

Hunger

A Memoir of (My) Body

Roxane
Gay



HARPER

An Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers

I was marked after that. Men could smell it on me, that I had lost my body, that they could avail themselves of my body, that I wouldn't say no because I knew my no did not matter. They smelled it on me and took advantage, every chance they got.

14

I do not know why I turned to food. Or I do. I was lonely and scared and food offered an immediate satisfaction. Food offered comfort when I needed to be comforted and did not know how to ask for what I needed from those who loved me. Food tasted good and made me feel better. Food was the one thing within my reach.

Until I started gaining weight, I had a healthy attitude toward food. My mother is not a woman with a passion for cooking, but she harbors an intense passion for her family. Throughout my childhood, she prepared healthy, well-rounded meals for us, which we ate together at the dinner table. There were no rushed dinners sitting in front of the television or standing at the kitchen counter. We kids eagerly talked about our latest school projects, like a suspension bridge made out of balsa wood or a baking soda volcano. We shared our accomplishments, like a good report card—which was of course the expectation—or a goal scored in a soccer match. My brothers and I bickered toward the end of dinner, usually over who would do the dishes. My

parents, Haitian immigrants, talked about things we only half understood, like the *American* neighbors or my father's latest construction project. We talked about the goings-on of the world. We talked about what we wanted for ourselves. I took it for granted that this is what all families did—come together and become an island unto themselves, the kitchen table the sun around which we revolved.

The food my mother cooked for us was good, but it was secondary to the way we invested in being so connected to one another. My parents always made it seem like my brothers and I were terribly interesting, asking us thoughtful questions about our childish musings, urging us to be our best selves. If we were slighted, they were offended on our behalf. When we had some small moment of glory, they reveled in it. I fell asleep most nights flush with the joy of knowing I belonged to these people and they belonged to me.

Even as I became more and more withdrawn, my family remained strong, connected in these intimate, indelible ways. I have no doubt that my parents noticed the change in me. They would continue to notice, to worry over me, for the next twenty years and longer. But they didn't know how to talk to me and I didn't let them in. When they tried, I deflected, refusing to take the lifelines they offered me. The longer I kept my secret, the more attached I became to keeping my truth to myself, the more I nurtured my silence.

15

The only way I know of moving through the world is as a Haitian American, a Haitian daughter. A Haitian daughter is a good girl. She is respectful, studious, hard-working. She never forgets the importance of her heritage. We are part of the first free black nation in the Western Hemisphere, my brothers and I were often told. No matter how far we have fallen, when it matters most, we rise.

Haitians love the food from our island, but they judge gluttony. I suspect this rises out of the poverty for which Haiti is too often and too narrowly known. When you are overweight in a Haitian family, your body is a family concern. Everyone—siblings, parents, aunts, uncles, grandmothers, cousins—has an opinion, judgment, or piece of counsel. They mean well. We love hard and that love is inescapable. My family has been inordinately preoccupied with my body since I was thirteen years old.

My mother, who stayed home to raise my brothers and me, did not teach me how to cook, and I had little interest in being taught. I just enjoyed watching her prepare our

meals from the periphery of the kitchen—the efficiency with which she pursued the task always impressed me. Her brow furrowed in concentration. She could hold a conversation, but when something demanded her attention, she hushed and it was like the whole world fell away from her. She did not enjoy sharing the kitchen space and did not want help. She always wore latex gloves, like a doctor—to avoid contamination, she said. She was known to add a drop of Clorox to the water when washing meat or fruit or vegetables. She washed a dish or cutting board or bowl immediately after it had been used. Save for the aromas wafting from the gas stove, you would never know my mother was cooking.

Throughout my childhood, my mother prepared a bewildering combination of foods—American dishes from the *Betty Crocker Cookbook* or *The Joy of Cooking* one night, and a Haitian meal the next. The dishes I remember, the ones I love most, are Haitian—legumes, fried plantains, red rice, black rice; *griyo*, or pork marinated in blood orange and roasted with shallots; Haitian macaroni and cheese—everything served with sauce (a tomato-based sauce with thyme, peppers, and onions) and spicy pickled vegetables, everything made from scratch. This was how my mother demonstrated her affection.

My mother didn't believe in processed foods or fast food, so I have never eaten many foods people take for granted—TV dinners, Chef Boyardee, Kraft Mac &

Cheese. She was ahead of her time. Her stance infuriated my brothers and me because our American friends got to eat magical foods like sugary breakfast cereals, and snack on Cheetos and Chips Ahoy and Little Debbie Snack Cakes. "Fruit is a snack," my mom would tell us. I vowed, when I grew up, to decorate my home with clear glass bowls filled with M&M's and she laughed.

The older we got, the laxer my mom became. By the time my youngest brother arrived, junk food had breached the perimeter of our home, though in the moderation entirely characteristic of my parents.

At thirteen, I went to boarding school. We had moved around a lot throughout my childhood, following my father and his successful career as a civil engineer. He built tunnels—the Eisenhower Tunnel in Colorado; subway lines in New York and Washington, DC; an outfall project in Boston. When my brothers and I visited him on construction sites, my dad would secure hard hats on our heads and take us belowground, so deep and dark, and show us how he, quite literally, was changing the world.

His company was headquartered in Omaha, but whenever his district got a new project, he would be dispatched, and off we would go for a year or two—Illinois, Colorado, New Jersey, Virginia—and then back to Omaha we would return. I began exploring boarding schools so I might attend one school for all four years of high school. I was, I admit, also enamored with *The Girls of Canby Hall* series of books by Emily Chase. I would be like Shelley Hyde from Iowa, the fish out of water who still forged lifelong friendships with her new roommates as they had youthful

adventures against the backdrop of their quintessentially New England campus.

And then I was raped and I had to pretend to be someone I wasn't and I wanted nothing more than to run away. Attending boarding school is how upper-middle-class girls run away, to be sure. If I went away for high school, I wouldn't have to pretend to be a good girl who knew nothing of the world. I could be the nothing I had become, without having to explain myself. I could continue clinging tightly, desperately, to my secret and my guilt and my shame.

