

MAXINE KUMIN

Deuter stands like a rock while I shakily attempt to mount. It is very hard to get my right leg over his side; he waits while I take a handful of mane and, with Victor steadying me, haul myself into position. I look around me. I've been planning this for so long! I thought regaining my seat in the saddle would bring with it some sort of epiphany, a revelation of huge consequence. Instead, I feel merely at home. I am back in my peaceful kingdom.

From this new perspective, the crowns of the maples are just beginning to redden. One final pocket of snow along the brook catches the afternoon sun. The raucous calls of pileated woodpeckers sound from the shagbark hickories. They're getting ready to nest. The whole impetuous natural world is poised to burst forth. We begin our stately procession, Deuter obediently following Victor.

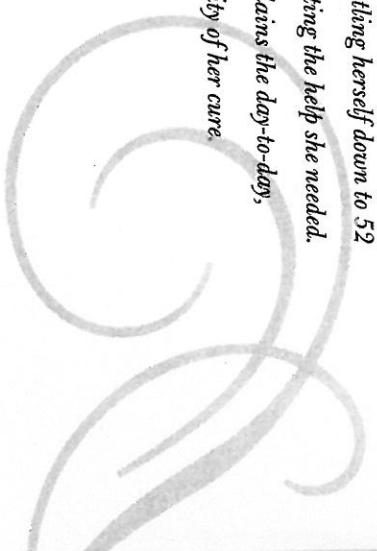
I close my eyes, let my hips absorb my horse's familiar cadence, let my torso follow the motion. I am letting myself believe I will heal.

f r o m

W A S T E D

MARYA HORNBACHER

*Marya Hornbacher bounced between bulimia and
anorexia for 13 years, whittling herself down to 52
pounds before finally accepting the help she needed.
In this excerpt, she explains the day-to-day,
unromantic reality of her cure.*



From here on out things are very blurry. Sitting in my room with my roommate, who started to cry and said, Marya, I'm sorry, I called your parents. I was just so worried. It took me a minute to register. Then I picked up the phone, it was the middle of the night I think, and called my parents and said, I'm really sorry, but I've got to come home. I hope you don't mind.

They minded.

My father explains this minding, years later: "I had said to you for so long, 'You're not eating enough, you're looking deadly ill again.' We said it and said it and said it, you said, 'I'm fine, I'm fine, I'm fine; you lied, you lied, you lied. When you wanted to come home, something in me said, 'She damn well better be sick.'"

If I put myself in my parents shoes, I can understand. After four years of watching your child play an infantile game of chicken, watching her stand at the edge of a cliff, teetering and laughing, almost falling and almost falling but never quite flinging herself over the edge, I can see how a worried audience might eventually get a little sick of this particular game. I can see how people might need to, for their own sanity and for simple reason's sake, let go.

And I can see, too, how a person's brain might refuse to accept that this time, she's actually gone over the edge.

My father flat-out did not want to believe that this was it. Neither did I. My own behavior at this point was entirely contradictory: I knew that I needed to get home, but I didn't want to admit that I was really sick. Like, really fucking sick. I lied about my weight and said I was just so stressed that I thought a short break from school would do me some good. My father suggested I work fewer hours. I was continuously hysterical, terrified that my one chance to get saved was out of my reach. The girl who cried wolf. I talked to my mother occasionally, incoherent, trying to get her to convince my father to let me come home, just for a break, I said. There was a lag time—a few days? a few weeks? time unravels in my head here—while my father and I argued in a series of phone calls about whether or not I should come back, my therapist pleaded with them, my roommate did. Then I just up and dropped out of school. I walked into my counselor's office and said I was an anorectic and needed a leave of absence. She was incredibly understanding and very supportive. She, too, called my parents and told them I—haha—visibly needed a bit of a rest. I packed my things and sent them home, quit my job, and hopped on a plane to Minneapolis.

Let us say that my reception was not exactly warm. I can understand that. I think it would be unpleasant to look at your child and realize she is going to be dead very shortly. My father was furious and my mother was terrified into a chilling silence. The night I got home, my mother sat

at the kitchen table with me while I ate several bowls of cereal in a row and then cried because I'd eaten too much, and she just said, Honey, oh, honey, don't say that. Lifting my head from the place mat, I looked at her, searching her eyes for an answer, and I asked: Mom, do you think I'm crazy?

