I was hungry. So hungry.

I'd had nothing to eat for breakfast. Sometimes I was given a glass of milk and a slice of bread—but more often, like on that morning, my stomach was empty as I boarded the bus that would take me from where I lived, on the outskirts of Kingston, Jamaica, to the school about ten miles away.

I was fifteen years old. Active teenage boys require at least 2800 calories per day in order to grow and thrive. I was lucky if I got twenty percent of that. So I endured a constantly aching belly that rumbled and roared loudly enough for others to hear, along with a bone-weary tiredness, agonizing migraines, and occasional dizzy spells.

I lived in a house with my mother, whom we called "Sister Martha," her husband John, their two small children, and my beloved sister Sheron. Three years older than I, Sheron did everything she could to help me, but she could accomplish little even to help herself, because our mother regularly beat her and also often beat me. Nothing was more likely to bring on another attack than my mother seeing Sheron slipping me something extra to eat.

So Sheron and I lived on very little food—and on the mangoes from the glade of trees in the back yard not far from our home.

Not long after I'd arrived in Kingston from the inland hillside village in northern Jamaica called Friendship, about seventy miles north near the coast—where I was brought up by my wonderful, devoted grandfather

Melbourne Folkes and my grandmother Clementina Folkes—I took some cornflakes from the pantry in my mother's house and some milk from the refrigerator. I was starving, so it was a perfectly normal, innocent thing for a boy to do. Except that my mother didn't agree. So she thrashed me. She used the closest thing she could find: a leather belt, a shoe, an electric flex. And if she just used her hands to hit me, it would be her fists, not her palms.

She also beat Sheron, though normally out of my sight, because although I was completely dependent on Sister Martha for food and somewhere to live, and although I was too young, too small to stop her, Sister Martha was cautious about attacking Sheron openly in front of me.

Sheron's whole body would be sore afterward. I remember that once she was left with a badly cut lip. Even today, Sheron still has a scar on her head from one of Sister Martha's "punishments."

Yet Sheron and I weren't only being deprived of food and were walloped indiscriminately for the most trifling deeds to which Sister Martha took exception. We were also starved of love, of maternal care, and of understanding.

Sister Martha was our mother, but she didn't act like it. She didn't like Sheron or me to think of her that way. Calling her Mom was absolutely forbidden and exactly the kind of behavior she'd consider to warrant another beating. She didn't even want us living in her house. She felt we'd been forced on her by our father's family, and she saw no reason to be kind. Melbourne and Clementina were the parents of her former partner, Lincoln, from whom Sister Martha had separated when I was four years old and Sharon seven.

Sister Martha didn't like to be seen with us in public. As for her husband John (we had to call him Uncle John), he didn't like Sheron nor me very much either. We were viewed as intruders. So for Sister Martha, feeding us was not high on her agenda. Sheron mostly did the cooking, but the portions we were allowed were, in effect, rationed.

Uncle John and Sister Martha had their own children, my half-brother William and half-sister Jess, who were five and three respectively. They were well fed.

Sister Martha would give me just enough money to get to school and back. I couldn't have walked and saved the bus fare because the school was just too far away. Besides, with no breakfast, I probably wouldn't have had the energy.

Lunch only cost about two Jamaican dollars, but Sister Martha didn't give me anything for it. A typical menu included delicious Jamaican patties—a kind of meat pie the thought of which would make my stomach bellow. As for the sight or smell of them, I did my best to avoid it. I'd have loved to have found some evening job to earn money to buy food; however, I was just a school child, and I couldn't have found anything at that age which would have earned me more than it cost to get to work.

When I was young, I really believed that Sister Martha didn't have sufficient money to give us two dollars for lunch. But I know now that what she was telling us was a lie. She did have enough for the cheap yet nourishing food you could get in the school canteen; she just didn't want to give it to us. I'm not saying she actively wanted us to starve. It was more that she didn't care enough to be bothered. The way she saw it, we weren't part of her life; we belonged to the past, and if she'd heard sometime during recent years that we'd died in Friendship in some accident or another on the farm, I don't think she'd have shed too many tears.

Maybe she'd have secretly been glad that we were out of her life. However, we were there, in her life, in her house, and disturbing the security of those who mattered: William, Jess, Uncle John, and her. At least that is how it seemed to Sheron and me because that was how she made us feel.

So when my classmates at the Donald Quarrie Secondary School went to the canteen to eat, I walked outside alone to look out to the sea,

visible from the school grounds. By that point I'd already been up for about five hours, and may have only had some bread and milk, or more often, nothing. I didn't want anyone to know how poor I was, especially not a wonderful girl named Sylvie Parker whom I adored. She brought smiles to my face even in the midst of this nightmare.