Because I was so shy and withdrawn, because of all the moving around throughout my childhood, the only people I had to leave behind were my family. I didn't have any friends to miss. I didn't have a particular local high school I had been yearning to attend for years. I didn't even know where we would be living for my freshman year, if my dad was transferred again. I was only thirteen, but it was surprisingly easy to decide that I wanted to leave home.

I don't know what my parents noticed about me in the year before high school. Since we had moved, I no longer had to go to a school where everyone called me Slur. Instead, there were new torments, new bullies, and even more motivation for me to run, run, run as far away from myself as possible. I applied to several boarding schools and got into them all. One, Lawrenceville, accepted me as part of the first class of girls to attend the school when

it went coed, but the thought of attending a school with so many boys was too much. I ended up going to Exeter because my cousin Claudine had just graduated from there and she seemed fine and the school seemed fine and because my parents liked the school's reputation. At such a young age, I absolutely took for granted that I would be attending one of the most elite and expensive high schools in the country, if not the world. All that mattered was that I would be able to run away.

Left to my own devices at boarding school, I lost any semblance of control over what I put into my body. Suddenly, there were all kinds of food available to me. The dining hall was an all-you-can-eat extravaganza. Certainly, the offerings were generally bad—damp and malodorous, as is the nature of industrially prepared food—but there were vast quantities available. And there was a salad bar. And there were peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. And breakfast cereal. And limitless soda machines. And dessert options. And The Grill, a campus greasy spoon where, for a few dollars, I could get a burger, French fries, and a frappé. And there was the convenience store downtown, where I could buy a huge submarine sandwich. And a Woolworth's with an actual lunch counter. I could order pizza, and within thirty minutes, it would be delivered to my dorm and I could eat the entire thing by myself and there was no one to stop me from my naked, shameless indulgence. The freedom of being able to eat, so extra-

gantly and without limit, offered me the only true pleasure I knew in high school.

I was presented with an orgy of food and I indulged in all of it. I reveled in eating whatever I wanted, whenever I wanted. I reveled in the stream of biting into a salty French fry and the slick hot ooze of melted cheese on a hot slice of pizza and the thick cold sweetness of a frappé. I craved that pleasure and indulged myself as often as I could.

I was swallowing my secrets and making my body expand and explode. I found ways to hide in plain sight, to keep feeding a hunger that could never be satisfied—the hunger to stop hurting. I made myself bigger. I made myself safer. I created a distinct boundary between myself and anyone who dared to approach me. I created a boundary between myself and my family. I became of them but not.

Being at boarding school was also something of a shock to my understanding of the world. I had grown up middle class and then upper middle class, but at Exeter, I encountered students who came from families who harbored generations of wealth, fame, and/or infamy—the children of political scions, Hollywood celebrities, and industrial dynasties. I thought I knew wealth until I went to boarding school, and then I learned what wealth truly looks like. I learned that there are people with so much money at their disposal they take lavish spending for granted and have no interest in those without the same privileges. I didn't feel inadequate. However lost I was, I knew I was loved

and lucky. But I was overwhelmed by how cavalierly these wealthy peers moved through the world, and how much was available to them.

As I was a black student from a reasonably well-off family, and I was from Nebraska, of all places, the white students didn't quite know what to do with me. I was an anomaly, and I didn't fit their assumed narrative about blackness. They assumed that all black students came from impoverished backgrounds and lived in the inner city. They assumed all black students attended Exeter by the grace of financial aid and white benevolence. Most of the black students only grudgingly accepted me into their social circles because I didn't fit their assumed narrative about blackness, either. As a Haitian American, I didn't have the same cultural touchstones. There were few students with whom I had any kind of common ground. As a socially awkward, shy girl, my loneliness became even more pronounced. Food was not only comfort; food also became my friend because it was constant and I didn't need to be anything but myself when I ate.

When I went home for that first Thanksgiving holiday, my parents were shocked, as if I were unrecognizable, and maybe, to them, I was. They saw me plainly while looking right through me. I had gained at least thirty pounds in only two and a half months. Suddenly, I was very round, my cheeks and gut and thighs fleshy in ways they had never seen. My clothes, the ones that did fit, strained at the

seams. Though I didn't want to go, my parents took me to a doctor who charitably declared that I was blossoming when so much more was happening to my body. He didn't seem overly concerned, likely attributed my weight gain to being away from home for the first time. My parents had no idea what to do, but they were incredibly alarmed and immediately began to treat my body as something of a crisis. They tried to help me without realizing that this early weight gain was only the beginning of the problem my body would become. They had no idea at all about what created the problem. They knew nothing of my determination to keep making my body into what I needed it to be—a safe harbor rather than a small, weak vessel that betrayed me.

During the first two years of high school, I ate and ate and ate and I became more and more lost. I started high school as nothing and then became less than nothing. I only had to pretend to be the girl I had been when I spoke to my parents on the phone or when I went home for breaks. The rest of the time, I didn't know who I was. Mostly, I was numb. I was awkward. I was trying to be a writer. I was trying to forget what happened to me. I was trying to stop feeling those boys on and in my skin, how they laughed at me, how they laughed as they ruined me.

I remember so little from high school, but in the past few years, as my profile as a writer has gotten more visible, I've started to hear from the kids I went to high school with and, oddly enough, they all remember me distinctly. They reach out via e-mail, or Facebook, or at events, and ask me, eagerly, if I remember them too. They share anecdotes that make me seem like I was interesting and not as unbearable as I remember myself. I don't know what to make of the memories of other people or how to reconcile

their memories with mine. I do know that I developed a sharp tongue in high school. I was quiet, but I could cut someone with words when I put my mind to it.

In my free time, I wrote a lot, dark and violent stories about young girls being tormented by terrible boys and men. I couldn't tell anyone what had happened to me, so I wrote the same story a thousand different ways. It was soothing to give voice to what I could not say out loud. I lost my voice but I had words. One of my English teachers, Rex McGuinn, recognized something in my stories. He told me I was a writer and he told me to write every day. I realize, now, that being told to write every day is writing advice many teachers give, but I took Mr. McGuinn very seriously, as if he were offering me sacred counsel, and I write every day, still.