There was an excruciating silence. The clock ticked. I was still wearing my coat.

She said, looking out the window, "I think you're very sick."

It took me a minute to realize that she'd just said: Yes.

I've never been so terrified in my life. I had registered, to some extent, that this was the end, that I was honest-to-God about to push my leaky little rowboat away from shore and really truly *die*. The idea began to sink in, more than it ever had, that I might be crazy, in the traditional sense of the word. That I might be, forever and ever amen, a Crazy Person. That what we'd suspected all along, what I'd been working so hard to disprove, might be true. I preferred, by far, being dead.

I spent the next few days sitting on the couch in a quilt, looking out the window, thinking about madness while my parents pleaded with me to go to the doctor, just to get a checkup.

I agreed to go. The night before I went, I drove—yes, drove—over to the university district to read in a café. I couldn't read, of course. I kept thinking about the fact that

I'd just eaten dinner, a bit of dinner, and it was making noise and jumping around in my stomach and I thought about throwing up but decided that as long as I was going to throw up I might as well throw up something besides the three bites of skinless chicken I'd eaten. I bought a few muffins and walked around eating them, the old familiar adrenaline rush pumping through me, propelling my legs into a Burger King, writing a check from an account that was empty, chewing calmly. Then I was off, running through the town, stopping here and there and eating and throwing up in alleyways and eating and blacking out and standing up and running and eating as I walked, impervious to the cold, hand to mouth and hand to mouth. I bounced checks worth \$200 in a few hours eating and running and purging and finally getting into the car and stopping on my way home at a Perkins, my last supper, I thought. I ordered pancakes with whipped cream and bacon and eggs and hash browns. I threw up in the bathroom, bought a slice of pie, ate it in the car and threw up when I got home. I got into bed, too tired to do my exercises.

It was the worst night of my life. It is the only lucid memory of this entire time. I dreamed I was eating and eating in a dark, hellish restaurant, and everyone was staring but I couldn't stop eating and then I'd jerk awake and think it was real and panic and then remember it wasn't real. I hadn't really eaten, everything was okay, and then, horribly delirated, I'd take huge swallows from the bottle of diet orange

soda I had by my bed, crash back into sleep, return to the restaurant, and keep eating, and wake, and panic, and drink, and sleep and dream, hours and hours of dream eating and the echo of people laughing as I ate and ate. When morning came I was essentially broken. I could hardly talk.

My father drove me to the hospital for my checkup. For some reason it didn't register with me that I was seen in the emergency room. For some reason, when I walked in, the woman at the triage desk took one look at me as I came through the door, picked up the phone, and said something I couldn't hear. Then there was a sound like a pummel of hootbeats and someone's voice on the loudspeaker. There was a flurry of people. I was taken to a room. I lay down on the little bed and someone put a blanket on me. Someone came in and poked at me, then helped me sit up, handed me a little can of juice. It said BLUE BIRD APPLE JUICE. Apparently I was supposed to drink it. When the somebody left, I poured it down the sink, thinking, Why am I pouring this down the sink? What does this prove?

That thought was my downfall.

A doctor came in. She was brisk. She told me she was going to admit me. I said I had to go, I was meeting friends for breakfast, which was true. I'd been worried all morning about how I was going to get out of eating at breakfast, wondering if the restaurant had yogurt, and whether it was fat-free or low-fat, and I asked if I couldn't come back later? wondering if in

the meantime I could gain enough weight to keep myself out of the hospital, something in the range of fifty pounds, and I was very tired and I lay my head on the pillow and closed my eyes for a minute. She waited. I pushed myself up from the bed and smiled and asked, Okay? I can go?

She said: You aren't going to make it down the block.

I thought about that for a minute.

I thought it was possible that she was right.

I asked if I could go have a cigarette while I thought about this. She humored me. I walked outside, holding the wall as I went. It was too cold to smoke, so I ground the cigarette out with my heel, turned, got dizzy, bent over, and waited. While I waited I counted my bones. They were all still there. Then I thought, my God.

I straightened up, held the cold brick wall while the dizziness came in waves and washed away. I walked very slowly inside, placing my feet carefully on the floor. I went to the desk and signed myself in.

