

I AM SO COLD, AND HUNGRY IN MY SOUL

For Frank, with love

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Prologue: Autumn

When Calhoun kisses May, she tries to pull away. He holds his hand behind her head. Holds her head against his. Holds his wooden lips against hers. A forced kiss, forces his tongue into her mouth. She hates his taste, hates the way his tongue slithers in her mouth, on her teeth, on her gums. She hates the feel of his stubble against her upper lip. She pushes her hands onto his chest trying to get away. He holds her head firmly against his, and with his other hand, holds her body against his body.

“There,” he says, when they were finished. “There. That was beautiful, wasn’t it?”

“Sure,” she says. “It was beautiful all right.”

“Want some more coffee?”

His coffee was good. His coffee was always good. She hated his kisses but always stayed for coffee, and always had to kiss him another time for that cup of coffee. Then he would give her food.

Sometimes, it would be cookies. Giant oatmeal raisin cookies. Always store-bought. Never from a bakery. Or brownies. The brownies were from another neighbor, made from a mix, but they were decent. May ate them greedily, sometimes with Calhoun, and sometimes when she came back upstairs to her apartment.

“Sure, I’ll have coffee.” She sits.

After tonight, she wouldn’t remember that kiss. She wouldn’t remember why tonight, after that kiss, nothing was or would ever be beautiful between them, ever again.

He is wearing a baseball hat hiding thinning white hair, and khaki trousers. His skin is pale and mottled. His elbows jut out unnaturally. He is over six feet tall and gaunt, with deep-set eyes.

She would never forget his hands, veined, narrow, after tonight. She would never forget his strong, nearly hairless arms, with their splotches, his watch, the sleeves rolled down. She would never forget the knit vest he wore, and took off, and hung on his chair.

It is 11:30 at night and May had thought she was coming down for a cup of coffee. Afterward, that would be all she would remember.

She watches as he measures the Maxwell House and starts the coffee maker. The familiar gurgle. Soft rock is playing on his stereo, just music, no singing. She doesn’t recognize the song. He sits down, smiles at her, looks her up and down, says nothing.

Then she says, “It’s late. We’re up late tonight.”

“I love your body.”

She squirms. Why does he love her body? Why does he always say this? She wants to hide, hide from him, hide upstairs in her apartment, away from him, away from everyone.

He says, “Aren’t you proud of your body?”

“No. Why?”

“You have beautiful tits.”

Tits. They sit in silence.

Then she says, “Why don’t you get the coffee.”

She eyes his back as he heads into his kitchen, his spotless kitchen, to get the coffee. She imagines his naked legs, white, hairless. He never wore shorts in the summer. Always khakis or navy blue pants, never jeans. Always a well-pressed shirt. She could smell the iron sometimes when she entered his apartment.

“Want sugar?”

“No, black.”

The clinking of spoon against cup. He is putting sugar in his. His sweet tooth. She likes that in a man.

“Cream?”

“You know I take it black.”

“I’ll give you some cream.”

“No, please don’t.” Again, the clinking of the spoon.

Holding two cups, he comes to the table. Places them on the placemats without spilling them. She marvels at this. A sleight of hand. His hands.

“Drink, you cunt.” He turns and moves his computer mouse, awakening the computer screen. On it is playing a silent dirty movie. “Do you like to watch these?” he asks. “Do they turn you on?”

“Not really,” May replies.

He turns the monitor toward her. “They keep me amused on nights like these,” he said.

Yes, Calhoun had taken her under his wing. Yes, he had been a comfort to her when she had lost her job. Listened. Always ready with coffee. “You and me,” he said, “a pair of turtle doves.” Even their 15-year age difference didn’t seem to matter.

Now, his apartment is dim, shadowy. His ever-present police radio crackles on the pass-over shelf separating his kitchen from the living room. “We’ve got a 50-year-old female, possible...at the intersection of School and Mount Auburn...seems to be...accompanied by male....”

“10-4.” The radio crackles again, and the rest is unintelligible. Another voice comes on, apparently the dispatcher:

“Car eight to...Lexington.”

A crackle, then silence.

Calhoun says, “I like tits. Big tits.”

“You made a good cup of coffee. I have to go soon.” Her index finger makes a ring inside the cup handle, gripping it tightly.

He grins. She can count his teeth. “Drink that one and I’ll get you a treat.”

“I don’t really want anything.”

“Yes, you do.”

“No, please. I’m not hungry.”

“I’ll give you something.”

“I’ll be full after this coffee. Plenty full.” She takes another sip. And another. She wants to finish quickly and head upstairs. But he comes around to her chair and stands behind her, kisses her hair. “You’re only half done with your coffee,” she says. “Go finish it and I’m going to go.”

“I want to kiss you, you cunt.”

“I’m leaving.”

She sips the last of her coffee and starts to stand. He pushes her back into her chair. Unbuttons the neck of her polo shirt and shoves his hands, both of them, inside. His hands, cold, caloused.

“Stop it,” she says. “Just quit it. I’m leaving.”

“Gorgeous tits.”

She grabs his hand through her shirt but he slides it under her bra and pulls one of her breasts up and out of it. Her flesh stretching, strained.

“Don’t you love your tits?” he asks. “Don’t you love your own beautiful tits? Aren’t you proud of them?” He does not wait for a response. “Ooh, titties,” he says. “Titties.” He squeezes them, jiggles them up and down. Her bra tight around her, digging into her, but his hands dig harder into her breasts now.

“Ooh,” he says.

“Look, Calhoun--”

“I want you, May.”

“Calhoun, I--”

He removes one hand from her shirt and with the other hand, holds her down. He grabs her waist with both hands and forces her up. Thrusts his hand down her gym pants, holding his other arm around her. She tries to get his hand out, but he is strong. “Gorgeous, gorgeous ass,” he says. He pulls his body toward her and she feels his pelvis slam against her butt.

He holds one hand restricting her upper body movement while one finger is suddenly sliding into her anus. She and Calhoun are between two upright chairs and she can’t move. The word “rape” enters her head again and again and then leaves her.

He again presses his body into hers and grabs her breasts from under her bra. His hands are no longer cold; they sweat now, his fingernails dig into her flesh. He reaches one hand, pokes several fingers into her vagina, pulling hairs and labia while ramming something hard, too hard, into her anus. She says, "Stop it! No!" over and over until she can say no more.

Her thoughts move in her mind just then, to her pet rat Helios, in his cage, to his soft fur, his tiny paws, the way he eats his kibbles, half the size of his head, so thoughtfully. In her mind she feels his body on her shoulder; she does not feel Calhoun's abuse but the softness of Helios, his occasional tremor as she holds him--why does he tremble so? She comforts him, to no avail, he quakes, and defecates in her hand, and she must put him down.

"You cunt, you cunt," says Calhoun, when he is finished. Then he says, "That was beautiful. Thank you."

All she hears, then, is the crackle of the police radio, and the ever-present soft rock on Calhoun's stereo that seems all too loud, booming loud, in fact. She cannot get away from the crackling and the sound of a song she now recognizes as an instrumental version of "We've only just begun," by the Carpenters. She wonders, wryly, if there is anything that has just begun, or if a door has been closed.

He gives her some cakes to take up to her apartment. She doesn't have the heart to refuse. They are some sort of generic Twinkies, wrapped, that he has put in a microwave container for her. She does not thank him.

"I want to do this again," he says. "Soon." She says nothing. "Want some coffee to take up to your apartment?"

This, too, she cannot, does not dare to refuse. He pours coffee into a Styrofoam cup, and places a snap-on lid top. "Here," he says. "Take it." She says nothing.

“Why don’t you come by tomorrow, when you wake up, okay? I want to see those tits again.”

She nods. And nods again. She holds the coffee with one hand, the cakes with the other. She cannot open the door. She quickly tucks the cake under her arm, and reaches. But he gets the door for her. As she slips through, he firmly grips her shoulder, then releases it. Then he stands at the doorway. “Come back tomorrow,” he says again.

As she is leaving, May glances back one more time into his dim apartment, seeing not him, but the knitted blanket on his bed. It is intricately designed, forest green, pink, deep purple, zigzag here and there, with abundant fringes and cloth patches, obviously handmade. Why hadn’t she noticed it before? Surely, it had been there all along. Someone had cared for Calhoun, loved him, cherished him, knitted this bedspread, and given this to him, long ago.

He looks her over, over and over. She tucks the cakes under her arm and pulls the door shut. Walks down the hall. It is a short distance to the elevator. Months later, she will remember the dampness of the carpeted floor, the stray threads poking out, the smears on the safety glass windows of the fire doors. She turns the corner and presses the UP button.

“Up late, eh?” It is Corinne, her neighbor from the third floor, a nurse.

“Uh, yeah,” replies May. Wondering if her fecal odor can be detected. Wondering if Corinne *knows* her sin. Her shame.

Corinne looks May up and down. May stares at the elevator indicator. Four, three, two. It stops at two. Who else is awake at this hour?

It is raining. She could hear it. Heavy rain falling into the parking lot like a the cracking of a whip, jumping off the roofs of cars, off Calhoun’s bright, bright red Mitsubishi with the

license plates “ZA” attached to it. For some reason, she always remembered those letters. Z. A. The ending of something and the beginning of something new and horrible.

Corinne says, “You looking for work?”

“Yeah.”

“They’re hiring at this day care place in Brighton. Check at Boston.com for it. It’s a place just starting up, Tiny Tots or something like that. Also, at Stop & Shop. They’re always hiring. All positions.”

“Yeah.”

Corinne twists her laundry bottle around in her hand. “I’ve got a mind to check out that supermarket myself. But May? You--you’re not *really* looking that hard for a job, now really, are you?”

May snuffles. The elevator arrives. An older male neighbor exits, eyes the both of them, then shuffles down the hall.

He *knows*. It is written on the body.

Corinne says, “Where have you been, Calhoun’s again? You two seem mighty chummy. It’s late. I won’t ask.”

May swallows, hard.

She pours his coffee into the sink, not wanting it, but keeps the cakes on the counter. No, in the freezer instead. The odor in the fridge is noxious. Must be the eggs. Checking the date on the carton. Six months ago, last spring. She puts the eggs in the freezer, far away from the cakes, closes the door.

She opens the trash, takes out the trash bag, knots it, and sets the bagged trash onto the floor. Peeking into the hall to make sure no one is around, she creeps to the trash room with the bag of trash, and tosses it into the bin. She sprays the empty trash bin with cleaner, and scrubs it. Filth, be gone!

