose ancient significance was now buried deep in folk-memory. Some lucky fellow was going on a mission to an almost mythical world long withdrawn beyond normal human reach where goods abounded still and life was safe. And everyone came to make their wishes. And to every request the lucky one answered: “I will try, you know the problem …”

“Oh yes I know, but just try …“No real hope, no obligation or commitment.

Occasionally, however, a firm and serious order was made when one of the happier people came. For this, words were superfluous. Just a slip of paper with “foreign exchange” pinned to it. Some wanted salt which was entirely out because of the weight. Many wanted underwear for themselves or their girls and some wretch even ordered contraceptives which I told him I assumed was for office (as against family) planning, to the great amusement of my crowd. I bustled in and out of my room gaily with my notepaper saying: “Joost wun wish!”

Yes, near enemies came too. Like our big man across the road, a one-time Protestant clergyman they said, now unfrocked, a pompous ass if ever there was one, who had early in the war wangled himself into the venal position of controlling and dispensing scarce materials imported by the government, especially women’s fabrics. He came like a Nichodemus as I was about to turn in. I wouldn’t have thought he knew the likes of us existed. But there he came nodding in his walk like an emir on horseback and trailing the aroma of his Erinmore tobacco. He wondered if I could buy him two bottles of a special pomade for dying grey hair and held out a five-dollar bill. This was the wretch who once asked my girlfriend when she went to file an application to buy a bra to spend a weekend with him in some remote village!

By forgoing lunch daily in Sao Tome I was able at the end of the week to save up from my miserable allowance enough foreign exchange to buy myself a few things including those antihistamine tablets (for I had abandoned in our hasty retreat the bottle that Father Doherty gave me). For Cletus—and this gave me the greatest happiness of all—I bought a tin of Lipton’s tea and two half-pound packets of sugar. Imagine then my horrified fury when one of the packets was stolen on my arrival home at the airport while (my eyes turned momentarily away from my baggage) I was put through make-believe immigration. Perhaps if that packet had not been stolen Cletus might have been spared the most humiliating defeat that sugar was yet to inflict on him.

Mercy came to see him (and me) the day I returned from Sao Tome. I had a tablet of Lux soap for her and a small tube of hand cream. She was ecstatic.

“Would you like some tea?” asked Cletus.

“Oh yes,” she said in her soft, purring voice. “Do you have tea? Great! And sugar too! Great! Great! I must take some.”

I wasn’t watching but I think she thrust her hand into the opened packet of sugar and grabbed a handful and was about to put it into her handbag. Cletus dropped the kettle of hot water he was bringing in and pounced on her. *That* I saw clearly. For a brief moment she must have thought it was some kind of grotesque joke. I knew it wasn’t and in that moment I came very near to loathing him. He seized her hand containing the sugar and began to prize it open, his teeth clenched.

“Stop it, Cletus!” I said.

“Stop, my arse,” he said. “I am sick and tired of all these grab-grab girls.”

“Leave me alone,” she cried, sudden tears of anger and shame now running down her face. Somehow she succeeded in wrenching her hand free. Then she stepped back and threw the sugar full in his face, snatched her handbag and ran away, crying. He picked up the sugar, about half-a-dozen cubes.

“Sam!” shouted Cletus across to his houseboy. “Put some more water on the fire.” And then turning to me he said again, his eyes glazed in crazy reminiscence: “Mike, you must tell them the battle I waged with sugar.”

“He was called Sugar Baby at school,” I said, dodging again.

“Oh, Mike, you’re no bloody good with stories. I wonder who ever recommended you for the Propaganda Directorate.” The other two laughed. Beads of perspiration trembled on his forehead. He was desperate. He was on heat begging, pleading, touting for the sumptuous agony of flagellation.

“And he lost his girlfriend,” I said turning brutal. “Yes, he lost a nice, decent girl because he wouldn’t part with half-a-dozen cubes of the sugar I bought him.”

“You know that’s not fair,” he said turning on me sharply. “Nice girl indeed! Mercy was just a shameless grabber like all the rest of them.”

“Like all the rest, of us. What interests me, Cletus, is that you didn’t find out all those months you went with her and slept with her until I brought you a packet

of sugar. Then your eyes were opened."

"We know *you* brought it, Mike. You've told us already. But that's not the point …"

"What then is the point?" Then I realized how foolish it was and how easy, even now, to slip back into those sudden irrational acrimonies of our recent desperate days when an angry word dropping in unannounced would start a fierce war like the passage of Esun between two peace-loving friends. So I steered myself to a retrieving joke, retrieving albeit with a razor-edge.

"When Cletus is ready to marry," I said, "they will have to devise a special marriage vow for him. With all my worldly goods—except my Tate and Lyle—I thee honour. Father Doherty if they ever let him back in the country will no doubt understand."

Umera and his friend laughed again.