I have not enjoyed writing this book. Making public what I have kept private from those closest to me, and often enough from myself, all my life, is not exactly my idea of a good time. This project was not, as so many people have suggested, "therapeutic" for me—I pay my therapist a lot of money for that. On the contrary, it was very difficult. I wrote in stops

and starts, trying to translate a material object, a body, into some arrangement of words. Trying to explain rather than excuse, to balance rather than blame. The words came bitten-off, in quick gusts and then long ellipses. After a lifetime of silence, it is difficult then to speak.

And even when you have spoken, you find your lexicon vastly insufficient: the words lack shape and taste, temperature and weight. *Hunger* and *cold*, *flesh* and *bone* are commonplace words. I cannot articulate how those four words mean something different to me than perhaps they do to you, how each of these has, in my mouth, strange flavor: the acid of bile, the metallic tang of blood.

You expect an ending. This is a book; it ought to have a beginning, a middle, and an end. I cannot give you an end. I would very much like to. I would like to wrap up all loose ends in a bow and say, See? All better now. But the loose ends stare back at me in the mirror. The loose ends are my body, which neither forgives nor forgets: the random half-hearted kicking of my heart, wrinkled and shrunken as an apple rotting on the ground. The scars on my arms, the gray hair, the wrinkles, the friendly bartender who guesses my age, smiling, saying, "Thirty-six?" The ovaries and uterus, soundly asleep. The immune system, trashed. The weekly trips to the doctor for yet another infection, another virus, another cold, another sprain, another battery of tests, another prescription, another weight, another warning. The little yellow morning

pills that keep one foot on the squirming anxiety that lives just under my sternum, clutching at my ribs.

The loose ends are the Bad Days: my husband finding a bowl of mush on the kitchen counter, cereal I poured and "forgot" to eat, my husband arguing with me about dinner (No, honey, let's *not* have rice cakes with jelly). The loose ends are the nightmares of hunger and drowning and deserts of ice, the shivering jolt awake, the scattering of cold sweat. They are the constant trips to the mirror, the anxious fingers reading the body like Braille, as if an arrangement of bones might give words and sense to my life. The desperate reaching up from the quicksand of obsession, the clawing my way a little farther out, then falling back. The maddening ambiguity of "progress," the intangible goal of "health."

It does not hit you until later. The fact that you were essentially dead does not register until you begin to come alive. Frostbite does not hurt until it starts to thaw. First it is numb. Then a shock of pain trips through the body. And then, every winter after, it aches.

And every season since is winter, and I do still ache.

February 18, 1993. I am given a week to live.

Four years (approximately 169 weeks, 1,183 days, 28,392 hours) pass.

March 11, 1997. I am alive.

There will be no stunning revelations now. There will be

no near-death tunnel-of-light scenes, no tearful revelatory therapy sessions, no happy family reunions, no cameo appearances by Christ, M.D., no knight on a white horse galloping into my life. I am alive for very mental reasons:

1. Being sick gets singularly boring after a while.
2. I was really annoyed when told I was going to die and rather petulantly went, Well fuck you then I won't.
3. In a rare appearance by my rational self, I realized it was completely stupid and chicken-shitish of me to just check out of life because it ruffled my feathers.
4. It struck me that it was entirely unoriginal to be starving to death. Everyone was doing it. It was, as a friend would later put it, totally passé. Totally 1980s. I decided to do something slightly less *Yogue*.
5. I got curious: If I could get that sick, then (I figured) I could bloody well get unsick.

So I did. Am. However you want to put it. Obstreperousness, which as a character trait is extremely exploitable in the energetic annihilation of one's own body and individual self, is also very useful in other pursuits. For example, life.

My eating disorder was not "cured" the minute I rolled—was rolled, rather, in a wheelchair with an IV in my arm, head nodding and heart lurching in my chest—onto the eating-dis-

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orders unit one bitterly cold day, February 18, 1993. It was not cured during the three months I stayed there, or during the years that have passed between then and today: I sit here now, eating dry cereal from a bowl because going to the store for milk seems somehow complex. It was not cured. It will not be cured. But it has changed. So have I.

