

DANCING WITH THE BAGLADY

A memoir

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and most of all, for loving me.

*These songs are true
These days are ours
These tears are free*

-Paul Simon

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Introduction

*I have my books
And my poetry to protect me*

-Simon and Garfunkel

Always read the first page before you buy a book. At least that's what I say. Otherwise, you might waste precious minutes and dollars on stacks of bleached tree pulp with blocks of black type you will never read. But if you connect with the narrator on the very first page, you know the author has succeeded.

Through the years, thousands of bound pages have nestled themselves in my wobbly, cornflower blue bookcase. Some of them, like Jerry Stahl's *Permanent Midnight* and Lauren Slater's *Prozac Diary*, entered my world because I skimmed the first page while lingering in overcrowded, java-scented, uptown bookstores. Instant connection. Inevitable investment. No disappointment. Others, I've purchased on a whim, usually the result of some lively display created by underpaid staffers forced to memorize authors and titles they will never read. Some of those I've read, some I haven't. Others, I just got lucky with, or brought home before they reached paperback editions because revered professors recommended them—books such as *Angela's Ashes*

and *Welcome to My Country*. Initially, I simply wanted to share scholarly conversations about these memoirs; I soon found, however, that there is more to creative nonfiction than just academic discourse. This is true of yet more books forced into my curriculum by instructors who anticipated clever student essays on the authors' styles, voices, and techniques. Happily, I carry no regrets after cuddling on my couch with Hilary Masters' *Last Stands*, John Hersey's *Hiroshima*, and Richard Preston's *The Hot Zone*. Even *Friday Night Lights*, the story of a Texas high school football team, absorbed me the way raw, immersion journalism promises to do.

The stories that travel through my eyes, to my brain, and into my heart are the ones that change my life. And it isn't just nonfiction; fiction has penetrating powers. But it seems that nonfiction—full-bodied nonfiction—also enters one's soul, and becomes an enduring element of the reader. For, as they say, real life is the stuff that matters. Yes, some fiction achieves this too, but that fiction most often contains truth, however well hidden beneath its many layers. Kurt Vonnegut's semi-autobiographical novels *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Timequake* accomplish this. Somehow, though, knowing that every bit of a story is true—or at least the memory of it—moves me beyond explanation. In the best instances, my connection with the author propels me to my notebook or journal or computer keyboard, or to simply scribble random thoughts in the book's margin or inside its jacket, because the urge to write cannot be gulped down like a chunk of half-chewed steak. Cicero once said, "A room without books is a body without a soul." I would like to take his quote further, because for me, my hand without a pen is a singer without a voice box. Day after day, the ink of my blue, medium point Bic flows onto the pages, preserving my tears, blood, memories, and dreams—yearning to connect with someone, or at the very least, myself.

In many ways, we are what we read, if only until we dog-ear the page and close the hard binding before falling asleep at night. I cannot say that my story will change your life forever, or the way you feel about the world or the people you've met here; nor can I say that it has changed me (who was it that said, "People don't change—they just become who they really are"?). But I can say that it has brought me closer to the language of acceptance—to the letters and words and rhythms that string together, making me who I am today.

For thirteen years, I've wavered in and out of depression, alcoholism, anorexia, bulimia, and a multitude of physical and psychological disorders—or the fear of them. I am 26. That's half my life. I cannot count on two hands the number of times I struggled through the first ten or twenty pages of a book in search of some far away place that would transport me out of my mental anguish, only to wedge the callous thing back into my bookcase between old yearbooks and fitness magazines, never to touch it again. Through my days, months, and years of recovery, I have given some of those books away, or shoved them in plastic storage bins along with flashy jewelry and fluffy prom gowns. With too many phantoms shadowing me, the notion of a "simple life" taunted me incessantly. My thought: sheer asceticism will soften gravity's pull. So, I tried desperately to rid my life of, or at least minimize, *all* human inconveniences—eating, sleeping, working, and even loving. But then one fine day, something occurred to me:

Isn't *LIFE* inconvenient?

We spend years wanting to grow up, because being a child is inconvenient; we want to share the freedom and independence that adults have. Then, when we finally become old enough to leave home, we focus on acquiring and optimizing modern luxuries. We want higher education and better paying jobs, two-car garage houses and

fight-free marriages; financial security, health insurance, pension plans, a cabin in the Hamptons. But when we finally realize we have that perfect marriage, or that dream house, or that brand new car that starts every morning on the first try, even in winter, our bodies begin to fail. We revert to the days of infancy when WE need to be taken care of. And so we sell the dream home, auction off that dependable car, and move into a nursing home where we forfeit our pensions to strangers who feed us pureed meat and potatoes, give us warm sponge baths, and change our soiled diapers.

So, I ask myself, why not live now, while I can, while it IS relatively convenient? Ted Nugent once said, “The only thing you know for sure is that you’re born at point A and you die at point B. I recommend you kick ass as much as you can in between, and if you got the goods, you best show ‘em off.” Although Nugent’s words refer to flaunty musicians like The Artist (Formerly Known as Prince) and Mick Jagger, they apply to all of us. Life might seem inconvenient, but it is here now, and it certainly sounds better than the alternative. As far as we know, we only get one dance on Earth. The music might not always be upbeat and cheerful. In fact, it may be downright grim at times. But what’s important is that we keep going, one foot after the other, because we never know when the DJ’s last record will spin.

Well, now that I’ve gotten you past page one—tricked you, didn’t I?—let us dance together. Take my hand, and I’ll lead you through the seasons of my so-far time. For your convenience, I’ve compiled it all into this little book, with neat blocks of text over crisp white pages. I figured that’s the least I could do. Maybe it’ll wind up jammed in your crowded bookcase, or maybe it’ll find a safe little nesting spot inside your soul.

Abacus

*There is a tribe near the Amazon who call themselves the Pirahã.
They have no counting system, and if you asked them why,
they would tell you they have no need for one.*

In America, we have: miles, minutes, dollars, dozens, hours, ounces, seconds, inches,
calendars, calories, slack, surplus, acres, axes, bytes, bits, pi, pounds, pennies, pixels;
miles per hour, words per minute, dollars per dozen, dots per inch.

I am holding a copy
of *Time* magazine in my hand.
They're charging \$2.95
for two weeks now,
a hundred and some pages.
And there's a man on TV,
Channel 9, telling me we have
23 shopping days left
until Christmas. I eat
3 chocolate chip cookies
(500 calories),
a bowl of Rocky Road ice cream
(400 calories),
wash my hands.
Walk 5 miles (burn off the cookies),
brush my teeth
(25 real, one fake),
drink water
(one quart, or 32 ounces),
take 2 pills
(500 milligrams)
to sleep

so I
stop counting.

Prologue

*Everything is not enough
Nothing is too much to bear.*

- Cowboy Junkies

Every now and then I get these fears, like razorblades across the eyelids, that everything I have and love will be stolen from me in the tic of a second. My worries emerged when the only grandparents I ever knew—my mother’s parents—passed away three years ago, within months of each other. Soon after that, my Uncle Joe was found dead in a hotel room after he overdosed on a buffet of prescription medications. That was November of 1999. My father died less than two months later.

Before Grandpa died, I had only attended two funerals—my friend Beth’s mother died of cancer in 1996, and a girl from my high school was killed in a car accident that same year. I was new to death in the family, yet I watched without surprise as my grandfather took his last breath on that cold Valentine’s Day. No one knew how sick he was; doctors discovered the tumor in his liver just weeks before his hospitalization.

As he lay there deteriorating in that stiff metal bed, I asked him if he wanted a radio or a tape player to listen to music. “I got cancer, Mora!” he said. “I don’t want any music.” Minutes later, he yelled at my mom for primping in the mirror. “Whadda ya hafta fix your hair for, Nina?”

I moistened his lips and mouth with a small sponge lollipop. I hugged him and gave him kisses on his cheek, and told him I loved him. Each time I pressed my cold lips to his feverish face, I feared that he would cease to live at that moment, that mine would

be the kiss of death. My mother, sister Mia, aunts Lucy and Mary Jo and I were there when he stopped breathing. We saw, we heard, and we knew. His shoulders lifted like an annoyed child shrugging off a question. "That's what happens when the soul leaves the body," Aunt Mary Jo said.

In a panic to find my grandmother, Aunt Lucy ran out of the room and down the hallway. Not knowing what else to do, I followed her. "Where the FUCK are the elevators?" she spouted, and then turned to see that she was standing directly in front of them. We would later laugh at this, but not now, no.

The next few days I spent mostly alone. This was the first person in our immediate family to die, and I guess we were lucky to be without sorrow for so long. Grieving, I went to the track everyday to run; I felt something evil lurking inside my body, and I needed to exercise it out. Across the highway from my house, I rediscovered solace in the gravel track where I jogged regularly in my teenage years. One lap, two laps, three laps, a mile—counting became therapeutic.

The collective need to shop for new clothes infuriated me. "Why do people dress up for funerals? That makes no sense!" I said to Mom, not expecting any answer, of course. Reluctantly, I drove to the mall. I could hardly look at myself in the mirror, so I bought the first outfit I tried on: a pair of dark purple pants and a black, short-sleeved sweater from the Limited Express. This would soon become my staple funeral outfit.

On the day of the viewing, I took a long, very long, scalding shower. I felt so filthy and could not get clean. I scrubbed my entire body with a loofah and shower gel, washed a second time with a sponge, a third time with a bar of Dial. I lathered my hair twice with two different shampoos. I soaped my face and feet three times, washing my hands in between. I would've stayed longer, but ran out of hot water.

All I could think about was how my grandpa was functioning fine on Christmas day, less than two months earlier. How could cancer steal him so quickly? Then I remembered the letters he and I had exchanged, and how he ended several of them abruptly, saying, "I'm getting 'lightheaded' again." During those last months, everyone kept commenting that he was losing weight, but to my family, losing weight was a virtue to be congratulated, not feared. After Christmas dinner, we sat in his pastel yellow and blue living room while he talked about the military, and the psychology class he took. He didn't tell as many jokes as usual; he seemed more intent on sharing his life experiences with me. Was he watching his life flash before his eyes? Did he know what was happening to his body?

*Three drunks stagger out of a bar and into the street.
"Wow!" the first guy says. "Look at that sunshine!"
"That's not sunshine, you moron—that's moonshine," says the second.
They turn toward the third guy and he says, "Don't look at me—I'm not from around here."*

*His tumor was "the size of a grapefruit" the doctor told us. A grapefruit. Why do they always have to compare it to food? "Your kidney stone is the size of a pea, sir."
"Your bladder has shriveled to the size of a walnut."*

Grandma told us he got the tumor from eating too many red grapes.

I watched the funeral through gritty eyes behind sticky, salt-stained contact lenses. I forced smiles at distant friends and relatives who nodded condolences. I shivered at the cemetery while Uncle Joe—Father Joe—threw holy water onto the coffin with the motion of a cross and declared, "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust." I rested a white rose on the casket, and returned to Mia's car because I couldn't watch Grandma or anyone else. We ate lunch, buffet style, at a nearby restaurant. Like buying new clothes,

I detested this tradition. I stuck to grilled fish and green beans—certainly easier to calculate than Swedish meatballs and fettuccini Alfredo.

Afterwards, I was exhausted. I couldn't wait to get back to school. This was my last year at the University of Pittsburgh, a place that had now become a nine-month vacation from my family, and I was completely immersed in my studies—Mythology and Literature, Astronomy, Senior Seminar in Nonfiction Writing, and Judaism. For the first time ever, I rode a train from Harrisburg to Pittsburgh. It would take almost seven hours—twice the time it takes to drive—but I didn't care. I was prepared to bury my brain in the adventures of Aeneas and dig into the foundations of another faith that was slowly starting to make more sense than my own, Catholicism.

As soon as I slumped down in my seat, I plugged my headphones into my ears and clicked on my handheld radio. When we pulled out of the station, the song "Daniel," a remake of Elton John's version by a local band called Fuel, infused my eardrums. Daniel. That was my grandfather's name, and I had never heard this version of the song before.

Three old men stagger down the road.

"It's windy," the first man says.

"No it's not. It's Thursday," says the second.

"I am too," says the third. "There's a bar. Let's stop in for a drink."

After that journey, I dedicated my mind to schoolwork. I thought about my grandfather everyday, and prayed to him to give me strength. On my navy blue backpack, I wore a button he had given me that Christmas. It was a cartoon of a saintly figure with wings and a halo, and it read, "Walk gently on the earth."

Although I had secretly hoped that this incident, watching my grandfather pass away on Valentine's Day, would redirect my soul, help me purge my inner miseries and misgivings, knowing that there was so much more to life, I kept counting. Somehow, I

thought that this, and later experiences with loss, would help me heal—that to stand so close to the grim reaper would force life into me. The truth is, I might never be completely healed.

1982: Any Given Saturday

*Fashion is rich people
Waving at the door*

-Paul Simon

Her yellow satin slippers fix themselves patiently on the tomato-red tile. Teetering on her toes, Mom inspects all angles of her auburn hair in the tri-folding, 4' x 5' vanity mirror in the downstairs *powder room*—not bathroom. A hairdryer and curling iron crowd one electrical outlet and bury the left half of the countertop, centered with a tomato-red, beauty parlor-sized sink. A box of hot rollers bakes on the right half of the countertop, towering over Concept Now mascara, eye shadow, eyeliner, concealer sticks, foundation, lipstick, and Mom's silver jewelry—all spread out like instruments on a surgical tray. This is, quite possibly, the prettiest, most organized, and most popular room in the house.

Two hours later, Mom is ready to go. Dad, in shiny black ankle boots, ironed black slacks, a pale pink oxford shirt, gray tie and jacket, slips Mom's bronze-skinned arms into her black, seal fur coat. In my burgundy velvet jumpsuit, I am next in line as he snatches my fake white fur from the hallway closet.

"Look at that beautiful child," he says to Mom, or to the air. I smile shyly and look down at the red carpet. Mia appears at the bottom of the stairs. I won't remember what she wears—only that I feel sorry for her, unable to ignore the half-inch pearly scar from her "chocolate chip" cheek mole, removed months ago.

Tonight, Dad is our sturdy, protective tree—his limbs dutifully ushering us, the ornamental fruits of youth, to his lavish paradise. He escorts his women out the back door to our 1976 white and orange Cadillac, which, minutes later, will enter the gargoyles gates of the West Shore Country Club in a glamorous procession of Mercedes and

BMW's. As usual, Dad lets us out at the front entrance, and we check our coats while he parks.

Across the foyer is the cocktail lounge, where we soon find ourselves nestled in the plush white couches surrounding the fireplace. Dad is on a first-name basis with Jerry, the bartender. He orders two white wines and two Shirley Temples. He lingers at the bar, asking Jerry who will be playing the piano tonight.

The lights dim. Mia and I tiptoe to the hors d'oeuvres table and pile Melba toast, red grapes and orange cheese cubes onto square white napkins bearing the WSCC gold crown emblem. In the distance, a Muzak version of Jim Croce's "Time in a Bottle" plays. We return to the sofa, while Dad follows behind with our drinks. He places them on the glass table. Mom sips her wine. The fire crackles. I eat the cherry from my drink. Mom and Dad speak silently through squinty smiles. Only minutes pass, but it seems like hours.

Dad rises—the signal that we are moving on. I skip ahead and guide us to the dining room, where the maitre d' greets and escorts us to a table. Dad pulls out a high-back leather chair for Mom, then Mia, then me.

Joanne appears in her black and white uniform, smiles and distributes our menus. Mom and Dad order more wine; Mia and I switch to Coke. Dad nods toward a table of diamond-adorned, sun-shriveled widows. "Look at the teabags," he mutters. Mom grins. Mia and I giggle.

Joanne returns. Mom orders the crab cakes. Baked potato. Hearts of lettuce. French dressing. Dad wants a steak. Well done. No—*burnt*. Scalloped potatoes. Hearts of lettuce. Creamy Italian. Mia orders a burger and fries. It's my turn.

"Can I get French fries and a side order of bacon?" I ask.

Mom and Dad snigger endearingly.

“Sure,” Joanne says.

“With ketchup?” I add.

This is before I learn that a single serving of ketchup equals one tablespoon, that one tablespoon contains sixteen calories, that I use an average of four tablespoons per encounter—a quarter cup, or 64 calories. This is before I force myself to like yellow mustard, the glorious, calorie-free condiment, and to use it in place of ketchup, butter and creamy Italian. My brain is not yet imprinted with digits, my inner calculator not yet tabulating compulsively. In the early days, I ate what I wanted without counting, without guilt.

“Of course,” Joanne replies, and returns with the Heinz.

Mia and I pick at the cracker basket and raw vegetable dish while Mom and Dad munch their salads. Dad gleams at me.

“Doesn’t she look like Brooke Shields?”

“Yes, she certainly does,” Mom answers.

“It’s the eyebrows,” Dad says.

I giggle bashfully. “No, I don’t!”

Mia scratches her scar. Our meals arrive. We dig in silently, Mom and Dad uttering random “Mmmms” through mouthfuls of crab and steak. I douse my fries with Heinz and chew my bacon. Mia nibbles on her cheeseburger and I wonder why she is so stocky and big-boned, while my frame is just above rail-thin; how her hair is brown and straight, and mine is blonde and wavy. I feel blessed, somehow. Chosen.

Halfway through dinner, Mom leans into the table. “That woman over there needs a nose job. See her?” she whispers. “God, that’s awful. Look at that thing.”

Dad tilts his head and nods toward a short, heavyset woman who has just entered the dining room. “That one’s mine.” He laughs sarcastically.

Dad grins at Mom, and she shines with perfection. Mia and I are still learning how to spot these apparent curses of nature.

At this point, I imagine Mom may have been mentally tallying her own list of improvements since she met my father: braces to straighten her smile, eye surgery to even out her lids, breast implants. I won’t learn of these procedures until much later, when I am old enough to disagree with them. Right now, in my eyes, my mother is the epitome of grace and beauty.

After the table is cleared, Mia and I order chocolate and vanilla ice cream. Mom wants a grasshopper, which I will get to taste. Dad has his usual: Grand Marnier on the rocks. It will take another hour for him to savor this treat, so I must remain patient. Dad is in good spirits. Mom appears content. This is all that really matters.

As I polish off the soupy remains of my ice cream, Joanne approaches.

“Will there be anything else, Mr. Mattern?” she asks.

“Look at the profile on that child,” he nudges Joanne, and nods in my direction.

“Isn’t she gorgeous? She’s going to be a model some day.”

I can’t believe he’s embarrassing me like this.

“She certainly is beautiful,” Joanne grins and winks at me, and I blush. She hands Dad the puffy, black leather pouch, the secret bill hidden inside.

Later, when we return home from *The Club*, Dad casually removes his tie and unbuttons his collar. He unzips his boots and gently kicks them into the hallway. Then, he sets his Galliano on a stolen cocktail napkin atop the black Yamaha baby grand. He coddles the keys, playing “Moon River” as though he composed it. His eyes narrow and

his lips curl into a smile as he rocks back and forth, nailing each note with swaying precision.

Upstairs in my bedroom, I listen to his music, let each note seep through the cracks of the walls and enfold me, wash away all the nights covered in broken glass and sharp accusations. I close my eyes and picture us the way we appear to fellow Club members: beautiful, rich, and proud. If they only knew about the weekends Mia and I spent at Grandma's house, watching *Falcon Crest* and *Fantasy Island* and spinning ourselves dizzy in Grandma's beauty shop chairs, while at home, Dad reminded Mom just how hard his fist could hit. How would we look, then?

I would have relished that tranquil Saturday night more, and others like it, had I known that in a few short years, The Club tab would top \$50,000, causing us to withdraw our long-esteemed membership. We were broke. No, we were bust. Alas, Dad surrendered his pride and begged a doctor friend for a loan so he could wipe out our debt. But of course, we all paid—Mom, Mia, myself. After the pretense was over, we all dearly paid.

Combat

*The price of a memory
Is the memory of the sorrow it brings*

-Counting Crows

I never met my father's parents. Dad was born Edward Gerard Mattern in 1930 in Shamokin, Pennsylvania, during the Great Depression. When he was six, his father died of a heart attack. Fourteen years later, the Navy honorably discharged him when his mother succumbed to Parkinson's disease. He went home to help his brother and sister take care of her. She died in 1951.

That same year, my mother, Antoinette "Nina" Blascovich, was born in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. While she was busy learning her ABCs, chasing the ice cream truck and skinning her knees, my father married his first wife, had three kids, then got a divorce.

In 1969, my mom, young, stunning, and fresh out of high school, accepted an operator position with Bell Telephone. There, she met my dad, who worked as a supervisor. In March of 1973, they married. The following year, they had my sister Mia, and in April of 1976, I was born.

After they were married, my mother moved into the house where my dad and his first family had lived, in the sugarcoated, square-seasoned suburbs of South Central Pennsylvania. It was a modest, white stone Cape Cod with dark green shutters. This is where I spent the first sixteen years of my life.

Most of those years, Mom stayed at home with Mia and me. Dad worked two full-time jobs—daytime hours with Bell telephone, and nightshift on the railroad. When we saw him, he was either eating or sleeping. Actually, I don't recall him dozing much, except on the couch, open book in hand. Our library held hundreds of paperbacks,

including every John Irving and Sidney Sheldon novel, Gregory McDonald's *Fletch* series, and other classics like Peter Benchley's *Jaws*, Judith Rossner's *Looking for Mr. Goodbar*, and Henri Charriere's *Papillon*. I tried reading *Papillon* once, but had to stop after learning that prisoners hid confiscated items in their anal canals. And I quit *Jaws* when the woman's leg got munched in the beginning—she felt a pinching, reached under the water, and her hand found nothing left but jagged bone and dangling flesh. My virgin stomach couldn't handle such gore, but Dad had the stamina of a brick. Nothing fazed him.

Our days revolved around this brick's solid schedule. Dinner was "when your dad gets home," no sooner, no later. He wouldn't eat all day, so when he came home, we waited, salivating, while he savored his wine-cheese-and-cracker appetizer. Then, since he taught me early how to tilt his frosty mug just so and pour the can of Genesee Cream Ale creating the least amount of foam, I played cocktail waitress. My tip was a few gulps of cold beer. I loved it.

Sometimes, dinner was a success. This included, among other things, preventing the Heinz ketchup bottle from obstructing Dad's view of the *Nightly News*. We always watched TV during dinner, the 19" Sony glaring at us from one end of the rectangular table, and Dad from the other. Mia and I occupied the bench on the wall side, and Mom sat facing us, closest to the stove and the set, so she could change the channel and grab the mashed potatoes with one quick sweep of her arm. But if the screen flickered, or if the green gun didn't fire inside the color tube and the picture was a dreadful reddish-blue, this was Dad's signal. He rose from the table and smacked the side of the old Sony. This fixed the problem every time, and scattered grateful smiles across the room. Then, if Dad gave enough correct answers during *Jeopardy*, the night ended with him in the living

room, sipping Galliano and listening to Al Jarreau or a muffled, live taping of his friend Steve Rudolph playing piano at the Harrisburg Jazz Festival.

Other nights, the house wasn't so musical. Everything had to be clean, crisp, and ready for battle. "Fold the bath towels long-ways first, and then double them over twice. Your dad likes them to fall open when he grabs one after his shower." And, "Empty the bottom half of the dishwasher first; otherwise, the ones on the bottom will get wet again when you empty the top."

An infamous scene was Dad standing in the hallway, pointing to the carpet. "Don't you see that?" he'd say. This was our cue to get down on all fours and handpick the tiny dust balls off the floor. If we didn't, we might hear the dishes crashing in the kitchen.

Only Dad was allowed to break the silence. We couldn't make any noise—not even in the form of celebration. If he so much as heard our feet hit the floor, he'd yell from his bedroom, "WHAT HAPPENED?" And in our house, you couldn't shut a door like a normal person. You had to first turn the knob all the way around, gently pull the door snugly into place, then—and only then—slowly release the knob, making no more than a quiet clicking sound.

Mia and I mastered these rules, and informed our guests, as well. Heaven help us if one of our friends opened the refrigerator to view our juice selection. "That girl is nosy. I don't want her coming here again," Mom would say.

I don't know if this was hers or Dad's jurisdiction. Either way, Mom said it to protect herself, for while we were learning the proper way to fold towels and close doors, she was discovering her own daily regimen. She practiced taking three-minute showers, because if she was under the water any longer, Dad accused her of masturbating.

Looking back on all that, I finally understand why Mom, to this day, walks around on her toes. Even in the supermarket or a department store, her heels never hit the floor. Her silver Plum Bottom wedges make a gentle *tap-tap* as she meanders past the delicatessen or through the linens section. It's terribly sad to watch your mother go through life like this. Moreover, it is damn near impossible to keep your own two feet on the ground.

It's 1979. Mia is five, I am three. Mom and Dad argue fiercely but routinely in the hallway while the telephone rings in the kitchen.

Mia answers. "Hello?"

"Is your daddy home?" an anonymous voice asks.

She replies enthusiastically, "He's in the other room, giving Mommy some shit."

Click.

Even now, Mom complains of being constipated. Dad *always* gave her shit about something. And she took it. She seized it, sucked it in, and smiled. Her whole life was constipated because of him.

She quit her job at Bell Telephone soon after their wedding, and didn't work while we were growing up because Dad didn't trust her. When I was in third grade, she became a Concept Now skin care consultant, which was acceptable because she set up shop at home. Dad installed a phone in every room and hallway, the patio and garage—eleven, altogether. I'm not sure if this was to accommodate Mom's business or Dad's eavesdropping.

Today, the result of Dad's distrust is a fifty-year-old widow who works the graveyard shift at the Post Office, not because she likes it, but because the pay is good. And with her days, fractured by evening naps and midnight breakfasts and the foggy air of sleep deprivation, comes wasted talk of taking a computer class that might magically heave her out of this shackled, manual labor trap.

Though life was tense with Dad home, his double-occupation allowed for a fairly ordinary childhood. This ended suddenly in the mid-eighties when he shocked us with an early retirement. Gone were the carefree hours spent watching *Three's Company* and *Gilligan's Island* after school, and filling up on chips and dip before dinner. After fourth grade, I dreaded being at home, surrounded by Dad's sourness.

With his handyman expertise, he became the odd-job man around town, but this only added to our restlessness, knowing he might roll up the driveway at any moment to retrieve a Phillips screwdriver or a can of WD-40. And sure, the elderly community kept him busy mowing lawns, drilling holes, and installing telephone jacks, but he still saved time to follow Mom wherever she went.

Winter 1985. Dad grabs his coat and keys while Mom's car backs out of the driveway. She is heading to church for a Camp Hill Women's Club meeting. Mia and I are eleven and nine—not yet old enough to be left alone—and I beg Dad not to leave. Despite my pleading, he stomps out and slams the door. Seconds later, the old Chevy chokes and grumbles, its dim headlights leading Dad down the dark driveway. I watch through the front door in disbelief. When he's gone, I run upstairs, dive in bed and sob

into my pillow until Mom comes home. But even then, I can't sleep. Downstairs, Dad storms in after her, screaming and smashing dinner plates on the kitchen floor.

"I'll find whoever it is and rip his goddamn guts out!" Dad roars.

"Ed, you saw me at the church!"

"You don't need to be out gallivanting around town. There's plenty for you to do in this house!"

"Oh yeah? And what about you? You repair Mrs. Johnson's leaky roof, you clean Mrs. Jenson's gutters. When are you going to fix OUR place?"

It was true. Dad tore the linoleum from the master bathroom floor and never replaced it. He purchased a new sink cabinet that occupied the upstairs hallway like a statue for six years. He stacked marble tiles in front of the living room fireplace, where they collected dust and soot. He arranged wooden boards outside in the dirt, marking where he intended to, but never did, build an addition to the house.

His favorite retaliation to Mom's question was, "Why should I fix it up? So you and your NEXT husband can enjoy it?" During these outrageous episodes, he even asked questions like, "How do I know for sure that I'm their father?" Accusing Mom of having an affair and alluding to her "skeletons in the closet" was his entertainment. Meanwhile, his own skeletons rattled upstairs amidst retired suits, sweaters and ties, and the echoes of his first children's footsteps on those very stairs.

It's 1980, seven o'clock on a warm summer evening. A skinny, four-year-old girl with corn silk ringlets is propped up on her mother's left hip. The mother clutches the

right hand of her six-year-old—a bold, brown-haired girl. The three walk determinedly through a dimly lit apartment complex and halt at number 36B.

“Go ahead. Knock on the door,” the mother instructs the six-year-old.

“No. I don’t want to,” she replies, suddenly withdrawn.

“Knock on the door, Mia,” the mother barks. “Say, ‘Daddy, are you in there?’”

“No!” Mia tries to squirm away from her mother’s firm grasp, but fails. She raps gently on the door. “Daddy, are you in there?”

The mother tugs on the six-year-old’s arm. “Again,” she orders. “Louder this time.”

Mia begins to cry. She knocks harder, and through her uncontrollable sobbing, shouts, “Daddy! Daddy! Is my daddy in there?”

I didn’t learn of the affair until ten years later. My mother told me about a woman named Mary Ellen, claiming she and Dad sneaked around for twelve years while he worked the graveyard shift on the railroad. The words that shook our walls that day stabbed brutally, suggesting something sickly and uncontrollable—a madman.

Suddenly, so much made sense: the arguments, the jealousy, the paranoid behavior. They say those who are guilty don’t know how to trust. I finally knew who the guilty one was.