She takes off her shoes and socks. Her feet cold touching the linoleum floor. Her thoughts travel. He had a police radio. 911. No. No use in calling anyone. She would put the whole thing out of her mind. Now.

She runs the water in the shower. Finding some newspaper, she lays it on the bathroom floor, takes off her clothes, and places them on the newspaper. She steps into the shower, adjusts the temperature. She washes herself three times.

He is such a nice man, she thinks. Why was the act so gross? Surely, the horror of it was all her imagination. Everyone respects him. Such a respectable man, the most respectable man in the building. Nicest guy you'll ever meet.

Until she moves away from him six months later, May cannot wash off the odor of the act. She has a vaginal smell she is certain is so strong that it is public knowledge, an infection, perhaps. She refers to it, to herself, as "the stink infection," and tells no one. It comes and goes. She has no clue where the odor comes from, nor does she make a connection to him of any sort. She smells the odor in other places, too. In cabinets. On food. In restaurants. On the bus. In the refrigerator. The odor travels with her everywhere, follows her as if it were attached to her, like a piece of clothing perhaps, a long winter scarf. All winter long, the odor falls with the snow, and stays in her apartment. Even when she opens the windows and lets in the frigid air, the odor doesn't leave the place, and she grows to hate her apartment. She hates the floor that it is on. She can smell the odor all over the floor, in the hall, in the elevator when it reaches her

floor, on other floors, too, once she walks those halls, because the odor follows her everywhere. She smells it in her mailbox when she goes to get the mail. When she opens a letter, the odor flows out of the envelope, the rotten stink of it, of something, some event that she cannot now identify.

Until she sees the photograph he sends her, she is afraid of being cornered--anywhere. In the aisle of a store, in the supermarket, buying oatmeal, which she now eats for breakfast, lunch, and dinner; this is her diet. Supermarket carriages all around her, she sees no way out of the oatmeal--cinnamon raisin, apple, all sweetened, not what she wants. She is trapped in a myriad of fattening instant breakfast cereals and cannot get away. She pushes her carriage, but it is stuck between two others. She tries to get out from in-between, but she cannot. She cannot reach the plain oatmeal, the safe oatmeal. She dreams of safe oatmeal and unsafe oatmeal, and has the calories memorized: 75 for a quarter cup.

In her dream, she confuses the two oatmeals, and wakes up suddenly, completely under the covers. She knows she cannot be pinned down, cannot be covered entirely with blankets, or she will suffocate, die of a heart attack; her heart will burst. She throws her covers off suddenly, heart saved, feels like she can breathe again.

And she can never breathe now in the elevator. Being in a tight space. Shortness of breath, not enough air. She feels as though her body parts are being held and she cannot move them. If someone else is in the elevator, she wants to hide her breathlessness, her aching lungs, her panic, her fear. And she wants to hide something else she cannot identify.

Now, after her shower and robed, she sniffs her polo shirt before tossing it into the empty trash, wondering why she is doing this, maybe trying to find his scent. Her shoes and socks, too, go into the trash. The shoes fall with a plop. She hated them, anyway. She tosses out her elastic

waist pants, sniffing them first, retching from the odor. The pants fall to the floor. She picks them up and they fall into the trash on second attempt. Her underwear, too, she sniffs and throws into the trash. Out, out! Her bra--out! She stares at the ugly clothes momentarily before tying up the bag, wrapping a second bag around it, and setting the bag aside. Then she puts a third bag around the second bag, and ties it.

She steps into her bedroom. Opens the closet. Piles of clothes tumble out. These will have to go. Opens her bureau. T-shirts. She removes her robe and puts on a pair of panties and jeans, a bra, and a t-shirt. *They show*. She quickly grabs a trash bag and tosses the t-shirt into it, then tries on another. This one says, "Red Sox," on it. See how the curvature of her breasts shows through. Nope. Into the trash. A larger t-shirt goes in as well. T-shirt after t-shirt goes into the trash. Finally, she gets to her largest t-shirts, and these, too, *show*, so they, too, must be discarded. Then, her button-up polo shirts--all these *must go* for sure, for the buttons can be unbuttoned, and this, though she doesn't know why, she finds disturbing. Out they go.

Then, her bras. She removes the one she has on. It separates her breasts and the shape of them can be seen. Must go. Discarding all four underwire bras in favor of her simple sports bras, which flatten her breasts, she is satisfied.

In her closet, jeans. These are okay, but the elastic waist pants are not. She stretches the pants for effect. They can be pulled down....But she doesn't think this, doesn't realize it, just knows that she doesn't want them anymore and that they must be tossed out. She finds about a dozen that she doesn't want. A blue pair, a green pair with a stripe, a brown pair of sweat pants. Not wanted anymore. A pair that makes a swishy sound. Not wanted. A pair with a drawstring that doesn't tie. Not wanted. She needs another trash bag so she goes and gets one.

Button-up shirts. Only some of these can she keep. The very largest. She begins trying them on. The smaller sizes, anything that touches her breasts would have to go. There are very few clothes remaining when she finishes discarding what is no longer acceptable to her.

Five bags of clothes. Goodwill? These can't wait. The trash is the place. Throwing on some safe clothes, May gathers the bags and brings them to her apartment door. She peeks outside into the hall. The trash room won't do. She'll have to get a carriage. May grabs her keys and heads over to the end of the hall, where she finds a shopping cart and brings it to her apartment door. She loads the bags onto the shopping cart.

Taking a deep breath, she looks at her watch. It is 7AM. She has been up all night. The elevator is empty. Down the elevator, out the back door. Still, no one. One by one, she throws the bags of clothes up into the dumpster, out of reach of anyone. There is no turning back now.

It isn't until a week later that she tosses out the cake he gave her.

Chapter One - SPRING

Home from therapy and Helios is dead. I touch him and he is still, already cold, but supple. I lift him from his cage, hold him between my hands, then don't want to touch him anymore. I set him in the corner, close the top.

Helios. The little god.

Damn! Damn damn damn! He wasn't sick. He didn't say he was going to die, didn't tell me, didn't give warning, didn't say goodbye...damn!

I want to blow air on him to bring him back to life. Instead, I blow out a deep sigh and breathe in air and blow some more out again. I check his food. He hadn't eaten for what looks like days. He didn't eat, I don't eat--what's going on here? See how selfish I am. I think of myself and no one else. Helios!

Therapy today. My blue-black-haired therapist. Her knee-hi stockings, her swollen ankles and knees, those short-sleeved blouses she wears revealing jiggly arms. Orthopedic shoes. The way she talks, her sing-songy voice: "What did you have for lunch today, May?"

"I had a ham sandwich."

"How many pieces of ham?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know? What kind of bread? You don't know? No, you didn't eat lunch at all. No lunch. No breakfast. When was the last time you ate?"

I do not listen to her anymore.

T's waiting room. The people in it. A fat guy with a fat wife. Matching blue sweat outfits. They took up three chairs between them. The wife held a blue teddy bear that wore a

sailor suit. The bear's hands had squeakers in them. She squeaked them at regular intervals. Some head case she was. Never saw them before, hope I never see them again.

Helios. Dead. For no reason. Other than my selfishness.

Maybe I could have saved him. Going to therapy, trying to save myself, trying to get back something I can't have anymore, something from way back I can barely remember anymore. Going to therapy and trying to do the impossible, to undo what can never be undone.

I pick him up and hold him in my arms, and feel the tumor that killed him. It is right there on his side. I wiggle the lump this way and that. Why didn't I notice it there before? Am I blind?

I count the days. Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday. Every day the same. How to get by eating as little as possible. Why stay alive when you can die? I wiggle the tumor and wonder just that. *Helios had no choice. I, at least, have a choice.*

I have anorexia. The "A word." You can die of it. Remembering T's words, "Without treatment, you will die, May." Her pen in her hand. Her legs crossed, with her skirt folded up a little, revealing its sewn hem. "That is your prognosis." The silence, except for the clock, and then my T clearing her throat a little, like she needs some water. I am dizzy and need to leave.

"Do you want to die? Do you?"

Neck bent, not knowing what to say.

"Do you?"

Crossing and uncrossing my legs. Counting the minutes like I count calories. You can die of this.

I say, "What right do I have to recover, when so many others have died, and suffered?"

Now, I put Helios back in his cage, pick up the phone, then put it down again. Pick it up and dial T's number, hang up, sit on the couch, and sob.

There is nothing more despairing than this, a starving woman alone with a dead pet rat. Nothing more despairing than a woman who has the choice to live or die, yet chooses to die. No one can tell me what to do. No one.

I write: I have been caught up in this selfish calorie-counting, this weighing myself, planning the next way I am going to starve myself and lose weight, for longer than I care to remember, and it has worsened now, and I have killed Helios.

I have lost seven pounds in the past month. Looking over my stats, I can see that I've gone downward. Always downward. I make sure of it. Starving just enough to lose, not quite enough to collapse, and die. What is the delay?

Maybe I want to stay caught up in it. Stay in the losing game, the fight, the push. Maybe I want something to fight *for*. And yet I have been so involved that I failed to notice *his* suffering, *his* disorder. I failed to see outside my own disorder to see him, and he died. I close my journal, and cry some more.

Jeffrey. Yeah. Died of a brain tumor. My memory floods now. The day he left college, leaving a note, "I am going to my parents' place for the weekend." No "goodbye." Nothing. My anger. Not knowing. Frantic.

Finding out when his parents called finally, "Is Rick there?"

"Rick?" So quickly had I forgotten about Rick.

"Who are we speaking to?" Then I realize it's his fucking parents. Imagining his father--stuffy, overweight, a handkerchief, blowing his nose, honking it, his mother--wearing an elastic-waist skirt and white blouse, hair braided, both of them so unlike my own parents. They want to

Speak with his *real* roommate. Rick. *That* Rick. The one he's supposedly rooming with. The one we've had this *arrangement* with all along.

Sophomore year. Jeffrey and I. Lovers. The feel of his skin against mine. Oh, how I felt so important around him. How the memory feels good to me, even though he died and is buried and I didn't even say goodbye.

"Uh, I'm a 'friend.' Rick isn't here." I begin to tremble. This doesn't sound good.

"A friend of Rick's? Where is Rick?" Why the fuck do they think Rick is so important? I take a drag from my cigarette. Yeah, Rick. So they want Rick and I mean nothing.

"Yeah, I mean, a friend of Jeffrey's and Rick's." Like I'm trying to sound confident and important.

"Who are you? What is your name?" The dad. The guy that took Jeffrey golfing the day before he left for college. Jeffrey *told* me.