I am precisely twice the size I was then. Which means I am still underweight. Which also means that in the mess of the last four years, I did a few things right. I am three inches taller than I was then, which means, maybe, that the body surges upward toward light, like a plant seeking sun. I am classified as (Axis I) 1. Atypical Bipolar II, cyclothymic, hypomanic 2. Eating Disorder Not Otherwise Specified (ED-NOS), (Axis II) 1. Borderline?, which means, essentially, nothing: I have scars all over my arms that were not there in 1993, which means some sadness came alive as my body did, and I, mute, etched it into my skin. It also means that we do not keep razors in my house. I am married, which means many things, including but not limited to the fact that I've learned a thing or two about love, and patience, and faith. It means I have a responsibility to stay here, on earth, in the kitchen, in the bed, and not seep slowly back into the mirror.

And I am all right. We will not deal here with words such as *well*, or *recovered*, or *fine*. It took a long time to get all right, and I like all right quite a bit. It's an interesting balancing act,

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the state of all right. It's a glass-half-empty-or-half-full sort of place, I could tip either way. It's a place where one can either hope or despair: Hope that this will keep getting easier, as it has over the past few years, or despair at the infuriating concentration balance requires, despair at the fact that I will die young, despair that I cannot be "normal," wallow in the bunmerish aspects of my life.

Blah blah blah. I'm sick of despair. It's so magazine-model-looking-apathectic-and-underfed-and-stoned-and-exactly-the-same-as-all-the-other-wan-sickly-models. Forgive me for being chipper, but despair is desperately dull.

So I guess what happened is that I got tired of being so dull. This is what happened: I went to the hospital and stayed there for a very long time. I got out of the hospital and threw myself into life with precious few tools and made a big mess and broke a bunch of things. Learned to be more careful. I worked, made friends, had a messy love affair, moved into a crack house apartment downtown and got a cat. Learned that in order to live, plants need water. That girl cannot live by cereal alone, though I go back and forth on that one still. That friends are a good source of food and soul when one has not yet gotten the hang of cooking or living (as opposed to dying) alone. That nothing—not booze, not love, not sex, not work, not moving from state to state—will make the past disappear. Only time and patience heal things. I learned that cutting up your arms in an attempt to make the pain move

from inside to outside, from soul to skin, is futile. That death is a cop-out. I tried all of these things. I shaved my head, attempted suicide in November 1994, got forty-two stitches in my left arm, which hurt like a sonofabitch, and decided that was enough of that. I wrote and published and read and researched and taught and went to school from time to time and drank a lot of coffee and had a lot of really macabre dreams and played Trivial Pursuit and went to therapy and found myself extremely wrapped up in the business of life. I learned, gradually, to just fucking deal.

There is, in fact, an incredible freedom in having nothing left to lose.

In my limbo period after leaving the hospital the last time, I was grasping at straws. If you do that long enough, you eventually get a hold of some, enough, anyway, to keep going. I no longer had anything that I understood or could believe in. The situation I was in then is not at all uncommon. The experts say, What did you do *before* your eating disorder? What were you like before? And you simply stare at them because you can remember no before, and the word *you* means nothing at all. Are you referring to Marya, the constellation of suicidal symptoms? Marya, the invalid? Marya, the patient, the subject, the case study, the taker of pills, the nibbler of muffins, the asexual, the encyclopedia, the pencil sketch of the human skeleton, the bearer of nightmares of hunger, the hunger itself?

It is impossible to sufficiently articulate an inarticulate process, a very wordless time. I did not learn to live by words, so I have found myself with few words to describe what happened. I've felt rather like I was dubbing in voices and adding Technicolor to a black-and-white silent film. This history is revisionist in that same way: I have added words, color, and chronology to a time of my life that appears to me a pile of random frames scattered over the floor of my brain. I am sometimes startled, now, when I stand up and turn to the door to catch myself in the mirror. I'm often surprised that I exist, that my body is a corporeal body, that my face is my face, and that my name has a correlation to a person I can identify as myself. But I suppose it's not so strange to create a collage of memory—clippings that substitute for a linear, logical narrative. I did a very similar thing with myself.

There is never a sudden revelation, a complete and tidy explanation for why it happened, or why it ends, or why or who you are. You want one and I want one, but there isn't one. It comes in bits and pieces, and you stitch them together wherever they fit, and when you are done you hold yourself up, and still there are holes and you are a rag doll, invented, imperfect.

And yet you are all that you have, so you must be enough. There is no other way.