The most important thing Mr. McGuinn did for me, though, was to walk me over to the campus counseling center. He saw I needed help and took me to a place where I could get that help. I won't say I found solace or salvation at the counseling center because I didn't. I wasn't ready. The first few sessions with my counselor, who was a man, were terrifying. I sat on the edge of my seat, staring at the door, plotting all potential routes of escape. I did not want to be alone with any man, let alone with a stranger, in a room with a closed door. I knew what could happen. And still, I kept going back, maybe because Mr. McGuinn asked me to, maybe because some part of me knew I needed help, and I was so hungry for it.

I ate and ate and ate at school. At home for breaks, I made a show of dieting (and continued eating everything I really wanted to eat, in secret). This double life of eating would become something that stayed with me well into adulthood. It lingers even now. My parents tried to figure out why I was gaining so much weight. I had no answers I could share with them. They put me on a medically supervised liquid diet during the summer after my freshman year. Every day, I drank five milk shakes that were chalky and disgusting. Of course I lost weight—forty pounds, maybe more. My parents were pleased that I had gotten my body under control. I went back to school, and my classmates admired my new body, offered me compliments, wanted to hang out with me. That was the first time I realized that weight loss, thinness really, was social currency. Amidst this attention, I was losing my newfound invisibility, and it terrified me. I was scared of so much as a teenager.

Early in the first semester of my sophomore year, I lost

what currency I had gained over the summer. Within a few weeks, I immediately began eating again, working vigilantly to undo the progress I had made the previous summer. My newly narrowed face plumped up. My stomach strained against the waistbands of my pants. My breasts swelled wildly because not only was I gaining a lot of weight, I was going through puberty.

I still held on to the hope that my boarding school life might resemble *The Girls of Canby Hall*, that I would bond with all the girls in my dorm and all my teachers would love me. That was never my experience.

Loneliness remained a constant companion. I didn't have many friends. I was awkward and maladjusted around the friends I did have, and most of the time, I was certain they only tolerated me out of pity. I regularly said the wrong things. I invented a boyfriend, Mr. X, and I don't know what makes me cringe more now—that I used this bizarre pseudonym for my invention or that I invented a pseudonym at all. I couldn't even come up with a credible name for the imaginary man of my dreams. Eventually, the girls in my social circle figured out that I'd described Mr. X based on one of their boyfriends, which was, as you might imagine, incredibly awkward, and they did not let me forget it. I had no fashion sense. I didn't know how to style my hair. I didn't know how to be a normal girl. I didn't know how to be human. It was a sad, sad time. Every day was a crushing disappointment or gauntlet of humiliation.

And then, later in the fall of my sophomore year, I began experiencing severe pain in my abdomen. It would keep me up at night, gasping and in tears, alone in a dorm room, far from home. I went to the infirmary, which was not known for any kind of competence, and the staff asked me, over and over, if I might be pregnant. That was, in their minds, the most likely problem a teenage girl could have. I wasn't pregnant, but they weren't really interested in investigating further. They sent me on my way each time, not seeming to take me seriously. The medical community is not particularly interested in taking the pain of women seriously.

One night, I crawled to the door of the resident faculty member on my floor, a woman who, during my freshman year, had imitated me in a game of charades by widening her arms and waddling around the room until someone guessed my name as the clue. When she finally woke and came to the door, I was cold and sweating and clammy. Campus security took me to the local hospital, where the doctors discovered I had gallstones. I called my parents, terrified, and my dad told me not to worry. He told me to close my eyes and that in the morning, he would be there. I did as he said and when I woke up, there he was. That is the kind of father he has always been. I had emergency surgery, and my gallbladder was removed. It turned out the high-protein diet I had been on for the summer had not done my gallbladder any favors. I spent about ten days

in the infirmary, and ended up with a wicked new scar, tender to the touch.

During my recovery, I was still in pain, and before long, doctors discovered that the surgeon had left some gallstones inside me—such tiny objects causing so much pain. I was rushed to Mass General in Boston, my first ambulance ride, and I was scared again, but also excited in the way of a child who does not quite understand mortality. This time, both my parents came and fretted over me until I was better. Before long, I went back to school. I had lost weight with all the sickness, so once again, I had work to do to make my body bigger and bigger and bigger and safer.

An epidemic is the spread of a contagion. It is the unstoppable march of an infectious disease across humanity. Throughout history, there have been many epidemics—measles, influenza, smallpox, the bubonic plague, yellow fever, malaria, cholera—but none is so deadly and pervasive, according to countless news reports, as the obesity epidemic. Instead of fever, leaking pustules, swollen glands, or lesions, your symptoms are girth and sheer mass. The obese body is the expression of excess, decadence, and weakness. The obese body is a site of massive infection. It is a losing battleground in a war between willpower and food and metabolism in which you are the ultimate loser.

Rarely does a day go by, particularly in the United States, without some new article discussing the obesity epidemic, the crisis. These articles are often harsh, alarmist, and filled with false concern for people afflicted by this epidemic and a profoundly genuine concern for life as we know it. Oh, the burdens on the health-care system, these

articles lament. Obesity, these articles ultimately say, is killing us all and costing us an unacceptable fortune.

There is, certainly, a very small grain of truth in these articles, in this frenzied panic. And also, there is fear, because no one wants to be infected by obesity, largely because people know how they see and treat and think about fat people and don't want such a fate to befall them.

As a fat woman, I often see my existence reduced to statistics, as if with cold, hard numbers, our culture might make sense of what hunger can become. According to government statistics, the obesity epidemic costs between \$147 and \$210 billion a year, though there is little clear information as to how researchers arrive at that overwhelming number. What exactly are the costs associated with obesity? The methodology is irrelevant. What matters is that fat is expensive and therefore a grave problem. Fat people are a drain on resources, what with needing health care and medication for their all too human bodies. Many people act like fat people are reaching directly into their wallets, the fat of other people a burden on their personal bottom line.