From then on, I reciprocated Dad’s rage. When he yelled at Mom, I yelled louder until the fighting ceased and Mom slipped away, unscathed. He often lifted his fist at me, and then recoiled like a frightened child when he glimpsed the hysteria in my eyes. I was his blood, and I wanted him to see his reflection in me, to know that I was not fooled by his glamorous, self-indulgent façade, that I knew what he was capable of, and what he

had already done, and that he would hurt Mom no more. To me, he embodied a monster of the worst kind, a fiend to his own family.

Color

*If you can judge a wise man
By the color of his skin
It must mean you're a better man than I*

-Aerosmith

Easter Sunday, 1974. Mom is pregnant with Mia, and she and Dad drive across the Susquehanna to visit her parents in Harrisburg. Her brothers and sisters and their soon-to-be spouses have gathered to share ham and potatoes and cheap champagne. They warmly greet my parents, the prestigious ones from the West Shore, or the *White Shore*, as some, like my father, called it.

As Mom and Dad enter Grandma's kitchen, my Aunt Debbie, a relative by marriage, smiles at Mom and asks eagerly, "So what are you going to name her?"

Before Mom can utter a syllable, Dad spouts, "We don't know. We're going to wait and see what color she is, first."

This is the story Mom relays to me. She leaves me at this point, where I imagine a moment of gut-wrenching silence: Aunt Debbie, who would later become my godmother, swallowing hard to keep the spiteful words from erupting; Grandma, with her back to the party, mashing fresh horseradish and repeating some mental mantra to dismiss the situation; and Mom, poor, fragile Mom, clasping her belly with both hands and praying silently for God to please let her baby girl grow up patient, strong, and wise.

Hammers

*We each of us protect ourselves
We're hostages to the past*

-Mick Jagger

While growing up, Mia and I rarely received elaborate playthings. Our storage chest harbored countless knitted dolls and stuffed animals—silent toys. We were taught to entertain ourselves with Monopoly, Candy Land, and Chutes and Ladders. Again, virtually noiseless. The rowdy games, like Hungry Hungry Hippo and Dizzy Dolphins, Dad whipped against the dining room wall, shattering them to pieces before our eyes. Evidently, they proved too loud for him.

Furthermore, activities involving travel or heavy equipment were off limits. We watched longingly as neighbors strapped suitcases to their station wagon roofs and headed off to ski resorts and camping trips. We wanted to go, too, but Dad said these hobbies were a waste of money. Instead, we spent our dollars on Chablis, escargot, and filet mignon, the more convenient, classy investments.

Still, there were more restrictions. Mia and I weren't allowed to play soccer or climb rocks because we might knock our teeth out, and we couldn't participate in gymnastics, because surely this sport would stunt our growth. So, left to our own devices, we invented games that no one could touch.

On rainy days, when Dad was at Bell, we slipped into Mom's old high heels and prom gowns. In the powder room, we teased our hair and painted our faces with red lipstick and obscene amounts of blue eye shadow. When the mirrors deemed us stylish enough, we dashed to the living room and spun around to 8-tracks of the Village People, the Bee Gees, and A Taste of Honey.

During hot summers, we fluttered through the backyard sprinklers in Scooby Do and Bat Woman Underoos, or we delved into mind-expanding books like *The Wind in the Willows*, *A Wrinkle in Time*, and *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe*. Soon, we invented our own wondrous stories. Our backyard became a French bistro where Sue and Lee Ann, two girls that bore a striking resemblance to us, ate lunch everyday. The Soup Chef served vichyssoise, or sometimes clam chowder, and delicious linguini dishes. But the Spy always watched from the cloakroom, as Fly the Fly tried to sneak into the customers' soup. We spoke in a coded language that no one else understood, which alone made us special. In this way, Mia and I established our own private oasis, a fantastic getaway from our parents' clean-swept battlefield.

Mia and I rarely snapped or squabbled like most siblings. How can you fight over imaginary friends? One time, when we did enter a senseless, hair-tugging scuffle, Dad disappeared into the basement. He clinked and clanked in his workshop, and quickly returned with two giant hammers in his fists.

“Here,” he said, handing one to each of us. “Beat on each other.”

Our eyes as wide as walnut shells, we examined the hefty wood and cold steel that weighted our palms. A truce transpired without word or wink. Perhaps we should have used this scheme when he and Mom argued.

1978. Mom strolls through the aisles at Giant, filling the cart with jars of baby food, spaghetti sauce and dill pickles. I occupy the child's seat up front, fiddling with a handmade doll I've named Lu-Lu. Mia trails behind with her plastic yellow PLAYSKOOL cart, scanning the vast array of colorful products, most of them, fortunately, out of her reach.

We pause in the “BAKING NEEDS” section. Mom grabs a bag of Domino powdered sugar and rests it atop our load. Beside her, Mia snatches a box of lime Jell-O from the shelf.

“Asshole, can we get this?” Mia is smiling, patiently waving the Jell-O in the air.

Mom’s jaw drops. She covers her mouth and giggles. A woman nearby, perhaps a little older than Mom, plunks her fists on her hips and gasps in horror.

“If that were MY daughter,” she points to the air, “I would slap her till next Tuesday. Ugh! Disgraceful.”

But how could Mia be punished for her vocabulary? This is what she learned at home, and in the car, on the way to church, when Dad cursed out the window at careless drivers: “Asshole! Son of a bitch!”

No, Mom could not scold Mia, just like I hesitate to condemn Dad. How could he know the role of a father? He grew up, for the most part, without one. So can I blame him for feeding me beer at age five, for running our house like a military base, for mistrusting Mom who was as faithful as the moon?

Indeed, he could have treated us better. Squandering our college money on another woman and on costly meals we couldn’t afford was far from praiseworthy. But that’s nothing compared to the bruises Mia sustained.

October 1988. Mia stands in her peach terrycloth robe in the powder room, curling her long brown locks and applying Mom’s makeup to her face. She dabs extra concealer on her right cheek, her scar still slightly visible. After she pats Liz Claiborne perfume on the pressure points of her wrists and neck, I follow her upstairs.

Here, in her perfectly kempt pink, ivory and gold bedroom, facing east, the color of the sunrise, I plop myself on the canopied bed and gaze enviously while Mom helps Mia into an elegant, camel sweater dress purchased at John Wanamaker's several nights ago. They take great care, so as not to disturb her lipstick or stain the dress.

Mia is fourteen, in ninth grade. Her sixteen-year-old boyfriend, a quiet but attractive redhead named Gary, will soon appear and whisk her off to the homecoming dance. Mia is excited. I am excited for her. Mom is ready with the camera, but for some reason, Dad doesn't want this to be a Kodak moment.

Minutes before Gary strides up the walkway, thunder rumbles. Dad barges into Mia's room, yelling something about "this older boy," and parties and drugs. Mom reaches out her arm, trying to block Dad's path. He backs her against the wall and heads for Mia in the center of the room. *Oh God, here we go.* I pull my knees to my chest and wait for disaster.

"Ed, no!" Mom shouts, cupping her mouth.

Dad grips Mia's hair in one hand, yanks her dress with the other.

"Let go, Dad!" Mia squeals, squirming to free herself.

Dad's fists yield, but he's far from finished. He kicks Mia in the shins, and she topples to the floor. He continues kicking while Mia spins in circles, clutching the dust ruffle on her bed, trying to pull herself up. The scuffle looks and sounds like the old Tasmanian Devil cartoons—one massive, dissonant blur.

Something eventually sobers Dad's rage, perhaps good old-fashioned guilt. Thus, the calm rushes in after the storm. Gary arrives, unaware of what Cinderella has endured. He waits in the foyer while Mia and I salvage her hairdo and blot at her makeup.

When we finish, Mom leads us to the front porch as twilight stretches above the treetops. Gary slips a white lily onto Mia's wrist, and she pins a red rose on his lapel. The two lovebirds smile and Mom snaps their photograph, but no hope exists for masking Mia's red eye, which now seems a permanent blemish, like her scar.

I often wondered if Dad hit Mia, and not me, because she was sturdier and less fragile. In junior high, we were both the same height, about 5'3", but Mia weighed 140, and I, 112. She was a firm size ten; I was a size four. She wore baseball caps and cleats and pitched softballs. I strutted around in skirts and bloomers and played tennis with cheerleaders. But eventually, we resigned these practical pursuits. They weren't numbing enough. We craved a late night, long-term occupation, a reality-squelching escape from the nightmare that was our lives. But as we slowly tipped the bottle and surrendered to the drink, sisterly love suffered.

Mia refused to share her six-packs with me, or let me tag along to wild parties. I resented her. I called her fat. I called her a beast. She showed me that she could be a beast, and pummeled me to the ground over and over again. What I didn't realize is that she had valid reasons for tight-fisting her alcohol. Mia knew that if we were caught, she, being the older, "more responsible" one, would take the beating for both of us. But this did not concern me. What concerned me was the oblivion I yearned for, and in due time, oblivion found me.

April's Fool

*Never understood what my body was for
That's why I always leave it laying out on the floor*

-Phish

Sunday, April 1st, 1988—three weeks before my thirteenth birthday. Slivers of morning sunlight pierce through the window above me. Slowly, apprehensively, I try to stand, but nausea and dizziness reel me back to the sofa. After a few deep breaths, I carefully roll onto the floor and crawl into the hallway, my sweaty palms slapping across the cold linoleum as I head for the bathroom. Trembling, I clutch the sink with both hands and pull myself up. Peering in the mirror, I smile. Then gasp. *For Christ's sake, there's a fucking hole in my face!* Inventory: upper left front tooth gone completely, root and all; right one cracked diagonally in half; upper left rearmost molar gone. I splash water on my face. The phone rings.

It's Holly, my friend, asking me if I'm all right, reminding me about falling down her concrete steps, landing on my face. During her narrative, she mentions *J. Roget, Red Bull, Bacardi's, screwdrivers...blood...Mora, we didn't know what to do...* A burning pain singes my gut and I slam the phone down. Sobbing, I dash upstairs to my room, pull the covers up to my nose, and wait.

For several hours, I drift in and out of sleep, dreaming that I am a homeless woman shuffling through the streets of some cold, angry city, wearing layers of filthy army surplus garbs and schlepping my life around in torn, plastic grocery bags. Businessmen and women in sleek black suits avert their eyes, while some drop spare change in my empty coffee cup. I traipse past prestigious storefront displays and admire evening gowns and tuxedos and diamond jewelry. I shudder when I glimpse my broken reflection in their windows.

Finally, a gentle tapping on the door jolts me awake. Mom leans in like an angel and whispers, “Good morning.”

With the least bit of enunciation, I mutter through pursed lips, “Mom, I have to tell you something.”

I let the covers down to expose my gap-toothed grimace, and she stares in horror.

“My God, Mora! What happened?”

She crouches at my bedside and listens to my tale, the blanket back up to my nose.

“Ed!” she finally yells when I am finished. “Come here!”

To my surprise, they didn’t scold me. Instead, they made a few phone calls from the kitchen and dragged me to the dentist’s office for x-rays and impressions. Their precious gem had toppled off the shelf. I was nicked, and we had to fix me, fast. Never mind the fact that I was a 12-year-old drunk. It was April Fool’s Day, and the joke was on me—for the rest of my life—and my parents now had a less-than-perfect daughter. In one obtuse instant, I trampled their dream of my ever becoming the next Brooke Shields.

The dentist said if someone had found my tooth that night and put it in ice or milk, he could have shoved it back in and I’d be as good as new. Happens to hockey players all the time. But I never went to the hospital. I didn’t even know what happened until the next day, and even then, the details were foggy.

I didn’t recall tumbling down Holly’s stairs, nor did I remember chugging half a bottle of Bacardi’s spiced rum—straight. What I did know is that I was lucky I didn’t break my neck or die of alcohol poisoning.

Mom went to Holly's house that dreadful fool's day and found my tooth on the front porch, the root still intact. It was too late, of course. But it wasn't too late for further action.

I missed a week of school to recover from the accident and await my new dentures. One morning, while studying my wounded gums in the bathroom mirror, I overheard Mom on the phone with our lawyer neighbor across the street.

"The girl's father was HOME, Tom, and says he didn't hear a thing! He never left his bedroom the whole time these kids were drinking and carrying on...Uh huh... Yes...No... Can we sue for negligence, or...Okay...Okay...Tonight at seven? Great, thanks, Tom. I'll see you then."

Mom hangs up the phone and summons me. I quietly agree to cooperate, to sit with Mom, Dad, and this hotshot lawyer when he arrives, and tell him everything I remember of that wretched night and my fall from grace. But when 6:45 rolls around, I bolt out the back door and scurry through the yard, searching for a place to hide.

Seconds later, behind Mrs. Hawk's giant oak tree, I'm huddled in a niche against its sturdy leeward side, peering out at the street, hoping no one will see me. Mrs. Hawk might, but even if she appears in her cloudy bedroom window, still as a ghost, wearing her neck brace and librarian glasses, she won't call anyone. She won't come outside. She probably knows everything about our family after living next to us all these years, but she pities me, and will keep my secrets safe. They say she is dying of cancer, and somehow, at this moment, cancer sounds better than what I have.

I watch the lawyer leave his house and cross the road. I see Mom step outside and scan the yard. I hear her holler my name, over and over, with a twinge of humiliation in

her voice. Minutes pass until finally, at 7:30, the lawyer strolls home and closes his front door behind himself and his briefcase. Our living room lights go out. I check my watch, wait another ten minutes behind that trusty tree, and casually creep home.

“Where *were* you?” Mom inquires calmly, upon my return, as if it matters now. She stands gazing, not out the kitchen window, but at the random fingerprints and smudge marks on it.

“Outside.”

“I called to you.”

“I know.”

“We can’t get a monetary settlement from Holly’s dad unless you talk to Mr. Drennan. Do you know how much all this is costing us, how much it’ll cost *you*, in the *future*?” She is suddenly stern.

“Mom, I’m not talking to some stranger about my life!”

“Mora,” she pleads.

“No, I won’t do it. I won’t. Don’t ask me again!” I dash upstairs to my room, slam the door, and shove a Talking Heads tape, queued to the song “Psycho Killer,” in my stereo. I crank the volume. This is my self-induced solitary confinement.

Back then, with my mistakes under scrutiny, there was always a reason to rebel. In this particular instance, I was NOT going to suck up my pride in front of some rich prosecutor who would inevitably inspect my mouth and quiz me endlessly about what I drank, where I drank it, how I got it, who was there, and so on. So instead of talking about what happened, I wrote about it in my journal, a requisite of Mr. Showers’ seventh grade honors English class. Mr. Showers was the first man I trusted, the first man who

was the way I thought a father should be. I disclosed everything to him in that journal, about the fights at home, the broken dishes, the infidelity, and even my drinking and self-destruction. In the margins beside my entries, he wrote heartfelt comments like, “You are a smart, brave girl. Life has dealt you a tough hand, but I have faith that you will come out on top of the world.” Those comments carried me through some of the roughest waters of adolescence.

Nevertheless, what I wanted more than anything was to forget about that April Fool’s night, to confess it on paper and then close the book. But the scars would forever remain, haunting me like angry ghouls, for I shattered more than just a pretty face that night. Something shook loose in my brain, and I felt it rattle with every step I took, reminding me of what I had lost.

And there was still the thought that maybe I deserved it. Perhaps it was punishment for my vanity, shallowness, and hedonism. Or maybe the incident served to remind me that there was more to life than just perfect teeth and slender thighs. Yet other forces convinced me that it was just a prelude to the curse of my mouth.

Dinner with Tom Brokaw

*We all want something beautiful
Man I wish I was beautiful*

-Counting Crows

May 1989. Dad sits at one head of the table, staring head-on with our 19" Sony color TV at the other end. We are eating fried chicken, baked potatoes, and corn on the cob again, which used to be my favorite. But since the accident, I have to hold the cob vertically above my plate, and with a paring knife, carefully slice the kernels off into a neat little pile. By the time I'm ready to dig in, everyone else is half finished.

No one requests the results of my math test or the date of Mia's next softball game. Through the gentle clanking of forks against ceramic, Tom Brokaw relays the *Nightly News*, something about the Iran-Contra Affair that I don't understand. I begin a joke I heard in school.

"Knock-knock," I say, already grinning about the punch line.

Dad pounds his fist on the table. "Listen!" he roars.

"I don't want to listen," I mumble fiercely, through a bite of chicken. Mia and I share looks of fear mixed with disgust.

After digesting the evening broadcast along with four beers, Dad requests jovially, "Let's watch Vanna."

Mom leans in close to the TV and punches the channel button, then sits back. A giant wheel appears on screen, and an unseen audience chants, "WHEEL! OF! FORTUNE!" The crowd cheers as Pat Sajak and Vanna White saunter into view, smile and wave.

Oh, to be Vanna White, flaunting fluffy gowns and prancing across the glittery stage, waiting for the magic bell when giant blocks light up, flipping them around to

expose vowels and consonants that systematically transform into some trite saying—my life would indeed be beautiful and simple. And Vanna is the obvious choice, for after watching *Pretty Woman*, Mom and Dad agreed that Julia Roberts had a “big snout.” But Vanna White, with her ivory smile, smooth skin and golden tresses—her name even chimes with pure perfection. I, on the other hand, am already damaged, have stumbled off the stage and cracked my pretty shell. As the years pass, my corn silk ringlets grow coarse and shabby. I must search for another reason to be admired, to earn my father’s praise.

Starving for Affection

*How much happiness is gained,
and how much misery escaped,
by frequent and violent agitation of the body.*

-Dr. Samuel Johnson

When I hear the word “discipline,” I don’t think of being grounded or losing TV privileges. As a child, discipline in the traditional sense lay buried under temperance and modesty inside a vast canyon of void. Mia and I were taught to be quiet and pretty. Mom wouldn’t go out for bread and milk without painting her face and fingernails. At home or The Club, she spoke just above a whisper, because ladies never raised their voices. For years, I thought this was discipline.

After shedding gallons of tears over the April Fool’s incident, I pulled myself up by my shoelaces. Eighth grade began. A fresh start. With my new Guess jeans and Esprit sweaters, I also sported a shiny set of metal braces, complete with a thick pink bite plate or “flipper” on the roof of my mouth. This contraption held my new fake tooth, filling the gap in my smile. That thing looked as convincing as Godzilla in the original 1950s film. Because of the structure’s surface, the orthodontist said he couldn’t attach a metal bracket like the ones covering my other teeth. A plain, coiled wire covered that section of my otherwise tinny smile.

At first, I hid my distorted grin, cupping my mouth when I laughed and tilting my head down when I spoke. As I passed through the hallways at school, piercing voices shouted “Fixodent” and “Super Poli-Grip” at me. But after a while, the name calling ceased and I became less bashful. My talent to pop my tooth out at the slam of a locker door shocked and amused the boys in my class. Some actually seemed jealous. And although most students knew the real story, I cooked up tall tales of bar fights and field

hockey brawls, glorifying my physical defect. I was legendary. Yet another upside was that to dress as a hobo for Halloween, half my costume was already intact.

Though the laughs at school were good-natured, they were far from flattering. Certainly, no one would kiss the broken girl with dentures. And at home, no more comments lauded my Brooke Shields eyebrows or Cover Girl profile. The arguments and excessiveness returned, and my existence nestled itself into the shadows. But I wanted the boys at school to like me, so with every ounce of eyeliner and lipstick in the house, I tried to be pretty, to rediscover the model that nature carved me out to be. More specifically, I craved attention, a connection to my father. Hence, from that inner determination, that firm voice of resolve, I created my own form of discipline.

One day, while studying a Dannon vanilla yogurt label—200 calories, 3 grams of fat—I decided to start “taking better care of myself,” which meant acquiring healthier eating habits and a firm exercise regimen. Dad was a strong man. He ran marathons, and inspired me to start running. He bought me my first pair of ASICS and taught me to write the date of purchase on the white rubber area above the sole. Six months later, I should buy new shoes.

I quickly swore off Twinkies and Tony’s pizzas, established a position on the JV basketball team, and made a conscious effort to do my homework everyday. After two hours of basketball practice, I’d eat a spoonful of beef stew and rush to my room to solve algebra problems. Then I’d go running for an hour, take a shower and go to bed. I was only fourteen, and already spinning myself into starvation—unintentionally, of course.

Gradually, my diet dwindled to half a grapefruit and two cups of tea for breakfast, a rice cake and broccoli for lunch, and water for dinner. This kept my daily total at or below 500 calories. I hoarded four-packs of Bubblicious—grape, strawberry, orange and

Hawaiian punch. The gum created the illusion of eating, and I chewed two packs a day until it rotted five teeth. Now, not only did I have dentures, but a mine of silver in my mouth.

During the day, I starved. At night, in dreams, I feasted. I demolished Thanksgiving dinners of turkey and mashed potatoes, ravaged tables of chocolate cakes and peanut butter cookies, blackberry pies and butterscotch puddings. I gorged in my mind while in reality, flesh evaporated from my bones.

I clipped dessert recipes out of *McCall's* and taped the pictures to my bedroom walls. Looking at these colorful confections had to be enough. On the weekends, I baked key lime pie or cherry cobbler for my family, served it up on a silver platter, complete with parsley sprigs and orange slices, but never even licked the beater myself.

Soon, I marveled at the power of restriction, and realized it was fun to lose weight. Moreover, I was finally in control of something: the scale. I kept running and cutting more and more foods out of my diet. No meat, no milk, no butter, no bread. No chips, no pretzels, no pasta, no peanut butter. The pounds melted off. Suddenly, I had gone from 112 to 93 pounds. I hadn't had my period in four months.

My dissipating body didn't heave me back into the spotlight at home, but that was okay. In some ways, being thin was better than getting attention or achieving success. It was better than love, at least love as I knew it. Although the hunger was sometimes agonizing, it was easier to accept, easier to endure, and easier to tame than sadness or anger. Thus, the starvation pressed on, and exercise prevailed.

Each night like clockwork, in the sub-freezing temperatures of the northeast December, I slipped my scrawny limbs into long underwear, then sweatpants, turtleneck and sweatshirt, a winter coat, two pairs of socks, two pairs of mittens; pulled a knitted hat

down to my brow and fastened furry earmuffs around my head. I didn't care if ice patches lined the sidewalks or if baseball-sized hail fell from the sky. Like a machine, my legs drove me across town, four, five, six miles, my feet slapping the slushy pavement, snot forming icicles below my nostrils. When I returned, I quickly undressed and hopped on the scale. *Damn it all to hell. Still 93.*

Before bed, I threw on boxers and a t-shirt, and slinked downstairs for a glass of water. Sometimes I bumped into Dad in the hallway.

"How far'd you go?" Dad asks, adjusting the collar on his flannel pajamas.

"Six miles, I think. Maybe a little further."

He grins encouragingly. "I used to go eight miles a day. For twenty years, I did that."

"Wow." I turn and head toward the steps.

"Look at them long, pretty legs," he whispers to my back.

This is my golden recognition.

On the inside, I swelled with pride—the arrogant awareness that I was of the elite who fit comfortably into a size-two suede skirt. But on the outside, my scarecrow figure sparked dour stares from presumptuous strangers. The skin on my hands, arid and scaly from malnutrition, cracked and bled uncontrollably, and no number of scarves or sweaters could stop my shoulders from shivering. My own expression, suddenly dead and unfamiliar, lacked the energy or the enthusiasm to smile. And so, while Dad's skeletons hung safely out of sight behind his closet door, my bones were busy trotting

around the neighborhood, the school, the mall, saying, “Yes, please,” and, “No, thank you,” and, “Does this come in an extra small?”

The most haunting scene transpired that New Year’s Eve. Mom and Dad rushed off to a holiday gala, leaving Mia and me with twenty dollars to order a pizza and watch Dick Clark. When the front door closed behind them and their headlights rolled out of the driveway, the phone rang. Our friend Danielle in Harrisburg was hosting a holiday bash. Her boyfriend would pick us up.

Thirty minutes later, there we were, smug and eager, the first to hit the freshly tapped keg. Those initial three pints of Coors Light were probably enough for a night of good cheer. But I pushed on. Around ten o’clock, when the other guests started arriving, Danielle mixed a screwdriver for me and left to buy more ice. Alone in the kitchen, I spotted a bottle of Captain Morgan’s behind the chips. I filled my half-empty screwdriver to the rim. Cheers!

That cocktail was vile, and contained ten times the calories of my average rice cake meal, but I gulped it anyhow. This was my night to shine, to boogie on the dance floor, to celebrate my new triumphs! My slim, sexy physique!

Despite my intentions, what followed was a televised flash of New York’s glittery ball descending from the sky, a heap of fluffy pillows scrunched under my head, then the grip of four strong hands tugging on my torso and legs. Just past midnight, my parents, fully clad in silver, black and gold, left their merrymaking to stand shivering on the city street, watching in shame as strangers lugged their baby girl’s limp body out of Danielle’s front door, over the slick sidewalk to the car, where they draped her across the back seat like a bag of dirty laundry. On the way home, I vomited all over the plastic floor mat.

The next day, nobody disturbed me. Nausea and exhaustion warded off the holiday pork and sauerkraut. I stayed in bed, staring at pictures of cherries jubilee and lemon chiffon on the walls, trying not to barf. Under the blankets, I tapped my toes to Grateful Dead bootlegs that spun inside my Sony boom box, my trusty companion through all my hangovers, its one speaker bashed in from Dad kicking it down the stairs.

Again, it was by chance that I survived. But in the next room, Mia took the beating for my overkill. I pulled my pillow over my ears, flinching and wincing through the thumps and cries as Dad knocked my blameless sister across her bedroom floor. What could I do? I prayed to God and Jesus and Mary and all the angels and saints. Halfway through my pleading, Mom burst in, threatening to phone the police if Dad didn't stop. He snickered cynically and retreated downstairs.

That holiday spawned a new affliction for excess. The After Eight mints and leftover peanut brittle called out to me, and I answered, open-mouthed. Valentine's Day came and went, and I devoured an ungodly two-pound box of chocolate-covered cherries. Soon, Easter passed, too, with a basket full of Cadbury eggs, marshmallow bunnies and jellybeans. I had already used all the laxatives in the house to purge myself and was too embarrassed to buy more. I wasn't talented enough to force myself to vomit like the classic bulimics. So, by midsummer, I was back to my normal weight, plus some.

Dis-ease

*And it's one more beer
And I don't hear you anymore*

- Elton John

While struggling with my eating disorders, I trampled through two and a half years in and out of sobriety, trying to forget myself. I never thought I was invincible. I simply didn't care. In this new territory, it wasn't food, but excitement I hungered after.

Bottle in hand, weighing a barley-and-hops induced 120, I exchanged one version of childish dress-up for another. At parties, I delved into naïve moms' closets, looking for a costume to borrow for the night. On a chance mission, I emerged wearing vintage 1970s jumpsuits, bellbottoms, butterfly collars and platform shoes.

Spring 1992. Typical parents-in-the-Caribbean, Country Club Hills bash. I wriggle my hips and thighs into Mrs. Albrecht's skintight, purple, yellow and red patchwork leotard, complete with crotch buttons and monstrous, matching bellbottoms. As I appear in the doorway in my new threads, fellow drunkards and disco fans clap and whistle. I strut through my friend Tom's living room like a model across the catwalk and climb onto the coffee table.

The most beautiful song can make a girl feel beautiful, no matter what the outside world says, and this is how I feel—beautiful. For hours, I twirl alluringly to the mystifying sounds of ABBA, and thrust my pelvis to the provocative KC and his Sunshine Band. I shake my booty. I do the hustle. I scan the crowd for my “Boogie Man,” but not even John Travolta could match my moves, and I know this.

In my mind, I am the envy of the party.

In my mind, I am the Dancing Queen.

Getting drunk became an excuse to rise out of bed each day, to breathe in and out, to place one foot in front of the other. It was a reason to cackle and carry on and lose my inhibitions with other confused, aimless teenagers like myself. It was a way to dance and make noise, to be heard and not just seen. But at times, alone after a night of heavy carousing, the true effects of alcoholism engulfed me. When the buzz wore off and sobriety struck, I lay sobbing in bed, clutching my pillow against my face, praying for God to gently steal my breath away. One night I opened my window, teetered onto the roof and contemplated jumping. Then I realized I would probably only break my legs.

Those were the bad times. On a good night, before climbing in bed, I reached into the pocket of my jeans and pulled out all the bottle caps I'd saved from each bottle of Glacier Bay. Counting them and discovering just how much I drank at the party gave me a sick, sinful pleasure. I still have those caps in a tiny basket above my bookcase.

By the summer of 1992, my tolerance swelled so that half a case of Rolling Rock fueled a good time (a little less was okay, as long as the joint circulated to my side of the gathering). In those days, a typical night was this: secure the alcohol from a legal and willing third party, locate a parentless house, drink until the beer dries up, stumble home just before dawn, sleep till four, chew two Alka-Seltzer tablets, stay in room listening to music until phone rings about another party, eat a quick dinner of sliced cucumbers and Wishbone French dressing. Repeat.

But this routine would not, and could not, last forever. My body, as battered as it was, eventually needed a break. If I didn't find a retreat soon, one would find me.

In January of 1993, that's exactly what happened. A sudden, debilitating sickness landed me in bed. After extensive testing, the doctors diagnosed pharyngitis and

mononucleosis. They prescribed antibiotics, but said the mono would have to “run its course.” I would feel better in a few weeks, they said—two months, at the most. But I thought I was dying.