I stuff my half-smoked cigarette into the ashtray. *Our* ashtray, the handmade one from a tag sale we went to the day after the fall semester started. "Well, my name is May. May I--"

"May, we want to speak with Rick." The mom.

"May I speak with Jeffrey?"

"No." So firm. Both of them have said this at once. So much unison now, so much a pair of turtle doves.

I try, again, to sound important, like I matter, which I don't, but to them I want to seem worthy of news about Jeffrey, whether it be good or not. "I am a *good* friend of his. Please. Let me speak with him."

"We're sorry." This, again, firm, though a quiver in his father's voice, as if he were trembling visibly.

“Please.”

“Sorry. He’s not--we can’t--he’s--”

Then, silence.

“Thank you,” I reply, “for telling me this. I don’t need to hear the rest. Really.” I *know* already what they’re saying. “Thank you.”

But his mother says, “It was a brain tumor. We’re sorry, May. The funeral--it was yesterday. We are going to contact the school tomorrow. We just wanted Rick to know first. His *roommate*, you know.”

I know now that I hung up that phone and realized I wasn’t good enough to keep him alive. Knowing I wasn’t strong enough, beautiful enough, perfect enough. I wasn’t good enough for his family. I wasn’t even his roommate in their eyes.

I close my eyes now and think of the party I went to right after Jeffrey’s death. A large, stinking room, half dope, half cigarettes. Led Zeppelin. Girls wearing patchy bell-bottoms and boys with jeans and long hair. So this is college. At the beginning of the year, I thought I knew everything. Now that Jeffrey was dead, I knew nothing.

Wine. Beer. Nothing hard. A boy says to me, “Hey, honey.” I ignore him. Two girls whisper and point and I know they are saying that I am Jeffrey’s girlfriend. I hear the word “died” more than once. Then, the food.

Hors d’oeuvres of every sort, all kinds of cheese, crackers, olives. Brownies. Cake. And then I see the chocolate chip cookie. Only one left. I grab it with a napkin.

“Hey, that was the last one!” A girl with a flower in her hair.

“So.”

“So you shouldn’t be such a *pig*.”

“Do you want it?”

But the girl’s back is toward me now and I am left alone in a crowded room with a huge chocolate chip cookie.

Putting it back was just the beginning.

I get up and put on the coffee. I measure six tablespoons, boil two cups of water. First meal of the day. Thoughts all over the place. Helios. My companion. Did fine with the move, didn’t seem to notice his cage was in a different location, different smells, different floor and walls. Helios, *adaptable*, unlike me. This apartment is too cold.

I pour the boiling water over the filter cone. Steam rises like the mist off the pavement on a hot day. Wondering why I can’t smell the coffee anymore, or taste it, either.

The coffee teeters as I bring it to the phone. The phone is filthy in my hand. I dial Susie’s number and hang up. Dial it again. Ten rings. She’s on the phone and not answering her call waiting. She knows it’s me.

The coffee is acidic in my stomach and makes me feel pukey. I get up to grab some Tums and dizziness hits me. I sit and try again, still dizzy, ignore it. Two Tums: five calories. Lord knows why I bought them. I take only one. That’s enough to combat the dizziness for a little while. My mouth burns as the sugar floods my system.

I dial Susie again. Picks up on the fourth ring. I know right away that my sister is in the middle of washing dishes. I can tell. I can picture her skillfully holding the phone on her shoulder, confident that the receiver won’t fall into the dish water. She is scrubbing ketchup off a plate, that gross tomatoey junk leftover from breakfast, when she served scrambled eggs. Luke is off at work. The ketchup is stubborn and she is using steel wool on it when she says, “Hello?”

I am trying not to bawl.

“May? We’re getting together this weekend, right?”

“Sure, Susie.”

“Can you still make it?” Susie makes sucking sounds like she’s eating something. I close my eyes. I know she’s just served lunch to her little stepsons. It’s that time. Maybe bologna sandwiches, canned baked beans, and milk. The baked beans have run down their chins and onto their clothes before Susie had a chance to wipe it off their faces.

“Yep.”

Susie eating the bologna slices as she is making the sandwiches, she cannot stop eating it. Soft, salty, gooey, stinking pork fat. I used to peel the edge off of deli bologna and then eat it, back, back way when...*then*. Sometimes, the plastic wrap was still attached. Susie licking the baked beans spoon as she cooks the baked beans, then putting the spoon back into the pot. *Boston* baked beans out of a can with pork fat included. Susie licking her lips and then wiping her mouth with a Kleenex. She keeps the Kleenex box on the counter, which she hasn’t wiped down for days. Suddenly, I shiver. I stand, fight off the dizziness, go to my closet, and get myself a hat to wear.

“So why are you calling? I only have a few minutes.” The diaper smell.

“Helios died.”

“Huh?”

“Helios. My rat.”

“Huh? Rat? Huh?”

“You know, my pet rat. Helios. The one I used to carry on my shoulder at the old apartment.”

“Oh, that thing.”

“He died. Today.” I set myself down on the couch, deep, deep into the cushion, still holding the phone tight against my ear.

“They don’t last long anyway, May. Rodents are gross.”

“Well, you know, I’m kinda upset, Susie.” I caress the arm of the couch, then reach for a tissue. The box is empty. I get up and fight off the dizziness. There is another box of tissues on the table, which I bring to my coffee table. I sit and blow my nose gently.

“You should never have gotten that thing in the first place. I always thought it was a stupid idea.”

“He was like my roommate, my friend, Susie. Look, I need a ride to the vet’s. I need to bring his body--”

“Well, I ain’t taking you. Find someone else to take your stinking rat.”

“Susie, you know there isn’t anyone else.” I wad the tissue into a ball and grab another.

“You need friends, May. Not just us sisters.”

“I have Nina.”

“Nina doesn’t count. She’s anorexic like you. Sick. She’s no friend.”

Calhoun. But don’t mention Calhoun. Didn’t I move to get away from the old building, the neighbors, the gossip there, the drama, Calhoun? Why did I miss him so? Bastard.

“May, are you there?”

“Yeah, sure, Susie.”

“I said, you need other friends besides Nina. Find some neighbor. You were friends with your other neighbors. Didn’t you have some guy friend there? Calley, something like that?”

“Never mind. He moved out.”

“You ought to socialize. Maybe it’ll make you eat. Go to restaurants or something. You know, order food, then eat it. Simple.”

“Susie, I go to restaurants with Nina sometimes. We’re going to The Top in a week or so.”

“So you guys order a few pieces of lettuce. I’m not impressed.”

“Susie, I--”

“Look, we’ll have a talk. When we meet. All four of us sisters. I’ll see you then.”

“Wait, Susie--”

“I gotta go.”

“Can you take me to the vet?”

“Tomorrow.”

“I gotta go today. Helios’ body. It’s gotta go today. I need it taken in. I can’t get there on my own.”

“Why don’t you just *put it somewhere?*”

“I can’t do that. You know. You had the dog--”

“May, this is a *rat!* Get real! Take a cab. Come on. I’ve got no time.”

“Susie. Please.”

“I’m busy until three.”

“Then four. I’ll call the vet.”

So cold. I take off my hat and slide a sweater over my head, then put the sweater back on. Check the temp in here. Seventy-nine and freezing. Fucking April is lasting too long and July can’t come soon enough.

A few solutions to starvation pop into my head and then leave me. A spoonful of sour cream: 30 calories. That'll keep my stomach satisfied for hours. Shuffle off to the fridge and grab the container, spooning out about a tablespoon and eat it, swishing it around in my mouth to make sure it absorbs. Instant gratification. A cup of coffee hasn't been enough. I reach for the caffeine pills, then back off. Okay, half a pill. Splitting a pill exactly in half, I take one half then put the other half in a bottle designated for split caffeine pills. I hide both bottles carefully in a cabinet. My sisters *can't* see these. Not that anyone ever visits.

Susie's games. Always her games. Like us kids. Lining us up for inspection. We might as well have been wearing army uniforms. "Do as you're told!" The filth on her hands, her neck, her arms.

None of us would say a word.

She says, "You bitches. Follow my orders!"

"She is the bitch," mutters Nancy. She scratches an itch.

"Line up! Now! Age first! If I had a whip I would whip you into shape! Oldest over here."

May, Nancy, and Deb, the youngest. Susie shoves me. "You!"

I say nothing. A couple of neighbor kids are there, Nina and a few boys. The boys laugh but Nina is sullen. She points a shaky finger at Susie, then lowers her arm. Never know what she thought, I never learned.

"Okay, now, height!"

Nancy, May, Deb. Nancy's jealousy when I shot up and regained my height supremacy over her later on. Susie pokes a finger into Deb's stomach. Says nothing.

"I'm the youngest," Deb says defensively.

Susie slaps her across the face. The neighbor kids ooh, all except Nina. Deb recoils. Tears up. Her face filthy from yard play. We are all filthy.

“Okay, fatness!”

Nancy, May, Deb. A neighbor boy, Boogie, snaps a photo and we are suspended like that forever in our fat.

It is so cold in here. I steady myself as I stand, then go to the bedroom and find a vest to put on over my jacket. Then I dig out my old diet book, *The Scarsdale Medical Diet*, my first diet book ever. Funny, I know exactly where I keep it on the shelf. No one questions that I have this old, outdated diet book. On the other hand, no one is ever in here. I don't know why I saved it. The pages crumble as I leaf through them. Sophomore year in college. I remember the exact day I started the stupid diet. I could dig up my old journal and find out the date, but I won't. Thinking I was so fat. Losing. Fast. Yeah, so fat. I look at people the same weight as I was then, and I don't find them fat.

I leaf through the pages. Half grapefruit for breakfast with dry protein toast. A thousand calories a day. If I ate that much now, I'd be fucked.

The photo Boogie took slips out. My reminder. I am nine years old. Lined up. Am I fat in the photo? Not really. Boogie *gave* me the hateful photo I wanted to burn, almost did.

Susie. Just developing. If she were lined up, *she'd* be the fattest because of her breasts. Wearing jeans--bell bottoms--and a tie-dye shirt, which our parents disapproved of naturally. Sullen look on her face. Her mouth is open in the shape of an “O.”

Nancy. Tall, lanky. No periods till 16. Lucky chick. Her freckles seem to shout out on her cheeks like they don't belong there. Later, they disappeared. Or maybe she just wears makeup to hide them.

Deb. In Boogie's photo, she sucks on her hand, making a face like she's nervous. She sure grew. How did that happen? Was she careless, or something? What does she eat nowadays that gets her the way she is? McDonald's? Yeah, McDonald's. All those burgers, fries, shakes....