I make it sound so simple: I say it got boring, so I stopped. I

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say I had other things to do, so I stopped. I say I had no other choice but to stop. I know all too well that it is not that simple. But in some ways, the most significant choices one makes in life are done for reasons that are not all that dramatic, not earthshaking at all—often enough, the choices we make are, for better or worse, made by default. It's quite true that there was no revelatory moment. Mostly what happened was that my life took over—that is to say, that the *impulse* for life became stronger in me than the impulse for death. In me, the two impulses coexist in an uneasy balance, but they are balanced enough now that I am alive.

Looking back, I see that what I did then was pretty basic. I took a leap of faith. And I believe that has made all the difference. I hung on to the only thing that seemed real to me, and that was a basic ethical principle: if I was alive, then I had a responsibility to stay alive and do something with the life I had been given. And though I was not at all convinced, when I made that leap of faith, that I had any sensible reason for doing so—though I did not fully believe that there was anything that could possibly make as much sense as an eating disorder—I made it because I began to wonder. I simply began to wonder, in the same way I had wondered what would happen if I began to lose weight, what would happen if I stopped. It was worth it.

It *is* worth it. It's a fight. It's exhausting, but it is a fight I believe in. I cannot believe, anymore, in the fight between

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body and soul. If I do, it will kill me. But more importantly, if I do, I have taken the easy way out. I know for a fact that sickness is easier.

But health is more interesting.

The leap of faith is this: You have to believe, or at least pretend you believe until you *really* believe it, that you are strong enough to take life face on. Eating disorders, on any level, are a crutch. They are also an addiction and an illness, but there is no question at all that they are quite simply a way of avoiding the banal, daily, itchy pain of life. Eating disorders provide a little private drama, they feed into the desire for constant excitement, everything becomes life-or-death, everything is terribly grand and crashing, very Sturm and Drang. And they are distracting. You don't have to think about any of the nasty minutiae of the real world, you don't get caught up in that awful boring thing called regular life, with its bills and its breakups and its dishes and laundry and groceries and arguments over whose turn it is to change the litter box and bedtimes and bad sex and all that, because you are having a *real* drama, not a sitcom but a GRAND EPIC, all by yourself, and why would you bother with those foolish mortals when you could spend hours and hours with the mirror, when you are having the *most interesting* sadomasochistic affair with your own image?

What all this grandiosity covers—and not very well, I might add—is a very basic fear that the real world will gobble

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you up the minute you step into it. Obviously, the fear is incredibly large or you wouldn't go to all the trouble of trying to *leave* it, and certainly not in such a long, drawn-out manner. The fear, too, is a fear of yourself: a completely dualistic and contradictory fear. On the one hand it is a fear that you do not have what it takes to make it, and on the other hand, a possibly greater fear that you *do* have what it takes, and that by definition you therefore also have a responsibility to do something *really* big. It's a little daunting, going out into the world with this state of mind. Most people go out with a general idea that they'll do something or other and that it will be okay. You go out with the certainty that you will be a failure from the outset, or that you will have to do something utterly stellar, which implies the potential for failure anyway. When I was growing up, I always felt there was an expectation that I would do one of two things: be Great at something, or go crazy and become a total failure. There is no middle ground where I come from. And I am only now beginning to get a sense that there is a middle ground at all.

I had to decide that whatever happened, I would be all right. That was the hardest decision I've ever made, the decision to protect myself no matter what happened. My entire life, I've turned on myself the minute something went wrong, even a tiny little thing. It is not an uncommon habit among women. Among those of us who see in all-or-nothing terms, it seems as if you have only two choices: either lash out at the

world and label yourself as interminably hysterical, shrill, unstable, and otherwise flawed, or lash out at yourself. With eating disorders, that lashing out at yourself is unfortunately rewarded—temporarily—by the world and thus is all the more tempting. But then the whole thing goes sour.

My leap of faith was more a negative reaction against the idea of wasting my life than it was a positive, gleeful run into the arms of the world. I'm wary of the world, even now. But I would not say I am wasting my life.

There is a difficult factor in deciding to end the game, and that is that most women are playing it at some level of intensity or another—and all of those levels have sublevels of dangers, not just the over-the-top-mortality-star type of disorder. Eating-disordered people, for the most part, don't talk to one another. It is usually not a little sorority where it's all done in a very companionable way. It's usually intensely private. And when you decide you are tired of being alone with your sickness, you go out seeking women friends, people who you believe can show you by example how to eat, how to live—and you find that by and large most women are obsessed with their weight.