For days, my brain roasted at 103 degrees. My skull throbbed with so much pressure, I thought it would crack open. My throat stung as though it had been pierced with needles and doused with rubbing alcohol. My limbs felt so heavy and cumbersome that I could do nothing but lie motionless. I couldn’t eat, aside from sipping Lipton Noodle Soup broth. I couldn’t drink, except for 7-Eleven Slurpees. The smell of a banana churned my stomach. The thought of all the beer and rum and vodka curdled my insides. Light burned my eyes and magnified every pain and discomfort. So, I stayed under the covers in silent darkness.

As time passed, I slowly regained enough strength to read, but only by the softness of daylight. Mom was working until 2am at the Post Office then. She visited me briefly, late-morning, to draw the shades and bring me a bowl of soup. Afraid of contracting my illness, she left me alone to snuggle with Hemingway and Fitzgerald.

It was then that I learned the difference between being alone and feeling lonely. I was both. I couldn’t see my friends, and had no energy to talk on the phone. When my friend Dorothy brought a bouquet of flowers, she stood in the doorway, whispered, “Hi, Mora. Get better soon, okay?” and disappeared. My closest companions were brilliant authors, but they were all dead.

Despite my contagion, my boyfriend Jim eventually came to see me. He sat at the foot of the bed in my contaminated cave and just watched me sleep. He even pressed his lips to mine, disregarding mono’s alias, “the kissing disease.” Amazingly, he never got sick.

In all honesty, I should not have been sick. I contracted mono by making out with my ex-boyfriend, Jason, at a New Year's Eve party. Now here sat Jim, caressing my sweaty brow, oblivious to my guilt. And why should I cheat on this adorable boy? The truth was, spending time with his family of seven—his parents, four sisters, and him—was unbearable. They were the essence of the American dream, a kind, fun-loving, Catholic family. They ate dinner together every night and discussed the day's events. Afterwards, they played Risk and Yahtzee, sipped instant iced tea, and munched on pretzels and chips. December was the worst, because weeks before Christmas, everyone gathered in the living room to decorate the tree and hum holiday carols. They invited me to join them once, but I claimed I didn't feel well and called Mom to pick me up. My throat ached from trying not to cry. As soon as Mom's headlights shown in the driveway, I whisked out the door.

Mom sensed immediately that something was wrong.

"Did you two have a fight?" she asked.

"No, I'm just tired," I lied.

I couldn't tell her that our failure as a family was crushing my moral fiber.

Yawning made it easy to restrain the tears until we arrived home and I hid in my room, where the soothing songs of Fleetwood Mac drowned out the chaos, if only momentarily.

Our last Christmas as a family included a week of yelling and complaining just to get Mom to pull down our boxes of homemade ornaments from the attic. Dad dragged in a discount tree on Christmas Eve, erected it in the basement, then went to the living room with his drink. Mia and I hastily decorated it so we could dash off to a party and get high.

Christmas morning was a classic time, indeed. It was 11:00 before all the Matterns surrounded our tattered tree. No cards with baby Jesus in the manger adorned the mantle. No songs of angels or wise men played on the stereo. No warm smell of baking cookies filled the air. Coerced out of bed, Dad scowled at us through the steam rising from his first cup of Folgers. Mom forced smiles as she handed us boxes of socks and underwear and winter boots. The finest part of the day was when Mia and I exchanged gifts: she gave me the Grateful Dead's *Shakedown Street*, and I gave her The Doors' *Morrison Hotel*.

That winter, while waiting for mono to surrender my strength, I finished *A Farewell to Arms* and *The Great Gatsby*. Caught up on my school assignments, my fingers found their way to a health book my Aunt Mary Jo had given our family for Christmas called *Prescription for Nutritional Healing*. This book became my consultant on all of life's matters for the next half-decade. I still have it.

I read the section about mono, and realized it was normal for me to feel so depressed. I discovered ways to boost my immune system to avoid getting sick again: eat oatmeal, carrots, garlic, and plenty of green, leafy vegetables; avoid drinking alcohol; take vitamin C; exercise regularly; don't smoke. The list went on and on. I also read about Parkinson's, my father's newly diagnosed condition, so I could understand the what, how, why and when of its symptoms and stages. I studied lupus, the autoimmune disease that nearly killed my Aunt Lucy years earlier, to fully grasp the miracle of her continuous survival. It seemed everyone *had* something—if not diabetes, then hypoglycemia; if not skin cancer, then eczema; if not mono, then chronic fatigue syndrome. I had mono. I was anorexic. Strangely, though I hated being ill, having these

labels made me feel real. Moreover, the ability to slap a title on my problems made them mine, and gave me the illusion of control.

I decided, during those dismal, lonely days in bed, that I never wanted to feel the way mono made me feel again. So, when I was finally up and around, I gave my body a month to regain its vigor, and then recaptured my old ideals from the anorexic days—only I vowed to maintain *moderation*.

I immediately quit drinking and doing drugs, which pleased Jim. In a shallow attempt to win more of his attention, I began jogging again that summer and reclaimed my sleek, fit figure. One benefit of being bedridden and unable to eat for three weeks was that I lost 14 pounds, without trying, and dropped to a delightful 106. Now all I had to do was maintain it. For the next six months, I ran three miles a day, and rode my bike five miles to and from Jim's house. I also became a vegetarian, thanks to my trusty *Prescription* book. Consider a grocery store receipt I found from March of 1993:

STROEHMANN BREAD	1.61
KIDNEY BEANS	.44
KIDNEY BEANS	.44
KIDNEY BEANS	.44
APPLES RED	2.36
BUTTER BEANS	.57
TOTAL	5.86

Foods like bread and beans were my sole sustenance, and this particular cluster probably lasted me a week.

With Mia away at college and Mom working the night shift, family dinners were a thing of the past. On Saturdays, instead of sleeping late, lying around and waiting to get drunk, I walked a mile to the grocery store and back. On weekdays, after school, I made a chef salad for Dad and popped a Red Baron pizza in the oven for him around five

o'clock. If I was hungry at that time, I microwaved a potato or a can of vegetable soup and retreated to the warm seclusion of the basement.

There, I reclined on the sofa and perused my budding library of health books: *The Doctors Book of Home Remedies*, *The Bantam Medical Dictionary*, *The Pill Book*, *How to Be Your Own Nutritionist*, *Eat To Succeed*, *The Low Blood Sugar Handbook*, *What You Can Do About Diabetes*, *Wellness Made Easy*, *Jim Fixx's Second Book of Running*, *The New York Road Runner's Club Complete Book of Running*.

Skimming their glossy pages, filling my hungry brain with details and facts, lists of causes, symptoms, and treatments, organic recipes and marathon training programs, I finally felt nourished. This was better than any family dinner or Christmas morning or Yahtzee session. These books became my blood, my security. Unlike the dreaded chocolate covered cherries and Cadbury eggs and peanut brittle, these books were safe for my indulgence.

Organic Trip

*They say the world high above
Is Caribbean Blue*

-Enya

In April of 1993, after nearly four years, I bade farewell to the unsightly braces on my teeth. With a straight white smile, I took a train to Paoli, Pennsylvania, to visit Aunt Mary Jo, Mom's youngest sister. This was a new venture for me, and I can't recall why it happened or who suggested it. Looking back, it all seems so surreal.

Aunt Mary Jo, slim and youthful, with natural, glowing, China doll skin and cerulean eyes, embraces me as I step off the platform. Her dark curly hair is knotted in a bun behind her head, and a few strands dangle around her forehead, accenting the softness of her complexion.

She helps me carry my bags to her pale blue Ford Tempo, and we leave the city, breeze through curvy country roads to Phoenixville, a small town twenty miles outside of Philadelphia. Here, my aunt rents a clean, white guesthouse beside a larger farmhouse and a freshly tilled pasture.

Until now, Aunt Mary Jo has been a mystery to me. She was sometimes present at holiday gatherings. Other times, the mention of her name sparked an abrupt "shush" from Grandma. I learn, during this visit, that this is because she dated a black man.

We schlep my bags into the guesthouse. Inside are a kitchen, a living room/bedroom, and a small bathroom. Jars of vitamins align the kitchen counter. A rustic slab of painted wood balancing atop an old metal stool forms a makeshift breakfast nook. A basket of oranges and pears comprises the table's centerpiece.

Within minutes, Aunt Mary Jo offers me a tall glass of carrot juice, fresh from her juicer. It is surprisingly sweet and flavorful.

“Your mom tells me you’re a vegetarian now,” she says.

“Yeah, I guess so. I just want to feel healthier.”

I spot a copy of *Nutritional Healing*, the same edition she gave us for Christmas, on her credenza. Tiny, fluorescent post-it notes peak out the sides, marking the most important sections. Catching my stare, she snatches the sacred tome.

“This is a *great* book,” she says, flipping through the pages. “I use it for everything.” She pauses and holds it open for me to look. “This is the candida diet I’ve been wanting to try. It’s supposed to rid your body of yeast and other unhealthy microbes that compromise the immune system.”

I nod, as if all this makes perfect sense to me. I haven’t yet reached that chapter.

“Anyhow,” she says, “I know a really good vegetarian restaurant downtown. Are you hungry?”

I wait while she brushes her teeth, and decide to brush mine. She hands me special organic mint toothpaste, and I use it, obligingly. It is bitter and gritty, and doesn’t foam in my mouth like Colgate or Crest, but it’ll do.

An hour later, we sit facing each other in a cozy wooden booth. Aunt Mary Jo smiles incessantly, her pearly teeth glistening, reflecting the tea light on our table. I decide, at this moment, that I want to be like her—healthy, simple, free. Not untarnished, but newly purified.

At this café, I sample black bean soup for the first time. It is spicy and hearty, with tiny carrot slivers, diced red peppers and broccoli florets. One bowl sates my voracious appetite. At last, I am full on more than food. I am full on family.

After dinner, we meander coolly through the city, arm-in-arm. We stop at a music store and purchase Mickey Hart's *Planet Drum*. She says she'll tape it, and give me the CD. Then she takes me to a health food store and buys me a light brown llama wool sweater, along with two tie-dyed t-shirts. She shares nutritional secrets about herbs and wildflowers, and I learn that she is soon moving to Florida. This saddens me, but I try to remain cheerful.

On the ride back, we chat about boys and concerts and beer. She knows the unedited April Fool's tale, and I declare that, after four years, I've quit drinking. She tells me that she used to party a lot, drinking and smoking, the whole bit, just like me. The entire time, I can hardly believe this is my aunt talking. I thought these relationships only existed in the movies, like Winona Ryder and her aunts in *How to Make An American Quilt*.

We return to her house, both of us exhausted. After changing into our pajamas and brushing our teeth again with the funky toothpaste, Aunt Mary Jo unfolds her futon in the living room and rests the mattress on the floor. She tosses two pillows at one end, and clicks off the lights. One lonely vanilla candle burns on the windowsill.

"Do you listen to music before bed?" she asks.

"Sure," I say, nestling myself under the sheets and crocheted blankets.

She slips a CD in the stereo and blows out the candle.

"Goodnight," she whispers, then slides in next to me.

This is when I discover Enya, and that elevating, so-happy-you-want-to-cry sensation. The melodies are soft but intense, her vocals fluid and exquisite. I am certain that if I dipped a silver spoon into the sound waves, they would taste like sweet velvet on my tongue. I drift to sleep envisioning Scottish hillsides and white horses, stone castles

with gemstone lakes and purple meadows and willow trees, peacocks grazing in the lush prairie. If my memory steals anything from this visit, it will be Aunt Mary Jo's warmth, and my first encounter with *Shepherd Moons*.

The Big Move

*To overcome an obstacle or an enemy
To dominate the impossible in your life*

-Paul Simon

When I returned to Camp Hill after that mystical weekend, it was time for Mom and me to execute our plan. We were moving out, leaving Dad, for better or worse. The exodus was arranged in December, just before we learned of Dad's Parkinson's, only in the preliminary stages. He was tired and stiff, which might explain why he allowed Mom to go work at the Post Office. He simply lacked the energy to stand in the way, or the fury to follow her. If only he knew why she needed the money.

We contrived our plot in the basement laundry room. There, atop the washer and dryer, I kept watch while Mom browsed "For Rent" ads in the *Patriot News'* classifieds. We used her business line to dial realty companies, make appointments, and set up utility accounts once we signed the lease on a two-bedroom apartment in Lemoyne, just four miles away.

The night before we left, Mom worked overtime and didn't come home until 3 AM. From my bedroom, I listened as she walked through the front door.

"How's your new boyfriend?" is Dad's welcoming grumble from the staircase landing.

"What? You're crazy," Mom says squarely, as she slips off her coat and drapes it over the railing.

"Oh, I'm crazy! And you're a cheat! Leaving here each night, saying you're going to work. I know what's really going on."

He trails her to the basement where she goes each night to drop her sweatshirt in the dirty clothesbasket. I sneak down the stairs and spy from the pantry. As she begins pulling her shirt over her head, Dad grabs her by the collar and yanks her toward him.

“You wanna be a martyr? I’ll make you a martyr! I’ll fix it so NO MAN will EVER look at you again!” Dad snaps.

With both hands, Mom slaps his chest and shoves him against the wall.

“Get the hell off me!” she shrieks, out of breath.

Dad snatches the phone off the receiver and dials 9-1-1.

“Give me the police!” he screams at the operator.

While he cries to the cops about his wife beating him, Mom yells, “Liar! He’s lying!”

When the officer arrived that night and saw Dad trembling and huffing, he didn’t need any explanation. He threatened to toss Dad in jail, and offered us a ride to the local women’s shelter. We declined. We knew that lightning had struck for the last time.

The next day, Aunt Lucy’s red Ford Explorer bounced into the driveway. In broad daylight, Dad lurked inside the doorway, dumbfounded, as we brushed past him with lamps, dressers, and couch cushions.

“Where are you going with that? What...what are you doing?” Dad spouts, wondering who could explain this, whatever it is, this hallucination.

“We’re leaving,” Mom says, shoving him out of the way with an end table.

“What? No you’re not. And you can’t take that!” he orders the three of us, as we struggle with the corner piece of the sectional sofa.

“I can take whatever I want,” Mom replies, indifferently.

“Ed, they have every right,” Aunt Lucy intervenes.

“Lucy,” he stabs, “you’re never welcome in this house again! Never! Hurry up and get the hell out of here! All of you!”

“We’ll be gone before you know it,” Mom says.

“You’re only leaving me because I’m sick! That’s what this is about!”

“You ARE sick! That’s why you’ve abused me and the girls for twenty years!”

During the months and days prior, I wondered if I would cry during the move. Instead, I found myself forcing down laughs of relief that wanted to gurgle up and spill all over the floor, the railing, the freshly clipped lawn of that place I once called home. I could see through her sparkling blue irises that Mom shared my bliss.

I did not know it yet, but this day marked the beginning of a sickening string of moves, and in the next six years, I would employ more than ten different mailing addresses between Camp Hill and Pittsburgh. I would drag my life around in boxes and bags, never fully unpacking, never really settling, all the while building inside me a need for my own sturdy home someday. But all that mattered to me at this moment was that we were abandoning that house and the madness harbored within.

The first week in our new place, all was peaceful. Mom granted me the larger bedroom, and the first thing I unpacked was my new stereo, an early birthday gift from Mom. Old dress shoes and jeans lingered, cold and untouched, in white garbage bags in my closet, but my tapes and CDs became warped and scratched from the friction of overuse.

With Mom's odd hours, I continued the grocery shopping, walking two miles and back from Karn's in the West Shore Plaza. She allotted me \$25 a week, more than enough to sustain my meatless diet, and this frugal discovery secured my vow to live cheaply, simply, and healthily.

I still ran everyday, and rode my bike to Jim's. In between leisure and exercise, I nourished myself with yogurt, beans, carrots, potatoes, and whole grain bread. I snacked on cauliflower, graham crackers, and raisins—foods so harmless, I forgot to count them. I cooked heaping pots of lentil and pea soup and transferred them to Tupperware so Mom could have dinner whenever she wanted. Together, she and I were more like roommates or best friends than relatives.

A few days after the move, Dad called, pleading with Mom to take him back. But as the months passed and we didn't return, he accepted his fate. He made a suspiciously smooth transition into a new affair with a woman named Jennie, but when they met me at Theo's for lunch one day, I noticed for the first time that Dad's illness was crippling his livelihood. His gait was slow and shuffling, as I read about in *Nutritional Healing*. His hand shook violently as he tried to cut his steak, so Jennie took the knife and sliced it for him. On subsequent outings, he ordered finger foods to avoid the struggle with utensils altogether. And when we talked on the phone, his weekly report included broad details of a gash on his leg after another fierce tumble in the shower. Soon, despite my wavering, I returned to the house several times a week, upon Mom's request, to watch over him. For this reason, my green Jordache duffle bag remained overstocked with clean underwear and t-shirts, always ready for a night with Dad.

May 1993. Back in my old room, the naked, 100-watt bulb dangling from the ceiling by frayed black wires, another of Dad's unfinished projects, greets me glaringly. My old, white net canopy lay crumpled in the corner like a retired ghost. All the things I left behind—my beer bottle collection, glass animal menagerie, concert ticket stubs—are sheathed in layers of dust as thick as felt. Balls of scotch tape cling to the walls from my old recipe cutouts. Water from the shower has leaked into my closet, causing the white paint to bubble and a musty smell to assault the air. This is too much for me, so I creep into Mia's room to set up camp.

"Mora, is that you?" Dad calls to me from his bed.

"Yeah, it's me."

Who else would it be?

"Do you need something?" I ask.

"No, I was just checking."

I peer in his doorway, and notice his bare, arthritic toes peaking out the bottom of his comforter.

"Could you put some socks on my feet? There, in the cabinet." He points, but I know exactly where they are. I used to fold them and put them away for him. I assume Jennie does this now.

I open the wooden doors and pull out the small drawer. All I see are dark, thin dress socks that he used to wear to The Club. Under the pile, I find a lonely pair of thick, white ones.

His feet are ice cold and pale. Gently, I stretch each sock and slide it over his toes, trying not to disturb his dry, scaly skin with my chilly fingertips. A thread catches on his big toenail, and requires some tugging to remove it. This reminds me of when Mia

and I were young, and we called this his wooden toenail because it was thick, rigid and sallow. The memory of these jokes shames me now.

“Thank you, honey,” he says when I finish, and flashes me one of his famous squinty grins.

“You’re welcome,” I answer. We are strangely polite and affectionate. He reaches for my hand. I offer it to him, and he squeezes tightly.

“Aren’t you a beautiful child,” he adds.

“I’ll be downstairs in the basement. Call me if you need anything.” I kiss him on his smooth cheek.

Ten minutes into *Pretty Woman*, I think I hear my name. I mute the TV. *Yes, he’s calling.* I pause the movie and trudge upstairs.

Dad lifts his right leg and points to his foot. “There, that one. It’s caught on something. Can you check it?”

The sock comes off with one, swift pull. White fuzz balls stick to his moist skin.

“I don’t see anything.”

“Okay, put it back on, then.”

I obey.

“There. It’s stuck again.”

Again, I pull the sock off without any trouble.

“Between my third and fourth toes.”

I carefully spread his toes and sweep the fuzz from the small crevice with my index finger.

“How’s that? Does it feel better now?” I ask.

“Yes, much better, thank you.”

“Is that all you needed?” I force patience out with my inquiry.

“I think so.”

This happens three more times. The third time, he wants a glass of milk with ice, to swallow his L-Dopa and blood pressure medication.

“I love you,” I whisper, and click off the light.

And I did. I loved him, regardless of what he did. No one deserved to suffer like that. Yet as much as I wanted to be his loyal, steadfast stone, his brave, forgiving nurturer, I dreaded those nights, and couldn't wait for summer when Mia would be home from college. She planned to stay with Dad and take care of him, and I would return to the serenity of my new abode.

But Mom was not yet salaried at the Post Office, and with the rising cost of utilities, we barely made rent. After six short months, we were forced to place our furniture in storage and relocate to the home of Mr. Gross, a 90-year-old widower who advertised a bedroom for \$180 a month.

Mr. Gross greeted us in the driveway. He was as hunched as Quasimodo but marched like a majorette. His manner was pleasant and hospitable, but each time Mom or I spoke, he shouted, “What? Huh?” I decided, in place of words, to simply nod and smile.

The house was jam-packed but tidy. A hospital bed, belonging to his late wife, occupied the sun porch, which was a sad and dirty olive green. The kitchen was dim, the color of beeswax, and reeked of burnt fish. The dining room sheltered hundreds of health books with titles like *Colon Health* and *The Truth about Prostate Cancer*. Apparently,

they kept our friend spooning his oats long past his significant other. I silently planned to examine these resources, perhaps forget to return the most interesting ones.

Mom and I hauled our bulging bags and boxes up the narrow, winding staircase. A young woman named Tammy, soon to be married, inhabited the front room, so we snagged the other one, beside the master bedroom. It was small—the smallest bedroom I'd ever seen, in fact. But a three-way window let in the morning sun, and below it was a built-in cushioned seat, perfect for reading or sipping tea. Here, mother and daughter bumped elbows in a double bed, shared a dresser, a closet, a robe, an alarm clock, so Mom's paychecks could buy a better place some day.

Besides dividing a refrigerator and medicine chest with complete strangers, the twenty-two antique clocks that chimed every hour from the living room took some getting used to. Mr. Gross snored like a grizzly bear, causing many sleepless nights. But this still beat the old familiar shrills of insolence and rage.

My compliance to reside here was the result of a harsh but proud realization: my mother finally left my father, on her own accord, and was not going back. At age 42, with no more than a high school degree, she ventured out alone, secured a job, and escaped her cage of diamonds, glitter and sequins. She wore jeans and sweatshirts now, and the glimmer in her eye reflected her real beauty, her newfound independence.

Throughout the summer, my weight hovered around 104—perhaps verging on the thin side, but still in the triple digits. A competitive cross-country season lie ahead, but at the end of August, I stumbled during practice and injured my right knee. X-rays and MRI's revealed no obvious damage, but each time I returned to the track, acute pain curtailed my run. After two months of physical therapy and strength training, my joint ached worse than ever. I punted my Asics into the closet and shoved my sports bras in

the bottom drawer. The bed, the TV, and boxes of sourdough pretzels became my trusty after-school companions.

By December, I weighed 120 pounds. I wore tunic sweaters and cotton stretch pants because my size 6 jeans were too confining. To save money for college, I accepted a part-time job at the Yummy Gummy Zoo, an elaborate candy store in the mall.

Big mistake.

Tornado

*Moves like a fist through traffic
Anger and no one can heal it*

-Paul Simon

By May of 1994, I weighed 115 pounds. In a size 8 turquoise gown, I accompanied Jim to the prom. On the ballroom floor of the Marriott, he sang U2's "With or Without You" in my ear.

That June, I graduated high school. By mid-July, the gummy bears pushed me back up to 120. Amazingly, this didn't bother me.

In August, the dentist fit me for a bridge. No longer would I spark spontaneous chuckles by popping my tooth out. This was a permanent fixture, a symbol of my transition into college life.

Weeks later, I abandoned south central Pennsylvania's modest metropolis and shadowed Jim to the University of Pittsburgh's main campus. This was not by choice. James Madison rejected my application to their dietetics program, and Penn State wanted me to study at their York branch. But after inhaling the Cathedral of Learning's gothic splendor firsthand, my verdict was sealed.

I'd visited Pittsburgh twice before—once when I was eight, when Aunt Lucy lived there, and in 1979, when my family sought refuge from the Three Mile Island (TMI) accident. Though this nuclear waste leak drove many away from the area, they, like my family, quickly returned. TMI's quiet contamination has been held responsible for long-term health problems to those dwelling near the site. In fact, it is my theory of why Pennsylvania claims the fourth highest cancer rate in the nation, as reported by my *Nutritional Healing* book. Had I learned this statistic sooner, I would have tried to leave sooner.

I didn't fall in love with the Three Rivers City immediately. Rather, I welcomed the freedom to return to my alcoholic tendencies, to guzzle cheap beer and embarrass myself on every sweaty, crumbly, basement dance floor in Oakland. Having deserted my rigid exercise regimen and forsaken the strict dieting that accompanied it, I re-entered the sloppy palace of sadness, confusion, and excess. I needed release more than ever, and up until this point, rowdy drinking and dancing were my only prospects.

Again, like in high school, I spent months torturing my body and mind, getting so drunk that fragments of nights disappeared from conscious memory—a symptom we veteran alcoholics call “black outs.” Most days, going to class was a joke. Thursday through Saturday nights were reserved for fraternity keg-and-grain-punch parties. Wednesdays and Sundays involved finding an over-21-er to buy forties of Budweiser from the “O” for us to smuggle, backpack style, into the dorms. Mondays and Tuesdays were spent sleeping, mostly, and cramming for exams. Somehow, my grades hung between C minuses and B pluses. That didn't concern me. Forgetting my past and my potential role in the future did.

Then one day, my Uncle Joe, the priest, called. He was coming to visit. I would have to mask myself in sobriety and academia. *No, I will not bring him up to my dorm room, I thought to myself. He won't want to come up, anyway, will he? Certainly not.*

I never knew Uncle Joe very well. He was the eldest of seven children—four boys and three girls—my mom's only big brother. When I was little, all I understood was that he could never get married, and that he was in charge of bringing bottles of Barbarini to complement our Christmas and Easter dinners at Grandma and Grandpa's

house. Grandpa sat at one head of the table with Grandma to his left; Uncle Joe occupied the other end, for he was also addressed as “Father.”

Each year, Uncle Joe hosted New Year’s dinner at his church rectory, all 21 of us. These meals were as quiet and proper as a Sunday Mass. No one watched bowl games on TV. No one passed a football outside. Bing Crosby could not be heard within those holy walls. But the chow, of course, was plentiful: ham, turkey, kielbasa, pork, sauerkraut, sweet potatoes, mashed potatoes, potato salad, pasta salad, vegetable salad, baked beans, lima beans, creamed corn, challa, white bread, rye bread, raisin bread, wheat bread. Dessert was even more ostentatious, with pumpkin pie, raisin pie, pecan pie; cheesecake, coconut cake, German chocolate cake; chocolate chip cookies, pumpkin cookies, sugar cookies. *The tally would be in the billions.*

Usually, I stuck to the basics: turkey and mashed potatoes. While everyone else poked and prodded at the bountiful banquet, the random banter became predictable and unbearable.

“Mora, did you have some kielbasa?” Mom notoriously asked.

“I don’t LIKE kielbasa, remember?”

“Oh, okay.”

“You really should try it,” Uncle Francis often added, through a juicy mouthful of the gristly sausage. “I think it’s the best we’ve ever had.” This, coming from a guy who rejected M&M’s, declaring that Yellow Number 6 is lethal.

Others had their self-proclaimed restrictions. Aunt Lucy, though she baked it, couldn’t eat the cake because it had too much sugar. Aunt Mary Jo passed the bread because of her wheat-free diet. Grandma refused the pasta salad because there was too much salt in it. And Uncle Jude couldn’t drink the wine because of his sulfite allergies.

Regardless, food remained the focus of the conversation, unless my aunts and uncles were remembering people whose names I knew but whose faces I'd never seen.

As I grew older, I realized my family was too large for intimacy. I tried hard not to talk much, which was easy since no one asked questions outside the realm of meats, salads, and desserts. This frustrated me, but kept me contently inside myself. Grandpa and Uncle Joe told the jokes, and most of the time everyone laughed, whether we understood the punch lines or not.

Mia and I were the first grandchildren, and we watched silently as our cousins quickly multiplied and juggled their time in the limelight, only to succumb, eventually, to the awkward silence. By the time I was fifteen, there were eight of us—three girls and five boys. I didn't talk to my cousins. I was too busy feeling guilty for my shortcomings, afraid I would leak my anorexia, alcoholism, drug addictions or suicidal thoughts onto these young, innocent souls. Our lives were all better if I kept quiet. Eventually, I knew I would either die or go off to college; either way, I wouldn't have to worry about filling the familial silence anymore.

It's a bright, sunny, February afternoon, 1995. Uncle Joe meets me in the lobby of the Litchfield Towers. He wears black dress pants and a Ralph Lauren sweater, probably a gift from some honorable old woman (his parishioners showered him with presents—money, wine, chocolate—one lady even gave him a Buick). I know his black and white collar lies tucked somewhere underneath that crocheted cotton, and I wonder if it gives him the power to see into my eyes, to know what I am really doing at college, which is certainly not what HE did when he went to seminary.

His smooth, Tom Hanks-like face grins at me. He is as tall and poised as the acclaimed actor, his build slightly thicker. We walk briskly to his gold Saturn sedan, and he opens the door for me. The streets are crowded and filthy with broken beer bottles and pizza crusts scattered in the gutters, and the campus stinks like day-old garbage. But this angel is here to steal me away from the chaos, just for a few hours.

Two cassettes rest in his ashtray—one is Bach, the other, the Crash Test Dummies. I imagine my uncle playing that song, the one about the kids and their birthmarks, for some little Irish Catholic boy who gets teased because of his red hair and freckles.

Uncle Joe takes me to the Grand Concourse Inn, a four-star restaurant that displays relics and architecture from its early days as a train station. He orders the surf and turf, the steak medium rare, and a glass of red wine. Still a strict vegetarian, and shocked by the prices on the menu, I humbly ask the waitress for black bean soup and a Greek salad.

“Is that all you want?” he asks.