At least I'm not fat. At least not that. I would rather die than be fat.

For some reason, when Boogie snapped the photo, the game ended right there, and summer was over. We went back to school, but nothing was the same. Susie was suddenly interested in boys. Nancy got into the "talented kids" art classes. Deb had back surgery. And me, I just tagged along, and faded into the schoolyard.

I place the photo back into the diet book and close it, careful not to crease the photo, and put the book back on the shelf. If I knew better, I'd hide the book. Like I keep my scale hidden behind the table where I keep Helios' cage. No sense in keeping the cage there now, but the scale can stay put. I don't want to be seen weighing myself. I close the shade when I step on the scale, and make sure the light is facing in such a way that it isn't casting my naked shadow onto the closed shade, for all the neighborhood to see, and know that I care what I weigh. When I step on the scale, I do so ever so quietly. You never know what my upstairs neighbor can hear, and *know*. Then, on second thought, I turn the book around on the shelf so that you can't see the spine, just in case, and it is at that moment that a rush of cold air comes through the open apartment door, and with it, Susie.

"What, no TV yet? Shit, it's hot in here, May. What do you pay for heat?" Susie twists her decorative scarf off of her neck and sets her large purse down on the floor. She rolls up her sleeves. "I said, it's hot in here, May. Don't you think it's just roasting in here? Don't you have

air conditioning or something? What the--you've got the heat on? And a sweater and hat? Are you nuts or something? It's in the 70's out there!" She steps inside.

"Do you want some coffee?" I ask, not knowing what else to say. I wait until she steps inside, then close the door quickly behind her. I don't want cold air coming inside my apartment.

"What kind?" Susie wipes her feet on the mat. "It's muddy out," she says.

"Starbucks Kenya," I reply, "real fresh. I just opened the bag. How are you?"

Susie arranges her collar, pushes back her hair. "I mean, do you have cream for it, or does that have too much calories for you, May? Huh? 'Cause I want cream in mine."

"I make it with filtered water," I say. But why do I need to apologize to my own sister?

"Come on. You should have cream in your fridge for guests. It won't hurt you. The calories don't leak out, you know. Plus it won't hurt to use a bit yourself." Susie looks me up and down. "You look awful, May. Just awful. You don't eat, that's your problem. Not like it isn't obvious to *anyone* with the least bit of brains."

"I do eat."

"What, carrots? Or, should I say, one carrot? That doesn't cut it, May. You need protein. Protein. You're wasting away. We'll talk about it, us sisters, like sisters should, on Friday. Promise me you'll come. Promise. Now, for the stinking rat."

"He's here. I have him ready." I show her a sacred cardboard box. Helios inside. I almost expect the box to wiggle, or make some rustling noise.

She shakes her head. "Stupid rat. I don't know why people keep them as pets, anyway. Can I have some water? Do you really have the filtered kind? Lemme take a peek."

I can't say anything and she's into the fridge. Opens the door and sticks her damn head inside. The cold air rushes out of the fridge with a whoosh, and fills the apartment. I'd like to cut her head off and put it in the freezer, take it out periodically and water it like a plant.

"Okay, I've got the water, May." She brings out the pitcher deftly. I am amazed at her strength. I have trouble carrying that pitcher when it is filled.

"Put it back when you're done." Not much else to say to her.

"You don't have any food in there. Sour cream--on what? You don't have any potatoes. Come on, May. Potatoes are low calorie. You can eat a potato. What else is sour cream for?"

I shake my head.

"An apple. May, how long has this apple been sitting here? Months? Since before you moved? Can I toss it? What else...."

There is nothing I can do so I study the designs on her quilted vest. I follow the paisley designs on her vest, around and around, with my eyes as she meddles in my refrigerator while I sit on the couch, helpless. Paisley--pink and brown. Why is it that everyone wears paisley? Is it the fashion? Pink and brown. Like her skin. Pink skin, brown hair, brown eyes. The rest of us are blue eyed.

Calhoun said he likes a "blue-eyed girl." Says the blue means she's good at giving head. I shut my eyes to hide them, and try not to think of Calhoun.

"This yogurt looks old. Fat free plain, huh? Will a little fat hurt? Why don't you buy frozen yogurt and put Kool Whip on it or something? Can I empty this yogurt into the sink?" Not waiting for a response, Susie dumps the yogurt out, washes the container, and says, "Do you have recycling? Can I recycle this container? Lemme see what else you have in the fridge. Orange juice. May! May? Come here!"

Not going to admit I'm too weak to go over there, so I just sit.

"May, there's nothing in this OJ container! Nothing! Nothing in this peanut butter jar, either! The jar of olives--empty! I'm going to toss 'em."

Susie is done and she has left my Gatorade alone, not suspecting anything, thankfully. She doesn't *know*, anyway. She doesn't know that Gatorade is one of my best friends.

"Shit this apartment is so--so I don't know. No words can describe it. Like your knitting. When was the last time you've picked it up? Looks like you haven't done anything on it since last time I saw you. I thought you liked to knit. What's this? A box of knitting supplies. Yarn. Needles. Unopen and unused. What do you have it for if you're not going to use it?"

I yearn for a glass of Gatorade. I need sugar right now.

"Okay, these books. Same books that were sitting there last time I was here. You don't read them, do you, May. They just sit there, unread. Isn't there a chair where I can sit down?"

"I'll get you one." I stand, then, thinking otherwise, sit.

"Never mind, don't. I'll sit with you on the couch. Where's that stereo you had? That nice one you got when you went out with Nina and she helped you choose it?"

"I left it at the old building, for the neighbors to have."

"You *what?*"

"I left it there. I didn't want it." The music. Calhoun. Taste in my mouth.

"Are you *nuts*? Leaving a stereo? Just like that? What do you listen to? That old radio there?"

"I have a computer. And Internet."

"Do you use it? Do you?"

"Let's get going."

“Where are we headed? Angell Memorial?”

“No, I found a local place just a couple of miles away that can do cremation.”

“Get any thinner, and you’ll be ashes, too.”

We get outside to find a cop standing by Susie’s car, about to write a ticket. He is holding the ticket pad, pen in hand, looking up pensively, writing, looking up, then writing again.

“Hey,” says Susie. “It’s mine. That’s my car.”

The cop straightens his hat, nods at us. He’s *fat*. Looks at Susie, looks me up and down. Says, “Ma’am, you’re in an illegal parking space. This is for building residents only. You need a sticker.” His face is all fat and so is his voice.

“She’s my sister!” said Susie, pointing to me. “She lives here. I *always* park here.” Suddenly, she sounds like a child again, like I remember her from when we were kids, around eight years old, playing in the neighborhood.

The cop flips his ticket thingy closed, puts his hand on his hip. “Well,” he says, turning to me, “You just tell your big sister not to park here anymore, okay?” He looks hard at us, then turns, moves away from us, his fat ass wiggling a bit as he walks.

“How did he know?” asks Susie.

“Know what?”

“That I was older than you? Do I look older than you? Do I really look old now? Does my age show?”

“Don’t worry about it, Susie.”

“Do I?”

But I know why he has made this assumption, and she knows, too. I am too thin now; I am tiny, invisible; I don't matter anymore.

"Well, it's your fault for not having your own parking space. I can't visit you if you don't have one, you know, if I don't have a place to park."

"There's the street."

"It's too far to walk."

"You've got legs."

Stepping into the car, the seat seems too hard, too cold. "Leather interior," Susie had told me when she had bought the car. I am not impressed. I suppose everything is cold and hard, everything. I touch the seatbelt and it stings me with its coldness. "I don't think the seatbelt is long enough for you, May," Susie says. Not funny. Not anymore.

"Can you turn up the heat?" I hold onto my arms, rubbing them up and down.

"Hey, we just stepped in. Can you wait two secs?" Susie starts the engine, revs the accelerator momentarily, adjusts some of the controls. The wipers turn on, turn off to clear the crud from the windshield. "Gorgeous day," says Susie.

I hold Helios and wonder whether I will be able to keep his ashes.

"I said, gorgeous day."

"Yeah, I suppose. Gorgeous. Can you turn up the heat?"

"Let's go to Starbucks."

"Can't we just--"

"Look, I can't do anything without my afternoon coffee, okay? We're doing Starbucks. I need caffeine real bad. And a sugar fix. You're getting something, too. I'll see to it. My treat. I have a Starbucks card so you have no choice."

It's time to break out of this seatbelt and escape. Escape Susie and all her bossiness, her Toyota, the bologna she ate this morning with the kids, the yogurt container she threw out and recycled, and all, all, all of the things she says about my thinness that need to be thrown out, down the sink or into the trash and taken far, far away from my skinny body, this body I loathe. For didn't Susie loathe the body, anyone's body, as well? Wasn't it Susie who cracked the metaphorical whip when she lined us up? "Now, for fatness..." We lined up like magnets attached to each other, front and back, side by side. Our surfaces stuck together and fit together, glued, inseparable sisters. Susie, May, Nancy, Deb. The four Golub girls. I have photos of us at the beach in our bikinis, of us blowing out candles at birthday parties. I have school photos, class photos, family portraits. In one, Deb is crawling on the floor in front of the entire family, and Nancy is reaching over toward her, amused, perhaps. Susie appears to be giving a yelp and has her arms up, Mom and Dad are smiling of course, and I sit there, not knowing what to say to the camera because I am the only one without a role. I know this now. Maybe I should have said, "Cheese," but now, I am so hungry I would not be able to even think about cheese, not even for the split second it takes for a shutter to open, and then close again, committing the crime of capturing me and my thinness in its memory.

I shiver, and rub my hands together. I try to warm them between my legs, then under them, but there isn't enough flesh on my legs to get this method to do any good. I try sitting on my hands and all I get are butt bones jabbing into my palms. Anorexia sucks.

Susie will not turn up the heat in the car, apparently. I chance it: "Can you please--"

"Look, May, see? It's on the *highest*. Can't get any warmer than this. I'm cracking a window. It's freaking hot in here. I'm going to smoke. Mind if I smoke? No, you don't mind, do you? Okay, see my pocketbook? Can you find the lighter? Shit, this traffic is annoying.

Look at that asshole over there texting and driving. See what you put me through, May? You really should get your own parking space. Like, you pay rent, so what's the deal? I *need* a place to park when I come, you know. Get one for me, okay?" She lights her cigarette, turns down the heat.

Susie parks at Starbucks and gets out, shuts the door behind her, saying, "What do you want in your coffee? Or shouldn't I ask. Never mind. I *know* you take it black. I'm getting chocolate chip cookies for both of us, because I want one. You'd better eat yours."