It's a little discouraging. I can think, in retrospect, of all sorts of ways in which I might have avoided an eating disorder, and thus avoided the incredibly weird journey through the darker parts of the human mind that my life, essentially, has been. If I had been

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born at a different point in time, when starving oneself to death did not seem such an obvious and *rewarding*—Oh, you've lost so much weight! You look fabulous!—way of dealing with the world, of avoiding the inevitable pain of life. If I had been a different sort of person, maybe less impressionable, less intense, less fearful, less utterly dependent upon the perceptions of others—maybe then I would not have bought the cultural party line that thinness is the be-all and end-all of goals. Maybe if my family had not been in utter chaos most of the time; maybe if my parents were a little better at dealing with their own lives. Maybe if I'd gotten help sooner, or if I'd gotten different help, maybe if I did not so fiercely cherish my secret, or if I were not such a good liar, or were not quite so empty inside, maybe maybe maybe.

But all this is moot. Sometimes things just go awry. And when, after fifteen years of bingeing, baring, starving, needles and tubes and terror and rage, and medical crises and personal failure and loss after loss—when, after all this, you are in your early twenties and staring down a vastly abbreviated life expectancy, and the eating disorder still takes up half your body, half your brain, with its invisible eroding force, when you have spent the majority of your life sick, when you do not yet know what it means to be “well,” or “normal,” when you doubt that those words even *have* meaning anymore, there are still no answers. You will die young, and you have no way to make sense of that fact.

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You have this: You are thin.
Whoop-de-fucking-dee.

But when you decide to throw down your cards, push back from your chair, and leave the game, it's a very lonely moment. Women use their obsession with weight and food as a point of connection with one another, a commonality even between strangers. Instead of talking about *why* we use food and weight control as a means of handling emotional stress, we talk ad nauseam about the fact that we don't like our bodies. When you decide not to do that, you begin to notice how constant that talk is. I go to the gym, and women are standing around in their underwear bitching about their bellies, I go to a restaurant and listen to women cheerfully conversing about their latest diet, I go to a women's clothing store and the woman helping me, almost universally, will launch into a monologue about how these pants are very slimming, how lucky I am to have the problem of never being able to find clothes that fit, “Because you're *tiny*!” she'll squeal. I have to remind myself that it's not a conversation I want to get into. I refuse to say, “Gee, thanks.” I don't necessarily *want* pants that are slimming, I don't want to look like the photos of skeletal models on the walls. Wanting to be healthy is seen as really *weird*.

So I'm weird. So what?
I want to write a prescription for culture, some sort of tranquilizer that will make it less maniacally compelled to

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climb the StairMaster right into nowhere, and I can't do that. It's a person-by-person project. I do it, you do it, and I maintain the perhaps ridiculous notion that if enough people do it we will all get a grip. I want to write about how to Get Well, but I can't do that either. I want to do a sidebar here with little pie charts breaking health down into statistical slices, showing the necessary percentages of therapy, food, books, baths, work, sleep, tears, fits, trials, and errors, and I can't. I find this maddening. If I were to describe the path between point A and point B, I would have to detail a convoluted, crisscrossed, almost blind stumble through a briar patch: the doublings-back, the stumbles into different, smaller rabbit holes, the sudden plunking down and howling with rage. In the end, I will have to point out that my stumble is specific to me. Your stumble will be different. You will avoid potholes I fell headlong into and find yourself tripping into quicksand I missed.

It is not a sudden leap from sick to well. It is a slow, strange meander from sick to mostly well. The misconception that eating disorders are a medical disease in the traditional sense is not helpful here. There is no "cure." A pill will not fix it, though it may help. Ditto therapy, ditto food, ditto endless support from family and friends. You fix it yourself. It is the hardest thing that I have ever done, and I found myself stronger for doing it. Much stronger.

Never, never underestimate the power of desire. If you

want to live badly enough, you can live. The greater question, at least for me, was: How do I decide I want to live?

That is a question I'm still working on. I gave life a trial period, six months, and said that when the six months were up, I could get sick again if I really wanted to. In that six months, so much happened that death seemed, primarily, inconvenient. The trial period was extended. I seem to keep extending it. There are many things to do. There are books to write and naps to take. There are movies to see and scrambled eggs to eat. Life is essentially trivial. You either decide you will take the trite business of life and give yourself the option of doing something really cool, or you decide you will opt for the Grand Epic of eating disorders and dedicate your life to being *seriously* trivial. I kind of go back and forth, a little Grand Epic here and a little cool trivial stuff there. As time goes by I take greater and greater pleasure in the trivial stuff and find the Grand Epic more and more dreary. It's a good sign. And still, every goddamn day I have to think up a reason to live.