“I had a big breakfast,” I lie. *Lying to a priest. Surely I will go to hell for that.*

Too ashamed to substitute a low-fat dressing, or to request their signature feta-garlic on the side, I examine the exotic green leaves, eating only those less drenched in oil. When the bean soup arrives, my heart flutters upon spying a blob of some creamy white substance—most likely sour cream—in the middle of this assumedly healthy dish. I eat it anyway, to avoid offending my uncle. *I just won't eat much the rest of the day. I'll have salad for dinner. It'll be easier to get drunk tonight.*

During lunch, Uncle Joe quizzes me about Pittsburgh's sites and history. I can't tell him the names of the three rivers; I only know the Allegheny, because that's the

county I now live in. No, I haven't been to the Carnegie Science Center or the Andy Warhol Museum. I haven't toured the Southside or ridden the cable car up Mount Washington.

"What? You haven't done any site-seeing?"

"I don't have a car," is my lame excuse.

"Couldn't you ride the bus?"

"I don't have time, with all my classes and studying."

"What do you do on the weekends? Surely you take a break sometime."

"I DON'T HAVE MONEY TO DO ANYTHING. I haven't even bought all of my books yet for the semester."

Who does this guy think he is, coming here out of the blue, bringing me to some fancy-schmancy restaurant, drilling me about the way I spend my spare time? I haven't spoken to him in years, and he thinks he can play Alex Trebec with me?

After lunch, we walk to the mall at Station Square so Uncle Joe can buy a box of expensive cigars and the latest John Grisham thriller. I watch him flash his American Express Gold Card to the overfriendly cashiers. *Is God picking up the tab?*

After we hug goodbye, Uncle Joe shoves two twenty-dollar bills in my fist.

"You don't have to do that," I plead.

"No, it's yours." The lines on his face ache of genuine concern. "Get those books you need, or treat yourself to dinner some night."

I am relieved to return to my claustrophobic pie-shaped room at the top of Tower A. It smells like sleep. My roommate stirs in her top bunk and peers over the edge.

"How'd it go?"

"All right," I sigh. "He gave me forty bucks."

“Cool.”

At sundown, I stuff the forty dollars from Uncle Joe in my pocket, stroll pompously past the campus cafeteria, the University bookstore, the 7-Eleven, the quaint cafes, and trudge on to the Delta Phi house, Jim’s fraternity, on South Oakland’s far side.

This is party money.

I pay my five dollars at the door, down my cups of Natural Light. I even pound half a bottle of Boone’s Strawberry Hill, offer the rest to Jim, and secure a seat at the card table. For three royal hours, I am the arbiter bibendi, the master of the drinking games, dealing the cards, pouring the shots, ordering people to fill my beer cup and save my seat during bathroom breaks. Around midnight, I toss out ten bucks toward the Hunger Buster, the local pizza joint’s special: 18-inch pie, foot-long sub, bread sticks, two-liter of Coke. This is the stuff I crave, and I don’t hold back anymore. Not when the buzz is strong. But before the grub arrives, the mood changes, deplorably, without warning.

Suddenly, in the middle of Forbes Avenue, I am trapped inside a tornado, throwing my knuckles against Jim—nailing his arms, his stomach, his chest, his skull. I am plowing him into brick buildings, cement walls, kicking his shins and screaming, “Fuck you! I hate you! I hate you! Fuck you!”

I don’t know why I’m doing this. Neither does Jim. Neither do his friends who are prying me away from him, and neither do the campus police who are hauling me off in their squad car.

“He called me a bitch!” I spit through my dentures. A lie, I am sure.

The female officer closes the car door behind me.

“You don’t need that from any man, honey,” she leans against the window.

“We’ll take you home now.”

Fortunately, for my sake, the police deliver me to my dorm without even asking my name. A simple, "I'll be all right," satisfies their concerns. This is now lucky escape number 3, in my book.

But it's far from over. I don't quit until the alcohol quits me. I ride the jerky, graffiti-covered elevator to my room on the 19th floor, barge in on my roommate who's trying to sleep because it's now 3:00 in the morning, and flip on all the lights. I grab the phone and dial Jim's number. No answer. I slam down the receiver, steal a giant jarred candle from my desktop and hurl it into the hallway. It crashes against the wall. Glass shatters all over the carpet. Tears stream down my cheeks as I fall to my knees, trying to pick up the broken pieces. My roommate forces me back, pulls my shoes off and quickly tucks me into bed.

I pass out while she's sweeping up the ruins. In the morning, a heavy throbbing in my right arm serves as my alarm clock. Upon inspection, a bruise the size of a tennis ball, swollen, purple, and pulsating, is the source of my agony. I am too sick to get up, so I summon my roommate, above me in her bunk.

"Allison," I whisper. I glance around the room and notice the garbage can. "Why is my candle in the tr—"

Allison's head hangs over the edge.

"You don't remember?" she giggles.

God, I would give half my blood to not remember. Remembering seems to be my biggest problem. Everything I've ever done wrong, I can't forget. Nor can I forgive myself. Little did I know, when I left my dorm room that night, I'd be wearing my father's shoes, clunking around in his heavy, bulky, work boots, five sizes too big,

rubbing the knuckles of my toes and forming angry calluses that would surely leave
scars...

...making too much noise, making a splintery mess.

Mending

*Oh to live on Sugar Mountain
With the barkers and the colored balloons
You can't be twenty on Sugar Mountain
Though you're thinking that
You're leaving there too soon*

-Neil Young

My sophomore days carried similar prospects, or lack thereof. The scale now confirmed a grim 136, but only when my feet teetered on its smooth, white rim for mere seconds, hopping off before the dial could spin any further. I nearly flunked out of college that year, and believed this was a direct result of laziness and self-loathing.

I hated being a business major, which I chose because it sounded easy but soon discovered nothing is “easy” in college. I hated my body, which was bloated and overweight from too many keg parties and midnight pizza calls. Aunt Mary Jo, now living in Florida, sent a box of wool sweaters she no longer needed, but none of them fit. My boyfriend of four years, Jim, was all but ignoring me, surely because of my extra weight. I was too tired to leave my bed and pop a tape or CD in the stereo, so I daydreamed during afternoon reruns of *The Wonder Years* and shoved iced animal cookies down my throat watching nighttime atrocities like *Highlander*. I was constantly sick from malnutrition and sleep deprivation, and cried at the drop of a fork. In addition, Dad's Parkinson's was worsening. There was talk of a nursing home, and I worried he would die soon. One more thing I couldn't control, and it didn't stop there.

That February, Grandpa was involved in a near-fatal accident. A pick-up truck slammed into his 70-year-old body while he was crossing a street in downtown Harrisburg. Surprisingly, he made a swift and phenomenal recovery. I, however, was not so resilient.

March 3, 1996

I'm home for spring break. Went to Grandma and Grandpa's for dinner tonight. Grandpa looks amazingly well, but I feel wretched. Grandma actually held out my arms and squealed, "What happened to you, Mora? You used to be so thin!" Aren't grandmothers supposed to make you feel good about yourself? God, I miss the younger days when afternoons promised swing sets and sandboxes, evenings unlocked toy cars and dollhouses, and food and fat weren't the first things on my mind before light hit my eyeballs each morning.

March 6, 1996

I want to talk to Mia. I want to know if she ever cries because things are changing. I'm not a little girl anymore—I have to leave Sugar Mountain in a month and a half. And I'm not the only one getting older; everyone is. This scares me. I hate seeing Dad disabled because he was once so free and functional. I worry about everyone in our family, and I want to make the right decisions. I'm so afraid I'll say or do the wrong thing one day and end up regretting it forever. Time is frightening the way it controls our lives.

That summer, through my journal writing, I came to understand that happiness doesn't just drive up to the curb one magical day and offer us a ride. We must grip the wheel and navigate our own journey. This is what I sought out to do.

For starters, I broke up with Jim. We had grown apart, and being together was only hurting us. It's a wonder things lasted so long, after all I put him through. We finally had an answer to the U2 song: Without.

I quit drinking. Again. And started running. Again. My knee finally healed, I was back to three miles a day. I got two jobs to pay off my credit card bills—the evil cash advances that funded rampant party nights, impulsive CD purchases and reckless outings to see the Rolling Stones and Red Hot Chili Peppers. I decided to eat meat again. Lots of veggies. No more pizza. Perseverance became my song, and that fall, after taking a journalism class, I changed my major to writing.

The next Christmas, Mom gave me a book, *Ten Stupid Things Women Do to Mess Up Their Lives*. But I wasn't messing up my life. I was mending it, without the advice of any condescending self-help book. And so I hid that snide thing *under* my bookcase.

Even Grandma remarked at how fit I looked. True, my weight hung just above 100 again, but I was more comfortable than ever, and optimistic about the future. I worshipped mirrors again, but this time, self-satisfaction gleamed in my eyes. I was even excited for the holiday dinners with my family, and as hard as it seemed, swore to make the food secondary to the conversation around me.

New Year's Day, noontime. Mom and I arrive at Uncle Joe's rectory, and he greets us at the front door. To my dismay, he seems surprised, almost disappointed, to see me.

His dark eyebrows lift. "I thought you weren't coming," he says, dully.

"What? I never said I wasn't coming," I reply.

He turns to Mom. "Didn't you say she wasn't coming?"

"No," Mom answers. "I told you Mia wouldn't be here. She isn't feeling well."

"Well, you'll have to sit in the kitchen with the kids," he instructs me. "I didn't set a place for you in the dining room."

I wanted to leave right then. How could he make me feel so unwelcome? Here I was, trying my damndest to grow up, to take responsibility for my life. This was the first New Year's Day in eight years that I didn't show up with a hangover, and now my uncle, the priest, was slaughtering the mood.

I didn't speak to anyone the entire day, except to tell Mom how pissed off I was. She understood, but was too sweet to challenge anyone in her family. The old familiar counting assailed my mind, and to be safe, I filled up on shrimp cocktail and raw vegetables (minus the dip) before dinner. This gave me about 100 calories, and then I'd have an estimated 200 of turkey, 200 of mashed potatoes, and 200 of baked beans. At 700, a modest margin remained for a few cookies, a piece of fudge, and a sliver of coconut cake. If my calculations were correct, this put me at approximately 1300, the safe number for a non-exercise day. Obviously, these feasts were arranged to sabotage me personally, and I refused to let that happen. Perhaps I would go running later, burn it all off.

For once, we left early, as soon as I said, "Let's go." On the ride home, I vowed to skip Uncle Joe's the following year. When the time came, I had a semi-valid excuse. I was leaving for a semester in London. My flight was scheduled to leave the Pittsburgh International Airport on Sunday, January 11th. I insisted that I must return to Pittsburgh before New Year's to begin packing.

Lethe

*If dreams are like movies
Then memories are films about ghosts*

-Counting Crows

For the self-starved, sleep is a threatening state. In my younger years, after training myself to ignore the rumbling and gurgling of an empty stomach and slip off into dreamland, forbidden foods like French fries, cheesecake and chocolate chip ice cream slaked my palate. These dreams were followed, of course, by that panicky wakefulness, when I sat up and gasped in relief, realizing it was all just a dream, and that I was, in fact, still hungry.

These were the safe dreams, easily explained and accepted:

Growling belly + sleep = visions of craved nourishment.

And these dreams were tolerable, however much they alarmed me at three or four or five-thirty in the morning. They served my determination well, for when I awoke in the dark, I told myself, "Tomorrow, I will be stronger than ever. Tomorrow, I will protect myself from the thunderous pangs of catastrophic hunger. Even in the unyielding wind and rain, I will not surrender." And in the morning, that's exactly what I did.

I could cope with those nightmares, but I could not fathom the evil that festered in later years.

December 30, 1997. My roommates flee to New York City for the New Year, but I opt to stay behind, to celebrate on my own terms, minus the kiddy table.

Alone in my Pittsburgh apartment, I partake in a gut-wrenching binge of Double-Stuff Oreos, Heath Bar ice cream, honey mustard pretzels and Keebler Fudge Stripe cookies. Over 2000 calories in fifteen minutes. Afterward, I down a quart of water and

six Ex-Lax's. My intestines feeling like an alien creature is bobbing inside, ready to rip me to shreds at the slightest muscle contraction, I lie on the couch as still as a rock and wait for morning's gentle reprieve. But what visits me instead is light years from this.

Hours before sunrise, my heart begins thumping triple time. I wake up, panting. My clammy, trembling fingers clutch the couch cushions, and I lie there, motionless, breathing deeply until the pitter-patter in my chest subsides. Six or seven times my heart awakens me, and each time, the couch pulls on me, trying to eat me alive—to steal my breath and suck me down inside, fuse me into its dead fibers.

I pray for God to spare my life, for I am sure this is it. I grip the fabric of the couch to keep from sinking. There is so much left for me to see and do and feel, and London is days away. I can't miss London.

Eventually, I fall asleep. In the morning, I swear to never take Ex-Lax again, or at least *not so many*—just the recommended dosage. For now, it is time to repent.

And so, this New Year's Eve, as my roommates wedge their cheerful, carefree selves into the crowded chaos and excitement of our nation's grandest metropolis to share tidings with friendly strangers, I, alone, fast to cleanse my soiled, sinful spirit. I down distilled water all day. In the evening, I ration myself a bowl of strawberries and a cup of herbal tea with milk. That is all.

The next day, my weary eyes open to a brilliant, snow-covered city. Feeling phenomenally renewed, I dash onto the front porch in pajamas and bare feet and spin around, letting the chunky white flakes land on my parched tongue.

Thank you, God.

On that blissful afternoon, while Mom's family members sported rayon, silk and cashmere, and sat erect with white linen napkins draped across their laps at Uncle Joe's stiff, wooden rectory table, I wore denim, wool, and brown suede hiking boots, and darted across campus, three quarters of a mile through five inches of snow, to Schenley Park. I marched past the glassy towers of Phipps Conservatory, up Flagstaff Hill, and greeted the Three Rivers skyline, suddenly visible through the dissipating showers. I pranced down the north side of the slope, found a friendly tree with roots like open arms, and snuggled myself in its grasp.

From there, I watched tiny children in red, blue and yellow swish-swish suits hike up the hill with their fathers and mothers and sisters and brothers, towing sleds and blown-up snow tubes and plastic saucers, only to sail down to the bottom again. For a moment, I imagined myself blending with the scenery, rooting myself in the soil like a strong tree, as I studied patterns of footprints in the snow and pondered the cycles of Mother Nature. Though only temporarily, this scene was a salve for my wounds.

Ten days passed, and my suitcases were stuffed and ready for the UK. It had been nearly two weeks since my heart thumped out of control and the couch tried to swallow me whole. The great count was over. The laxatives were staying home in their secret drawer. A new chapter was about to be printed in my book. It was time to fly across the ocean to another continent, to abandon my old woes and habits in America.

Bone Deep

*I'm a million different people
From one day to the next*

-The Verve

When I hear the Verve's "Bittersweet Symphony," I am sent swirling back to 17 Cornwall Gardens, Flat 6, London, UK, SW7 4AW, where I spent four dreamlike months in the winter/spring of 1998. If you've ever seen the Julia Roberts movie *Notting Hill*, you know the private, fenced-in parks that adorned my neighborhood. As part of the University of Pittsburgh's study abroad program, I was privileged enough to live in South Kensington, one of the most posh boroughs, just blocks from Hyde Park and Kensington Palace.

Four of us occupied this flat. Andrea and Emily, the Pitt girls, shared the large bedroom with me, with my tiny bed nearly sandwiched between theirs. Janet, from SUNY Oswego, chose the single room.

Andrea was a vegetarian, a quiet, mousy girl from Johnstown, Pennsylvania. Get a few pints of cider in her, though, and she'd out-dance the Energizer Bunny. Andrea and I shared many late nights in Leicester Square dodging clingy Welsh boys and flaunting our moves on monstrous, multi-level dance floors of clubs like the Equinox, where you *had* to look good if you wanted the burly bouncer to wave you through the door. Between Andrea's sleek, black, form-fitting attire and my black and gold cloak, we never hit a red light. Skimming prestigious clubs was our way of ditching the American boys with their conspicuous white tennis shoes and baseball caps; they didn't want anything to do with us, anyhow. Other than those thumping, strobe light nights, Andrea slept a lot—or at least tried to. She had a come-and-go case of insomnia, and many nights you could hear her violently tossing and turning in her bed. This was the most

noise she ever made, which wasn't enough to call noise. Most days, you wouldn't even know she was there.

Conversely, Emily was conspicuously present. Emily was from the hills of West Virginia. She was 5'10" with long dark hair, and wanted to be a model or a clothing designer—maybe both. She hoarded fashion magazines and clipped supermodels' pictures and pasted them on the wall above her desk. Her dresser was cluttered with photographs of her and her outlandish friends posing in fake black leather pants and fuchsia feather neck scarves, with Marlboro Lights dangling from their raisin painted lips. This was Emily's second semester studying in London, and she honestly thought she was British, which must be why she spoke with a sloppy, upper class English accent.

To say the least, Emily was not my cup of tea—especially since she seized every opportunity to invite fellow study abroad-ers for Earl Grey and chamomile at our flat. This was fine. But the cups, plates, spoons and saucers, after setting in the sink for weeks, magically landed in my soapy hands every time. For this and other reasons, we did not get along well. In fact, our third weekend in London, she threw a party at our place, regardless of my protest. At the time, I was at the George Clinton P. Funk concert in Brixton with my friend Laura. When Laura and I returned to Cornwall Gardens, Emily was trashed. She smothered Andrea, Janet and me, her "roomies," with drunken hugs and kisses—apparently her attempt at bonding. On the surface, all seemed innocent, until Emily, the loud life of the *soiree* as she called it, suddenly disappeared. Minutes later, we found her, face down on the floor between my bed and hers, lying in her own vomit. When we woke her, she tried to vacuum the mess off the carpet. The room reeked of sour vodka and cranberries and bile, so, rather than gag all night long, I opted for a fragile state of sleep on a small loveseat in the basement flat, where three other American girls

were living. One good thing arose from my weary night—a children’s story I wrote in my journal during the still dark, bird-chirping hours of morning:

Wally the Woo

Wally the Woo was a blue kangaroo
 Who came from the town of Kalamazoo.
 His favorite food was tiramisu
 And he wanted to be a chef, but no one in Kalamazoo
 Would hire a blue kangaroo
 They wouldn’t even hire a red or a green kangaroo
 (Wally tried dying his hair).

So Wally the Woo began to feel blue
 On the inside, too,
 Because he wanted some friends
 And he wanted a job,
 But no one in Kalamazoo
 Would even speak to a blue kangaroo.

Then one day
 Wally decided to build a canoe
 And sail to the distant land of Taligadadu.

When Wally arrived in Taligadadu,
 Tired and worn out from the long trip in his canoe,
 He met a beautiful native girl
 Whose name was Sandy Sue.

Sandy Sue welcomed Wally.
 She didn’t care what color he was—
 She was just pleased to meet
 Such a kind kangaroo.

Sandy Sue, as it turned out,
 Owned her very own Zoo.
 And although she was glad to meet Wally,
 Sandy Sue seemed very sad.

She said to Wally the Woo,
 “There’s something wrong
 with the animals at the zoo.
 They won’t eat their food.
 I’ve tried everything,
 And I don’t know what to do.”

Strangely enough,
 (and lucky for Wally, too),
 all the animals wanted
 was tiramisu.

This being true,
 There was nothing else
 For Sandy Sue to do.

“Wally the Woo,”
she said to her new friend,
“how would you like
to work at my zoo?”

“I would love to work at your zoo,
Sandy Sue! My specialty
Is tiramisu!”

“Wonderful!” replied Sandy Sue.
“You can start tomorrow, at half-past two!”

She gave him his own little cottage
Painted the lightest hue of blue
With plenty of palm trees
And green grass to catch the morning dew.

So Sandy Sue helped Wally the Woo
While he moved his things
To the cottage from the canoe.

After Wally moved in,
There was a big party at the zoo.
All the animals cheered and cheered—
They would finally have their tiramisu.

And Wally the Woo
Said to Sandy Sue,

“If it weren’t for you
and my trusty canoe,
I would still be stuck
in Kalamazoo.
I’ve made so many friends
In Taligadadu,
This is certainly
a dream come true!”

And with that,
Wally’s smile grew bigger and bigger,
And his face began to turn
the brightest, happiest color of blue.

Unintentionally, Wally symbolized the notion of finding comfort within one’s skin,
similar to my own inborn plight. Like Wally, I just wanted a place to belong. Writing
helped carry me to that place.

Despite the divine inspiration delivered to me that night, afterward, Emily and I
only addressed each other when absolutely necessary. It’s arguable that I should have
forgiven her, being that binge drinking and vomiting are an element of my own miserable

past. But we were 22 years old. Moreover, we had traveled across the ocean to live and study *responsibly* in a foreign country. Wasn't it time to know our limits? That's what I thought, anyway.

Of anyone I met that semester, Janet's the one I miss most. Janet was strong, fresh, beautiful and honest. She carried the muscle of a pro volleyball player, the sleekness of a runway model, the delicate charm of a Cover Girl, and the piercing candor of a courtroom judge. She rode horses and ran races. She was the kind of girl that other girls gaze at, and long to be like.

Above all, Janet's smile and laughter reminded me of my best friend Taryn, from childhood. Taryn was the only person who saw me completely through my first bout with anorexia. She literally held my hand, shook off my bleak and sometimes condescending attitude, until the pounds and the patience returned. Janet offered me that same kind of acceptance. We stayed up nights in her room with the door closed, talking about our similar family situations, for she also had a father who was unfaithful and indifferent. When her older sister came to visit, she shared Ambien, her prescription sleeping medication, with us. Each night, Janet and I swallowed half a pill and forced ourselves to stay awake and watch TV, waiting for the innocent hallucinations.

"I see three eyes! Four eyes! Two noses! No, three!" we shouted.

The infomercial actors' faces mutated—their features multiplying and swirling into one another. This was the funniest thing we'd seen on late night British television since the male-female duo who clapped their hands to a synthesized drum beat, not unlike an elementary school music class.

The fact that I didn't spend enough time with Janet is just one regret I have about London. Most days, my thoughts and footsteps were my only companions. After

absorbing British history and roaming the Tate Gallery, I usually stopped at Sainsbury's to stock up on the essentials: tuna, yogurt, lettuce, fat-free dressing, ketchup, horseradish and mushrooms. These items comprised my subsistence. Okay, for breakfast I feasted on oatmeal with brown sugar and milk. But bread was not allowed, nor was any other super-starchy food like pasta, potatoes, or pancakes. If I wanted to resist the common weight gain of traveling abroad that my U.S. friends had warned me about, I had to remain steadfast and strong. These were the rules. Simple as that. And thankfully, the Brits' serving sizes, such as yogurt cups, are approximately two-thirds that of American portions. This made my restrictions especially easy.

After my grocery store trip, I raced home, threw on my running gear and headed for Hyde Park. The last hour of daylight allowed me enough time to reach Speaker's Corner, turn around, and come back—approximately four miles. Sometimes, though, I detoured to an adjacent area like Chelsea or Knightsbridge. Unfamiliar with these roads, I often got lost and, always underdressed, my toes and fingers grew numb before returning to my flat. This didn't bother me; the human body burns more calories trying to keep warm than it does cooling off. On those cold winter evenings after the sun went down, I became a burning machine.

Undoubtedly, this rampant, addictive, perpetual motion kept me thin and firm as a baseball bat; for, when my plane touched down at Pittsburgh International after my four months abroad, I was down to 93 pounds again—my all-time achievement. While still in London, I dodged inquiries about my weight and even logged them in my journal.

28 January 1998

Sitting in my South Kensington kitchen, I listen to the traffic whir below my window. The sky is gray and raining, and the pigeons that usually entertain me while I sip my morning tea are nowhere to be seen. I spoon a dollop of oatmeal into my salivating mouth, savor the brown sugar sweetness. A dribble lands on my lap, marring my pink flannel pajama pants.

I will wash my pajamas this weekend in our strange British washing machine. They will hang to dry over the folding rack in the living room. They will be baggier on me after this process, as will my jeans and sweaters. Janet or Andrea will ask me again if I lost weight since I got here. I will say no—or I don't know—because I can't read that scale that gives me my numbers in stones. In reality, I have dutifully committed the conversion equation to memory so the numbers do not escape me. But my flat mates do not know this, so we will laugh at the notion of stones and, dismissing the initial question, rattle off all the quirky English measurements, signs, and sayings we've encountered thus far, like the small, painted rectangle of wood that hangs above the staircase in the Old Cheshire Cheese: "Mind your head."

But the running was worth more than the intrinsic value of deteriorating flesh. Because I ran, I absorbed more of the city than anyone who rode the tube or the buses. My own two feet carried me through districts and parks at a brisk but observant pace, allowing me to explore every tree-lined trail and lakeside walkway on the outskirts of Buckingham Palace. I even crossed the Chelsea Bridge one night, spanning high above the Thames, and jogged seven miles to Tower Bridge to gawk at its ever-mysterious, Disneyland-like construction. These adventures were what I wrote about most in my journal, poetry and prose alike. Ultimately, these runs were what set me free, concerning me with nothing but the cold concrete beneath my shoes; the constant, synchronic motion of my feet, ankles, knees, hips, waist, torso, arms and shoulders; the loyal pumping of my heart and lungs, and the fresh air flowing in and out of my body, as it finally became weightless.

This habit was so engrained in my daily ritual that, even when my mother flew across the Atlantic to stay with me for six days and nights, I sent her off alone to tour the Tower of London and the Crown of Jewels so that I could sail through the streets in my

new hundred-dollar Nike racing shoes. Although in my mind, not running for that entire week would have killed me, I will never forgive myself for the way my self-abuse affected Mom's visit.

The week began beautifully. It was magical seeing Mom against the surreal background of London that was my new world—my new love. I couldn't wait to show her Tower Bridge and Buckingham Palace and Big Ben, to drag her to the theatres to see *Waiting for Godot* and *Blood Brothers* and *Shopping and F***ing*, and to dine with her at Wodka, the fancy Polish restaurant a block from my flat. Yet, amidst all these otherworldly treasures, I also couldn't keep my mind off the goodies she smuggled into the country for me: namely, two bottles of Dimetapp elixir.

Ever since I was old enough to take over-the-counter medicine, Dimetapp was my favorite. Sure, I frequently complained of headaches so I could chew those yummy, orange flavored baby aspirins. I even feigned sore throats so Mom would let me suck on Luden's Wild Cherry Throat Drops. One time, after finishing a box, I refilled it with Sugar Babies. My clearest memory of nursery school is sneaking to my bag before naptime and grabbing a handful of the sweet, chewy treats. As anticipated, my teacher confronted me. I simply showed her the box and said, "I have a sore throat. My mom gave these to me," and that was it. But Dimetapp—that was the best. And I truly did have seasonal allergies, so spoonfuls of the sugary, grape syrup were plentiful and promising. When Mom wasn't in sight, I climbed onto the kitchen counter and fetched the bottle myself. It was safe. I never exceeded the recommended dosage. But I sure became addicted.

Even as an adult, that grape stuff continually soothed my allergies and my sweet tooth. But during the early stages of my eating disorder, when I realized that the active ingredient in Dimetapp, Phenylpropanolamine HCL (PPA), was also found in diet pills like Dexatrim and Accutrim, I slurped the stuff after allergy season was long gone. I simply wanted to curb my appetite, discreetly.

So, unknowingly, Mom fed my frenzy. Before she came to see me, I had rummaged through every drugstore and supermarket in London for Dimetapp or anything else with my secret ingredient, to no avail. I gave Mom specific instructions: two eight-ounce bottles, not the meager four-ouncers.

This drug had one major drawback, however. While it satiated my stomach and calmed my nerves, it made my head groggy, and therefore had to be countered with ample caffeine. I also had a strange inkling that it constricted my blood vessels, because although I was always cold—a symptom anorexics identify but never adjust to—when I took Dimetapp, I experienced unusual chills like those that accompany the flu.

My condition quickly deteriorated while Mom was in London. One afternoon, we rode the tube to the market on Portabella Road. We browsed the handmade jewelry, clothing and useless knickknacks. Mom wanted to buy me a beautiful silver necklace with a delicate light green stone. I flipped over the price tag.

“Mom, it’s eighty pounds! Do you know how much that is in dollars?” I gasped.

“I don’t care. You should have something nice. I want to buy it for you.”

Tears welled up in my tired, squinty eyes. “No, Mom. I can’t let you do that. Please don’t.”

And she didn’t.

God, how the guilt swelled inside me—the guilt of being a sub par daughter, mentally and physically exhausting to my gentle, unassuming mother. She remained ever complacent as I rushed her from theatre to park to restaurant to landmark. My monthly friend failed to visit me once while in London. So basically, an overblown case of PMS imprisoned my mood for four months—a condition that left little room for pleasant pastimes.

For some reason, it's easier to unleash tantrums on family members, because we know they'll love us unconditionally. I've done this to Mom since I was a little girl, and she's never abandoned me yet. That day, on Portabella Road, I barked at her to stand still while I snapped her photograph beside an eclectic London taxi. Then, after only being gone an hour and the day brighter and sunnier than usual, my pitiful shivering and ceaseless crankiness curtailed our outing. We grabbed a sack of roasted chestnuts from a street vendor and scurried to the subway station. London's frigid winter air had finally settled deep in my hollow bones.