She leaves the engine running. I turn up the heat to the highest. Can't stand the stink of her cigarette, try to turn on the fan but it doesn't help at all. I brush away a stray ash that has fallen onto her seat and it crumbles into my hand. Filth.

A couple of years after the games ended. Dad asking about them. I deny. Deny again. He admonishes me. Why me? But I am not thinking this, no, I think, "I deserve this; it is my own fault that we played these games, and I allow him to give me a good talking-to. I remember his words: May, I will make you so ashamed that you will wish you could undo what you did."

And all I can do now is wonder what he was thinking. Because he did nothing. Not that I recall. Even when he was on his deathbed, I wondered this. Maybe it was the mystery, this one of many about him, that kept my tears away at that time.

Or maybe it was that I was so damned starving all the time.

He's hooked up to so many machines I can't count them all. Mom says he's got a "port-a-cath." No clue what this is and I'm too hungry to care. Swollen hands, arms, feet sticking out from under the blankets and sheets. I go to cover them. Bruises on his legs. I cannot bear to look.

Seven months ago. He was skinny and looked starved. Looked anorexic in fact. I dared myself to ask. Would have been stupid, of course. Cancer depleted him of nutrients as did chemo. Cancer, the C word. The A word kills, too, but nobody wants to know this because people with anorexia wish it upon themselves. It's our own fault. We deserve our fate and the world, in the end, turns its back. When we get sick with anorexia, do we get flowers? When my blood work has come out bad, when I stagger around in my apartment, when my weight drops, does anyone call or come by to talk to me, other than Susie's with her admonishments?

My hands grip together. *I could not face my own father, nor could he face me.* Was I, too, in denial over him? Was this the reason I hardly shed a tear when he died?

The nurse comes in with a tray. I cannot stand the food odor. The whole place smells like a nursing home: the floor, the sheets, and now, the peas, meat loaf, and gravy served on his tray. But an orange sits there unpeeled. I wonder if it's juicy, fresh, and cold.

"We requested *small* portions," Mom complains.

"These are small portions," explains the kitchen person. "You don't have to eat the whole thing.

"It will go to waste!"

The kitchen staff person says nothing.

Slowly, Mom lifts the plastic cover from the food. It isn't the least bit colorful or tasty-looking. She cuts the meatloaf into tiny pieces. "Here, Stephen," she says.

"I can't--"

"Stephen, you need food! Eat!" She places the fork in his hand. He cannot hold it. It falls onto the bed. She picks it up, sighs. "We need some help."

"Feed me."

“What?”

“I said, ‘Feed me.’”

“Stephen--” But Mom, you can tell, does this more than willingly. I watch in horror as she spoons meatloaf into his mouth as if she were measuring coffee. “Eat, Stephen,” she says, shoving the meatloaf in faster and faster. She grins at me. I can count every filling in her teeth, even in the back of the canyon that is her mouth.

Susie has taken her wallet with her and left her pocketbook on the seat. I glance inside, telling myself I’m her *sister* and it’s okay for sisters to do this. A bunch of coupons wrapped with an elastic band. I flip through them. Baby asparagus, baby apples, baby pears, baby peas. If I had known, when I was a baby, that I was eating out of jars from a supermarket, I may have developed my eating disorder right then. Coupons for Pampers, sanitary pads, tampons, frozen vegetables, frozen pizza, cranberry sauce out of a can, a gallon of milk free. Alongside the coupons, a half-used roll of quarters in a plastic baggie tied with a twist-tie. A granola bar, chocolate-covered. Two hundred twenty calories. A lollipop. Five calories, even with the tootsie roll inside. A key--what for?--with a photo attached, of her youngest, Kyle, his baby mouth smeared with some kind of food, a hand holding a spoon in his face. His dad’s. This is supposed to be cute. Digging further: lipstick, scented. Eye shadow, and other makeup, in a little pouch, and a smallish hairbrush. A tampon. Tissues.

I take the mirror out of Susie’s pocketbook and look at myself. I hold my lips tight, pretending to put lipstick on, then pucker them, as if I were applying blush. I hold up my eyebrows. My lips have no color, none whatsoever. It is like I have no mouth, no opening there, no speech, nothing to say, not that it matters, anyway. I have nothing to say.

Susie returns with our coffees and two small paper Starbucks bags. Quickly, I put the mirror back and close her pocketbook. She pulls open her door. “Damn crowd in there,” she says. “The line was practically out the door. Here’s yours.” She hands me a coffee. I notice that the other one clearly has cream in it, from the bit coming through the top, so I trust that she’s giving me the one without cream, the black one, the one without calories. “And here’s the cookie. Chocolate chip. That is, M&M’s. You’d better eat it. I expect you to eat it just like I’m eating mine. She sits in the Toyota, puts her coffee in the coffee holder, then buckles her seatbelt. Then she puts the cookie in the bag in her lap. *She is going to eat it while she drives.* She puts the other bag on my lap, like she’s expecting me to eat the cookie right away, too. *Why is this always such an issue?*

“I can’t eat cookies. They make me sick.”

“Eat.”

“I don’t like them.”

“You’re making excuses. You like them. Eat.”

We hit construction. Bumps in the road like bumps in an ordinary person’s life that ordinary people just ride over, but I cannot; I stumble and fall. “Shit,” says Susie. “This is bad for the car. Can’t they leave the roads alone for a change? Why did you put me up to this, May? You should have taken a cab.” She turns off the road onto a side street, drives a couple of blocks. A mother holds her baby in her yard, the kid waves in the air randomly.

We go over a speed bump and I spill my coffee. All over Susie’s leather seat. “Okay, I’m pulling over. Right here. Damn you, May. I can’t take you anywhere.”

“Sorry. At least the box was on the floor.”

“I don’t give a rat’s ass about--oh, sorry. I’ve got napkins.” She grabs napkins from the passenger side visor, and starts patting my seat. “I think I can get all of it. You can wash these jeans. What size do you wear, anyway. Zero?” Susie pats my jeans. “This’ll wash off. There, I’ve got it off my seat. These seats don’t absorb. That’s the beauty of them. Beautiful seats, don’t you think? Your thigh is nothing but a bone, May. You didn’t waste *all* that coffee, did you?”

A knock on the window. Susie rolls it down quickly. The lady with the baby. “Everything okay?” she asks. Her voice is melodious and clear.

“Yeah, we spilled something.”

“Cookie,” says the baby.

“You want mine?” I ask, holding it up.

“No, thanks for the offer. It’s bad for his teeth,” says the mother, laughing. “Glad to hear you’re okay.”

Susie says to me as we pull away, “She didn’t want food from a stranger, anyway. Now eat, and I’ll eat mine.”

“The car is moving.”

“You’re not driving.”

The vet office is closed for lunch when we get there and we have to wait ten minutes for them to re-open. I have half of my coffee left and it is cold and I am cold. Susie puts the car in PARK and swears. “Why didn’t you *call* and find out first when their lunch break was, May? We could have avoided this hassle. What you put me through. All our lives you did this to me. All you put me through with your eating disorder over the years. The grief you give me. You’d think my marriage would have fallen apart by now. Look at how much Nancy and Deb worry

about you. Look at what they have to deal with. Money problems. There are bigger things out there than just you, May.” Susie takes her cookie out of the bag, breaks a large piece off, and eats the piece hungrily. “Mmm, this is good. Eat it, May. It won’t kill you.”

I take a sip of my coffee. Even cold, I cherish it. I try to watch Susie eat without her knowing I’m watching her. Her teeth, as they bite into the cookie. Crumbs, gently falling off to the side of her lips. Her other hand wiping her lips clean and the crumbs then falling onto her lap. She is unaware that they have fallen there. Then she takes another bite, chews, swallows. I watch the workings of her jaw and cheeks as the cookie bit works through her mouth and down her throat. When I eat something like that, my mouth stings and I get a rush, then my stomach hurts and I feel very, very sick. I take another sip.

“Look, May. You have no friends. You used to have so many. What about match.com, eh? Find a nice guy. Even if he was a lot older than you. Even if he’d been married 20 times. Maybe it would get you eating again.”

“Guess I’m not really interested, Susie.” Like maybe I don’t want someone getting me eating again.

“You know, people meet on match.com from long distances and actually get married. You can meet someone real quick that way. Talk on the phone and then meet. You know, instant messaging and all.

“Susie, forget it, okay?”

Susie chomps on her cookie some more. She is halfway finished. She picks up the crumbs from her lap. “Look at your ruined life. You push everyone away. Everyone. You used to have so many friends. You had lots of friends before you moved. Like people in your old building. You had other friends, too. You had that group of friends at work. Then you didn’t

look for another job. Living on your savings. The day care job pops up for a month, then they fold. May, your savings aren't going to last forever. And you should've held onto your friends. Money is one thing, friends are another."

I am almost finished with my coffee. Susie digs into the cookie bag for crumbs. She speaks while chomping on crumbs. "May, *what happened to you?*" Susie turns to me. Tearful. Cookie crumbs still on her tongue. Suddenly, she looks very, very fat.

"You falling apart over a stupid rat. A rat isn't a person, you know. This coffee is too stong. Did you finish yours? Yeah, it's not like when Dad died. Not at all. But you act like losing your rat is the end of the world. It isn't. Losing a rat isn't the *same* as losing a person, May. A rat is just a *thing*. Don't you get it? You didn't even cry when Dad died. What's the deal here? Why, May? Why a rat? Why a stupid, stinking rat?"

Helios' box is still on the floor by my feet. He is wrapped in tissue paper. The tissue paper was leftover from a gift that Nancy had given me, a pink lace sweater that didn't fit. I had given the sweater to Goodwill and saved the tissue paper in my underwear drawer. Even my underwear doesn't fit now.

"May, I know this isn't important, but what did the rat die of, anyway, do you know?"

"He had a tumor. I felt it."

"Sorry."

Susie folds the cookie bag in half, then in half again. She puts the bag into a little trash receptacle she has for the Toyota.

"May, can I ask you something? Will you answer me, honestly?"

I shrug.

"How much do you weigh now? Eighty or so?"

“I suppose.”

“Come on, you know.”

“Yeah, around that.”

“Shit.”

Cars whoosh by on the street. I look into my lap.

“What would Deb and Nancy say? They would be shocked. And Mom?”

“Mom doesn’t say anything.”

“Nothing?”

“She doesn’t know.”

“Huh? Doesn’t she *see* you? She should get her eyes checked.”