Statistics also reveal that 34.9 percent of Americans are obese and 68.6 percent of Americans are obese or overweight. The definitions of "overweight" and "obese" are often vague and obscured by arbitrary measures like BMI or various other indexes. And this just in: the obesity

epidemic has recently crossed the Atlantic Ocean, and now many Europeans are falling prey to what is quickly becoming a pandemic—an epidemic of global proportions. What matters most is that too many people are fat. The epidemic must be stopped, by any means necessary.

34

Few areas of popular culture focus on obesity more than reality television, and that focus is glaring, harsh, often cruel.

The Biggest Loser is an unholy union of capitalism and the weight-loss industrial complex. On the surface, *The Biggest Loser* is a television show about weight loss, but really, it's anti-obesity propaganda, offering wish fulfillment for people with unruly, overweight bodies, both on the show and in the viewing audience. The show allows the home viewer to feel motivated without actually doing anything. If the viewer does get motivated, they can participate at home and feel like they are, in some small way, part of the show. Meanwhile, they also have the satisfaction of watching fat people become less fat from one week to the next while competing for \$250,000.

I watched the first few seasons of *The Biggest Loser* avidly. The show offered the ultimate fat-girl fantasy—you go to a “ranch” for a few months, and under the pressure of intense personal trainers, dangerously low caloric in-

take, the manipulations of reality show producers, and the constant surveillance of television cameras, you lose the weight you've never been able to lose on your own.

During those first few seasons, I often toyed with the idea of auditioning to appear on the show, though, realistically, that could never happen. I'm too shy. I would go through withdrawal from the Internet. I can't work out without music. If Jillian Michaels screamed at me, I would shut down or cry like a baby or strangle her. At the time, I was a vegetarian and I was concerned because I don't eat Jennie-O turkey, a product the show shamelessly hawked for years by way of product placement. Appearing on the show simply was not and is not feasible for me.

The longer *The Biggest Loser* has been on the air, however, the more the show has disturbed me. There is the constant shaming of fat people and the medical professionals who take every opportunity to crow about how near death these obese contestants are. There are the trainers, with their undeniably, implausibly perfect bodies, demanding perfection from people who have, for whatever reason, not had a previously healthy relationship with their bodies. There is the spectacle of the contestants pushing themselves in inhuman ways—crying and sweating and vomiting—visibly purging their bodies of weakness. This is not a show about people becoming empowered through fitness, though the show's slick marketing would have you believe that.

The Biggest Loser is a show about fat as an enemy that must be destroyed, a contagion that must be eradicated. This is a show about unruly bodies that must be disciplined by any means necessary, so that through that discipline, the obese might become more acceptable members of society. They might find happiness, which can, according to the show, according to cultural norms, only be found through thinness. When we watch shows like *The Biggest Loser* and its many imitators, we are practically begging some power beyond ourselves, "Take these all too human bodies, and make what you will of them."

With the dramatic reveal of Rachel Frederickson, the Season 15 winner of *The Biggest Loser*, those of us who watch finally had an unimpeachable reason to be visibly outraged about the show and its practices, even though the show has been on the air and offering a damaging narrative about weight loss since 2004.

When her season began, Frederickson weighed 260 pounds. At her final weigh-in, on live television, she weighed 105, a 60 percent loss in mere months. During this reveal, even trainers Bob Harper and Jillian Michaels gaped at Frederickson's gaunt body. She had disciplined her body the way she'd been asked to, but apparently, she had disciplined her body a bit too much. The biggest loser, we now know, should lose, but only so much. There are so many rules for the body—often unspoken and ever-shifting.

In an interview, Harper would later say, "I was stunned. That would be the word. I mean, we've never had a contestant come in at 105 pounds." There was a wide range of responses in the press and on social media in the wake of seeing Rachel Frederickson's new body. Her body, like most women's bodies, instantly became a public text, a site of discourse, only now because she had taken her weight loss too far. She had disciplined her body too much.

As of late, several former contestants have leveled many accusations against the show, alleging that producers used forced dehydration, severely restricted caloric intake, and encouraged the use of weight-loss drugs and more to help contestants reach their goals, to make for better television. Even more damning was a medical study of one season's participants, led by metabolism expert Kevin Hall. The study found that thirteen of the fourteen contestants' metabolisms continued slowing even after their significant weight loss. This slowed metabolism contributed to the contestants gaining back most, if not all or more, of the weight they had lost on the show. The results are a stark reminder that weight loss is a challenge that the medical establishment has not yet overcome. It is certainly not a challenge a reality television show has overcome. It's no wonder that so many of us struggle with our bodies.

In the two months after her big reveal, Frederickson gained twenty pounds and reached, apparently, a more acceptable but still appropriately disciplined size. She

explained that she lost so much weight because she was trying to win the \$250,000 prize, but those of us who deny ourselves and try so hard to discipline our bodies know better. Rachel Frederickson was doing exactly what we asked of her, and what too many of us would, if we could, ask of ourselves.

35

There are any number of weight-loss shows in the vein of *The Biggest Loser*. On *Extreme Makeover: Weight Loss*, the show takes a slightly more realistic approach to the project of significant weight loss, following fat people on their “weight-loss journey” over a year. The trainer is far more genial than those on *The Biggest Loser*. We see more of the genuine struggle of weight loss, how it’s not something that can be neatly accomplished and packaged for a televised audience. The message, though, is the same—that self-worth and happiness are inextricably linked to thinness.

Some shows are hell-bent on exploitation. On *Fit to Fat to Fit*, physically impeccable trainers gain weight so they can better empathize with their clients. Then they have to lose the weight again so as to return to their natural, more perfect forms. The show chronicles their initial joy of eating with abandon, followed by the apparent misery of having to eat fast food and being fat, and finally the lasting satisfaction of these trainers returning to their

I hesitate to write about fat bodies and my fat body especially. I know that to be frank about my body makes some people uncomfortable. It makes me uncomfortable too. I have been accused of being full of self-loathing and of being fat-phobic. There is truth to the former accusation and I reject the latter. I do, however, live in a world where the open hatred of fat people is vigorously tolerated and encouraged. I am a product of my environment.

Oftentimes, the people who I make uncomfortable by admitting that I don't love being fat are what I like to call Lane Bryant fat. They can still buy clothes at stores like Lane Bryant, which offers sizes up to 26/28. They weigh 150 or 200 pounds less than I do. They know some of the challenges of being fat, but they don't know the challenges of being *very* fat.