After Mom returned to the States, the chill lingered like an angry virus. Some days, I took three twenty-minute showers, just to feel warm for the duration. I drank cup after cup of hot herbal tea until my belly could hold no more. I still ran, mostly to heat my body, if only temporarily.

One night, while jogging along Cromwell Road a half-mile from my flat, my left arm tingled and suddenly deadened. I couldn't feel it at all. I couldn't move it. It wasn't just numb. *It was paralyzed.*

I slowed to a walk, and panic set in. I sped up again, rubbing my arm with my right hand. I didn't know what this was. I didn't know what to do. I just wanted to get home.

Miraculously, the feeling returned to my arm as I reached my front door. I vowed not to tell my flat mates, or anyone else—at least not for a long time. Surely, they would laugh. Chalk it up to my hypochondria.

Two short years later, every drugstore, supermarket and department store in the United States purged their shelves of any product containing PPA. The FDA claimed an astonishing number of young women taking the drug experienced paralyzing strokes. The pharmaceutical company that manufactured the drug is now facing countless lawsuits.

My numbness, however, was soon forgotten, and my attention refocused on a Grateful Dead cover band called the Cosmic Charlies. After seeing concert posters attached to telephone poles and music store windows, I felt driven to see the band.

All alone on Friday, February 13th, I traveled to North London in search of a cramped bar called The Unplugged Club. Normally, Friday the 13th would keep me at home with the windows locked and the doors bolted, but for some reason, that night harbored prospects.

With little trouble, I found The Unplugged Club, and for hours, danced by myself toward the back of the crowd. Friendly fans surrounded me, sharing my love for the familiar, carefree music. After the show, I approached the stage and thanked the lanky, long blond-haired bass player. “You made my Friday the 13th,” I said. Then, realizing it was past midnight, “You made my Valentine’s Day!”

He smiled. “I’m Cody,” he said, and shook my hand. He was American, but told me he lived in London with his mother and stepfather. He gave me his phone number

and invited me to the next show. Finally, I found warmth and acceptance—my own private outlet, away from study abroad.

Thereafter, I followed the Cosmic Charlies to every gig. Cody distracted me from my sadness and further complemented my London experience. We spent afternoons in the parks and evenings in coffee shops. We even visited the Isle of Wight. Cody embodied the perfect gentleman, but something was missing.

Aside from my newfound love for London, my overseas experience proved that I could fill up with as much art, culture, and academia as I wanted. I could stand strong next to the mystery of Stonehenge, dip my fingers into the steamy, healing waters at Bath, suck up the worldview through a straw from the Old Royal Observatory at Greenwich meantime. But personally—emotionally—I was still empty.

I recall sitting in a pub in Leicester Square with Cody one Saturday afternoon. We had just seen *Titanic*. We sat across from each other while I sipped a pint of cider. (I was terribly hungry but too shy to mention it, too scared of what my fish-and-chip choices might be, so instead tried to sate my needs with alcohol.)

This was one week after Cody and I met and two weeks before he would say he loved me, but his sparkling eyes already gave away the secret. I, on the other hand, could taste the blankness of my own stare. A skeleton slumped in this cold wooden cove in the shady corner of the pub, I had nothing to say and nothing to feel, except my own bones digging into the hard surface beneath me.

But Cody, young as he was, seemed to have it together.

“At the end of the day, all you have is yourself. I just live my days so that when I go to bed at night, I can say it was a good day, and I lived it the best way I knew how.”

This is the philosophy Cody shared with me about himself. It seemed simple, yet wise. How I wished to feel that way, too, alone in my bed at night. But all I sensed around my mattress were phantoms and beasts, ties to a haunting past and a formidable future. Not even Cat Stevens or the Cowboy Junkies could lull me to sleep anymore.

18 March 1998

The New Year's demons have returned. In my bed at night, my heart flutters, jolting my fragile body awake. In the darkness, my hungry hand fumbles through silver jewelry and cracked CD cases atop my nightstand until it grasps the thick square-ness of my travel alarm. I place the clock on my pillow. Then, resting two fingers on my neck, I count my pulse as the green glow of the second hand ticks its way around. 39 beats per minute. 40. No, 41. *Will tonight be the night it stops? Should I go to the kitchen and eat half a granola bar? Can anything save me now?*

In this manner, I feel my breath slipping away four more times before the morning sun tells me I'm still alive. I am so hungry, I eat most of my daily calories before class, even before my shower: oatmeal with a generous heap of brown sugar and milk, one large pink grapefruit, 5 ounces of plain yogurt with prunes, tea with sugar and milk, two glasses of water. A good 600 calories. Thankfully, during times like these, common sense and a ravenous appetite override my neurotic need for starvation.

But the nighttime tuggings at my consciousness extend beyond the rhythm of my heart. I have disturbing nightmares in this South Kensington flat. These are not the nightmares in which you filter death through your eyes or taste murder on your tongue. No, my nightmares are felt, not seen. Giant boars and thundering wildebeests buck on my mattress and batter my bedclothes and rip me from sleep in a cold sweat. Other nights, invisible beings clinch the covers over my head so tightly that when I wake, I have to yank them off of my head to escape suffocation. It is true: asceticism has inevitably and incessantly distorted my perception. I now know why famous painters and sculptors locked themselves in a room devoid of food and water to create bizarre worlds with brush stroke and fingertip. What is real, except for the feel of sharp bones protruding under smooth skin?

Perhaps it was the music that made Cody so genuinely comfortable in his clothes. He sang, played guitar, and transformed groups of complete strangers into dancing waves of camaraderie and good cheer. With all my soul, I yearned for the ability to turn my breath into song, to create beautiful melodies from *my* throat and mouth alone. But each time I tried, my voice cracked. I could hear the notes so clearly inside my head, but when I attempted to duplicate them out loud, it sounded like a teenage boy going through

puberty—scratchy and off-key. And so, patiently, I sought others whose tunes created the soundtrack of my life, until I discovered a way to make my own music.

One rainy evening while Cody was busy traveling and entertaining the North of England, a review in *Time Out* of Marya Hornbacher's memoir *Wasted* caught me in a vulnerable moment. Here was a 23-year-old woman, only a year older than I was, pouring her story out into the void, for no other reason than with the hopes of laying the demons to rest and consoling potential or current eating disorder sufferers.

Raindrops streamed down my face as my possessed body sprinted to the nearest Barnes and Noble in Notting Hill. It was ten o'clock at night and inside, the storekeeper counted the day's profits. Panting and soaking wet, I barged through the doors and scanned the aisles for the nonfiction section. I found it, and the book. My tired, bony fingers gripped the hard, light blue binding. This was it. A salve. An antidote. A friendly man with a nametag that read, "Hi, My Name Is Stuart," rang me up.

Did he know what the book was about? Did he notice my bony shoulders nearly poking through the thin wool of my army surplus shirt? Did he realize that my purchase was a desperate stab at acceptance and healing? I'll never know, but I'm certain someone in that store or on the street that night saw how pitiable I was, a lost little girl in a shopping mall, scurrying around with wide eyes and tears that wanted to spill but were forced back to brew until the next catastrophe.

As it turned out, the book would not save me. I was not yet ready for saving. But what it did was make me feel less crazy, less possessed, and more like a girl who really did just lose her way.

Toward the semester's end, a startling thing happened. A young woman in my journal writing class stood up and read an entry aloud. She announced that she had

beaten her eating disorder, her bulimia, and that it hadn't troubled her since she stepped foot on European soil. Moreover, this trip renewed her self-confidence, and she felt strong and certain to never suffer again.

Oh, how I wished for similar words to spill from my lips, words claiming strength and recovery, contentment. How I longed for them to drip from my weary mouth, to pour from my fingertips onto the page and stay there, in black and white, like the truth. But no—instead, I discovered how easily eating disorders travel, undisturbed, in tiny, airtight compartments, some 5000 miles across the ocean. They are invisible and omnipotent, following their victims in the wind, hurtling into our brains and splashing around in every conscious and subconscious second of our days. My trip to London was, in essence, a bittersweet symphony—one that would charm and scorn my memory.

Music As Prayer

*All the world's indeed a stage
And we are merely players
Performers and portrayers
Each another's audience*

-Rush

Wait. If you're still with me, here's what I want to say. I would have compiled a beautiful soundtrack to accompany this manufactured tree pulp, because it doesn't seem fair for you to read these quotes and not hear the songs from which I've borrowed them. But it would have proven too costly and time-consuming to ask permission from the artists and their record labels. And had I done so without the go-ahead, I might have a hefty lawsuit under my fingernails. Plus, if I gave you the music, you might get lost in your own dance, and turn your attention from the album at hand. So here's a simple amplification, in honor of the lyrics.

As far back as I can remember, through all the mess and the numbers and the sadness, music kept me sane. During my prepubescent years, I spent endless hours behind my bedroom door, taping songs from the radio—hard core stuff like Jethro Tull's "Aqualung," Pink Floyd's "Dogs of War" and Jimi Henrix's "Purple Haze," and heart-lifting songs, too, like Procol Harum's "Whiter Shade of Pale," The Eagles' "Desperado," and Elton John's "Goodbye Yellow Brick Road." I played them back until the words printed themselves on my brain, until the ribbon inside the tape frayed, escaped its plastic casing, and wrapped itself irreparably around the inside of my stereo. In the lucky event that a friend gave me a tape or record for my birthday, I studied the verses, the photographs, the credits, the musicians' names. I wanted to learn everything. In 1984, I was probably the only eight-year-old girl who could rattle off all the members of Van Halen.

My junior high days involved an overzealous obsession with the local classic rock stations. Their play lists drove me to purchase tapes by Cream, Eric Clapton, and The Stones. I owned the entire *Goodfellas* soundtrack before the film even debuted.

In my teen years, thanks to Hershey's Stadium, live music invaded my world. When certain artists like Phish or the Grateful Dead weren't hitting the local scene, I bummed a ride to distant stadiums, arenas, and amphitheatres. The more concerts I attended, the more I felt like *somebody*. I tallied the shows in my journal, listing the details of each one, date, venue, opening and main acts:

Aug 1991	Paul Simon – Hershey Stadium
Mar 1992	Spin Doctors, Blues Traveler – Dickinson College
Apr 1992	Merl Saunders – Penn State University
June 1992	Steve Miller Band, Grateful Dead – RFK Stadium
July 1992	Phish, Santana – Mann Music Center
Aug 1993	Spin Doctors, Spacehog, Screaming Trees – Hershey Stadium
May 1994	Candlebox, Rush – Philadelphia Spectrum
Aug 1994	Spin Doctors, Cracker, Soul Asylum – Hershey Stadium
Sep 1994	Blind Melon, The Rolling Stones – Three Rivers Stadium
Dec 1994	Phish – Philadelphia Theatre of Performing Arts
July 1995	Phil Collins – Hershey Stadium
Aug 1995	Chicago; Crosby, Stills and Nash – Hershey Stadium
Feb 1996	Everclear, Toadies, Red Hot Chili Peppers – Pittsburgh Civic Arena
Apr 1996	Bush, No Doubt, Goo Goo Dolls – Pittsburgh Civic Arena
Aug 1996	HORDE tour with Neil Young, Lenny Kravitz, Rusted Root, King Crimson, Blues Traveler – Hershey Stadium
Oct 1996	Republica, Gravity Kills – Metropol
Oct 1996	Phish – Pittsburgh Civic Arena
Dec 1996	Phish – Philadelphia Spectrum
Jan 1997	Wheezer – Metropol
Feb 1997	The Wallflowers, Sheryl Crow – A.J. Palumbo Center
Mar 1997	The Who – Pittsburgh Civic Arena
July 1997	Phish – Virginia Beach Amphitheater
Aug 1997	Phish – Limestone, Maine
Oct 1997	They Might Be Giants – Metropol
Oct 1997	Phish – Cleveland, Ohio
Jan 1998	George Clinton and the P. Funk Allstars – Brixton Academy
June 1998	Allman Brothers Band – Star Lake Amphitheater
Nov 1998	Kiss – Pittsburgh Civic Arena
June 1999	Paul Simon and Bob Dylan – Star Lake Amphitheater
Apr 2001	David Gray – A.J. Palumbo Center
Sep 2002	Cowboy Junkies – West Virginia Mountain Stage
Sep 2002	The Wallflowers, John Mellancamp – Polaris Amphitheater

I imagined that this list somehow proved my worth, and that the more famous people I witnessed on stage, the more exciting my own performance might become.

In addition, when I needed guidance, I didn't leave my bedroom. I simply plugged in one of my godfathers: Mick Jagger, Jerry Garcia, Paul Simon, Bob Dylan. Their words were ever loyal, with soothing sentiments when my emotions plummeted, and cutting sarcasm when my confidence soared. Moreover, when all pride and resolution escaped me, when there was nothing else to define me and nothing left to believe in, I found faith in the music. Like books and writing, it gave me another cause to push on. It gave me a reason to dance.

Ebb and Flow

*If God would send his angels
I sure could use them here right now*

-U2

Like Hansel and Gretel, I left a trail of crumbs behind me. Like Hansel and Gretel, I was already lost. I didn't know how, if ever, I'd find my way home again.

When I returned to Pittsburgh that spring after my semester abroad, everyone around me was applying for jobs, trying on wedding gowns, buying baby clothes, but my life was no different. Again, I was emaciated, from abstinence gone awry. Wasted, dried up, I could barely muster enough energy to cry, though how I needed to. I was as pale as a China doll with gray hollow half-moons under my eyes. Fragile and empty. Again, I went searching.

Suddenly, I carried a hunger that I was ashamed of, and I refused to sit down and sate it, to eat a real meal. What resulted was a vicious cycle of binging and purging, but not in the usual manner of bulimia. My disease morphed into something I have yet to hear defined by any psychologist or dietician, and the mere thought of my twisted behavior still frightens me.

At my worst, I was hovering over the tiny white plastic garbage can in the corner of my bedroom, behind closed doors, wondering if my three roommates could hear all the crinkling of wrappers from granola bars, iced oatmeal cookies, and assorted bulk chocolates from CVS. One night, I sat with a Snickers bar, gnawing off the smooth chocolate edges, wrapping a tissue around the remaining naked hunks of gooey, spit-saturated nougat, caramel and peanuts, and throwing them in the trash. Later, if I decided I wanted those gooey bits, I retrieved them from the refuse, peeled off the soggy tissue, and nibbled until they were no more.

At my best, I walked away from my shame, two miles up Squirrel Hill and back, attempting to ignore my urges. Yet, there wasn't a single night that I passed by the Uni-mart without scoring a package of oatmeal raisin or chocolate chip cookies. I was certain that the sullen, blond-haired boy who manned the register knew my secret. He saw through the frenzied, psychotic look in my eyes, as I envisioned ripping into that package and shredding its contents beyond recognition. Once out of the store and sheltered by the dark mile and a half to my turnaround point, I'd break apart all the cookies like some starved, barbaric animal, chew out all the raisins or chocolate chips, and leave a trail of plain doughy pieces behind—for the pigeons, I assured myself. Worried that someone was following me, I always looked over my shoulder before dropping my crumbs. I shuddered when I saw my own crooked shadow.

Occasionally, the walks eased my mind, but this habitual squandering of money and food is what brought on the guilt. At night, I returned to my room to find frantic black ants picnicking on the light brown carpet around my trashcan. This is what brought the shame. I often contemplated what my mother would say if she knew about my secret vice. After all, she's the one who taught me to be frugal and conservative, to keep a constant stock of Saran Wrap, to always save my leftovers.

Mom knew so much about me, but there was still so much I hoped she'd never learn. She knew I was anorexic when I was fourteen, but she said she never took drastic measures because she figured I was just "going through a phase." That *particular* phase only lasted four months, and I gradually layered an adequate amount of flesh onto my 93-pound body. The disease slipped into hibernation, and I thought it was gone for good until seven years later, in London, when I managed to shrink my healthy 112-pound body back down to 93 pounds.

I didn't realize this, however, until after my trip. I began to suffer horrible bouts of depression, crying sometimes for days, so I decided to visit a counselor. She had me take a yes-or-no, always, often, occasionally, rarely, or never test. A week later, she told me I was "more depressed than the average person."

It's true: to have someone sit in front of you, gaze at you pathetically, and tell you that yes, in fact, you ARE depressed, when you've already been walking around for weeks or months or years thinking that something good, something REALLY good, better happen soon because if not, you just might satisfy that urge to toss yourself in front of an eighteen-wheeler so it can plow over you and break every bone in your body, since that would probably feel better than this, whatever it is that you've been feeling all this time—to have someone look you in the eye and say those words, *cli-ni-cal-ly de-pressed*, as if they are some sort of fucking genius for figuring it out, only makes you feel worse. And that's what I did, I felt worse.

The counselor referred me to a psychiatrist, Dr. Hazlewood, who told me my depression could be the result of my weight, which was way below normal, even for someone with small bones like mine. Or my weight could be the result of my depression; it works both ways. She sat and listened to me cry and looked at me like a child who just lost her favorite doll baby. She didn't know that I was simply a twenty-two-year-old who wanted to be heard.

It's June 5, 1998. Dr. Hazlewood is reviewing the results of my blood tests, routine for the administration of Zoloft.

"I thought you said you don't drink," Dr. Hazlewood states flatly.

"I don't, anymore," I reply. "But I used to."

“Yeah, but...”

She is speechless. She stares at the pink and yellow papers in her lap. I study the Georgia O’Keeffe on the wall, averting my eyes from the scale I’ll soon have to step on. *I should have carried rocks in my pockets. I’ve heard that works.*

“These results say your liver cells are at 40. “ She points to the chart, where the number 40 is highlighted. *Great. More numbers. Just what I need.* “Anything below that is in the danger area. Only extreme alcoholics drop below that mark.”

“Well, I said I used to drink a lot.”

“This just can’t be,” she pauses. I know she wants to remind herself out loud of my young age, but she doesn’t. “We’ll test you again, after you’ve been on the medication for a few weeks. If your cells get any lower, we’ll have to consider other treatment.”

Despite my test results, I told her that I wanted Zoloft, not Prozac. I had read that Prozac often increases a person’s appetite *and* causes weight gain, but kept this little tidbit to myself. So, after our first visit, she sent me off with a small sample of Zoloft (they don’t give the mentally ill a whole cluster of drugs at once, as a precaution).

Those little blue oval-shaped tablets, which I broke in half for the first two weeks, made me feel better at first, but most of the time, I felt like I was either wearing a fake smile or smiling too much. The Zoloft also made me terribly nervous, so now I was picking not only at cookies and candy bars, but also at my own flesh. I created little areas inside my ears and on my scalp that I would scratch gently and habitually with my fingernails until they bled. Then I would wait a few days until scabs formed, and peel those off. Then I’d start the whole process again. I picked at the skin around my cuticles

until they bled. I scratched a spot on the top of my head until a cowlick formed in my part. I plucked the little black hairs that kept sprouting up like weeds around my nipples and embarrassing me in front of my worst critic, my bathroom mirror. Everyday I checked for more, and it seemed the more I plucked, the more they grew.

I quit the Zoloft soon after I started, believing it was the pills, not the 44 ounces of Diet Coke (thank you, 7-Eleven, for the Super Big Gulp) that made me jittery. I quit seeing Dr. Hazlewood and the counselor, concluding that they only made me more depressed. I decided to train for a triathlon, thinking it would be a better form of therapy for me.

In training, I exercised three hours a day—running, swimming, and bicycling—each activity requiring its own special count of laps per minute, miles per hour, calories per session. My vigorous regimen created an alarming physical hunger in me that this time, I could not deny. I began sneaking my roommates' food because I refused to buy certain high-carbohydrate foods like honey mustard pretzels and cheddar cheese crackers. I would eat the entire bag and replace it the next day, hoping no one would notice. My body needed these calories, but still, I did not allow this food to nourish me. I took laxatives—a trick I taught myself without ever learning it was a sign of bulimia, back when I first became anorexic—because damn it, I *still* couldn't make myself vomit, no matter how far I shoved my fingers down my throat.

After the triathlon—which my tired limbs finished successfully, nothing short of a miracle—I kept walking to burn off calories. My hunger would not cease, and so the more I ate, the more I walked. Half the time, I'm not sure the physical hunger existed; I was just so used to *being* hungry all the time that I believed I *should be* and *was*.

Through glass-fronted cafes and restaurants, I watched normal weighted people polish off pastrami sandwiches, coleslaw and French fries, and wondered how they could smile and chuckle over peanut butter pie.

*Got a bowling ball in my stomach
Got a desert in my mouth*

-Tori Amos

Bulimia literally means “ox hunger.” That is what I felt like when urge overcame willpower—a crashing, erratic bull ready to devour anything. I didn’t care what sloppy sort of mess I might leave behind. Just let me eat, regardless of the guilt destined to follow. By God, give me the Entenmann’s, the Häagen Dazs, the Tastykakes. I’ll walk five miles when I’m done. That’ll erase *half* of the feast.

One night, that winter, I ran nine miles on an uncomfortably full stomach because I couldn’t relax with my curse of an appetite. Balls of pretzel and cracker dough, 900 calories too much, churned in my belly like lava in a volcano, ready to erupt. With each pounding step, I pled for God to strike me down in my tracks for my gluttony, my wastefulness. I pictured myself where I truly belonged: lying in a dusty ditch beside a desert highway, the cruel sun scorching my skin, my tongue as dry and useless as a dead rodent, green flies buzzing around my eyes and vultures circling above, waiting to devour the measly flesh still cloaking my feeble bones.

My body became my worst enemy, my mind, a control prison. Without even trying, I had trained myself to memorize and calculate every component of every food.

One cheese sandwich:

2 pieces of light bread = 70 calories, 4 grams protein, 2 grams fat
 2 slices of fat-free American cheese = 60 calories, 12 grams protein, 0 grams fat
 1 Tablespoon of light butter = 50 calories, 5 grams fat
 Grand total = 180 calories, 14 grams protein, 7 grams fat

One package of peanut butter crackers: 210 calories, 5 grams protein, 11 grams fat

Twelve carrot sticks: 30-40 calories, all carbs

One 12-ounce can of Coke: 140 calories, all carbs

One plain M&M contains 4.3 calories, one peanut M&M, 10.1 calories. Why do I know this? The serving size in a one-pound bag of peanut M&Ms is a quarter cup and equals 240 calories. Multiply 240 by the number of servings in the bag and you have the total calories for the entire bag. Dump the bag and count how many M&Ms are in there, before you've eaten any. Divide the total calories for the bag by the total number of M&Ms, and you get 10.1. Do I do this sort of thing because I want to? No, I do it because I feel like I'll vomit if I don't know the numbers.

Suddenly, I possessed only one true talent: turning knowledge into detriment. I hated my disease, but more disturbingly, I hated my hunger. I refused to recognize the fruitful truth that Lauren Slater discovers in her memoir, *Welcome to My Country*: "Food is fuel, the weakness that makes us want it our greatest strength." Instead, I wished for a gadget that would attach to my body and monitor everything that went into my mouth and everything my body burned so I could always maintain a zero balance. For once, couldn't someone *else* keep track of this for me?

Lieutenant: Well, Captain, all the numbers seem to be in check.
Captain: All right, Lieutenant. Break 'em down for me.
Lieutenant: Okay. Six months ago, we programmed 'er ta remain at 100 pounds. This meant she would have to process exactly 1300 calories per day, plus 100 for each mile she traveled without our assistance. Until now, we were only going on estimation and anticipation. But we generated the log today, and our calculations proved correct. She weighs exactly 100 pounds, which means her intake was averaging 1600 calories per 24-hour period, after propelling herself approximately three miles a day.
Captain: Well done, Lieutenant. Well done. Do you think you can keep her steady at those figures?
Lieutenant: Of course. As long as the wires in her brain-like mechanism don't falter, she should stay that way forever.
Captain: A-plus, Lieutenant! Good work. I'm glad to have you on my team.
Lieutenant: Thanks, Captain. Over and out.

It's bad enough that such ideas swamped my mind. Even worse is the fact that I began doing the right things, but for the wrong reasons. When the university sponsored blood drives, I'd donate a pint because I knew it would possibly save three lives. But I also did it because it was a free way to flush out part of my physical being. Nowhere else in the world can you lose a pound so effortlessly.

First, I had to convince the screening attendant, merely by straight-faced lying, that I weighed more than 111 pounds. Then I had to pass the iron test, which I prepared for the previous night by downing a colossal "blood builder" vitamin. If my droplet of blood sank to the bottom of the test vial, it was good to donate.

After the long hour it took for the technician to squeeze enough juice out of me to fill the sixteen-ounce bag (sometimes they whispered in my ear that they'd dock me down a notch, take fifteen ounces instead, since my veins were unusually small), the recuperation table welcomed me. Here, free services and supervision were received all around. A volunteer asked what you would like to drink, poured the apple juice into a Dixie cup, and carried it to your seat. Then Archway cookies, an otherwise taboo treat, were scattered across the tabletop in all flavors. You were urged to eat at least one with

your juice, to replenish your blood, and to sit for fifteen minutes. And if you teetered, if you tilted your head, if you even mentioned the word “dizzy,” a white-coated concierge arrived within seconds and shoved you into a wheelchair. Then, you were wheeled to a bed, placed gently on your back, and told to do “bicycles” with your legs to boost your circulation. Once more, free supervision.

The neurosis didn’t end with my vain Red Cross donations; paranoia set in. I felt like a junkie hiding an addiction. I imagined everyone knew about my fixation—my roommates, my friends, my professors, my family—even the strangers who sold me the bad, sugary treats that would sooner or later end up on the ground or in my garbage. They, like Dr. Hazlewood, felt sorry for me. But they weren’t professionally qualified to help, so they kept quiet.

One desperate day, I sought therapy again. I dialed a number for a psychiatrist who advertised treating people with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder.

“I count *everything*,” I confessed to the invisible voice on the other end. “Calories, fat, protein, carbohydrates, miles, minutes, milligrams, pounds, ounces, tablespoons, teaspoons, quarter cups, half cups, stairs, street blocks, *gulps of water*.”

“I wouldn’t call that OCD.”

“But it drives me crazy. It’s *compulsive*.”

“No, I can’t say that’s my field. I recommend you call a social worker. Someone who deals with eating disorders.” He hung up.

This is not what I wanted to hear. I did NOT have an eating disorder. I had an obsession, and it just happened to be with food and exercise. I had a compulsion, and coincidentally counted everything that affected my diet and physical activity.

Let me repeat: *I did not have an eating disorder!*

No one could help me, it seemed. No one would take me seriously. So I stopped seeking treatment and recoiled inside myself even more.

At this point, the doctors told my family that Dad had entered the final stages of Parkinson's disease. He now had Alzheimer's as well, and at the most, two years left. I mulled over his illness, recalling my neuroscience professor from a previous semester, and how she explained that a lack of dopamine, a neurotransmitter involved in hormone release and central nervous system function, contributes to symptoms of Parkinson's. Our textbook discussed plaques and tangles, areas of trauma in the brain that are present in victims of Alzheimer's. I imagined plaques and tangles in my own brain, rough-looking, worm-like masses that hindered my thoughts. I couldn't concentrate on anything but eating and exercising, and resented my very being for this. I was a victim, a perpetrator, and an innocent bystander—held hostage by a humiliating, debilitating illness.

Not only was my body ravaged by this disease, but my brainpower was sabotaged, as well. During that fall semester in 1998, the only class that inspired me was honors poetry. By mid-semester, my fifteen credits dwindled to three. I had to drop all of my other classes, or risk failing them.

Mom still sent a modest check each month for my rent and groceries, but with all the credit card bills I'd racked up in London, and my new-fangled, unleashing habits, my existence required more dollars. I found a part time job as a "runner" for the university mailroom. The middle and upper campuses were assigned to me, and for four hours each day, I trekked up and down hills, in and out of doors, up and down stairs, delivering certified mail to the science, technology, and athletic facilities. Through wind, rain, sleet or snow, as they say, those packages reached their rightful recipients.

Each day, en route to the highest reaches of my path, I passed the tall, mysterious, beige building—the Western Psychiatric Institute, where Dr. Hazlewood said she wanted to send me, months ago, if I “dropped anymore weight.” I glanced up at the tiny square windows and envisioned girls too much like myself, staring out across the skyscraper city, wishing for something—anything—that promised a respectable future.

Somehow, I envied these imaginary patients. For them, the world was safe. They had someone counting their calories for them, telling them what and when and how much to eat, monitoring their every bite of potatoes and every stride of exercise. The doctors and nurses understood this disorder, and knew not to rush these women, and perhaps men, too, who suffered in the monster’s cold clutches. They knew, unlike the outside world, that to heal from an eating disorder, one cannot simply eat more. For although starvation and bulimia are murder on one’s heart and digestive tract, recovery from these disorders can be even worse.

Many people think Karen Carpenter died of anorexia. While this is partially true, some sources claim she died because, after finally admitting herself into the hospital, she gained ten pounds in one week, overdosed on Ipecac, and suffered a fatal heart attack. Now professionals know that the triumph has to be slow and subtle—maybe just an extra graham cracker a day for an entire month. Then two graham crackers. Then three. Then add a tiny glass of milk. If not, it might prove too overwhelming, emotionally or physically, for the patient. And I knew that inside Western Psych, behind those small square windows, clean nurses’ aides, dressed in white like angels, watched over my fellow anorectics, day and night, as they nibbled their graham crackers and sipped their milk, as they took tiny baby steps toward normalcy. For this reason, I was jealous.