Yeah, Mom. Astigmatism, perhaps? No, I know full well what it is, and Susie knows, too: denial. It runs in families, and runs deep. All the years of thinness. All the explanations, the meetings with therapists, family therapists and the like have flown by her now, but they always did. Yeah, Mom. Sure, she doesn’t wear her glasses, doesn’t really need them, anyway, the silly wire frames too big and awkward for her, tinted, too young-looking perhaps, her silly hat, the way she shouts at people because she’s hard of hearing--she doesn’t listen, anyway. Her hair: fake blonde, not quite though because she does a bad job of dyeing it herself, the roots not done right, frizzed ends, brittle, thinning, as if she were the one not eating, but it’s only because she’s played with it so many times that I can’t count nor can any of us.

Yeah, Mom. Her comment on my body. Recently. I should never have had my shirt tucked in, should have worn it sloppily, but she would have commented on that, too.

“Gee, May, you have such a tiny waist!”

And that was all she said.

Susie asks me, “When did you last see her?”

I toss out my coffee cup, and pick up the shoebox that contains Helios’ ashes, putting it in my lap. “We had pizza.”

“Pizza? Really?”

“Sort of. Well, yeah.”

“How was she? Pizza, eh? I’ll be darned. You won’t eat a freaking cookie and you have pizza. What’s her secret?”

“Will you knock it off, Susie?”

“Eat the cookie, then, and I’ll shut up. The vet place should be open by now. Let’s head over.”

Rain. We pass a woman sitting at a storefront begging, coffee cup in hand. She wears an old coat and nothing on her head. She holds a sign that reads, “Please need money to help feed my starving family.” There is barely an overhang to keep her dry.

A man walks by and shouts at her, “Get a job, lady!” She cowers, as if he has assaulted her with his words. I reach into my pocket, and toss a quarter into her cup, to feed her starving family.

Susie yanks me away. “Think about what you just did!” she shouts at me. “Think about it!”

“Huh?”

“Starving family my foot.”

A long stairway at the vet’s office, many, many stairs. Don’t they have wheelchair accessibility in these places? Each step a struggle. I feel my heart strain. Perhaps I am overweight.

Susie says, “Look, do you want me to grab that box? You look like you’re going to fall with it or something. You can carry the cookie.”

“I’m fine, Susie.”

“I can’t believe you’ve put me up to this. Cremating a rat. Honestly. What do they do with the ashes?”

I stub my toe on a step, then grab the railing. “I’m keeping them.”

“That’s just plain stupid. It’ll cost you a fortune. No rat’s worth that.”

I nearly ram my head into the door frame. Steady myself there, then recall I’ve got my trusted Gatorade in my knapsack, which I carry around “just in case” I might faint while away from home. *Because I would rather faint than eat.*

I stumble into the vet office, drop into a chair. Susie sits beside me. I fish for my Gatorade. It’s watered-down to reduce calorie count, but it’s Gatorade nonetheless. I take a swig. One quarter cup, diluted to a cup. Twelve and a half calories. That’ll be about right to keep me conscious.

Susie says, “Aren’t you going to go over to the desk?” She fumbles with her purse and takes out a tissue, wipes her nose, puts the tissue back in.

“In a minute. Let me--let me, uh--”

“Huh? You’ve got the ashes. Just go.” She pats my back as if to push me forward.

“Gimme a minute.” I take another swig of Gatorade, steady myself. “Okay. You come with me.”

Several people at the desk are waiting. We pet an overweight dog. The dog licks my hand. He is some sort of beagle pup, brown, black, and white spotted. His back side wiggles to and fro. His leash dangles behind him on the floor. He doesn’t care what weight he is, doesn’t

hate his body, doesn't think about calories, doesn't feel ashamed that he is overweight. No dog criticizes another dog for being overweight. I would surely rather be a vet, then, than a human doctor.

The owner of the overweight dog says, "He's a fattie, all right." The owner is wearing a blue and white Red Sox t-shirt.

I respond, "He's a sweet little dog. He's not fat."

"Oh, yes he is. Needs a lot of exercise." The owner pats his own belly, then says to me, "Looks like your dog gets plenty of exercise."

"Excuse me, Miss, is Helios a patient of ours?" Yeah, they're talking to me.

I turn around. "No, you took care of one of my cats, years ago."

"Okay." Pause. "So what's that?"

"The body."

"Oh, sorry." The assistant fumbles with paperwork, then says, "Will this be credit card?"

"Uh, yeah."

"Okay. Do you want group cremation, or individual?"

"Individual."

Susie barges in. "And what the heck is that supposed to mean? Could you explain this in plain English? You mean, this rat, or whatever it is, is going to be cremated separately, individually, and kept separate? And that costs how much more? May, you can't afford--it's just a rat, for godsakes."

"Susie, I have the right--"

"It's just a *rat!*"

I lean over the desk and say, clearly, “Individual,” and hand her my credit card. The assistant smiles at me, saying, “Miss Golub, we believe here that everyone grieves differently. It is very important to many people to keep their pets’ ashes. I’m so sorry for your loss.” She doesn’t swipe my credit card right away. Instead, she comes around to the front of the desk, and gives me a hug, and holds me for a minute, Susie standing aghast, while I weep, and hold this stranger who doesn’t seem to care what size or shape I am, only that I have lost a pet like so many other pet owners that have come into this office and have lost ones that they loved.

The little jewelry box that used to hold my rings will be good for the ashes. After all, I no longer wear my “fat” rings, that fall off of me now. Looking at the rings a few months ago, taking them out of the box, putting them back in. They seem so heavy, like they belong to someone else. How dull they’d gotten! Too embarrassing to get them resized. I drop each, one by one, except one, into the toilet. Then I flush. Then I think of bulimia and feel weird about it all. Trying to convince myself they were cheap, anyway, but this is a lie; they were not.

When Jeffrey gives me the ring, we are sitting on the dorm balcony and it is spring, like the weather now, only I am not cold; I am warm near him. He holds my hand and I am getting tired of him holding it. I pull my hand away. He grabs it back. “Quit it,” I say. “Just stop it.” I get up to go.

“No, wait.”

“Don’t be a jerk.”

“May--”

“Well, it’s my hand.”

“Just let me have it for a sec.”

“Just don’t play ‘This Little Piggie’ again, okay?”

He turns my hand over, and over again. His half-stubble of a beard, now grown in this way and that, dark and bushy hair, overcoat with the collar turned up; he is always cold. He wears jeans and is skinny. He has never said anything about weight to me--his, mine, or anyone's--ever. God bless him. But now, he slides his ring around my finger and presses my hand against his breast. Then he says, "That's for you, okay?"

Even Jeffrey's ring goes down the toilet like a bulimic's puke. Because that's how it felt. Purging. Saying goodbye to fat forever. It didn't feel like I was throwing out Jeffrey, just fat. And now, the little jewelry box would be used for something besides rings.

Susie cusses as we pull out of the vet office parking lot and into the rainy street. "A rat. All this for a stupid rat. I'm late picking up the kids even. Did you eat that cookie we got?" Susie turns on her directional and makes a sharp left hand turn to avoid the construction, then turns right.

"Yes."

"Really?"

"You bet."

"I have a hard time believing you, May."

I am a better liar than I used to be, but not by much. I could tell Susie I ate it at the vet's office when she wasn't looking. I could tell her I gave it to the overweight dog. But both of those are lies.

I stand at the desk with the box and there's all this activity. They don't notice me, this skinny girl who is invisible anyway, too tiny to be seen. All looking away. I remove the elastic holding the shoebox together. I lift the lid. Helios is inside. I take the cookie out, carefully place it beside him, then quietly close the lid.

CHAPTER TWO

On the purging and re-acquisition of clothing

My closet full of fat clothes. Huge shirts. Button-up men's shirts mostly. Size XL, XXL and XXXL. And these are supposed to "hide" me? They make me look fat instead. If they make me look fat, how is this "discreet" clothing? I carefully try each shirt on, and one by one, discard each in a Goodwill-designated bag. Just about all of them are plaid. I love plaid. Where are these shirts headed? Is some man going to buy them? Or will a woman who wants to hide herself snatch them up first? Do I know this frightened woman who sifts through the racks?

More clothes in my closet that I have shrunk out of. Jeans that might not fit. Some of them I'm sure of; others, I have to try on to be sure. Pairs I haven't worn for a long while. I remove one pair from its hanger. A crease where it hung. I dust off the pair. The label has cracked from age. I remove my shoes and the floor is cold against my feet even though I am wearing socks. I wiggle my toes to keep them warm. I remove my jeans and throw them in the corner. Is anyone looking? Does anyone see me in this criminal act? What right do I have to try on clothes--me, a skinny girl? Can't I just have any clothes I damn please? Sure, that's how society sees it. Fuck.

I pull up the jeans and the hips and waist are way too big. They won't even stay on. Dang, I got thin! These go to Goodwill. I check out the belts. None fit. Jackets, all too large. I go through my underwear box and take out the ones on the bottom that are way too big, and toss them. *Because if I keep it, I'll grow back into it. Logical.*

Should I feel proud, or ashamed? I will be skinny forever, won't I? Will I lose more and more weight and need tinier and tinier clothes? Because that's the direction in which this is headed. Downhill. Fast. I feel proud because I am not fat. I feel ashamed of who I am inside. And it's who you are inside that matters more than whatever you think you are on the outside. And yeah, it's very easy for me to say that to another person, and so hard for me to believe it for myself.

I am ashamed of my thinness, but I need to have clothes that fit. XXXL won't do anymore. I toss the last of the XXXL shirts into the bag. Then I change my mind, and take out the last one. Jeffrey's shirt.

Bennington College. Sophomore year, springtime. He's been gone, dead, two weeks when I find the shirt in my laundry basket. I hadn't realized our laundry was mixed up. It is his plaid L.L. Bean shirt, the kind they made back then that they don't make anymore. I throw everything else on the floor and just hold the shirt, and hold it, and hold it some more, and smell the taste of it, how much I missed him as soon as he left college to die, and never return. I carry the shirt with me in a bag to class, and feel the shirt--the material, the buttons, the stiff collar--during lunch, during a movie, all day long, and try to bring Jeffrey back to me.

It never worked.

But I keep this shirt now. Why? To remind myself of Jeffrey? I don't need a shirt to remember him. Jeffrey was a long time ago. Thirty years. Maybe I need the shirt to be reminded of what I used to look like and that I will never look like that again. Now, I hold the shirt in my hands and try to get back the feel of Jeffrey, but he is gone now, too far back in time perhaps, or I am the one that is too far gone. I hang the shirt back up in my closet and wonder what I will use it for. Jeffrey, what would you have thought if you had known what happened to

me after you died, that I went on a crazy diet and what happened to my body? No one had heard of anorexia nervosa back then. People just thought I got skinny “naturally” because of the sadness. Or ignored me. Or looked on me with wonder, or like some kind of novelty. I hid myself usually, until summer hit. Then there were the stares, the gawking. Jeffrey, would you have thought I was ugly then, if you had seen me? Was I a freak, as I am now? Would you still have loved me?