To be clear, the fat acceptance movement is important, affirming, and profoundly necessary, but I also believe that part of fat acceptance is accepting that some of us struggle with body image and haven't reached a place of peace and unconditional self-acceptance.

| ROXANE GAY |

I don't know where I fit in with communities of fat people. I'm aware of and regularly read about the Health at Every Size movement and other fat acceptance communities. I admire their work and their messages, find that work a necessary corrective to our culture's toxic attitudes toward women's bodies and fat bodies. I want to be embraced by these communities and their positivity. I want to know how they do it, how they find peace and self-acceptance.

I also want to lose weight. I know I am not healthy at this size (not because I am fat but because I have, for example, high blood pressure). More important, I am not happy at this size, though I am not suffering from the illusion that were I to wake up thin tomorrow, I would be happy and all my problems would be solved.

All things considered, I have a reasonable amount of self-esteem. When I'm around the right people, I feel strong and powerful and sexy. I am not fearless the way people assume I am, but despite all my fears, I am willing to take chances and I like that too about myself.

I hate how people treat and perceive me. I hate how I am extraordinarily visible but invisible. I hate not fitting in so many places where I want to be. I have it wired in my head that if I looked different this would change. Intellectually, I recognize the flaw in the logic, but emotionally, it's not so easy to make sense.

I want to have everything I need in my body and I

| HUNGER |

don't yet, but I will, I think. Or I will get closer. There are days when I am feeling braver. There are days when I am feeling, finally, like I can shed some of this protection I have amassed and be okay. I am not young but I am not old yet. I have a lot of life left, and my god, I want to do something different than what I have done for the last twenty years. I want to move freely. I want to be free.

I am no stranger to dieting. I understand that, in general, to lose weight you need to eat less and move more. I can diet with reasonable success for months at a time. I restrict my calories and keep track of everything I eat. When I first started dieting under my parents' supervision, I would do this in paper journals. In this modern age, I use an app on my phone. I recognize that, despite what certain weight-loss system commercials would have me believe, I cannot eat everything and anything I want. And that is one of the cruelties of our cultural obsession with weight loss. We're supposed to restrict our eating while indulging in the fantasy that we can, indeed, indulge. It's infuriating. When you're trying to lose weight, you cannot have anything you want. That is, in fact, the whole point. Having anything you want is likely what contributed to your weight gain. Dieting requires deprivation, and it's easier when everyone faces that truth. When I am dieting, I try to face that truth, but I am not terribly successful. There is always a moment when I am losing weight

when I feel better in my body. I breathe easier. I move better. I feel myself getting smaller and stronger. My clothes fall over my body the way they should and then they start to get baggy. I get terrified. I start to worry about my body becoming more vulnerable as it grows smaller. I start to imagine all the ways I could be hurt. I start to remember all the ways I have been hurt.

I also taste hope. I taste the idea of having more choices when I go clothes shopping. I taste the idea of fitting into seats at restaurants, movie theaters, waiting rooms. I taste the idea of walking into a crowded room or through a mall without being stared at and pointed at and talked about. I taste the idea of grocery shopping without strangers taking food they disapprove of out of my cart or offering me unsolicited nutrition advice. I taste the idea of being free of the realities of living in an overweight body. I taste the idea of being free.

And then I worry that I am getting ahead of myself. I worry that I won't be able to keep up better eating, more exercise, taking care of myself. Inevitably, I stumble and then I fall, and then I lose the taste of being free. I lose the taste of hope. I am left feeling low, like a failure. I am left feeling ravenously hungry and then I try to satisfy that hunger so I might undo all the progress I've made. And then I hunger even more.

I often feel ravenous even if I am not hungry. On bad days, and I have many bad days, I eat a lot. I tell myself I don't do this. I tell myself that I'm not sitting around eating candy or Cheetos all day. That's true. I don't keep junk food at home. I don't make a habit of eating junk food. But then I become fixated on a certain food and then I eat it and eat it and eat it for days on end, sometimes weeks, until I am sick of it. It is a compulsion, I suppose.

When I am eating a meal, I have no sense of portion control. I am a completist. If the food is on my plate, I must finish it. If there is food left on the stove, I must finish it. Rarely do I have leftovers. At first, it feels good, savoring each bite, the world falling away. I forget about my stresses, my sadness. All I care about are the flavors in my mouth, the extraordinary pleasure of the act of eating. I start to feel full but I ignore that fullness and then that sense of fullness goes away and all I feel is sick, but still, I eat. When there is nothing left, I no longer feel comfort. What I feel is guilt and uncontrollable self-loathing, and

oftentimes, I find something else to eat, to soothe those feelings and, strangely, to punish myself, to make myself feel sicker so that the next time, I might remember how low I feel when I overindulge.

I never remember.

This is to say, I know what it means to hunger without being hungry. My father believes hunger is in the mind. I know differently. I know that hunger is in the mind and the body and the heart and the soul.

In *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*, Julia Child writes, "Cooking is not a particularly difficult art, and the more you cook and learn about cooking, the more sense it makes. But like any art it requires practice and experience. The most important ingredient you can bring to it is a love of cooking for its own sake."

I did not think it was possible for me to love cooking. I did not think such a love was allowed. I did not think I could love food or indulge in the sensual pleasures of eating. It did not occur to me that to cook for myself was to care for myself or that I was allowed to care for myself amidst the ruin I had let myself become. These things were forbidden to me, the price I paid for being so wildly undisciplined about my body. Food was fuel, nothing more, nothing less, even if I overindulged in that fuel whenever I could.

But then I moved to Michigan's Upper Peninsula and lived in a town of about four thousand while attending graduate school. And after that I took my job in

Charleston, Illinois, another small town. I became a vegetarian and realized that if I wanted to eat, I was going to have to prepare meals for myself or I would be relegated to a diet of iceberg lettuce and French fries.