Suddenly Sylvie was just there. She was about the same age as I, and so beautiful. She wasn't only lovely to look at; she was also a kind and gentle girl, she was clever, and she didn't judge me for being poor or from the countryside. Sylvie was liberated from worrying about what other people thought of her even at her young age, and it made her popular. That sort of sweet, quiet confidence shines through, makes people comfortable, and is attractive. However, she never let it go to her head.

Very soon I fell madly in love with Sylvie. I adored her. I was so crazy about her that when I was with her I even forgot how hungry I was! I really wanted her to feel the same way about me as I did about her. And even though she was wildly popular with the other boys, city boys with money, I didn't need to worry. She had the understanding that personality counts, and my drive and ambition were obvious, even though I was destitute and starving. Sylvie and I used to kiss secretly on the school bus. Those kisses made the journey so special. I think I'd have stayed on the bus all day if Sylvie had been there with me. We went on school trips, and we would get to sit next to each other and share kisses then as well.

Unfortunately, because I was poor, Sylvie's aunt didn't like me. She would try to encourage Sylvie not to associate with me. It taught me that when you're needy, no one takes much interest in you, it becomes harder to make friends and establish contacts, and it can be more difficult to be accepted. If you allow it, your self-esteem and consequently your chances to improve your situation can be affected. However, I stayed determined and kept my ambition to make something of myself, no matter what some people thought of me. I remained confident that I could, one day, be prosperous.

Sylvie never became my girlfriend, but we were friends for three years; that is, most of the time I was at the school. I don't think she ever knew about the nightmare that I was living, the lack of food and love at home. I did my best to hide it from her, from everyone. If she ever knew, she never told me so, and if that's the case, I'm glad of it.

Sadly, I've completely lost touch with Sylvie now. Maybe I'll never be able to tell her how important her friendship was to me during those terrible times, how much I looked forward to seeing her, and how she made my days more bearable when I was so hungry and so desperate.

To cover my embarrassment over lunch period, my fifteen-year-old self gave excuses. I'd say that I was doing my homework or going to eat something out in the schoolyard. I certainly knew it would have been torture sitting with my classmates, watching them eat, smelling their food, and experiencing the shame of having no money, nothing in front of me.

So what did I really do while they were eating? During the lunch hour I'd run as far from the school as possible without actually leaving the grounds. The school was by the sea, not far from a long beach on the opposite side of the road. It was an industrial area, and every day I could see vast cargo ships sailing past. These ships carried away the products my homeland exported, especially bauxite (aluminum ore), sugar, and coffee.

I could see the ships leaving Jamaica, where my life was so limited, and I could see people working on their decks. I knew they were traveling to other places, where their struggles might not be so demoralizing, places like the United States. I wanted to go to other places too. I wanted to escape. I felt alone, unloved, and ashamed. And very hungry. Always hungry.

Even worse, I knew that back in the canteen, Sylvie and my classmates were enjoying their lunches, chatting and laughing while they ate. I was missing out, not just on the food, but also on their company. I realize now just how suicidal I felt back then. I wanted my suffering and

those cruel days to end. Any one of us can have awful thoughts, and some of us become angry enough to want to turn our hurt on others.

But I was too weak to fight and too frightened to let other people know what was going on. I know I'm not alone in having felt that way; perhaps some readers of this book will have had thoughts as tragic as mine. However, instead of succumbing, I somehow drew on some inner strength. I kept watching those ships intently until lunch period was over, and I had to return to class. I hoped and prayed for a better life.

Still, my sheer hunger often drove me to weep.

You might ask why I didn't run away. I didn't; God only knows why. I had many opportunities and something—anything—had to be better than this. Still, I had no idea where to go.

Back in the hills of northern Jamaica, in Friendship, I could have worked on my grandfather's farm. But it would have been a life of poverty, obscurity, and of mooching, scratching around to make some sort of living. Friendship had been a marvelous place when I was a child, but now I was growing up. I knew I had to be a man and make my own way in the world.

I would often hear my grandfather's words of wisdom ringing inside my head in sayings that poetically summarized how he saw life. He didn't usually invent his aphorisms; they were part of his inherited culture. But the reverence and integrity he gave to them left me in no doubt that they were the basis of a powerful philosophy of life. For example:

Mother may have, father may have,
but blessed is the child who has his own.

That told me that a child must one day find his own way in life and support himself. It led to me believe that I too would one day have a better life. I trusted in God, and I could only begin to provide for myself by staying in school in Kingston, even if it meant remaining with a mother who didn't want me.

Also, I cared so, so much about my sister Sheron. If I ran away, what on earth would become of her? Sister Martha may have hated my being there, but if I left home, she would have been furious, furious that I'd done something disrespectful, out of her control—furious that it might cause her embarrassment, furious enough to vent her considerable wrath on Sheron.

Childhood may be, objectively, quite short. However, for an unhappy kid, each and every day of misery feels like a lifetime. My existence was pure hell.

For the first time in my life, but not at all for the last time, I was driven by desperation.