Jeffrey playing with my hair, he combs it gently, never pulling it and hurting me. How he does this is a mystery. “Your hair is like silk,” he says.

“Everyone says that about hair,” I say. “Say something original.”

“Your hair is like chinchilla shit.”

“That’s fucking funny.”

“You’re fucking beautiful.”

“What’s a chinchilla? Isn’t that a rodent? Don’t people keep them as pets?”

“Yeah, the dean has one.”

“Really? Seriously? You’re making that up. Comb the other side now.”

“No, I’m not making it up. The dean. Fenton. The one that was by Commons the other day. He carries his chinchilla around with him sometimes. I’m serious. He walks it.”

I burst out laughing.

“Stupid, you’re going to make me fuck up your hair.”

“Let me get this straight. The dean, Fenton, has a chinchilla. A fucking chinchilla.”

“Right.”

“You’re on something. Something serious. We have class work to do and you’re seriously stoned. Chinchilla, eh? Okay. You show me the chinchilla and I’ll buy lunch.”

Jeffrey, I still owe you that lunch, even now. I'll take you to an "All You Can Eat" buffet. You can have wings. Juicy wings, with shiny, spicy barbecue sauce. Or chicken fingers you can dip in sauce and eat. All kinds of salad. Avocados, cherry tomatoes, celery sticks filled with cream cheese, onion dip, Ritz crackers, grapes, ribs that are so deep brown you know they are good, Chinese food of all sorts, burritos you make yourself filled with refried beans that aren't from a can, shredded cheddar cheese that's been shredded by hand, Romano cheese, gruyere cheese, fresh feta cheese, peppers, tomatoes, kidney beans made from scratch. Imported fresh olives. Fresh pita bread. Pie, cake, cookies. All you can eat, Jeffrey.

And I will eat nothing.

But I will watch *you* eat. I will watch your lower jaw move up and down as you chew, watch you wipe your mouth with your napkin, then put the napkin back into your lap. I will watch your hands as you deftly maneuver your silverware. I will watch you wipe your hands on the second napkin you've asked the waiter for, because one napkin wouldn't do. I will watch with fascination when you try to talk with food in your mouth, and marvel at the bit of chicken stuck between your two front teeth. Because I love it when you eat, Jeffrey. I want the world to eat, and eat, and eat, because it fills me up with joy. But it's the kind of seductive joy that has taken me down a bad, bad road, and there's little I can do to turn back now.

So I will send these clothes to Goodwill when the truck comes by, and today buy new clothes that fit me, if I can, girls' clothes if I have to. I throw on a jacket and hat, put on a pair of headphones over the hat, and head out.

The weather is clear for a change. Sky gray but not dark. I am practically skipping. A man with a baby carriage passes me going in the opposite direction, ignoring me. A runner whooshes past. Two dogs, unleashed, run through the woods, one male, one female, both black.

The owner whistles for them and they run to him and he leashes them. Water drops fall on my shoulders from the deciduous trees above, which are sprouting new, bright green leaves.

Children shout in nearby yards. I turn up the headphones. Puddles up ahead obstruct my path. I quickly step over them. I feel light as a bit of dust, floating along the path.

What do these children think, when they play? Are they jealous of each other? Do they fight over each other's toys? I focus on one child, a small girl wearing a white hooded jacket. She is Asian with black hair and alabaster skin, and she holds a naked, chubby, Caucasian blonde doll that is missing most of its hair. She holds the doll by its thumb, and runs in circles in the yard. Other children run after her, all screaming words I cannot understand. Perhaps they are not words, but joyful shouting to announce the day. Or perhaps my headphones are too loud.

Suddenly, I realize I am not thinking about my thinness. Suddenly, I realize I am not worrying about how I am going to starve myself today. I realize that for this brief moment, having stopped and stood still on this path, on this day when there is no rain, with children and grown people around me that have no concern about what I weigh or what I have or have not eaten, I am freed of the demon.

But not really.

The wooded area ends and I am out on a park path. More children on swings with parents. They are surprisingly silent. All I can hear is an occasional parental cooing. And the tapping of shoes on pavement. More dogs at the other end of the park. Further on, a baseball game starting up.

Nina and I played baseball with the boys and didn't think much of it. There was no separation between the sexes, no line drawn, no difference in ability between boys and girls on our street, anyway. Nina was a fairly good pitcher. I wasn't. There were never enough kids to

make up two teams. But the real fun was the tumbling. Here, we piled on top of each other, boys and girls alike, and rolled on the ground, over and over, a bunch of us, tangled amongst each other, shouting “ahh!” and “oomph!” over and over, boys and girls giggling and grabbing each other’s shirts, mud everywhere. And it didn’t matter who had hit a home run that day, or who anyone’s parents were, or if you were a boy or a girl, or what grade you got on a test. We were on the ground. We were with each other. We were young and free. We touched and grabbed each other’s clothes and limbs. And no one got hurt. Ever. We’d get up, dust ourselves off, scream, and do it again. And once you grow up, you never get that back. Because tumbling takes on a new, terrifying meaning. It ends up in bed, and the lights are always off.

Midway through the park I run across a huge anthill. I stop and watch them tumble for a while. They say ants can carry x times their weight, and do so regularly. It is ironic that ants have no flesh, no fat; they are only bones. Bones! Do ants ever get cold? Do they know what cold is? Do they suffer and know sadness? Do they grieve when one of them dies? Do they ever feel hope and joy in their hearts?

The ants crowd around a nondescript, rainwater-saturated cookie by the side of the path, fighting amongst each other for morsels of ant food. And I recall fighting over the cookie at the party at college. *You shouldn’t be such a pig.* Am I just that--a pig? Was I, for grabbing the cookie? I nearly ate it. I nearly put it in my mouth. I was so close.

The cookie, so tempting. Chocolate chip, my favorite, so sweet, the chocolate so dramatically different and moist, not like the cookie part, crunchy and buttery. It is inches from me now. My tongue works in my mouth. My teeth prepare to bite. My cheeks are already wet with saliva. The cookie approaches. *You shouldn’t be such a pig.*

The spell is broken. And then, my diet begins.

Everything, tempting though it may be--especially sweets--gets put back from where it came. The dining commons become a place of evil. I go there only when pressured, and eat only to keep up my reputation as someone who can eat anything and not get fat. Then, I don't eat for the rest of the day and into the next. I have my tricks. Calorie counting becomes automatic. I get good at mathematical addition and can do figures in my head if I have to. I write it all down--in code--lest someone see my journal and read it and *know*.

Two months into the diet. Letter from Nina: "I have been dieting since second semester freshman year now. Never mind how much weight I lost. It's been more than you saw me last summer. My parents pulled me from school. The doctor says I have this thing called anorexia nervosa. It's this illness that makes you thin. Have you heard of it?"

The letter is written on yellow stationary. Her writing is shaky. Usually, it is perfectly formed. Ink blotches dot the letters periodically. But I do not think the letter has been written in haste. She goes on: "May, I'm scared. A couple of days ago, I fainted in the bathroom. My dad wanted to take me to the hospital but my mother said no, wait and see.

"I don't want to go back to Wesleyan. I want to transfer to a community college here in New York near my parents. I am ashamed to go back to Wesleyan now that I am so far behind. May, don't ever start worrying about your weight. You are so beautiful and perfect.

"Love, Nina."

I fold up the letter and put it back into the envelope, and weep. Nina. Something happened to her and now she's sick. She couldn't even do school anymore, and it was all my fault for my selfishness. Maybe I didn't write to her enough. Maybe I was paying so much attention to Jeffrey, and not enough attention to her. Maybe we shouldn't have gone to colleges so far apart. Maybe....

But now, as I leave the park, I realize that at that moment, I had no clue, with all my dieting, that I was not ready to admit that I, too, had this starvation disease, this illness that made you thin: anorexia nervosa, the very same disease Nina had developed not long before I did. And had I recognized it then, would it have done me any good? It didn't do Nina any good. Her own parents now call her a "useless, burnt-out anorexic." And my own sisters? They aren't much better.

Garbage odor overwhelms me as I leave the park and approach the bus. The smell nauseates me, especially since my stomach is empty. They say a person in state of starvation has a heightened sense of smell, especially pertaining to food odors. I suppose that's why burgers on an outdoor grill make me salivate, literally. I have drooled over the smell of burgers. And I don't even like them. Or so I prefer to tell myself.

On the bus I sit next to a woman who is eating cookie after cookie. These are Archway cookies, the hermit kind, made with ginger and spices, chewy if they are fresh. She eats them right out of the package, chewing them slowly but steadily. I try not to look too interested, but I watch her fat cheeks chomp on each bite, and her jaw move up and down, and her neck jiggling as she chews. She wears glasses with a chain attaching them around her wide neck. She uses up a seat and a half. I take up the remaining half seat.

Perhaps the woman can't help but eat these cookies. Maybe she's got a problem eating too much. Maybe a problem like mine, only a little different. They say it's all on the same "spectrum." But I can't speculate too much. A crumb falls between us and I want so much to reach down onto the hard, plastic seat and pick it up and put it in my mouth, and keep it there, cherishing the taste for a long, long time. Because even a crumb will give me energy and

strength to go on for another little while. But I don't reach for the crumb. The woman grabs it first, and puts it into her mouth. I don't want to look at her anymore.

A baby on the bus drinks juice from a baby sipper. Babies don't think about calories. Babies don't worry about their weight, so this baby, I assume, isn't worrying about the calories in the juice the way I would. My T says that we are not born hating ourselves, that this is a learned behavior. I find this hard to believe. I can't recall a time I didn't hate myself.

"Want a cookie?" It is the woman sitting next to me.

Uh oh. "Sorry--er, no thanks," I say.

"No wonder you stay so nice and trim. You have *self control*," says the woman. She is talking with cookie after cookie in her gaping mouth.

Suddenly, she drops a cookie onto the bus floor. Her face contorts into a panic, then relaxes. She reaches for another cookie in the package, and takes a bite of it, and I assume the dropped cookie is forgotten, until a child makes a dive for it, a young boy of perhaps four, who had been sitting at the front of the bus, his jacket peeling off of him as he tumbles after the cookie, under our seat. His mother steps under us and grabs the child by his suspenders and pulls him up, saying, "Never, never pick food off the floor! Never! That is *not* yours!" Spittle flies out of her mouth and lands on my jacket. I wipe it off.