Around that same time, I started watching *Barefoot Contessa*, Ina Garten's cooking show on the Food Network, every day from four to five p.m., just after I got home from campus. It was a time to let the world go and relax. I love the show. I love everything about Ina. Her hair is always glossy and smooth in a perfectly coiffed dark bob. She wears a variation on the same shirt every day. I learned from the FAQs on her website that her shirt is custom-made, but she won't divulge by whom. She is married to a man named Jeffrey who has a fondness for roast chicken, and if the show is any indication, their relationship is an adoring one. She is intelligent and wealthy and wears these traits comfortably but inoffensively.

Ina loves rhetorical questions. "How good is that?" she'll ask while sampling one of her delicious dishes. Or, "Who wouldn't want that for their birthday?" while planning a surprise for one of her coterie of elegant Hampton friends. Or, "We need a nice cocktail for breakfast, don't we?" when preparing brunch for some of her many always attractive, wealthy, and often gay friends. There is one episode where she takes food (bagels and lox) on a trip to Brooklyn to eat more food (at a farmer's market or some such).

I love Ina Garten so much one of my wireless networks at home is named Barefoot Contessa. It's like she's watching over me that way.

Ina Garten makes cooking seem easy, accessible. She loves good ingredients—good vanilla, good olive oil, good everything. She is always offering helpful tips—very cold butter makes pastry dough better, and a cook's best tools are clean hands. She uses an ice cream scoop for the dough when she's making muffins and reminds the audience of this trick with a conspiratorial grin. When she shops in town, she always asks the butcher or fishmonger or baker to put her purchases on her account. She doesn't sully herself with cash.

One day, she invites some construction workers who are rehabbing a windmill over for lunch and she decorates the table with construction accessories like a tarp and some paintbrushes and a bucket. As she prepares their meal, she makes sure to provide man-sized portions, to be followed by a brownie pie, a decadent affair I would eventually try to bake.

What I love most about Ina is that she teaches me about fostering a strong sense of self and self-confidence. She teaches me about being at ease in my body. From all appearances, she is entirely at ease with herself. She is ambitious and knows she is excellent at what she does and never apologizes for it. She teaches me that a woman can be plump and pleasant and absolutely in love with food.

She gives me permission to love food. She gives me permission to acknowledge my hungers and to try and satisfy them in healthy ways. She gives me permission to buy the “good” ingredients she is so fond of recommending so that I might make good food for myself and the people for whom I enjoy cooking. She gives me permission to embrace my ambition and believe in myself. In the case of *Barefoot Contessa*, a cooking show is far more than just a cooking show.

64

I am not the kind of person who can survey the pantry, identify four or five random ingredients, and assemble a delicious meal. I need the protection and comfort of recipes. I require gentle instruction and guidance. On a good day, I can experiment with a recipe, try to mix things up, but I need a foundation of some kind.

There is, I must admit, something very satisfying about making things from scratch, to know every dish in a meal was made by your own hands. As a lazy person, I’m a fan of premade things, but it was a lot of fun and deeply relaxing to make, for example, my own dough and my own cherry filling for a beautiful cherry pie. I felt productive and capable.

What has fascinated me about cooking, and coming to it in the middle of my life, is how it’s actually a really good endeavor for a control freak. There are rules, and to succeed, at least in the early going, those rules need to be followed. I am good at following rules when I choose to.

I take particular pleasure in baking, which is a challenge because baked goods are generally not conducive to

healthy eating or weight loss. But I teach, and so sometimes, I bake and bring treats to work to share with my students or colleagues.

Part of the pleasure of baking is in its precision. Unlike cooking, which favors experimentation, baking requires weighing and measuring and exact times and temperatures. The pleasure of having rules to follow is multiplied.

Things often go wrong and cooking can be messy, but the act of creating something from disparate ingredients still remains satisfying. Cooking reminds me that I am capable of taking care of myself and worthy of taking care of and nourishing myself.

65

Food, itself, is complicated for me. I enjoy it, too much. I like cooking but hate grocery shopping. I'm busy. I am an embarrassingly picky eater. I am always trying to lose weight. This combination has me always in search of programs or products that will make it possible for me to manage dealing with all these issues at once. I tried a service called Fresh 20, which does the meal planning but leaves you responsible for the grocery shopping. I've tried Weight Watchers. I've tried eating only Lean Cuisines. I've tried low-carb diets. I've tried high-protein diets. I've tried combinations of various things. I've tried SlimFast during the day and one real meal at night. I've tried to keep healthy snacks around—fake junk food that only depresses me as it tries to serve as a plausible substitute for the real thing—beet chips, kale chips, pea crisps, rice cakes. Then I've thrown all that fake junk food out because I don't want fake junk food, I want real junk food, and if I cannot have real junk food, I'd rather have no junk food at all. I've tried to eat fruits and nuts. I've tried fasting every

other day. I've tried eating all my meals before eight p.m. I've tried eating five small meals a day. I've tried drinking enormous quantities of water each day to fill my stomach. I've tried to ignore my hunger.

In truth, these attempts have always been either fairly half-assed or short-lived.

In my quest to better nourish myself, I joined Blue Apron when I moved to Indiana in 2014. Blue Apron is a subscription service, where each week, they send you the ingredients, in the correct portions, for three meals. They deal with two of the most unpleasant cooking-related tasks: meal planning and grocery shopping. I was kind of skeptical about meal kits because members are given little control over the meals they receive. But if I was going to try and take better care of myself, I was going to put my best foot forward.

It's really cute how everything is labeled and packaged. There are knickknacks that include things like tiny bottles of champagne vinegar and a little ramekin of mayonnaise. As someone who loves tiny things, I always considered unpacking the box something of an event. The ingredients are accompanied by full-color, full-page recipe cards with step-by-step instructions and pictures. There is little room for error, and yet there is still the human factor. I am the one who is left to prepare the meals, and my fallibility is particularly pronounced in the kitchen.

My first meal was a cannellini bean and escarole salad

with crispy potatoes. I wasn't at all sure what escarole is, but I decided it was spicy lettuce, a better, more accurate name. The amount of spicy lettuce Blue Apron sent was laughable, so I added a head of romaine hearts because lettuce has no calories or nutritional value but it can take up some space on a plate.