In time, I would realize that I was the lucky one, not on the inside looking out, but already on the outside, and making it. For even though my hours were shrouded in calories and miles and ounces and milligrams, I was free. And while freedom can prove frightening, I would rather run wild and scared than be caught, trapped and tagged.

Costumes

*No one knows what it's like
To be the bad man
To be the sad man
Behind blue eyes*

-The Who

October 31, 1998. At 2:30 in the morning, through a hazy, NyQuil-induced sleep, a knocking two floors down rouses me. Although nobody visits me without calling first, especially late at night, I listen intently.

The front door opens and closes with a swift squeak and a slam, and my roommates' muffled voices vibrate the walls. Footsteps pound the stairs and draw closer, as my consciousness, beyond my control, sneaks further and further away. Suddenly, my bedroom door creaks open, and a glowing black and white peace sign slinks inside.

This giant peace sign is Paul, whom I haven't seen since early September and haven't spoken to in more than a month. Paul, whom at this point I say I'm in love with—a lie I've believed since we met eighteen months ago.

The peace sign is Paul's face. He used black and white paint to create this image on his skin, though it is not a mask, it is Paul's true character. Paul taught me that not all people speak badly about others. I never heard him utter a cruel word about anyone, unless that person intentionally harmed him. I have never known him to act irrationally in any situation. When I describe times that I have done so, he shakes his head disapprovingly, or worse, says, calmly, "*Mor-a.*"

Paul is thrilled about his artwork, and points to it with both index fingers. "Do you see this? Do you *see* this? You see what I did? Ha-*Hah!*"

I am still trying to make sense of this scene, still trying to wake up, shake off the drug hangover, when Peace Man asks, "Do you wanna hang out?"

Hang out, of course, means do I want to toddle ten doors down to his apartment, applaud his newly composed verses, listen to Phish or Dave Matthews, have sex, fall asleep, disappear at sunrise and not talk again for at least a week.

For a moment, I think, *Yes. I will get up and go with him. Maybe I can retrieve my Grateful Dead bootlegs and Neil Young CDs he borrowed.* But instead, I say nothing.

He crouches on the edge of my futon mattress. After he tells me of all the bars he's visited, he asks me what I did tonight.

"Nothing," I whisper. "I've been home all..."

"You're tired," he says, not letting me finish, as usual. "Maybe this isn't the best night."

I can't find the courage to tell him yes, I *do* want to *hang* out, but the thing is—the *problem* is—the NyQuil is stealing me away and I wish I could stop it, take it back, but I can't. I can't take back what I did and I can't tell Paul what I did, because even though we've been sleeping together, albeit off-and-on, for the past year and a half, Paul has no idea who I am.

I am home on this Hallowed Eve not because there is nothing brewing in Pittsburgh on October 31st. No, I am home because I chose to be, possibly because I ate too much, or possibly because I didn't eat enough—definitely because I am sad, definitely because the cough syrup summoned me to it, and now I'm in its trance. Moreover, I am home because I feel no need to display a costume. I bear a mask everyday of the year, so this night, when the rest of the country is parading around as superheroes and celebrities, my façade of a normal person is staying safe at home with me. See, just as the junkie dresses in black to conceal the bloodstains on his clothes, the

exercise-bulimic dons false smiles and walks in the shadows to hide her obsession from the world. Only my eyes recognize the truth beneath this fib of a face.

I am the baglady that everybody sees but nobody knows. I wander around town trudging miles up hills to return on the down slope with plastic bags full of half-eaten cookies and candy bars, the reward after calories are burned. I save my pennies and nickels and dimes to buy cheap cappuccino, to keep the energy blasting through my veins. Why? So I can speed-walk and count and run and walk further and eat while I walk and count and go home and lift weights and eat again and chug laxatives, sleeping pills and strong-as-hell cold medicine when *I'm not even sick*—at least not that way. Sometimes I wonder if I take all these drugs hoping they'll make me better. Somehow, it feels good to swallow a remedy, as long as it's a cure for *something*.

I don't know that when I finally leave this room, this house, this street, I will shed many sides of myself, all pieces of the great mystery I've been trying to solve. When I leave Atwood Street, I will leave Paul, and the way I am with him—shy, restrained, hidden. When I leave this house, I will purposely forget the long, fur-lined, black and gold coat in my closet that was my mother's when she was 25. I will leave it because, like my own smile, it is a costume—everywhere I go, people cannot take their eyes off of that coat, or me in it. That coat has provided me with a false sense of beauty, and for that reason, has attracted far too many strangers. I will realize this, and decide I don't want it anymore. I won't want the spotlight, and won't need it. I will learn, when I leave here, that it is time to grow up, to finally stop glancing around to see who is watching me. And when I leave this tiny rooftop-view room, I will say goodbye to the ants and the crumbs and the drug store addictions, or at least I will try. And eventually, I will leave Pittsburgh altogether.

But for now, Paul kisses my forehead and slips away, because my silence tells him this is best. We spend two more nights together this year, and then he flies to Florida to celebrate Hanukah with his parents. My last days of the semester are spent in this room, in this bed, brooding over the tell-all-feelings letter I write to Paul in my journal. Finally, I transfer that letter to stationary paper. I fold it up neatly, seal it in a purple envelope, and drop it in the mail. Paul receives my letter, and in January, back in Pittsburgh, calls to declare that what lured him to me, what maintained our two-year affair, were my eyes. "Ocean Iris" he nicknamed me, in a poem he wrote. This is his desperate attempt at flattery before confessing the line that will end this charade forever:

"I love you, Mora, but I'm not *in* love with you. There's a big difference."

In. Such a simple word, with such implication. Maybe it was my fault for not *letting* Paul in. After all, I had been donning my mother's shoes, her delicate, silver sandals, tiptoeing through that relationship, agreeing with everything Paul said and keeping every ounce of anger, sadness, and even excitement and bliss plugged up safely inside a blue glass bottle on my dresser. Impenetrable.

Finally, one day, with a quick heave, I sent that bottle soaring through the air and smashing against the wall. I needed to hear it shatter, to see its hearty contents spill across my mildew-stained, ant-ridden carpet, and to feel around for the jagged, splintered pieces. Sometimes, you need to make a mess of your life so you can clean it up and move on.

Gestures

*The smell of hospitals in winter
And the feeling that it's all a lot of oysters
But no pearls*

-Counting Crows

They call that place where Dad spent his last days a “home.” That place, where medicated zombies, unaffected by the meshed odor of meatloaf and urine, patrol the hallways in tattered pajamas. Old women shuffling past the nurses’ station point bony fingers in the air and serenade an imagined audience with random Motown tunes. Carts of Jell-O and strained peas wheel from door to door. Roommates and relatives come and go, with fractured hearts and forced smiles.

Dad hadn’t even a TV in his room to watch Tom Brokaw, his dinner partner for the past twenty years. Jennie, his faithful girlfriend since Mom and I left, visited him every other day and listened to his half-sense speech. He used to articulate each syllable as precisely as an English teacher. Toward the end, his mumbled thoughts sounded like some unintelligible language. Unable to distinguish where one word ended and another began, we repeated, “What? What?” Soon, we lost patience and changed the subject.

December 24, 1998. His body is as stiff as the dead. I try to move his arms, his legs, but they are like the boards of an old ship—rigid, bumpy, warped. His gray hair is still thick and curly, but longer than he ever allowed it to grow in the days when he made decisions for himself. His face harbors several days’ growth of beard. I am told the barber only comes on Tuesdays.

And they never put his glasses on. His vision is worse than mine, and I can’t see past my own nose without my contacts. *Does he recognize me? Does he know my name today? Are these nurses always as nice as they act when I am here?* I wonder if he

remembers how he used to scream at me, and how I always yelled back. I wonder if he's able to cry at this injustice, or if his tear ducts have dried up like the desert of his mind.

Jennie stands beside me and fidgets with a box of Kleenex. Her warm body brushes against my side as she whispers, "The only thing he had left to enjoy was eating, and now he can't even do that anymore." She nods toward an open can of vanilla Ensure with a bendy straw on his bedside tray.

I wish people wouldn't talk about him like he's not here. Jennie leaves us for a moment, and I decide, consciously, not to small talk him. Even with our fractured history, I respect him too much. *How are you? It's unusually warm out today. Did you hear about Mrs. Lutz's new Mercedes?* These questions don't flow well in my waters. Not here, not now.

Dad never liked small talk. I remember a telemarketer calling during dinner when we all still lived in the same house and ate organized meals. Like all telemarketers, this one must have begun by asking Dad how he was. "*Don't ask me that,*" he whined. The conversation ended seconds later, with a slam of the receiver and no goodbye.

When friends asked this question, Dad's usual answer was, "Better." Then they'd say, "Oh, were you sick?" "No," he'd say. "I'm just better."

Looking at him in this hospital bed, I wish with all my breath that he could be better.

I know he can't, so I stroke his arm and kiss his soft cheek. I find a tube of Chap Stick in his nightstand drawer and smooth it onto his lips. I adjust the blankets around his legs and gently rub his feet. Words we can no longer share, but maybe—just maybe—these tiny gestures will speak what I cannot say.

Back home, since Dad cleared out of the house and Mom returned, the rooms are filled with small talk. The hugs seem as futile as the tree stumps in the back yard, the I Love You's as faded as the green shutters bracketing the warped front windows.

Sitting across the kitchen table, Mom mentions indifferently that she wants to sell the piano. "You don't play it anymore, do you?" she asks me.

"No, I guess not." I nibble on an Oreo.

"I mean, you're hardly ever here, anyhow, right?"

I don't answer. How can I tell her what to do? She and Dad bought that piano—if she wants to sell it, she has every right.

This is as much as we have spoken all day, until Mom reiterates her decision to have Dad cremated. "It costs \$400, as opposed to a coffin, which is thousands."

She slides a sheet of paper in front of me. "Here. I need you to sign this. It's a refusal for resuscitation."

This is a choice we all agreed upon months ago—Mom, Mia, and I. The choice was made long-distance, across the wires. At the time, it was transparent, intangible, untraceable. But tonight, scribbling my shaky signature on the thick black line at the bottom of the page makes it real.

Now I am sick with silence. This house is choking and suffocating inside itself, heavy with the dirt, the dust, the sagging roof that has long needed replaced. Sharing its pain, I retreat to the basement, as close to the cool ground as I can possibly go.

If a robber broke in tonight, he'd marvel at the crumbling guts of this place, at the paint chipping off walls, the ceiling bubbling from years of water leakage, the cobwebs tangled in every corner of every room. Then, he'd find me, the half-dead skeleton clutching her knees, shivering in the dark, damp cellar, surrounded by ghosts swirling in

the air. He would take pity on me for surrendering to his sweaty metal pistol. He would think he was in Hell. He would shoot himself, instead.

At this moment, all I feel is sinking despair, a need for a savior, or a need for death. I do not know that, approximately one year from today, on this same spot on the sofa, a phone call will reach me—notification from the nursing home that Dad has died. I am unaware of the release that will wash over me, the knowledge that he is no longer hanging on by his toenails to one fraying thread of a recycled hospital blanket, the knowledge that he is free again.

The morning after receiving this message, it is January 4th, 2000. I find myself alone in the kitchen, my hands reaching out to the shelves that have replaced the Sony TV. Here, beside Mom's portable CD player, a Sarah McLachlan album waits alone. I study the CD, placed here by a guardian angel, or my sister. Instinctively, I open the jewel case and slip the disc in the stereo.

Before long, my arms are wrapped around my weary body, which sways like a tender pear tree in the wind. My socked feet slide across the newly tiled floor as I spin to the soft melody:

*Your love
is better than ice cream.
Better than anything else that I've tried
and your love
is better than ice cream
everyone here knows how to fight*

*and it's a long way down
it's a long way down
it's a long way
down to the place where we started from.*

Somehow these words speak to me more than any homily, self-help book, or Hallmark sympathy card. Here, in this pastel kitchen, on this clear blue morning, I *am* Daddy's little girl again. I know he is watching me. And these aren't just my arms hugging me—they are his arms, too.

After the dance, my feet find their way to the back patio, and my vision relives the moments that made my dad loveable, no matter what despicable acts he committed or how many hurtful words he splashed about.

It's a warm, sunny afternoon in May of 1992. Inside the screen porch, I recline on a lounge chair, listen to the local classic rock station and read *The Catcher in the Rye*. Dad gathers fallen twigs from the back yard.

Suddenly, a ChemLawn truck screeches to a stop in front of our next-door neighbor's house. A husky man emerges from the truck and slips into a puffy white astronaut-like suit. He plops a full-coverage helmet on his head, grabs a hose from the back of the truck, and traipses into the grass.

Soon, a loud chugging sound fills the air, along with a misty spray, as this lawn doctor diligently treats his weedy patients. He carries on his business undisturbed for several minutes, until... *Oh God. What's Dad doing?* ...A tapping on his arm, his shoulder, his helmet, halts him by the rose bushes. He turns to face my fuming father, now gripping a wiry tree branch in his burly knuckled fist.

"Hey! Hey! Stop that!" Dad shouts through the chugging noise, branch poised like a weapon.

"What? Man, what's wrong with you?" Lawn Doctor shrugs away from the stick.

“Stop that NOW!” Dad screams. He pokes Lawn Doctor’s arm and then yanks on his helmet. The chugging ceases and the mist disappears.

Lawn Doctor removes his helmet. “What the hell is this?” he squeals. “I’m just trying to do my job, man!”

“Why are you wearing that suit, huh?” Dad gripes, tapping Lawn Doctor’s knee. “If you’re wearing that suit, shouldn’t *I* be wearing a suit, too? Shouldn’t my *wife* and my *daughters* be wearing suits? You’re spraying this shit over here, but it’s blowing into *my* yard—*my* property!”

Lawn Doctor tries to resume his operation, but Dad won’t drop the stick; he stands steadfast, aiming the branch at his new archenemy.

Lawn Doctor postponed his treatment for the day, and months later, received a small court settlement—the fee Dad paid for aggravated assault charges.

Mom says the cops were lenient because they were afraid of my dad. Apparently, the whole town saw him as the guy who would tear you apart with his bare hands, if given the chance.

And I believed this. It seemed nothing frightened Dad. He used to tell me stories of his younger years, when he ate a light bulb as a dare—just crunched on the glass and swallowed the shards, all to appease his audience. He chewed raw eggs and swallowed live goldfish. He even lay under the tracks while trains rumbled over him, just inches above his nose. No wonder people were scared.

Still, strangers took an instant liking to Dad, despite his crazy and frightening antics. As a tradition, after Sunday evening Mass, we used to eat dinner at a restaurant called Gullifty’s. One night, a waitress we hadn’t seen in a while served our table. She

recognized us immediately, and said, “Hi! It’s good to see you. Where have you been lately?”

“I just got out of jail,” Dad said with a straight face.

We were all shocked. But it was funny. Dad had a way with one-liners, especially with a frosty mug of Beck’s Dark in his grasp.

Our seasonal day trips to Baltimore’s Inner Harbor epitomized Dad’s nonchalant charm. While Mom, Mia and I browsed the shops, Dad sat at the piano bar in a waterside cocktail lounge and swigged glass after glass of white wine. One time, when we stopped to “report back,” his spirits were so elevated that he reached in his back pocket and handed me his leather billfold.

“Here,” he said through a squinty smile. “Go spend some money.”

Visions of Banana Republic shirts and Calvin Klein jeans floated through my mind. I glanced at Mom for approval, but she just shook her head.

“But Mom, he *gave* it to me,” I whined.

“I know he did, but give it back.”

So I did, after a long, eye-rolling sigh. We agreed to return in two hours, after riding the ferry and visiting the aquarium. Then we ate an expensive dinner at a bar and grille—one that also sold hamburgers and fries, of course.

Yet Dad had a softer, sensitive, *sober* side, unknown to many. I witnessed this one rainy, Sunday afternoon in 1987, weeks after acquiring our first family pet, a calico-Persian kitten Mom named Sadie. Passing through the hallway on my way to the basement, I caught a glimpse of Dad sitting in the kitchen, cradling Sadie and gazing at her like a newborn. “Aren’t you a dear little thing?” he whispered, nuzzling his face

against hers. She nuzzled back, reciprocating his affection. When Dad was with Sadie, it seemed he didn't need his fifth of Black Velvet, case of Yuengling, or gallon of Inglenook.

Ironically, his affinity for animals resembled his friendliness with strangers. Was it because neither would begrudge him, forsake him, blame him, as family could? Or was it the fact that they were unacquainted with his temper, his infidelity, his brutality?

With a kitten in sight, peace governed the Mattern house. The Polaroid waited nearby, ready to capture Sadie in an endearing pose. Soon, we took in two stray cats, as well. Caring for these animals instilled a temporary tranquility in all of us. Dad would call to Mom, "Nina, you have to come see this!" Together, they stood grinning at these precious creatures. Never was the kitchen so still, so silent, so safe.

It's these memories that surfaced that cold, sunny January morning, as I spun around in the kitchen, hugging myself and swaying to Sarah McLachlan. Moments at the piano also came rushing back—Dad playing Moon River, the two of us practicing Heart and Soul, side by side, paying homage to the black and white keys. Forever dangling above my grasp was the dream of being Daddy's little girl. For Daddy taught me how to ride a bike, shoot foul shots, and whack tennis balls against the garage. In due time, he removed the training wheels, raised the basketball hoop, bought me a brand new Prince racket and arranged lessons. Yet he also gave me my first sip of beer, there at the dinner table, in front of Tom Brokaw and Vanna White and Alex Trebec. And somewhere, somehow, this habit became a permanent curse of my existence, all because Dad let go too soon.

Or maybe I'm the one who let go.

Pillars

*I don't know what I'm hungry for
I don't know what I want anymore*

-REM

In January of 1999, my willpower returned miraculously, without the help of any milk-dipped graham crackers or clean white angels. Suddenly, I was able to eat small meals every few hours and feel satisfied. I did not binge regularly anymore, and not at all for a month or so. When I did overeat, I used laxatives to purge my gluttony, and then ate sparingly for a day until my hunger was deemed physical. I lost some of the weight I recently gained (proof that you can't always spot a bulimic's deprivation). In a way, I was in control again, partly because of the erasers.

Oh, the erasers—little yellow miracle pills I discovered in the cold and allergy section of Giant Eagle; the generic ones worked as well as the name brands. My discovery was not intentional. I began taking the allergy-sinus pills for a fleeting scratchy throat or runny nose. The bonus was that they curbed my appetite and only made me a little tired, which I solved with a twice-daily dose of 7-Eleven cappuccino. This was an amazing find, given the fate of my former friend, PPA.

So, rejuvenated by drug store addictions, I quit my job, accepted the last loan the federal government would allocate for my undergraduate education, and refocused on academia. I became a studying machine. I charted time spent in class and time spent studying, and made sure my weekly totals always met or exceeded 40 hours. Never, in my entire college career, was I so organized and determined. Never did I feel such a void of distractions. I was woman. You could *almost* hear me roar.

Not only did the erasers allow me to dismiss my food and exercise obsessions and center on my schoolwork, but they also masked my depression. I wasn't involved in a

sexual relationship—had just broken free from Paul—so my emotions and my hormones deserved a vacation. These things left me, were erased so subtly from my conscious being, and I barely cried anymore—not even in the face of death. To me, this was strength. This was power.

Aside from the erasers, two larger sources fueled my engine. Number one, with my credit card debts swept clean, I invested in a Pioneer 25-disc programmable CD changer and a cutting-edge Sony receiver with bass boost and surround sound. My music collection peaked with Jamiroquai, Beck, Kula Shaker, Erasure; more Phish, more Dylan, more REM, more Lemonheads. These new acquisitions sparked endless nights of dancing, singing, or contemplating life, alone in my bedroom, newly devoid of crumbs and ants. Thus, my stereo baptized this fresh environment that to me, felt like freedom.

Fuel number two involved a new quest. After a long-endured Catholic life, I dismissed my inborn faith, or rather, dangled it out the window for a while, deciding whether or not to drop it. After all, Catholicism never agreed with me. For starters, my plate was piled so high with sins, I couldn't see the bottom. Some were inarguably wrong, like gluttony, greed, and dishonesty. But premarital sex and birth control—it's a wonder wearing satin panties isn't sacrilegious. In my mind, Catholicism demanded perfection, yet I knew no one who fit that description. Every Sunday for sixteen years, I watched my mother sit in church and refuse Holy Communion because she married a divorced man. It saddened me that she kept going to Mass all those years, letting the proper Catholics brush by her knees on their way to suck on a piece of stale bread. And those people really believe that wafer is Christ's body. Huh! That was ten calories too many, if you asked me.

Wait. It wasn't that I ever denounced God. Many times, He rescued me. I believe this with every nerve in my defective existence. God is what I believed in most, his omniscience, omnipresence. But where was Mother Mary all the days my father abused his family? Where was Jesus the night I knocked my tooth out? *Where was Saint Joseph when the Jews were exterminated in World War II? Why was a religion, founded upon a Jewish man, rejecting Judaism?*

I'm still not sure what intrigued me most about Judaism. Perhaps it was my empathy toward its heritage and hardships, or maybe it was Paul, the only Jewish boy I ever dated, whose poise, diligence and humanity could only be a product of his upbringing. Mostly, I sought the kind of devotion that would temper and humble me.

As a young child, I listened to my grandma murmur selective details: "The Jews go to church on Saturday...The Jews fast on their wedding day...The Jews don't serve meat and cheese in the same meal." The Jews. They were forever a mystery to me. I wanted to know more, but my curiosity had to remain a secret. Sure, plenty of Grandma's friends and beauty shop customers read the Torah, but she cherished her rosaries and crucifixes. She raised seven children under her faith, and her eldest son, Uncle Joe, became a priest. Uncle Joe. Father Joe. *What would he say if he knew I was contemplating Judaism, denying the notion of Jesus Christ as my savior? What would Mom say?* When I tried explaining the foundations of Judaism to her, she refused to acknowledge that anything but Christianity exists, even though Judaism is itself the foundation of Christianity. Even so, why should I care what others might think? This was my private, personal pursuit, and if ever there were a time for transformation in my life, this was it.

I enrolled in a class with one of my sorority sisters. She was in the process of converting, and became my inspiration. If she could do it, I thought, so could I. I talked to Jewish friends. I purposely walked past Jewish temples and synagogues, hoping to stumble upon a mentor, someone who would teach me the intricate belief system. I went to Jewish food festivals and tasted latkes and honey cake. I wandered around Squirrel Hill, a predominantly Jewish neighborhood in Pittsburgh, on the Sabbath day and watched Orthodox families trekking to morning service, the young boys in their yarmulkes, the men with their finely groomed beards. I bought books: *The Jewish Book of Why*, *The Gifts of the Jews*, *Cooking Kosher: The Natural Way*. I joined the Jewish Community Center (for a month, which was all I could afford), and swam there three days a week.

Why should I believe in Jesus if all these good people don't? And it's not that they don't believe he existed; they just don't believe he's the Messiah. Why is that wrong? If someone walked the earth today and claimed to be the Messiah, which people have done *since* 2000 years ago, the majority would be skeptical, right? What I learned was that the Jews found nothing wrong with their religion when Jesus came along, so they saw no reason to change it. As the saying goes, if it ain't broke, don't fix it, right? And part of their beliefs condemned idolatry, so why would they worship a man who claimed to be the Son of God?

The more I thought about it, Christian holidays seemed completely downplayed and commercialized, as if people forgot that the word "holiday" comes from "holy day." All my family did on Christmas was eat ham and sweet potatoes and coconut cake and open new ties and board games and stuffed bears. During Lent, it was a game, a dieting technique, to give up Milky Ways or French fries for forty days. Weight loss is what we

wanted, not enlightenment. On Easter, recovering from chocolate bunnies and marshmallow Peep overload, we yawned through long, boring masses and recited words that had lost their meaning. We accepted the communion wafers in our palms, but never, ever, drank the wine, contaminated by so many random lips sipping the cup.

That year, instead of observing Easter, I attended a Passover Seder. My books told me that Passover is the most widely observed Jewish holy day, a festival that celebrates the Children of Israel escaping the Egyptian “house of bondage.” Furthermore, Passover is universally symbolic because it preserves and honors the ideals of freedom. What better reason for a holiday?

Inside the community center cafeteria, thirty or forty students, a mix of reform and conservative Jews, all close to my age, aligned both sides of a long table. A dark-haired girl named Erika handed me a nametag. She knew it was my first time, and invited me to sit beside her so she could explain the rituals.

Here, I learned that Jews eat matza to represent the children’s hurried departure from slavery. They left before the bread had time to rise, is the saying. During the meal, I followed along with the rabbi in my Haggada, recounting the story of Exodus, and chanting the psalms to my best avail. I dipped my matza in the bitter herbs (maror) and the apple and nut mixture (charoset), both part of the traditional Seder tray. Upon Erika’s whispered instructions, I spilled a dab of my grape juice, in place of red wine, for each of the ten plagues. In the end, I hummed along to the Chad Gadya, a song of German origin, ironically, that celebrates the continual survival of the Jewish faith, despite history’s attempts to conquer and obliterate it.

Finally, here was food meant not to bloat my belly like turkey and stuffing, but conservative, time-honored fare, intended to cultivate my spirit. Nourishment that stood

in not for flesh, but for history, faith, and liberation. Was this one last attempt at escape? Maybe. And was this a sin, contemplating conversion for food's sake? Perhaps, but there was more. What I wanted was an excuse for abstinence, a reason for self-restraint, so that instead of whining to the host at New Year's dinner, "I don't like ham," I would firmly state, "I don't eat pork." My announcement would be factored in with the no sugar, salt or wheat's at the table, no questions asked.

That February, however, a light snowfall cast shadows over my crusade. Mom called me in Pittsburgh to report that Grandpa was dying of liver cancer. I immediately hopped a Greyhound to Harrisburg and visited him at his bedside, where I offered him music in a vain effort to calm his pain.

"Did you get my last letter?" I asked, wiping beads of perspiration from his brow.

"Yeah, I did. I'll probably never write again, Mora."

These were his last words to me, before he passed away that Valentine's Day.

At the funeral luncheon, I hovered over the salad bowl, picking out the chunkiest lettuce cuts. I swapped serving forks with Uncle Joe as he finished with the green beans. Remembering his recent fibromyalgia diagnosis, a newer disease not yet in my vocabulary, I asked how he was feeling.

"Fine," he forced a smile and cleared his throat. "I'll dance with you at your wedding."

I laughed. *My wedding.* "Do you know something I don't?" I asked, playfully.

Not soon enough, I returned to Pittsburgh and resumed my religious studies. On Good Friday, after I announced that I wasn't coming home, Mom said Uncle Joe was moving in with Grandma. His back hurt so badly, he told Mom, he could barely walk or

even stand. It seemed like a good idea. They would take care of each other, Grandma tending to Uncle Joe's physical needs, Uncle Joe consoling Grandma's spirits.

But the following July, another razor sharp phone call stole me away from Pittsburgh. Grandma suffered a stroke. Her body was paralyzed, her hours, uncertain.

Grandma, who gave Mia and me two presents every Christmas, one more than our cousins received, because unlike them, we had only one set of grandparents. Grandma, who bought me a new pair of Birkenstocks or Cole Haan's each year, always with the same advice: "If you spend money on anything, Mora, spend it on your feet. They'll last you a lifetime." Grandma, who, after losing her beloved husband of 50-plus years, offered full-time care to her 50-year-old son, Father Joe.

Father Joe later confessed to Mom that he felt responsible for Grandma's stroke, or at least its graveness. Normally, Grandma rose at six in the morning, but the day of her stroke, she slept in. Early that afternoon, Uncle Jude called, and Uncle Joe told him she was still in bed, snoring noisily. Uncle Jude came over at once and burst into her room. They found her, not just sleeping, but almost dead. Uncle Jude resuscitated her and called an ambulance.

When the news reached me, I jumped on another Greyhound. But when I arrived at the Hershey Medical Center, a vicious bladder infection launched me to the 24-hour Emergency Clinic. And so, while the only grandmother I ever knew answered yes-or-no questions with eye-blinking sign language, I winced at the hospital's bright bathroom walls, doubled over in agony, squeezing bloody kidney stones into the toilet.

Three days later, my infection dissipated enough to allow me to kiss Grandma's unbending cheek, to hold her unfeeling hand, and to whisper "I love you" in her ear that I prayed could still decipher words.

After she died, my thoughts of conversion were shelved, along with my books. *Were these losses my punishment for denouncing Catholicism, and chiefly, Christianity? Was my family being knocked off, one by one, because of my qualms with religion?* I never mentioned my interest in Judaism, my doubts about Jesus as the Messiah. Still, in my mind, I wanted to mourn the way the Jews did, to cover all the mirrors in the house or turn them around so I didn't have to look at myself; to witness beards of mourning bloom on the men's faces around me instead of cleanly shaven chins so familiar; to tear my garments as Jacob did after Joseph was bludgeoned and killed by a wild beast; to wear synthetic, non-leather shoes, forbidding myself the luxury of physical comfort; to toss clumps of grass over the caskets as my loved ones were lowered into the ground, providing me with some sort of closure.

Father Joe performed the funeral mass for my grandmother and led us to the burial plot next to Grandpa's grave, where we had all stood just months ago. Uncle Joe's torso and limbs appeared as strong and thick as ever, but his stance was wobbly, his gestures shaky. His face grimaced, squelching back the tears as he tossed holy water over the casket in the sign of the cross, his quivering voice barely audible as he chanted, "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust."