Obviously I've come up with something.

I do not have a happy ending for this book. I suppose I could end it with my wedding—Former Anorectic Catches Man! Ex-Bulimic Saved from Gastric Rupture by Pretty White Dress!—but that would be ridiculous. I could end it with the solid relationship I have with my parents, but that seems less than relevant. I cannot end it with assurances of

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my own Triumph Over Adversity, because (1) we're a ways off from Triumph yet, and (2) the Adversity was, um, me. I cannot end it with my blooming health or stable weight because neither exist. I cannot sum up and say, But now it's over. Happily Ever After.

It's never over. Not really. Not when you stay down there as long as I did, not when you've lived in the netherworld longer than you've lived in this material one, where things are very bright and large and make such strange noises. You never come back, not all the way. Always, there is an odd distance between you and the people you love and the people you meet, a barrier, thin as the glass of a mirror. You never come all the way out of the mirror; you stand, for the rest of your life, with one foot in this world and one in another, where everything is upside down and backward and sad.

It is the distance of marred memory, of a twisted and shape-shifting past. When people talk about their childhood, their adolescence, their college days, I laugh along and try not to think: that was when I was throwing up in my elementary school bathroom, that was when I was sleeping with strangers to show off the sharp tips of my bones, that was when I lost sight of my soul and died.

And it is the distance of the present, as well—the distance that lies between people in general because of the different lives we have lived. I don't know who I would be, now, if I had not lived the life I have, and so I cannot alter my need

from WASTED

for distance—nor can I lessen the low and omnipresent pain that that distance creates. The entirety of my life is overshadowed by one singular and near-fatal obsession. I go to great lengths now to compensate for a life of sadness and madness and a slow dance with death. When I leave my house, I put on a face and a dress and a smile and wave my hands about and talk brightly and am terribly open and seem to have conquered my monsters with great aplomb.

Perhaps, in some ways, that's true. But I often feel as though they have conquered me. As I write this, I am only twenty-three. I do not feel twenty-three. I feel old.

I have not lost my fascination with death. I have not become a noticeably less intense person. I have not, nor will I ever, completely lose the longing for that *something*, that thing that I believe will fill an emptiness inside me. I do believe that the emptiness was made greater by the things that I did to myself.

But to a certain extent—the extent that keeps me alive, and eating, and going about my days—I have learned to understand the emptiness rather than fear it and fight it and continue the futile attempt to fill it up. It's there when I wake in the morning and there when I go to bed at night. Sometimes it's bigger than at other times, sometimes I forget it's even there. I have days, now, when I don't think much about my weight. I have days, at least, when I see properly, when I look in the mirror and see myself as I am—a woman—

MARVA HORNBACHER

instead of as a piece of unwanted flesh, forever verging on excess.

This is the weird aftermath, when it is not exactly over, and yet you have given it up. You go back and forth in your head, often, about giving it up. It's hard to understand, when you are sitting there in your chair, having breakfast or whatever, that giving it up is stronger than holding on, that "letting yourself go" could mean you have succeeded rather than failed. You eat your goddamn Cheerios and bicker with the bitch in your head who keeps telling you you're fat and weak: Shut *up*, you say, I'm *busy*, leave me alone. When she leaves you alone, there's a silence and a solitude that will take some getting used to. You will miss her sometimes.

Bear in mind she's trying to kill you. Bear in mind you have a life to live.

There is an incredible loss. There is a profound grief. And there is, in the end, after a long time and more work than you ever thought possible, a time when it gets easier.

*This is the Hour of Lead—
Remembered, if outlived,
As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow—
First—Chill—then Stupor—then the letting go—*
—Emily Dickinson

There is, in the end, the letting go.

THE LETTER WRITER

ISAAC BASHHEVIS SINGER

*Sometimes we are unaware that we need to be healed
until someone or something changes our lives. Herbert
Gombiner is old and weak, living alone with his books
and his memories. It takes the advent of life-
threatening illness, coupled with the unexpected
arrival of a compassionate woman, to fully
wake him to what his life had
been and could be.*