The recipe was simple enough. I washed and peeled two potatoes, sliced them, boiled them for the prescribed amount of time. While that was happening, I made the dressing—mayonnaise, fresh squeezed lemon, garlic. The recipe also called for capers but I hate them, so slimy and ugly, and while I was trying to work through my pickiness, there was only so much progress to be made in one sitting.

When the potatoes were ready, they went onto a baking sheet and I drizzled them with olive oil, salt, and pepper. They baked at 500 degrees for twenty-five minutes and my kitchen got unbearably hot. I began thinking about the melancholy of cooking for yourself when you are single and living alone. One of the many reasons it took me so long to learn how to cook and learn to enjoy cooking is that it often feels like such a waste to go to all that trouble for myself.

Dinner would not wait for melancholy, so after rinsing and draining the beans, I softened a yellow onion, then assembled the salad, adding tomato, the beans, the lettuce, the dressing, all served over the crispy potatoes. It all turned out fine even though I had the saddest collection of

kitchen tools aiding me in the process. It was the first time in my life something I prepared bore any resemblance to the recipe from whence it came.

In another box, there were ingredients for an English pea ravioli dish. I began by softening four cloves of garlic and some onion. The onion looked hideous because I do not have knife skills. What should have been orderly diced onion was a quantity of awkwardly shaped onion chunks. When the onion and garlic were softened, I added the English peas, some salt and pepper. It all smelled good. I felt accomplished, and maybe even a little powerful, the mistress of my culinary domain.

I took the onions and peas off the heat and added some chopped mint, and then added it to fresh ricotta, an egg, and some Parmesan cheese. This was, in theory, the filling for my ravioli.

It's interesting, I've noticed while cooking, how ingredients in their individual and naked state can be a bit repulsive but necessary, kind of like people. The egg, Parmesan, and ricotta, so wet and loose, did not thrill me. It felt way too intimate.

And then it came time to assemble the ravioli. I thought I followed the instructions correctly, but the ravioli did not reflect that. The assembly process itself was irritating. The pasta sheets wouldn't hold together, no matter what I tried. I crimped the edges with a fork, but the edges would not stay crimped. I nearly threw the disastrous-looking

ravioli against a wall because the tenor of my aggravation was wildly disproportionate to the potential of the meal I was attempting. In the end, I decided, *Fuck it*, and threw the sloppy mess into boiling water, hoping for the best, prepared to eat the worst.

The pockets of pasta I had tried to create quickly disassembled, coming apart limply at the seams. Tragedy was multiplying. Once I thought the pasta sufficiently cooked, I drained the whole mess into a strainer, and then put that mess in a saucepan with browned butter and let it simmer until it looked at least somewhat edible. The dissembled ravioli ended up tasting fine and I am sure there was a lesson in there somewhere about how almost anything can be salvaged when you cook, but I never did find that lesson.

Blue Apron and other meal kit services are well and good, but sometimes cooking is such a pain in the ass. It is exhausting wrapping my mind around having to prepare food to put in my body every single day, and living alone, I am always the one responsible for that preparation. The more I cook for myself, the richer my appreciation for women and men who cook for their families every day grows.

Some nights, it is a question of whether I have peanut butter, jelly, and bread so that the dinner problem is thusly solved. Of course, I cannot help but wonder when basic meals became problems rather than meals, complicated

ordeals rather than daily, sustaining rituals. I love food, but it is so difficult to enjoy food. It is so difficult to believe I am allowed to enjoy food. Mostly, food is a constant reminder of my body, my lack of willpower, my biggest flaws.

When I ask my mother for her recipes, she is, at once, helpful and vague. She shares the basic ingredients and cooking instructions, but I can never quite replicate the taste of her dishes. Once I asked her for a recipe for *soup joumou*, which Haitians prepare for New Year's Day, our Independence Day. This is what my mother offered.

<i>Two heads of cabbage</i>	<i>Turnips</i>
<i>Peas</i>	<i>Carrots</i>
<i>Butternut Squash</i>	<i>Onions</i>
<i>Leeks</i>	<i>Cilantro and Parsley</i>
<i>Potatoes</i>	<i>Beef Tenderloin</i>

Cook meat until tender over low heat. Season to taste with garlic, salt, black pepper and hot peppers.

Add water.

Add vegetables.

| ROXANE GAY |

I have never attempted this recipe.

My mother always insists she is giving me or my sisters-in-law the complete recipe, but I cannot shake the sense she is holding back, keeping a secret or two to herself so what is unique about her cooking, her affection for her family, will always be in her sole possession.

Sauce is the staple of many Haitian meals—tomato-based, fragrant, delicious. Even when my mother makes American food, sauce is on the table. It goes with everything. If my dad sits at the dinner table and doesn't see the sauce, he asks, "Where is the sauce?" and my mother scowls. Sometimes, she is simply teasing him and the sauce is in the oven warmer. Sometimes, she isn't in the mood to make it.

I never seem to hold on to the most important elements of my mother's recipes, so when I am in my own home trying to cook certain Haitian dishes, I call home and she patiently walks me through the recipe. The sauce, a simple but elusive dish, stymies me. My mother reminds me to put on my cooking gloves. I pretend that such a thing would ever find a place in my kitchen. She tells me to slice onions and red peppers, setting the vegetables aside after a stern reminder to *wash everything*. My kitchen fills with the warmth of home. The sauce always turns out well enough but not great. I cannot place what, precisely, is off, and my suspicion that my mother has withheld some vital piece of information grows. As I eat the foods of my childhood prepared by my own hand, I am filled with longing and a

| HUNGER |

quiet anger that has risen from my family's hard love and good intentions.

There is one Haitian dish I have mastered—our macaroni and cheese, which is filling but not as heavy as the American version. When I attend a potluck, an activity I dread because I am extraordinarily picky and suspicious of communal foods, I bring this dish. People are always impressed. They feel more cosmopolitan, I think. They expect there to be a rich narrative behind the dish because we have cultural expectations about "ethnic food." I don't know how to explain that for me the dish is simply food that I love, but one I cannot connect to in the way they assume. Instead of being a statement on my family's culture, this dish, and most other Haitian foods, are tied up in my love for my family and a quiet, unshakable anger.