My family expected Uncle Joe to be the rock that would anchor us and keep us from straying, but his mind and body weathered quickly, without warning. That August, upon the church's request, he entered a mental institution in Philadelphia. I sent him a letter with encouraging words, reminding him how much he was loved and appreciated. Fibromyalgia alone did not call for institutionalization of this kind. This disease was either the root or the result of mental anguish, but no one talked about it. No one in the family discussed the core of a problem, unless it was too late.

In December, Mom called to tell me Uncle Joe was missing. Apparently, he rented a car and fled the institution. The police were searching for him. I hung up, angry. *Why would he make everyone worry like this? If it was so horrible there, why didn't he just tell someone?*

Twenty minutes later, the phone rang again. Mom said the police found Uncle Joe, dead in a hotel room near Bedford, Pennsylvania. Cause of death: internal bleeding.

The snowfall that began so innocently in February was now a full-blown avalanche. All at once, the pillars of our family lay crumbling beneath the ground, beneath my tired feet. First, the only grandparents I ever knew. And then, Uncle Joe.

No one called his death suicide. I didn't learn about the empty prescription bottles until weeks later. Taking one's own life, according to the Catholic Church, is a sin. Uncle Joe could not have a Catholic burial if he killed himself.

I didn't go to the funeral. I was angry, and tired. Also, I sensed Dad slipping away, and knew his sparse turnout would be nothing compared to Uncle Joe's stately procession. I didn't want to measure the crowds, or compare the condolences. I couldn't handle that humiliation.

Months afterward, amidst Uncle Joe's junk mail, Uncle Jude found the letter I'd written. He forwarded it to me. It was unopened.

Thinking back, I feel so ignorant. Wasn't I crying out, all my life, for someone to pay attention to me? Hadn't I, too, under the salty, violent waves of depression, considered taking my own life? And why did I ever think my words were so important to

a relative I barely knew, and that my words alone could save him? But why couldn't *somebody's* words save him? Were there any words at all?

I spent too much time being annoyed with Uncle Joe for not opening my letter, for succumbing to his misery and quitting the world, the family. I was angry because he challenged me, and saw his questions as an attack on my character. But maybe all along, Uncle Joe knew I needed someone to push me. He knew I needed a father.

Grief strips us of our BA's, MA's, PhD's; peels off the bulletproof vests, steel-toed boots, hospital scrubs and priests' collars, until we are nothing but delicate skin covering flesh and bone, tangled nerve endings, brains too weary to question Death. *We don't understand.* We wail, punch walls, fall to our knees. Some of us even chuckle in the murky air of disbelief.

In Uncle Joe's case, adding his own name to the obituary page was his reaction, and I need to accept this. Performing his parents' funeral rites drained his faith dry, but he did these things because we expected him to. As for his suicide, I hold the Catholic Church partially responsible. If priests were allowed to marry, my uncle may have had a compassionate woman by his side, carrying him through these testing times. But he was forced to live a solitary, abstinent life, devoid of that sacred, marital bond. Catholicism makes chastity an obligation for its ordained servants, despite divine word, which loudly speaks otherwise:

It is not good for man to be alone;
I will make for him a companion (Genesis 2:18)

One who does not have a wife lives without joy,
without bliss, without happiness (Talmud: Yevamot 62b)

My yearning for a new faith continued to lay shrouded in dust after Uncle Joe's passing. What mattered now were the beliefs in my heart. Furthermore, I understood that conversion would not save me in the way I needed to be saved. Likewise, I knew that familial death did not curb the counting or the obsessions, nor did anything else. Judaism, Catholicism, Buddhism or atheism, food still hijacked my mind and hindered my days. Finally, I realized it wasn't religion I craved.

Someone to Watch

*Don't surround
Yourself with yourself*

-Yes

I met Chad in April of 1999. I had just written 6000 words toward my senior seminar project. I wanted to celebrate, so I called my friend Gloria, Jim's little sister, and asked her if she was going barhopping. After tempting her with half a bottle of Smirnoff I'd been saving for a special occasion, she agreed.

In her dorm room, we wolfed a few shots. I felt reborn. With withering memories of Paul, I decided I was through dating fraternity boys who only wanted to get into my pants. I was too old for that, and too determined. I was writing again, and writing well. If the perfect man came along one day, I would deal with it then. But that night, believing Mr. Right did not exist, I told Gloria, "I am never getting married." I said "never" like it was two words—"neh ver." She looked at me in slight confusion, her eyebrows raised, but we said "Cheers!" and downed another shot.

CJ Barney's was a typical college bar with dollar drafts and bump and grind music. Not my favorite place, but it was the only choice on a Tuesday night. And besides, I was at my *own* party. It didn't matter where I was. I just needed to let loose. My only requirements were the Beastie Boys and a bottle of Amstel Light.

When we arrived, I was already delightfully drunk, and ready to get down. Despite CJ's lack of a dance floor, I shoved bottles of Budweiser out of the way and created my own space beside the DJ's booth. Finally, I wore my own shoes that night—no more of Dad's clunky boots or Mom's delicate sandals, just my snug, gray and purple hiking shoes. I was kicking and spinning and in the groove when suddenly, I noticed a beautiful smiling boy, watching me, three feet away. He leaned in close.

“Are you a dancer?” he said, utterly sincere.

I laughed. “Are you serious?”

“I go to the Art Institute and I know a lot of dancers at Point Park. I thought you might be one.”

I gazed up at this curly, brown haired boy who towered over me by at least a foot. His skin was as pale and smooth as ivory, his eyes so clear blue, I saw my reflection in them. He never stopped smiling, as if he knew something I didn't.

Soon, I became blind to the underage girls bumping into me and trying, conspicuously, to get free beer from the bartender. I didn't notice whatever Top 40 beats the DJ was spinning, and I'd forgotten my request for the Beastie Boys. I couldn't see or hear anything except Chad, and as my beer grew warm on that sticky table beside us, our conversation turned inevitably to music. He listened to me, intrigued that I'd seen the Grateful Dead, years before Jerry died. We discovered we'd both been to some of the same Phish and Allman Brothers shows. He asked me how old I was.

“I'll be twenty-three in two weeks,” I said. “How old are you?”

He hesitated, and then replied, “Nineteen.”

“No way.”

“I'm serious.”

“You don't look that yo-, I mean, you don't look nineteen.”

“I wasn't going to tell you, but I decided I didn't want to lie.”

How sweet, I thought, peering into the clearest blue eyes I'd ever seen. I dove gently but quickly into them. I mentioned the Grateful Dead tribute concert at the Graffiti on Friday, and asked if he wanted to go. When he said yes, I scrawled my

number on his forearm, and he wrote his on mine. We parted briefly, and when I saw my friend Brett, I yelled, “Look! I got digits!”

Chad walked me *almost* to my apartment that night (I had to be somewhat mysterious) and we said goodnight. When he leaned toward my face, I kissed him on the lips without even thinking.

Thursday, two days after we met, I returned from class to see on my caller ID that “Chad Finnerty” had called seven times. The last time, he left a message. *Finnerty, so that’s his last name.* When I called him back, he said, “You don’t have caller ID, do you?” I almost said “No,” but like him, decided not to lie.

On Friday, we met at my friend Heather’s apartment, a block from the Graffiti. He and I chattered all night, ignoring our friends. I walked next door to use the bathroom because Heather’s wasn’t working. When I came back outside, Chad was waiting for me on the porch. We stood, surrounded by the clear April sky, staring at each other.

He brushed his hand across my cheek and said, “I’m not one to rush into things, but something about this feels right. I just...feel so comfortable talking to you and...I couldn’t imagine not being with you. I mean, really with you.”

“Oh, God. That’s exactly how I feel about you,” I said, completely dumbfounded.

“Are you serious?” he sighed. “I was so nervous to tell you that, but I couldn’t NOT say anything. I mean, you’re everything I’ve ever wanted. I can’t believe this.”

April 11, 1999

I’m writing this down so I can try and concentrate on other things for a little while. I met Chad last Tuesday. I haven’t been this happy—content—since...have I ever felt this way? I don’t feel the need to impress him. I want him to know me and like me for who I am, and so far I’ve told him who I am and where I’ve been. Thinking about him relaxes me. I trust him. Can’t wait to see him again; didn’t want to leave him today, but I have to tend to my life.

See, on my way to Heather's that night, I felt guilt-stricken about how much I'd eaten earlier that day. I planned to return home and go through my usual bedtime routine: two Correctols to flush out my bowels, two teaspoons of Nyquil to put me softly to sleep. But I didn't go home. Chad stayed with me, watched over me all night, and though I have been tempted, I never took laxatives again, nor did I sip medicine to prolong my avoidance of reality. I had a reason to wake up in the morning.

For the next two weeks, Chad and I were nearly inseparable. One evening, after a long day of walking and studying and walking some more, I stumbled home and found him sitting on my front porch, playing his guitar. He'd walked from his house in the Southside all the way to Oakland, just to see me. Apparently, he'd been waiting patiently for hours. My roommates came home one by one and told him I wasn't upstairs, but he kept waiting. I would've returned much earlier if I hadn't forced five miles under my feet, but I didn't tell Chad this.

Being the eve of my birthday, he handed me a red rose and a small envelope. Inside were two tickets to see Paul Simon and Bob Dylan at Star Lake Amphitheatre in July. My immediate thought: *It's only April, and this guy wants to be with me in July!*

A week later, we sat on my bed together while I studied for finals. Chad offered to quiz me, and opened my mythology book to the story of *Oedipus*.

"What's this?" he asked.

"What's what?"

I scooted over next to him, and he pointed to a list of numbers scribbled in the margin:

120

140

260

80

340

170

510

200

710

Flipping through the text, he pointed to pages and pages of similar calculations. Slowly, his smile-puffed cheeks sank into the rest of his face. His mouth fell slightly open, and he curled his lower lip under his top teeth. He confronted my eyes, which I couldn't hide.

“Is this—?”

“Yeah,” I said.

I'd mentioned my history of eating disorders to him once during a waterfall of confessions. I told him I still have tendencies, and that the obsession is not as bad as it used to be, but it's a menace to my mind everyday. Now, his eyes told me he finally understood. I nestled my head into his chest and sobbed quietly.

“Baby, you're twice as strong now with me by your side,” he whispered.

One month after we met, Chad asked me to marry him. Our families thought we were nuts. So did our friends. We agreed, but knew we didn't have a choice; it would happen sooner or later, so why not sooner? Six short months later, we became husband and wife—three words I never thought I'd say in relation to my own life—in a cramped elopers' cove in Nitro, West Virginia, called, appropriately, The Wedding Chapel. Our names were placed in black letters, some of them backwards, on a big white sign in front of the old church, along with “Lisa & Jeff,” also married that day.

Chad accepted a computer animator position in Charleston, West Virginia, and we relocated. That October, after all the bags were unpacked, all the empty boxes stacked in the cellar, all the dishes carefully shelved to never be broken in a fit of rage, I learned that it doesn't matter where I live anymore, but only whom I am with. I know this on rainy days in our drafty two-bedroom house, when Chad reaches for his songbook and his twelve-string guitar. He exposes his thoughts to me, verses he wrote yesterday or years ago, delivers them out loud with full conviction. And even though I envy his talent, and the release that rushes through him as he closes his eyes, plucks and strums each string with bare fingertips and belts out seamless, lyrical poetry, I know this is a part of me that has gone unfulfilled, until now.

All I ever wanted was a place to call home, a best friend who would spark openness and gratitude in me. I wanted someone who would listen to Bob Dylan or James Taylor albums with me, and order pizza on lazy Sunday afternoons. If I found this, I swore to God that I wouldn't screw up again.

But there is no room in a marriage for an eating disorder, and this truth materializes routinely, neurotically, like an uninvited guest at mealtime. On the worst days, I listen half-heartedly to Chad's stories, all the while tallying the chicken, the potatoes, the rice, the salad dressing: *120 plus 250 equals 370, plus 150 is 520, plus 50 is— oh God—570.*

Sometimes I feel like a polygamist, fully devoted to Chad, and to my disease. I have a marriage with love and a marriage with numbers, an obsession with thinness and control, which to me, for a long time, meant success. Even after finding Chad, I realize that for me, the line between weight and self-love is a broken one.

Loss

*I'm in you more so
when they put me in the ground*

-U2

Fortunately, Chad was with me when my grandmother, uncle, and father passed away—all in less than a year's time. Chad had lost his father before we met, so I found strength in his experience. Still, I was not prepared to say goodbye to all of those people so soon. And now, it seems that the more I have, and the more I love, the more I fear loss. After that dreadful year, the blades cut into my heart each time the phone rings.

By the time Dad died, at least I was accustomed to the funeral process. I wore the same clothes to his mass that I wore to Grandpa's, but also wore my running shoes, in honor of Dad's love for the sport. I thought this was part of my grieving, a dedication to my father, but immediately afterwards, regretted this decision. All I envision about that cold, January day is how I thumped across the altar to read "The Second Letter of Paul to the Corinthians," or whatever Biblical excerpt I choked on. Of all the motions I carried out in the Catholic cathedral that day, it seemed wrong for me to be bouncing around divine statues and oversized crucifixes in my Nikes, whether I agreed with the religion or not.

And then came the question of Dad's ashes. Should I transfer them to an ornate urn and display them on the mantle? Scatter them across the Susquehanna, along the garden path where he used to run? Bury them next to his mother's grave in Shamokin? Or leave them, packed in their cardboard box, on a gritty shelf in Mom's garage?

Eventually, I discovered that his final resting place was trivial, for his remains float all around me.

Piano / Car

*Sometimes even music
Cannot substitute for tears*

-Paul Simon

I think of Dad more than ever, now that he's gone. Usually, it's because I'm listening to music or running—two passions he cultivated in me. I also think about him when I'm driving, because he taught me the beauty of a five-speed. In fact, he's probably the reason why I insist on a stick shift instead of an automatic. It's all about control.

Making my hour commute from Winfield to Huntington one morning, I was listening to Tori Amos, attempting to calm myself before another day of balancing my roles as graduate student and teacher. My plan backfired. Less than five miles into my journey, I had to pull off at a rest stop, the road too blurred through my tears.

Suddenly, I pictured a scene from my childhood: My father, before Parkinson's crippled his body and Alzheimer's erased his personality, standing in the double doorway between the hallway and the living room of our Cape Cod, watching and listening to me improvise melodies on our baby grand. I invented one piece, a rhythm of notes that rolled into and out of one another, and I turned the song into something new each time. Dad squinted his eyes and grinned at me, and clapped his hands when I finished playing. Though I acted bashful and told him to go away, I secretly treasured these moments, and stuffed them in my pocket like a flattering love letter you never throw away, no matter how much it tears or fades over the years. Now, Tori's intense piano playing made me yearn for that piano, where I once poured my emotions onto the black and white keys.

Before Dad got sick, he said he would give the Yamaha to the first daughter to marry. But Mom sold it, shortly after that December in 1998 when I signed the refusal for resuscitation, long before any wedding bells rang. With Dad in the nursing home,

Mom needed money to pay his medical bills. She sold all of Dad's "toys," as he called them—his tool shed, a cement mixer, an ancient air compressor.

I had forgotten all about Dad's piano promise until that morning on the interstate. Covering miles and reliving memories seem to go hand-in-hand, but when that vision smacked me in the face, I was unprepared. I hadn't let myself cry in months. I'd wanted to, needed to, but told myself I didn't have time. It was my first semester as a teaching assistant and graduate student, and my first year as a wife. I had too many priorities, and crying just wasn't one of them. But now, more than ever, I wanted that piano, and I wept for it.

The only place where I dare sing out loud is alone, in the car. There, I am free and everything is beautiful. I become Margo Timmins or Tori Amos or Sarah McLachlan. I become the voices and the strings and the melodies pounding, thumping, swirling, swaying. I become the music.

That day, I convinced myself that if I had the baby grand, I could sing with my fingers. This would be my release, my pacification. I needed something else to occupy my hands besides picking all the raisins out of oatmeal cookies and discarding the remaining chunks of cooked dough. I needed something else to amuse my mind besides counting every calorie I shoved into my ravenous mouth. I was still looking, and hoping, for a mind-body cure.

Companions

*I will follow you
Will you follow me?
All the days and nights
That we know will be*

-Genesis

February 4, 2001

Why do I do this? Why do I ruin every weekend? Every time Chad wants to go out, take a drive, enjoy the day, I get indecisive. "I want to go early. I have a lot of work to do. I want to get my cappuccino. I don't want to go far," I tell him.

Okay, so as usual, he complies with my every wish...only, we don't leave as soon as I want. It's two hours later, after he's finished some work.

"I'm not sure if I want to go now," I say. *Damn it. I wanted to leave at 11:00, or 11:30. Now it's 1:00. Even if we leave this very minute, we'll be gone the rest of the day. I won't get anything done.*

He inches closer to me on the couch. *I won't look at him. I won't look him in the eyes because I'll see how sweet he is and realize he hasn't done anything wrong. I'll just stare straight ahead. The worms. The worms. They're stirring in my head.*

"You do this every time," he says.

"No I don't. Not every time." *Straight ahead. Don't turn. Don't look.*

"Well, enough for me to expect it. That's how often you do it."

Fuck! I wanna punch something. Not him—of course not him. That's not what I mean.

I Just

Feel

Rage

And I don't know what to do with it. He's right. I do this all the time.

"I was thinking maybe we could go to the mall, then eat an early dinner. I haven't taken you out in so long."

"No, I don't want to be out long enough to get hungry for dinner. I have a lot of work to do." *And what if we don't get back in time for me to work out? What if I eat too much, and I'm too full to work out? No, I won't eat anything—maybe a piece of chocolate or something. Definitely cappuccino. Then I'll have to work out. I'll be wired and energized and I'll need to work out. I can't eat much for dinner if I don't work out. We'll probably have pizza and I want to be that hungry.*

"I am in such a foul mood. Why do you want me to go with you?"

"I always want you to come with me. I just want to spend time with you. Come on, you know you'll feel better if you get outside today. I don't even care where we go."

I know he's right, but oh God, I just want to cry and I have no idea why. And oh God, if he goes, if I let him leave without me, I'll probably do something to hurt myself, drive my fist into my head, dig my fingernails into my arm, and if he knew I still did that he would be so hurt and he would cry. We both would cry. I don't know why I do it—it just feels better to hurt more on the outside. There's no reason for this, no reason. I want to cry. I have so much to be thankful for, so much in this world. He...

"Well?"

"Why don't you just go ahead and go. No. Wait. I'll come."

Oh God, now I'm crying and everywhere we go these days, my eyes are red and puffy from crying. So many strangers see me cry, and what do they think? I hope they don't think he did something to me. I do this to myself.

180 plus 180 is 360 plus 50 is 410, no, we'll say 40 and round it off to 400. Cappuccino will make it 550, 600 at the most. It's 1:15. I've been up for 3 hours. 400's okay. That's good.

We walk out to the car and I'm still nervous, still thinking about how little money we have and he wants to go out to dinner. *Should I be worrying about the gas we'll waste driving to the mall?*

We leave our driveway, pull out onto the main road. I still feel anxious, uptight. We almost argue about cat food or shampoo, something unimportant. *Why do I do this all the time? I don't let myself **enjoy** anything anymore. What's worse, I don't let **him** enjoy anything anymore. I'm always worried about something. My moods are always changing. I know, if I were a car, I'd be a five-speed. I wouldn't allow smooth changes in speed unless my driver was smooth. I would whine and roar if driven too fast in third gear, and stutter and choke if driven too slowly in fourth.*

We've almost reached the interstate. A ball of soggy sawdust lodges in my throat as I force the tears down. The sun stings my salty eyes. Chad takes his hand off my knee and fumbles through his collection of the Doobies, the Dead, Bob Dylan. He finds the right tape and slides it in the stereo.

It's Marc Cohn, the first tape we ever bought together, two years ago in May when we were traveling through central Pennsylvania, between his and my mother's houses. We were in the same car we're in now, his light blue four-door 1991 Escort, automatic, with a weather-cracked dashboard and cigarette burns in the seats from when he used to smoke.

He plays this tape now because he knows I'll feel better. But it always makes me cry, makes me realize how I forsake him and our love. We danced to "True Companion" at our wedding reception, clung to each other and bawled the whole time.

So now, here I am, clutching his soft green corduroy-covered arm with both hands, nuzzling my face into his shoulder, keeping my eyes closed. I'm picturing the ditch again, the sand, the heat, the flies, the birds of prey. I shake my head, hoping these visions will leak from my treacherous imagination, never come again.

We're on I-64, the road I take to school everyday, the road I can't stand most days, but today, because he is with me, I remember how in love I am, how lucky I am. I don't even watch the highway; I cling to my husband, my angel, my personal savior. When I lift my head, just for a few minutes, his right hand instinctively finds my neck and his fingertips knead the tender flesh covering the spots that are most tense. He always knows just where to touch me, and he's driving, so aware of the road and of me. I keep my eyes shut, and this feels so good, I almost drool.

He stops massaging, and again, I cling to his arm. I won't look up at him now because I don't want him to see my tears. I'm happy and relieved, and I can explain this later. I let the humming of the car, the rustic scent of his coat, the dynamic piano in "Walking in Memphis" ease my mind. Tears drip slowly down my cheeks, onto my right wrist, where they trickle down the soft inner side of my arm. I look down at my lap, and acknowledge that my thighs are thicker than they were when we first met. I know this is okay. I begin to heal.

When you start letting go of an addiction, you decide to think about life more. The world hits you in the face. A lover's hand feels softer, the blue sky appears brighter,

and melodies sound more intense. Sensations are enhanced as if you've taken some drug that forces you to meditate on your surroundings—that's what healing is like for me. I know that this day in the car won't change me forever, won't make me stop counting, won't be **the sign** I've been searching for to end my illness, my obsession. But I know that these tears I cry, the way I cling to Chad's arm, this wind on my face, brings me one step closer to wellness. I don't care if we ever leave this road or this car. Thirty, forty, fifty miles, and we could keep going, miss exit 20 for the mall, drive on forever. This is what I wanted, what I needed today—to not care, so much that I'm able to enjoy life.

And then I'm struck by the habit of my life and almost lose it for a minute. We enter the perimeter of the parking lot, and I begin to count what **he** has eaten today: *6 mozzarella sticks=360 calories, plus French fries, probably 300. He must still be hungry. What will I do when he wants to stop and eat?*

Oh, God. What am I doing? Let go. Let go. He's driving the wrong way—I know he doesn't want to go around the building this way...no, don't say anything. Let him figure it out on his own, for once. Don't interrupt this mood. We're not going to die if he doesn't do it my way. We'll find the bookstore, eventually. Maybe we'll just keep driving. Maybe he won't stop.

I plan my apology, but I know no words can make up for what I put him through. I don't know how he deals with my ever-fluctuating moods. And I just had my period—it's not like this is PMS and I have half an excuse.

We park. I look up, into his clear blue eyes, study his milky white, thinly bearded face, his soft lips.

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry,” I say.

“What are you talking about?”

He sees I’ve been crying, but doesn’t mention it yet. *He’s so used to this, God, he’s so used to me crying all the time.*

“I’m sorry I put you through this, that I do this to you.”

“Nonsense. What are you talking about? Honey, listen to me: you’re perfect. You didn’t do anything to me.”

He wipes my face with his soft artist fingertips.

“You okay?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I’m okay.” I smile so he knows I mean it.

With that, we venture into Border’s. As we walk across the parking lot, Chad rationalizes.

“You know, we don’t have much money,” he says, “but we do have a lot of stuff. We’ve sacrificed having money for having things, instead. We live in a nice house, have two sweet cats, two computers, a stereo, a new couch. The only things we really spend money on are books. At least we don’t spend money on CDs anymore—thanks to MP3s.”

I am so close to saying, *Yeah, but we can’t MP3 the new Enya CD. I would really like to have that.* But I keep my mouth shut. My goal today is to not complain, to be pleasant, agreeable.

We enter the store. Chad heads straight for the computer section and flips through an animation book. He wants to learn more about lighting, he tells me.

“You know where I’ll be,” I say.

I walk into “Literature” and peruse the Kurt Vonnegut selections to see what’s in stock, count how many I own, how many I’ve read, how many I still want to read. Then I look through the classics—Aeschylus, Plato, Ovid—*they have no Virgil*. I count how many plays I’ve read, proud of my accomplishments thus far.

I begin to feel hot and nauseous from the thick, sweet scent of coffee and pastry, and from the multiplying Sunday crowd. *Vultures*. I find Chad by the magazine section. *I’m not going to whine*. I read the poetry in *The Atlantic Monthly*. I look for *The New Yorker* but I can’t find it. I slowly waltz over to Chad, who’s now reading a special effects magazine. I tilt my head to the side. “You ready to go?” he asks. I nod. I’m trying to talk as little as possible. I’m so tired of my voice. “They have journals,” he says, and points to the shelves behind me. “I know.” I don’t even look. I just want to go home.

I creep into the mall—wretched, overly populated—to throw away a Twizzler’s wrapper. When I return, Chad’s already in line, waiting to pay for a back issue of *Animation Magazine*. There are too many people behind him so I wait by the clearance CD’s. I grab an Iron Butterfly album, plan to show it to Chad and sing “In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida” in a really obnoxious voice before we leave. He’s at the register, and I see the cashier, a young blond girl, smiling at him. She says something like, “Is that her back there?” and looks at me.

What the heck is going on?

I don’t know that girl. She must be hitting on him. Look at him. He’s so cute. Who wouldn’t hit on him? He had to tell her, “Sorry, I’m married.” “Oh, is that her back there?” I won’t make a big deal out of it.

“What was that about?” I ask him on our way outside.

“What do you mean?” He’s smiling. He won’t look at me.

She was hitting on him. She was hitting on him and he doesn’t want me to know.

“I saw her look at me and say, ‘Is that her?’”

“Oh...I got you a surprise, and I told her to be quiet about it. I wanted to wait at least until we got out to the car.”

We’re outside now.

“No! You didn’t have to get me anything! I really thought she was hitting on you, and you had to tell her you were married. Then I figured you didn’t want to tell me.”

We both laugh. He hands me Enya’s new CD, *A Day Without Rain*.

“Thank you, baby,” I say. “You are so sweet to me. I don’t deserve you.”

“Oh, you deserve so much more. I really wasn’t planning to get it, but it was on display at the register. It was a last minute decision.”

Soon, we’re snuggling on the couch in our living room, listening to Enya and eating sweet mesquite beef jerky. *This is true love*. He knows it. I know it. Finally, for the first time in days, I can breathe. This is what I needed to calm down, to slow down, and feel alive. But this feeling won’t last long.

Later, I will watch Chad carry his computer out into the living room and place it on the coffee table. He will loosen the tiny screws that hold the tower together, and ask me to hold the base still while he pulls the cover off. I will watch his wide eyes study the insides, like a brain surgeon preparing to remove a tumor. His long, skinny fingers will steadily remove and replace tiny components that to me just look like scraps of metal.

I won't tell him this, but I will wish he could open up my head like this, find the malfunctioning pieces, and remove them. I will imagine my mind and nerves fully exposed, him tinkering with memory, deleting parts that hinder my daily performance. I will envision the worms that dwell inside my head like a computer virus, confusing and complicating everything I try to articulate. I will tell him to find the plaques and tangles—the clutter that consumed my father's brain, the things that are in my brain, erasing me, slowly but surely—and get rid of them, burn them away. I will wish the task of fixing me were a simple one.

Tooth Dreams

*It's just a little lump
But you feel it
In the creases and the shadows
With a rattling deep emotion*

-Paul Simon

Something in my mouth is bleeding. I spit, and blood swirls in the bubbly, blue-gray toothpaste as it spatters the shiny white sink. I scrape the lower left area of my gums with my toothbrush and look—not there. Next, the lower right—not there, either. It must be that sensitive area, way back, upper right—yep. Found it. I spit. More blood.

I study my top right front tooth. *Everybody who looks at me must notice the bottom, middle corner—it's so much whiter than the rest, and thinner. And the whole bottom half is tinted gray from the metal behind it. Why did Dr. Keefer make my other tooth so much shorter at the top than it actually was?* I study the slick, pearly porcelain, and the gums above. A slight hole and scar tissue remain where my real tooth used to be. If I lift my lip high enough, you can see this thing isn't rooted in my gums; you can see it's merely glued and anchored by metal to the gray teeth on each side. I look at the smaller tooth to the left. *It's so gray. If I ever have the money, I'll have it redone. I know people notice it. They probably stare at it like they would at a hair lip or a glass eye. They don't want to look, but they do. It's all they see when they look at me— even the people who say they can't tell it's fake. They're just trying to be nice.*

I have dreams about this bridge in my mouth. I have dreams that it's collapsing, and I have to hold it in place with the tip of my tongue. My mom is always nearby, and I tell her to call the dentist, but she's not listening. She's too busy—she's planning Mia's wedding, and my sister is the center of attention for once. I don't feel anger or jealousy at this, only surprise.

Suddenly, I'm with one of my students, a boy, slightly attractive but so young, and I don't want him to know my tooth is falling out so I cup my hand over my mouth and walk outside, somewhere, never home, never familiar, into the woods. The whole bridge crumbles inside my mouth and I want to yell for my mom but I don't want to lose my tooth in the underbrush. I would never find it. I need a dentist. I try to close my mouth but can't. It's full of broken pieces.

