

THE EVIL OF TWO LESSERS

by Michael Ventura

October 30, 1996

It is not unusual to be a hungry child. You can find hungry children easily, all over the world. If you're an American, no matter where you live, you can find a hungry child a short drive from your home--or on your doorstep. The New York Times reports that 22 percent of American children live in poverty. That's a little more than one out of five. So I emphasize, if you're curious about them, they're easy to find.

Twenty-two percent, one out of five--just numbers. To make it more vivid: When you think poverty, think hunger. For make no mistake, poverty is hunger. Even American poverty. Not the kind of scarecrow hunger you see in news footage from Africa, but a constant, dull, gnawing, often slightly dizzying, always very tiring sensation, because there's never quite enough food, and what there is doesn't come dependably, and is usually not very prime. You eat it, but it doesn't really feed you.

There's something inside you wanting, wanting. The overwhelming sadness of that wanting is the air you breathe. You want food, you want cleanliness, you want to be protected. You can't articulate all you want, except for the food. You are a little engine of wanting, it's so much a part of you that you don't even call it wanting, it's simply what comes out of your heart all the time, and it's what comes out of your eyes, it's how you see the world.

At night you toss and turn with this, your nerves are not just frayed, but quite literally starved, and you're jittery, so it's hard to get to sleep. You wake often in a sweat--they're liver-sweats, the kind alcoholics get, but you get them because your liver has little to process but toxins. You're a kid so you don't know this, you're just sweaty and scared. You finally don't sleep so much as pass out. When the alarm rings in the morning it's difficult to open your eyes, to function. Constant, low-grade hunger has its own kind of hangover. What really wakes you up is the tension in the apartment.

For of course you're living under tremendous pressures, in cramped and dirty quarters--dirty not because your mother doesn't keep a clean place, but because the building is so old, ratty, and roach-infested that only a fire could really clean it. It's certainly too much of a task for a mother who is working as hard as she can, pushed beyond her limits, always nervous, always afraid. Nothing makes her more afraid than looking at her children, because children are not angels, children want and are very insistent about what they want, and she has nothing or next to nothing to give them. And what is more frightening to children than to see the constant, exhausted fear in a parent's eyes? The only good thing about the fear you face in the morning is that it finally wakes you up.

If your mother is like mine, she has seen to it that you've done your homework and on good nights, you've even been read to. She expects you to go to school and you go. But you're always a little sick. You catch anything going around, because you've nothing to fight it with. You're living on nervous energy, after all, so even your vitality is eating you alive. Again, if your mother is like mine, she tries to teach you some sort of values, but the values you need to survive in the street go against all she's tried to teach. If you're a good kid, you try to juggle both. You try to be kind and tough. You try to remember

what Jesus said but, if you're resourceful (as I was), you also steal food. Actually, it's not food you're stealing; it's sweets. Any nutritionist can testify that people deficient in protein feel a lust for sweets. And sweets are easier to steal than protein, and they don't need to be cooked. So you drive the local markets crazy stealing all the sweets you can get your hands on. It doesn't make you any less hungry, except briefly; in fact, the sugar high, on an empty stomach, makes you a bit crazy.

You also start to smoke (stealing the smokes, too, of course). On one level you think you're doing it to be cool, but one reason chronically malnourished kids are so susceptible to the lure of cigarettes is that nicotine is a hunger suppressant. Kids don't consciously know this, but the cigs make hunger easier to take. So you're nine, as I was, and smoking like a chimney every time you can score. Obviously, you're also susceptible to drugs, because they make you forget hunger too--they make you forget everything, especially the panic in your mother's eyes (which, being a kid, you of course feel guilty for).

On Decatur Street in Brooklyn, where I found out about hunger, our standard supper was spaghetti and butter. Sometimes there was milk, but often there wasn't. For breakfast, when there was breakfast, there was corn meal mush made with sugar and hot water. Sometimes for supper, too. One stretch, for many months, that's all there was. Corn meal mush. And then I got a fever.

This was around 1957. Maybe '58. There were no anti-poverty programs then. Virtually no safety net. Depending on what statistics you believe, one-fourth to one-third of Americans lived in poverty. But you would never have known that by reading the newspapers, watching television, or going to movies. As incredible as it may seem, America's poverty was simply not discussed by its politicians and pundits. There were some threadbare government programs, still called "home relief" in our neighborhood. My mother was a "welfare mother," as she would be called now. I was a child, I didn't know how much money my mother received a month; but I know the rent for our tenement apartment (stifling in the summer, freezing in the winter) was about \$40 a month, and the welfare check barely covered it, along with an additional few dollars for food. Yes, she worked. As a domestic, a file-clerk, whatever she could get. But there was no minimum wage for such work. The situation was, in short, exactly what the Gingrich Congress and William Jefferson Clinton are now calling "welfare reform."

Anyway, I got a fever. Aspirin didn't help. A doctor came. They made house calls then. We didn't have his fee, and he knew that, but he came anyway. Some doctors were like that then. He informed my mother that the combination of fever and malnutrition was killing me. He thought I'd die if I didn't get to a hospital. In fact, he thought I'd die anyway. But he got me to a hospital.

In those days, hospitals didn't turn you away if you had no money. Especially if you were a dying child. All that has changed now, as the people on "welfare reform" are about to find out. I was delirious with fever and I weighed next to nothing, but I clearly remember the doctor saying "acute malnutrition"--jargon for hunger. Obviously, they intervened in time and I didn't die. Within a few months my brothers and sister (the twins were 6, my sister 4-and-a-half) were in an orphanage, and I was in a foster home. (Today, it's more likely that we'd be on the street.) The food was better, and there was more of it, but "family life," if that's what we'd been living, was over.

I am reluctant, and have always been reluctant, to write about this. In all these years of writing articles, this is the first time. I write it now not because it's my story, but because, as I said to begin with, it is not unusual to be a hungry child. Few of us are fortunate enough ever to be in a position to write of it. I am bearing witness.

Bearing witness for the one out of five. And bearing witness for the future--the very near future, the results of "welfare reform." William Jefferson Clinton was too chicken to risk a double-digit lead in the polls, so he condemned a million children (by his own count) to the life I have described. Knowledgeable and somewhat honorable people like Senator Patrick Moynihan say one million is a very conservative figure. Moynihan describes the future of these children with one word: "hell." (It is interesting that an ancient Jewish definition of hell is: "anywhere where you sacrifice children.")

One out of five. But that doesn't have to haunt you. One out of five children in the magazine ads doesn't look hungry. One out of five children in the sitcoms doesn't look hungry. One out of five children that William Jefferson Clinton poses with, in his photos, doesn't look hungry. But one out of five children, within a short distance of where you live, is facing what I faced, what all threatened children face, and soon it's going to be a lot more brutal.

I know a lot of people who consider themselves good (not special-good, just decent-good), and who are going to vote for this Clinton person. They are using the Gingrich Republicans as an excuse. What they are really voting for is the right not to care. Not to see. Not to do. They are voting for the right to let someone else deal with the children. They tell me it's the lesser of two evils. But it is really the evil of two lessers. They have reduced the idea of political activity to a choice between Republicans and Democrats.

For the hungry children, this is no choice at all.

There is another choice: to begin the great work of wresting power from the forces to which you acquiesce. For a voter, a small beginning would be voting for neither man, demonstrating that there are some things you will not stomach. But that's not a choice many will make this year, and nothing I write will change that. I am writing only to say, to anyone within the sound of my voice, that I can still see through the eyes of a hungry child, and through our eyes your "goodness" looks vile.

Copyright © Michael Ventura. All Rights Reserved.