And still, when I am with my family, when we become that island unto ourselves, I allow myself to be a part of them. I am trying to forgive and make up for lost time, to close the distances I put between us even though it was necessary, for a time, for me to be apart from them. These are the people who know not all of me but know enough, know what matters most. They continue to love me so hard and I love them hard in return.

Every New Year's Eve, we all convene in Florida and attend a gala at my parents' country club. There is a five-course meal—lots of tiny, twee dishes. There is drinking and dancing. Even surrounded by a hundred other people,

we are unto ourselves. We return to my parents' house by one in the morning and the party continues—furniture moved, *konpa* music playing, more dancing, my brothers and cousin and me staring at the breathtaking spectacle of this family, the beautiful beast we become when we are together.

My hunger is particularly acute when I visit my parents. For one, they are minimalists when it comes to keeping food in the house. They travel a lot, so it doesn't make sense to keep fresh produce around, knowing it will likely spoil before it is eaten. And though they eat and, I am sure, enjoy a good meal, my parents are not people who take exceptional pleasure in food. They rarely snack. Any food in the house generally requires some kind of preparation.

But there is also the paranoia I develop. I feel like everything I do is being watched, scrutinized, judged. I deprive myself, to give the appearance of conforming, of making some small effort to become thinner, better, less of a family problem. Because that's what they tell me—my weight is a family problem. So, in addition to my body, I carry that burden too, knowing that my loved ones consider me their problem until I finally lose "the weight."

I start to crave foods, any foods. I get uncontrollable urges to binge, to satisfy the growing ache, to fill the hollowness of feeling alone around the people who are sup-

posed to love me the most, to soothe the pain of having the same painful conversations year after year after year after year.

I am so much more than hungry when I am home. I am starving. I am an animal. I am desperate to be fed.

My fat body empowers people to erase my gender. I am a woman, but they do not see me as a woman. I am often mistaken for a man. I am called "Sir," because people look at the bulk of me and ignore my face, my styled hair, my very ample breasts and other curves. It bothers me to have my gender erased, to be unseen in plain sight. I am a woman. I am large, but I am a woman. I deserve to be seen as such.

We have such narrow ideas about femininity. When you are very tall and wide and, well, I guess the tattoos don't help, you all too often present as "not woman." Race plays a part in this too. Black women are rarely allowed their femininity.

There is also a truth that runs deeper. For a very long time, I only wore men's clothes. I very much wanted to butch myself up because I understood that to look or present myself like a woman was to invite trouble and danger and hurt. I inhabited a butch identity because it felt safe. It afforded me a semblance of control over my body and how

my body was perceived. It was easier to move through the world. It was easier to be invisible.

In relationships with women, presenting as butch meant that I didn't have to be touched. I could pretend I didn't want to be touched and I could stay safe. I could have more of the control I constantly crave.

It was a safe haven until I realized that I was playing a role rather than inhabiting an identity that felt true to me. People were seeing me but they weren't seeing me.

I started to shed that identity, but people continued to see only what they wanted to see. Today, the people who misgender me aren't doing so because they perceive a queer aesthetic. They're doing so because they don't see me, my body, as something that should be treated or considered with care.

When I was twelve years old I was raped and then I ate and ate and ate to build my body into a fortress. I was a mess and then I grew up and away from that terrible day and became a different kind of mess—a woman doing the best she can to love well and be loved well, to live well and be human and good.

I am as healed as I am ever going to be. I have accepted that I will never be the girl I could have been if, if, if. I am still haunted. I still have flashbacks that are triggered by the most unexpected things. I don't like being touched by people with whom I do not share specific kinds of intimacy. I am suspicious of groups of men, particularly when I am alone. I have nightmares, though with far less frequency. I will never forgive the boys who raped me and I am a thousand percent comfortable with that because forgiving them will not free me from anything. I don't know if I am happy, but I can see and feel that happiness is well within my reach.

But.

I am not the same scared girl that I was. I have let the right ones in. I have found my voice.

I am learning to care less what other people think. I am learning that the measure of my happiness is not weight loss but, rather, feeling more comfortable in my body. I am increasingly committed to challenging the toxic cultural norms that dictate far too much of how women live their lives and treat their bodies. I am using my voice, not just for myself but for people whose lives demand being seen and heard. I have worked hard and am enjoying a career I never dared think possible.

I appreciate that at least some of who I am rises out of the worst day of my life and I don't want to change who I am.

I no longer need the body fortress I built. I need to tear down some of the walls, and I need to tear down those walls for me and me alone, no matter what good may come of that demolition. I think of it as undoing myself.

Writing this book is the most difficult thing I've ever done. To lay myself so vulnerable has not been an easy thing. To face myself and what living in my body has been like has not been an easy thing, but I wrote this book because it felt necessary. In writing this memoir of my body, in telling you these truths about my body, I am sharing my truth and mine alone. I understand if that truth is not something you want to hear. The truth makes me uncomfortable too. But I am also saying, here is my heart, what's

left of it. Here I am showing you the ferocity of my hunger. Here I am, finally freeing myself to be vulnerable and terribly human. Here I am, reveling in that freedom. Here. See what I hunger for and what my truth has allowed me to create.

Acknowledgments

Pieces of this memoir, in different forms, have appeared in *GOOD, Tin House, Autostraddle, The Toast, xoJane*, and *Brevity*.

Thank you to *Law & Order: SVU* for always being on television so I can have something familiar in the background as I write.

I want to thank Maya Ziv, Cal Morgan, Kate D'Esmond, Amanda Pelletier, and Emily Griffin at HarperCollins for supporting this book so fiercely, so completely. Maya, who first acquired this book, has always been its most ardent champion, and Emily offered generous, insightful edits that helped shape this book into what it is.

Thank you to "Team Gay," which includes my incredible book agent, Maria Massie; my film and TV agent, Sylvie Rabineau; my speaking agents, Kevin Mills and Trinity Ray; and my lawyer, Lev Ginsburg.

Thank you to Sarah Hollowell, a beautiful young woman I met at the Midwest Writers Workshop, who taught me more than she will ever know about my right to take up