Our cat Avery pounces on my pillow and wakes me. Chad sleeps soundly as the morning sun glares through the window. I do not tell him about this dream. His thick, long legs are wrapped around me, and he smiles and mumbles innocently—something about cameras and pixels. *No, I can't tell him.*

I want to call my mom. I want to make sure everything's all right. I wonder if my great Aunt Irene is okay. They moved her to the nursing home recently because she couldn't walk anymore. I'm convinced for a moment that she's passed in the night, but no, I never have teeth dreams about family. *I won't call Mom. I won't tell Chad.*

The last time I had one of these dreams, it was about Lori, the receptionist at the hospital where I used to work; her grandfather died. I had the dream on a Saturday night, and when I arrived at work on Monday, a temp was sitting in Lori's chair. I remember that morning, when I awoke, and how I sensed someone's soul slipping away. I knew it was her grandfather, though I never met the man. *Wait, no—that was nearly a year ago.* I had another dream four months ago, when Mia's friend's father died. *That's right. The dream—all of my teeth were rotten and crumbling.*

All my life, my teeth have posed problems. The first time I went to the dentist, Dr. Shoppe told me I had ten cavities, requiring two separate visits and laughing gas each time. I was five. That was two decades ago, long before that April Fool's night when I

lost my tooth, and now, my gums throb where that crooked but lovely *real* tooth used to be.

They say that when a person loses a leg, they still feel it aching or itching from time to time, like when it's about to rain. They feel it, even though it's not there; only a stump remains where the limb used to be. I think that's why my gums ache. I even massage my fake tooth sometimes, to release the tension.

Chad says it's all in my head. He says all my aches and pains are. A lump is nothing. It'll go away. Leukemia took his father's life in 1998, when Chad was only 18. As a result, he avoids discussion of any disease. If he catches me flipping through my health books, skimming lists of symptoms and treatments, he threatens to tear them up and toss them in the garbage. "Sweetheart, there's nothing wrong with you! I'm going to burn that damn book!" he yells.

This is why I don't voice my suspicions. I didn't tell him, for instance, that Wednesday morning, after the night we finished a bottle of champagne during our honeymoon in Myrtle Beach, that my right thumb was shifting uncontrollably from side to side. Instead, I lay in bed beside him, watching my hand in disbelief. *Was it the alcohol? Is it because I don't drink much anymore, and my liver can't metabolize it the way it used to? Are these "the shakes?"*

I didn't tell him because I thought this was the first sign of Parkinson's, my father's disease. That's how Michael J. Fox realized something was wrong with him—he had tremors in his pinky finger. Dad used to make a "pill rolling" motion with his thumb and forefinger, also an early symptom. I don't tell Chad because in my mind, I am certain I will suffer and die the way Dad did. I don't tell Chad because I am afraid he will believe this. I also fear he really will take my books, shred their sacred pages, and

incinerate them. And then what will I consult when I need their advice, when I so desperately crave their diagnoses? They are the ointment for my cuts and bruises, the pills that numb the pain, the labels that make me real. I cling to them like a hard hat in a hailstorm.

Fear of Deceit

*And these old hopes and fears
Still at my side*

-Paul Simon

Always present in the anorectic-bulimic's mind is the fear of deceit, that the numbers we learn are false. The bathroom scale might be off a few pounds. The size two jeans might really be a size four. The frozen yogurt might not *really* be fat-free, and that butter spray might actually have calories.

In high school, one of my favorite noshes was Stroehmann's 100% Stone Ground Wheat Bread. At eighty calories a slice, three pieces substituted for my regular lunchtime bagel. After school, two or three more slices dipped in warm Prego with mushrooms comprised the perfect snack.

One afternoon, however, I studied the nutrition label longer than usual. The numbers didn't add up. The amount of carbohydrates listed actually made each slice 100 calories—not 80.

That night, I wrote to the company, politely explaining how I loved their bread, but how betrayed I felt by their product misrepresentation. Three weeks later, I received a giant envelope in the mail filled with coupons, an entire book about bread and nutrition, and a personalized letter of apology and explanation. Nine months later, they revised their label.

My psychosis permeates my subconscious, as well. I remember a dream one night during my undergrad years. I was drinking a quart-size bottle of lime-flavored seltzer water, which I often do in real life—for its tangy taste, false satiety and caloric absence. In the dream, after finishing the bottle, I looked at the back label and saw that

each serving contained 25 calories. My dream-self startled at the betrayal, at the harsh blow to my gut.

I awoke in a sweaty panic, as with the binging nightmares, relieved when I felt the cool, crisp sheets against my dry skin, and the bones of my knees rubbing uncomfortably but pleasingly against each other—proof that I was still too thin, that I'd only been dreaming, alone in the dark. Lying on my side on my unframed futon mattress, I snatched my clock off the floor and found solace in 3 AM's green glow.

Although the labels and the scales and the clothing sizes never promise consistency, even the best mirrors cannot conceal shame, which is why I do not trust those reflective sheets of glass. No matter how thin I actually am, the guilty gloss over my eyes adds fifty pounds to my bones. In reality, though, I am the skinniest glutton you'll ever see.

Because I never trust mirrors, driving a car evokes even more fear of deceit. What if the reflection is not the truth? The manufacturers go so far as to print, "Objects in mirror closer than they appear." I look over my shoulder before changing lanes, just as I glance down at my naked stomach before stepping into my size-zero cargo pants. I need reassurance.

Call it obsession.

Call it paranoia.

Call it genetics.

When I was little, Mom said I would get diabetes if I kept eating so many Dum Dums and Tootsie Rolls. Through the years, she shared a variety of odd caveats with

Mia and me: sitting on cold, hard ground would give us bladder infections; eating raw or undercooked noodles would give us worms; allowing our boyfriends to tickle us would make us stutter. Meanwhile, time and again, I gagged watching her chew raw bacon over the stove on Sunday mornings. She said she began eating it that way when she was pregnant with me. Maybe that's my problem.

I must have the dirtiest elbows because of her warnings. See, I'm one of those people who won't touch anything in public bathrooms—I pump the towel dispenser with my elbow, turn the spigot on while my hands are still dirty, lather fiercely up to my wrists with several blobs of soap, rinse thoroughly, snatch my paper towel, dry my hands, turn the spigot off with the towel, grab the door handle with the towel, exit, and find the nearest garbage can outside the restroom to toss my germ-ridden rag. When I confront other doors that push open, I enter with a forceful, clothed, shoulder-shove, never touching anything with my bare skin. I have surgeon's hands.

I wasn't always this way. But Mom convinced me that most people twirl their fingers around inside their assholes and then go around touching everything. So my suspicions multiply by the minute. One morning, while meandering through Kroger's produce section, I found a plump, delicious-looking cucumber. As usual, I placed it in the front of my cart. I stared down at the plastic flap where babies and children sit and felt a ball of panic clunk in my gut. *What if kids pee on that thing? What if their diapers leak onto it? For God's sake, I just put my cucumber there!*

Recently, similar fears emerged in my home. Chad hired a freelancer, a friend of his from the Art Institute, to help with a computer-animated series. For five months, he came to our house everyday, and the three of us shared the same facilities. Like my mom used to do when we had friends over, I listened one day while he was in the bathroom. I

heard a trickle. A flush. A thump when the toilet lid went down just before he came out. But what I didn't hear was the water running. *He didn't wash his hands. And I have officially become my mother.*

So then, until the project was completed, I used my elbow to click on the light. After flushing and washing my hands, I turned the doorknob with a wad of toilet paper and chucked it in the trash on my way out. At night in bed, I cringed if my elbow brushed my pillowcase, remembering all the bacteria-laden buttons and levers it encountered during the day. You can imagine my relief when the freelancer left and I scrubbed and sterilized every fixture in that room with Clorox bleach and alcohol. No more dirty elbows.

Absolution

*They say to love is to bury
Those demons from which we all hide*

-Cowboy Junkies

Morning is the easiest part of the day, when my tally is at absolute zero. Clean slate, or plate, I should say. And amidst all the “meals” like cornflakes and cheese sandwiches and baked potatoes that I would rather not eat, but do, at regular “mealtimes,” for Chad’s sake, I intermittently pay homage to the chocolate shrine inside my refrigerator door.

With their single digits, M&Ms used to be my prime pick of The Forbidden, but now there are bite size Reese’s bits, Almond Joy, Hershey’s with almonds, Kit Kat, Heath Bar, Cookies and Cream—all about ten calories a pop. The count is easier. Plus, bite-size pieces spare me the trouble of transforming full-size candy bars into crumbs via my normal, riveting, nibbling regime.

When I am reduced to this old-fashioned process, I still reach for small: Hershey’s Golden Nuggets. One of these can last me an entire day.

- 9:00AM - Retrieve a pre-refrigerated piece from the butter nook, eat a corner here, a corner there, wrap the rest for later.
- 12:00PM - Before lunchtime, unwrap that glorious golden paper and nibble until precisely half the bar remains. Wrap it up and hide it behind the mustard.
- 2:30PM - Mid-afternoon, bite off half of the half. Wrap it up and tuck it behind the strawberry jam.
- 5:30PM – While the spaghetti boils and Chad’s still in the studio, snatch that smidgeon and gnaw off the last remaining corner. Place behind mustard.
- 8:30PM - After dinner, when all the dishes have been rinsed and placed in the sink, all the leftover spaghetti scooped out and salvaged, and Chad is in the bedroom changing into his pajamas, reach behind the strawberry jam—no wait, the mustard—and find that little morsel of sweetness. Slowly unwrap the golden foil. Roll the treasure around in your palm. Precious gem. Place in mouth, close eyes and chew. *What’s that noise? He’s coming? Turn toward wall, shove evidence in trash, brush off hands while chewing and swallowing.* Kiss him as if nothing’s wrong.

The next morning it begins again. I whittle each piece down, millimeter by millimeter, until it's as if I'm not consuming anything at all. Mere shavings. Single digits. Less remorse. With the larger chocolate bars, it simply becomes a matter of geometry—you'd be amazed at how much surface area a Hershey's Symphony Bar can acquire after I'm through surgically removing all the tiny toffee pieces.

This activity busies my hands and my mouth. It's why I can't get anything done. I need the chocolate, and if it's not here my mind can't concentrate, but if it is I still can't focus because it's calling my name. So I traipse in and out of the kitchen, answering these calls twenty, thirty times a day. I crave it because my body still NEEDS something that I am not giving it. After years of restriction, I know this. But the fear is still there: What will become of my hips, my thighs, my butt, if I take a big, hearty bite? Or worse, what if I eat THE WHOLE THING? I can't and I won't. Still, I need it and will pick and nibble until I practically HAVE eaten the entire bar or bag or box, until I feel absolutely sick to my stomach. Then comes the torture of estimating all the nibbled corners, peanut M&M shells, crunchy toffee bits; the torment of trying to formulate some figure that MIGHT represent the damage done, so that I can plan the rest of my day accordingly.

The numbers blur and my head spins. Eventually, the cravings turn to commitments outside the home. This is where teaching—where learning—saves me. I never knew Marshall University existed until after we moved here in 1999. I slaved over demeaning, demanding temp jobs for nearly a year. Then one day, an impulsive phone call to the head of Marshall's English department set me free.

Somehow, through the cunning words in my "Statement of Purpose," I convinced the graduate school to grant me a teaching assistantship. Aside from the previous

summer when I taught Chad how to drive standard, I never taught anything to anyone. I tumbled into the position headfirst, and surprisingly, it landed me back on my feet.

Standing in front of a classroom, holding the power to mold my students, watching their fresh, eager eyes, I forget everything else. **I find absolution.** Not once do I wonder how many grams of sugar might have been in my 20-ounce gas station cappuccino breakfast. Not even during the silence of in-class writing time do I fear the cheese sandwich that I know will be my lunch. I have a purpose: I am here to make a difference in these fragile lives before me, and that's what I will continue to do. And I discover that my grandest quality is patience—waiting for an answer, allowing the students to search through their books, even if it takes minutes instead of seconds. My whole life has trained me to manage awkward silence, and so I wait eagerly for these scholars to break it. If only I could live in the serenity of the classroom, for it's when I leave those walls that the demons return.

Big Daddy

*You can't always get
What you want
But if you try sometimes...
You get what you need.*

August 24, 2001

Journeying home after a long day of school, The Rolling Stones' *London Years* disc 3 sways me into a calm, contented mood. Hungry for dinner, I snatch the cell phone and dial home.

While I wait for Chad's voice, visions of Ponderosa or Shoney's—any place with an all-you-can-eat salad bar—gush through my mind. *It's Friday. Surely we can go somewhere cheap and casual. I'll fill up on vegetables so I don't finish my chicken and potatoes.*

Chad tells me he plans to work late. His contract employee is staying to help him. "Let's order a pizza," he says.

My good mood slithers out the window and becomes tangled in the back tires before flailing itself into dry mud on the roadside.

"Pizza? From Fox's?" I ask patiently, trying whole-heartedly to mask my disappointment. I know he'll say yes, get Big Daddy—their 21-slice special. I say I might stop at Wendy's for a salad, too, because I want something besides pizza. He understands—he knows that dough, sauce, and cheese just don't fill me up like they do a normal person. He knows I need all the roughage I can get, or I'll eat myself into oblivion and whine about it all night long. He *doesn't* know that if he happens to leave me at home after we eat pizza, I'll use every furious second to travel nowhere on the treadmill. One night, I trudged so long I tripped up the machine—it hit 100 minutes,

rolled back to zero and shut itself down. I had almost reached seven miles. I felt triumphant.

I agree to get Big Daddy. First I stop at Kroger's and build a salad for myself—iceberg lettuce, purple cabbage, button mushrooms, baby corns, red, yellow, green peppers, broccoli, cauliflower—a whole pound, enough to force a sense of fullness into my churning gut. I veer into Fox's parking lot at 5:10, climb out, and make room in the back seat for my unwanted guest. I look around to see who is watching me. No one. Inside, I tell the guy behind the counter, "I'm here to pick up a pizza for Finnerty." The words nearly gag me. So foreign to my vocabulary, I imagine them landing on the counter, flopping about like a fish choking for air. I pay him \$10.59, and he hands me Big Daddy. I carry the monstrosity of glut to the car, set it on the rooftop while unlocking and opening the doors, and frighteningly position it, perfectly level, behind the driver's side. I hop in and start the engine, glance over my shoulder, making sure the ogre in the back is staying in its cardboard cage. The whole five-mile drive home that beast kicks, growls, thumps, drools, and threatens me in all its wretched, sloppy violence. When I turn around to rebuke this monster, it's as still as a gravestone.

People say you shouldn't let food control you. Food is powerless, they say. This is a clichéd piece of advice for the eating disordered—mainly the overeater. And this is not true of Big Daddy. That thing is a goddamned bitch of a beast, determined to get me one day. So far I've gotten away with eating less than three pieces per encounter. So far I am safe from its dooming imprisonment.

Sometimes I wish for jail-like restraint. It would be easier if I *had* to live on bread and water alone, because I can't handle the freedom of a full refrigerator, of store

shelves stacked high. The word temperance carries as much meaning for me as the word morality does for a nihilist.

Many women wish for the willpower of an anorectic, or the talent of a bulimic. Some yearn for the precious skill of self-starvation, to be thin and stay thin and never let food get the best of their bodies. I know this because I hear them say it. I read online bulletins, and witness online chats on sites such as *The Beauty of Visible Bones*. I've participated in discussions for depressed females, and these women tell me they wish they could return to that pre-motherhood size two they once were, as if this would miraculously make them more pleasant people.

I, too, know what it's like to be overweight, and to feel lazy and sluggish and unworthy of good things. I understand the discontentment of owning clothes that are suddenly too small—way too small. I know what it's like to wish on the waif.

Between my freshman and sophomore years in college, I went from a healthy 5'4" and 120 pounds to an uncomfortable, button-popping 145. Granted, this is not considered "fat" by military standards, but it was abnormal for me. My drunken midnight binges busted me out of a size six, then an eight, then a ten. I wore a size twelve dress to my sorority formal. Finally, I stole my boyfriend's sweatpants, which I wore without pride everywhere I went.

But the thing is, once you discover that squirmy, skinny girl lurking beneath your skin, she's not as comforting as you thought she would be. There is always the threat that this "new, improved person" will disappear under layers of fat, the fear of going back to "the way you were," which the world would call "average" or "normal." We repeatedly beat back the knowledge of how variable the human condition is—recognition of the miracle that *makes* us human.

The truth is, crossing over from overeating to under-eating is like walking down a rocky path and admiring the soft green hills that surround you but don't belong to you. You imagine yourself hopping the fence, racing through the lush grass, diving into its velvety blades, rolling around and finally lying beneath the warm sun. But once you arrive there, you discover that the grass isn't so soft, and the ground is far from smooth. Underneath the wildflowers are lumps of dry dirt and uneven ground and you *can't lie still*. You toss and turn, searching desperately for a contoured dip to rest your head, but all you feel are bumps and knobs below every inch of your body. The weeds scratch your ankles. The mosquitoes bite just as hard as they did before. There is no shade and that sun is so fucking hot.

10:30pm

The household has been fed, me consuming my usual two-and-a-half slices of pizza, pitching the other half in the trash. The remaining five pieces have been sent to their refrigerated resting place, wrapped neatly on a Correll plate with Saran Wrap, awaiting Chad's lunchtime tomorrow. But they won't remain quiet with me in the next room. I hear them hissing in the cold, scratching at the plate, clawing at the cellophane atop the wiry shelf. They want out, they want me, and I—regretfully, sinfully—crave them. Chad is still working in the studio at the other end of the house, so I quietly retrieve the plate, set it on the counter, uncover it as if I'm stealing a rare jewel under the rightful owner's nose. Saliva flows as my eyes rape this forbidden fare. I am like Jack the Ripper greeting his last victim.

I fumble around in the silverware drawer for a sharp paring knife, carefully slice the edges of each piece several times, lowering the dimensions of each rectangular serving, and gnaw on the thin strips. *It's better this way. No one will notice.* Strip after

cheesy, saucy strip, the slices become exponentially smaller and smaller, until finally...*Four will be enough for him tomorrow. What the hell? I haven't binged in a while.* I even take the time to heat it in the microwave—that last crusty corner slice. I devour it while it's still too hot for a sane person to eat. *Why did I do that? I was still full from earlier! Now what?*

11:00pm

I go to Chad, cradling my bulging belly, and confess my indulgence.

“That’s good, honey,” he says. “I’m *glad* you ate that.”

He knows I’ll continue to complain, so he follows up with: “You’re so beautiful. Nothing could make me not think you’re beautiful.”

“Even if I gain fifty pounds?”

“Even if you gain five hundred.”

I curl up in bed and wonder what I did to deserve him, and what I’d do without him. I don’t think I’d be in graduate school. I’d probably be working some crappy telemarketing job and still living in my one-room, roach-infested Pittsburgh apartment. I’d be running five or ten or twelve miles a day, for no other reason than to punish myself. I’d be living on lettuce, tuna, vodka and chocolate. I’d own stock in Ex-Lax. I wouldn’t be writing at all, save for a self-loathing poem here and there. I wouldn’t admit it, but I would be horribly depressed.

Today, depressed is one thing I know I am not. Once in a while, I do feel sadder than usual. That happens once a month, on average. But ever since I’ve had Chad to ask me about my days and to embrace me during the nights, I have not shivered between cold sheets, nor have I longed for a magical remedy to make me a happier person.

August 25, 2001

My cat Chloe watches disdainfully as I add two more laps to the PROFORM 730CS, making a grand total of seven miles for the day on my ever-faithful perpetual mile machine. I was planning to stop at six miles, but proudly extended my goal to six-and-a-half. Then I marched outside to get the mail (my conscious tells me this trip equals an eighth of a mile). With little contemplation, I decided, *why not push it to seven?*

In my too-big rubber Adidas sandals, I trudge the extra “distance.” Chad is thirty miles away in Charleston practicing guitar; I keep close watch out the window so he doesn’t catch me in this pathetic state. I finish my seven miles, destroying 700 calories. Only 200 to go. I *will* starve these away.

The seven miles are my only option to make up for yesterday’s 2200, 900 more than I deserved. All morning, these numbers ricocheted inside my throat and seared my gut, still distended from the previous night’s feast. I turned in bed, envisioning the box of Correctol tablets in my underwear drawer. I haven’t touched those pretty pink pills since Chad came into my life, but for the first time in more than two years, I almost gave into their purging promise. But no, I remained strong. I told myself, *you can walk it off, even if you spread it out over two days—five miles today, five miles tomorrow. You’ll eat 1300 calories each day, and no more.* This, I reason, will almost put me back at zero. This, I think, will make me stronger than if I just took some pills and waited for release. So this is what I did.

Now, dog-tired after those twenty-eight “laps,” I wonder what’s truly worse—scouring out my insides or beating up my bones.

Confessions

August 31, 2001

When the confessions come, they surface late at night, in the surreal-ness of streetlights gleaming through the window, so that upon stirring in pre-dawn darkness, it's questionable whether or not they even happened; it may have simply been a watered-down dream. And in the pure sunlit hours of morning, it seems all has been blessed and buried in the backyard, and need not be dug up for any reason.

So we go on.

Last night, I told Chad about the nibbling, about the mushy bits of chocolate, caramel, toffee and nuts that decorate the inside of our trashcan. At first, he didn't think anything was wrong—he thought it was normal for a “woman” to eat the coating off chocolate-covered pretzels and throw the pretzels away.

“Why not?” he said. “That's the yummy part!”

I had to explain in detail how I hide behind the wall, and when I hear his footsteps, I toss the remnants in the garbage.

“That's okay,” he said. “Isn't that the game we play when we sneak a treat from the kitchen?”

“No,” I whispered. “It's not a game for me.”

I told him how I shake like an alcoholic in withdrawal, my mind on autopilot as I gnaw and chew, wrap and throw. Gnaw and chew, wrap and throw. Gnaw and chew, spit, wrap and throw. My eyes don't blink. I am possessed.

I don't know what normal is, but this is definitely not it.

Each of us has a something. We all think that something is the worst of our being: the thieving store clerk, the alcoholic mother, the junkie father. For every habit, though, there is always some justification, some other fault that could be worse. The thief says, “At least I’m not an alcoholic.” The alcoholic says, “At least I’m not a junkie.” The junkie says, “At least I never killed anyone.”

In this dizzying disorder I claim as my own, when I’m fumbling through the cabinets for anything sweet or chocolate, shoving my findings into my mouth and showering crumbs all over the floor and counter, sweeping them up before my cats can eat them, balling up mushy leftovers inside a napkin and stuffing them inside an empty spaghetti box in the garbage—this madness followed by forcing myself onto the treadmill to walk four, five, six miles, all under a sick, gurgling stomach—I repeat these words in my head: *At least I never killed anyone.*

At some point, every addict hits bottom. Sometimes this is epiphany, sometimes it is death. Other times, it just teaches us how to be better addicts.

I use the term “addict” because that’s what I am—I am addicted to food, and its consequences on my body. I am addicted to exercise and the way it disintegrates what I eat. I am addicted to counting, controlling, concealing.

Sometimes I wonder what kind of vice is worse—one that’s illegal, expensive, and dangerous to score, like heroin or crack, or one whose instruments are universal, relatively cheap, and readily accessible, 24/7.

It’s easier to hide the latter because humans *must* eat. We do it in every home, at every restaurant, and on every street corner. In the movie theater. At the mall. Ball games. Parties. “Hors d’oeuvres are on the table. Help yourselves!” So when someone abuses what is necessary to stay alive, how does the abuse stop? One can’t “give it up”

like smoking cigarettes or snorting cocaine. Retaining that innocent balance known only in childhood seems hopeless, impossible.

Perhaps we should simply accept the fear and the counting as part of us, as scars, birthmarks, brain tattoos. At least we are the proud ones who offer a precise, immediate answer when a co-worker asks, "What's 960 divided by four?" 240.

And we must expunge the word "perfect" from our vocabulary, at least when describing tangible matter. "Perfect" is for snow angels, sunrises, first kisses.

Not people.

Still, recovery always waits in the driveway, engine running, always warm, its doors forever unlocked. All we need to do is grasp the handle, open the door, duck our heads, and hop in. Closing the door is the hard part.

Prayer for the Young

*Oh very young
What will you leave us this time?
You're only dancing on the earth
For a short time*

-Cat Stevens

Sometimes it seems as though I pulled my disorder out of a top hat, like a magician. I needed a diagnosis, a label to slap on my psyche. This isn't unusual for a hypochondriac, but I believe it goes deeper. Recent studies suggest that eating disorders may be hereditary, and not merely psychological. My inner-workings might truly be marred.

Still, the familial compliments and criticisms of my youth undeniably fed the flames of this frenzied disease. I can still feel my grandmother's cold hands gripping my wrists, lifting my arms up to examine my bulging, sophomore-year body: "What happened to you, Mora? You used to be so thin!" She meant no harm, but harm is what came.

I often observe little girls, shopping in Kmart with their mothers—skinny girls with blonde ringlets who look just like I did, once upon a time. Sometimes I say a silent prayer for them that they will never be the way I am, and that no one will ever make them feel badly about their bodies.

If I have a little girl some day, I will tame lions and build bridges with my bare hands to keep her healthy and secure. I will shout for joy with her when she is happy, and when she is sad, I will wrap my arms around her and share her tears. I will teach her that all people, whether they have large noses or wrinkled skin, weigh 60 pounds or 600 pounds, deserve equal respect and kindness. I will encourage her to do what her heart says is right, and help her discover her music.

January 3, 2002

*Oh joy
That you bring
Oh joy
Make my heart sing*

-Mick Jagger

Chad works beside me at his desk while I polish and arrange these memoirs, like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, trying desperately to deem them sensible.

“Your thesis is going to get published, isn’t it, baby?” Chad asks sweetly.

“Yeah, right,” is my hasty reply. “When chocolate cake is fat free.”

I stand and announce that I’m taking my afternoon walk, but want a hug first. Chad rises and I wrap my arms around him, press my face against his chest. He returns my embrace.

Usually, Bono or Mick Jagger or both voices seep from my speakers. But today, a gentle computer hum is the only sound infusing our studio.

“Dance with me,” I say. And he does. We sway as though the most beautiful song doesn’t float on the air, but emanates between us.

I wonder why this isn’t enough, why the counting continues to control me, or vice versa, why I can’t plow through it like a bulldozer into a crumbled wreck.

Still, I am taking baby steps, spending my New Year evenings on the couch, with Chad and a bag of tortilla chips. Snacking after dinner. 100 extra calories a day. Maybe 200. Sometimes it hurts. Sometimes it triggers tears, and I don’t know if they are guilty or joyful. But I step on the scale and see that my body hasn’t blown up with one small splurge, and discover that this food gives me energy, emotion, laughter, *character*. I may be the only person on the planet whose resolutions include gaining five pounds.

And that makes me proud.

Epilogue

*If I have weaknesses, don't let them blind me-
Or camouflage all I'm wary of.*

-Paul Simon

My most recent fear is that after death, I will be left alone with my own mind, with thoughts to speak but no voice to speak them, no one to tell them to, and energy to expend but no muscles to burn it with, no pores to let it leak from. That will be my penance—inner chaos, discontentment, HELL.

With no body, no physical hunger, what will I count?

They say that only 40% of people with eating disorders ever truly recover. So far, anorexia and bulimia have robbed me of twelve years—nearly half my life. Sometimes I fear being part of that 60% that must either deal or die with this cumbersome illness.

Will it be gone when I turn to dust, or will I count every dead cell dissipating in the wind?

Regardless of my collected fears, my latest hope is that Chad and I will make a family together some day. As it is, I'm more stable than ever. I have a treadmill now. I'm like a hamster. I don't go anywhere when I run. I have a home, a place where I belong. What's more, I must still be fertile, despite my intricate past of clever starvation tactics. Now, you could plot the moon's path by my menstrual cycle—a far cry from the days and years when it arrived unexpectedly and unwelcome, every four to six months. At the risk of sounding cheesy, I do believe Chad has made me more of a woman. I have more estrogen flowing through my body, now that I bleed on a regular basis. Or maybe it's just that I eat more, now that I have someone to enjoy food with me.

Before love, what joy was there in eating ice cream alone?

Chad tells me that this eating disorder is simply memories, apparitions, splinters of the past. And he's right. My illness has passed on. It took its last full breath the day I

*met Chad. But its skeleton survives—the numbers and the counting, remnants of thrashing starvation and brutal purging and fear of becoming **FAT**. The numbers. I can bury them, but the bones still rattle. I can incinerate them, but the ashes remain.*

And I know what Chad wants for me – he tells me all the time. He wants to work and make enough money so I won't need a job or a degree, so I can just write. He also wants a baby. He's wanted one ever since we got married.

All my life, I wished for a man to look at me the way he does, to say, "Let's have a baby," and really mean it. But now that it's happening, I tell him no. I still feel like a child, like a baby, myself. What qualifies me to bring a new living, breathing being into the world when I can't even chew a hamburger without guilt tapping me on the shoulder, mocking me in the mirror?

Maybe having a baby will heal me one day. Perhaps, when I have another life to mold, I will set my selfish obsessions aside, clearing the way for a healthy family. Or maybe it will make me worse, compelling me to study the calorie requirements for an infant at each stage of growth, and then I will count for three people instead of two. Maybe I will be sick forever, but I suspect that in time, my fears, along with the counting, will grow dull as a razor's edge. Meanwhile, I will savor every second, and every second helping, or try to. I will celebrate the dream of growing old doing what I love to do—writing, singing, teaching, loving—and never, ever stop dancing.

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