The child begins to cry. "Cookie!" he wails. "Cookie!"

"That belongs to the lady!" the mother says.

A man sitting in front of us, who has been reading the newspaper, picks up the cookie and hands it to the woman sitting next to me.

Her face falls. What could she be feeling inside?

My stop comes. I ding the buzzer, and stand, but I cannot keep my balance. I fall into someone's lap. "Hey, lady," he says.

"I'm so sorry." I stand, steadying myself. The guy is listening to some loud rock music on headphones. The bus comes to a halt.

The guy looks at me and says, too loudly, "Why don't you go on a diet, lady."

I move on. "Hey, are you okay?" It is the woman. She's getting off, too. We head to the back of the bus. "Take my arm. You'll be fine. That jerk. It takes all kinds."

Her arm is soft and inviting. I hold it willingly because I have no choice. I am too unsteady. I need my Gatorade--soon. We step off the bus.

"You sure you don't want a cookie?"

"No thanks. It'll make me sick."

"My name is Frieda. Oh, you--you--" A rush of recognition appears on her face.

"You're--I'm so sorry--you have--Let me give you a big hug, okay?"

And there, in the street outside the Goodwill store, a very heavy woman and a very thin woman embrace, enveloping each other in their fullness, each around the other in an understanding that only they--we--share.

After drinking half a bottle of Gatorade outside the store, not caring if anyone sees me, I go inside Goodwill. Here are rack after rack of clothes that used to belong to other people. Who owned them before, and why did they discard them? Were these clothes too small or too big? Were they the wrong color, the wrong style, or did the owners just get tired of them? Were the owners employed at supermarkets, banks, hospitals, insurance offices, or warehouses? What

were their names? Did they have names, or were they nameless, faceless, childless, unwanted as their clothes were?

I go through the racks to try to find shirts. I look for tiny ones with long sleeves that cover my skinny arms, button-up shirts with button-up cuffs I can unbutton and roll up three-quarters in the heat, just enough to let in some of the breeze but not enough to expose my upper arms. The shirts are all mixed up, different sizes, because the racks are arranged by color and not size. So I pick a color and go for it. Brown. I head over to the “brown” rack and as I’m between racks, a lady says to me, “You fit better between these racks than I do.” I don’t want to look at her, but I turn and stare at her back, at her paisley jacket, the huge designs that circle her arms and cross around her torso in purple and green, her Kelly green stretch pants, her tennis shoes, her pocketbook. I shoulder my knapsack and decide to head over to the “blue” rack instead.

Here the shirts are packed so tightly that I can barely get my hands in-between them. I pull out a couple of shirts and cannot get them back into place, so I hang them sideways on the rack. There are no price tags, only color-coded removable markers on each shirt label that I cannot easily understand.

I choose four shirts: blue, brown, yellow, green, then look for a changing room. I find one off to the side of the store, a little triangular room with a mirror on the outside. Why would anyone want to look at themselves *outside* the changing room? Don’t they need mirrors inside? I step in. There are also mirrors inside. I remove my knapsack, jacket, and shirt. It is cold in here. I hastily try on a shirt, trying not to notice what I look like, but I have seen: I am bonier than ever now. I try to twist my eyes away from what I see and I cannot help but notice my concave stomach, where it pulls away from the bottom of my rib cage, where the flesh sinks in at

my clavicle area, and as I lift my arms, my empty armpits. What have I done to myself? What harms have I caused? But I push this question out of my mind. Or try to.

I quickly button the shirt. But it is not quick enough. My breasts, under my bra, are still in view. I try to turn my head, to close my eyes, to hold my hands over myself, to erase, to eradicate, to imagine I am cutting them off.

Aren't you proud of them? Aren't you?

The night before he leaves, Jeffrey asks, "Can I suck on them?" One piece of hair crosses his forehead over his eyebrow. I refuse, lower my shirt, and turn away.

The night ended there.

Nina's breasts were always smaller than mine, and I was jealous throughout high school. Whereas Nina could wear the tiniest shirts, I wore loose peasant shirts that hid my breasts well. All our clothes were made in India then; it was the rave.

Summer after senior year, I'm headed home on Waltham Street from the ice cream shop on my bike, trying to avoid pot holes on the road. Suddenly, some rough asphalt comes my way, and my bike teeters. I steady it, and as I do, an old pickup truck slows, then passes, Rhode Island license plates. When I come to the next intersection, the same truck passes again, then stops. Two men in the truck. The guy in the passenger seat motions to me, saying, "Nice tits." His hands are thick, and his unlit cigar hangs out of his mouth like it's hanging by the stubble on his chin. Then they pull away.

Nina. Why couldn't mine be small, like hers? Why couldn't I just tuck mine away and hide them, like they were invisible, so I could look like a boy? Why couldn't I just *be* a boy, like the boys we used to tumble with, the boys who didn't care that they were boys or girls? Nina

didn't worry about her breasts. Or so I thought. Even after she developed anorexia when we were freshmen, I didn't understand that she worried about her body.

One of the Goodwill shirts I have chosen, the green shirt, is tight and clingy. I check it out in the mirror. It's the kind of shirt that Nina could wear easily, and I can wear only if I'm brave, only if I dare to reveal my breasts, only if I dare to allow others to see my thinness. On a whim, I decide to buy the shirt. *Thank God I'm not fat. Thank God for that.*

I search the racks for jeans and can't find a pair small enough for me. I own one pair that fit and they are girls', that I will have to wash over and over. I head over to the kitchen utensils section. Here are all kinds of useful items of interest scattered about haphazardly: toasters, coffee mugs, glassware, waffle makers, coffee makers, carafes, large spoons, all kinds of utensils. I rummage through these. Wouldn't a toaster be useful? I could cook English muffins, rye bread, wheat bread, frozen waffles. I look over what is there and choose a fairly expensive single-slice toaster that will fit on my counter. Then I choose two sturdy glasses. Wouldn't it be nice to put milk in them? Whole milk, or skim? Maybe two percent. I never drink milk, but it would be good to start. After all, they say a woman over 50 should have three glasses of milk a day. Realizing that I don't have enough hands to hold everything, I decide to get a shopping basket. I choose a spatula, a metal kind, for lifting omelets, and realize that I should buy a dozen eggs on my way home, too. I grab a small iron-cast skillet, too, well-seasoned, well-loved.

Eggs: wholesome, so many ways to prepare. Fried, over easy, scrambled. I know how to cook them all these ways. Soft boiled, hard boiled, any boiled. I know how to hard boil them so that they peel properly and don't get funky on you. I know how to tell whether an egg is raw or boiled before you crack it open and are sorry to find it raw. Eggs, which can be made into

French toast, pancakes, waffles. Eggs benedict. Egg bread. Egg McMuffin. Egg salad, made into a sandwich or eaten by itself. Surely, eggs are a good food.

Satisfied, I bring all these, plus the shirts, to the register. There is a line and I am tired. I cannot tolerate lines. I put my basket down, swing my knapsack off my shoulder, and get out my Gatorade.

“Miss, no food or drink here.”

“Sorry.” I put the Gatorade away. Lady, I want to say, I *need* this more than you need your stupid rules. Do you want to lose a customer? But I stay in line. I want to hold onto the customer in front of me to keep from falling, want to grab him and say, “I am weak and starving, will you help me?” but hold back. I want to shake him, shake the world, tell the world that I am hungry, that it is not only those that can’t afford or don’t have access to food that are dying of starvation, and that the starving are not necessarily only on the street corners holding coffee cups up and begging for money, but right here in this Goodwill store with a credit card in her wallet. The hungry also include those that *choose to starve themselves*. And when you restrict long enough, you’re not hungry anymore.

Two customers ahead of me is a lady with a screaming kid. I want to cover my ears so that I won’t hear the screaming. The mother makes no effort to silence the kid, but rather, fumbles with her wallet. The kid turns and suddenly runs to me saying, “Gimme!” He hits my leg over and over. Spittle runs down his chin. “Gimme!” He cries harder. The mother calls him back. Apparently, she doesn’t want to lose her place in line to go get him. The man just ahead of me, the one I wanted to lean on, gently guides the boy back to his mother.

“Thank you,” she says.

I put my headphones on and try to think of other things.

At the head of the line now, I place my things on the counter. Five shirts, a spoon, a spatula, a cast-iron skillet, a toaster, and two glasses. The cashier rings me up and tells me the total. Then the devil hits me over the head:

Eggs: 80 calories. Butter: 100 calories.

I say, "Sorry, I don't really want these."

"Huh?"

"I just want the shirts."

"Miss, I already rang these up."

"Sorry. I just have a really small kitchen, and don't have room."

The cashier shakes her head. Calls out, "Roger! I need the key! Roger!"

"Can I pay by credit card?"

Standing, waiting for the bus, I am freezing, I take off my hat and headphones, replace my hat, and put my headphones over my hat. I turn the music up loud to drown out the sound of the breezes. I want to drink more Gatorade but reconsider. Calories. I will have some food when I get home, just a little bit. Maybe an apple.

The bus approaches, comes closer, I wave, then the bus passes, doesn't stop, then stops about 30 feet past me. I hurry to get over to it. Seeing that I'm hesitating before boarding, the driver lowers the bus for me. She says, "Sorry--you're so tiny, I didn't see you standing there!"

So if you can't see me, I don't have to pay my fare, I want to say. But instead, I tap my card, and enter the crowded bus. *At least I'm not fat. At least not that.* But this is getting old. I easily slide past some carriages at the front of the bus. There are no available seats. I grip a pole, and wish that I could pray.

If I could pray, I'd pray for peace of mind. I'd pray for the world to get off my back. I'd pray for a place where I could just be myself and be skinny and not be bothered by anyone. I imagine this place: a dark, narrow path surrounded by wide, inviting trees. There are no children in sight, no signs to guide me, no sunlight. On the way, I pluck a flower, and it dies in my hand. But now, I just hold onto the pole and pray that I can pray.

Someone offers me a seat. I take it. The next to me is eating from a McDonald's bag, and I know before the person opens the bag that it's a quarter pounder, French Fries, and ketchup. I can tell. I know the smell of McDonald's well. I turn and glare at the person. She opens the bag and takes out the fries, dumps ketchup on them, and begins to eat them. What right does she have to do this, to eat food that reeks? I turn my headphones up louder, but it does no good. Nausea hits, but I cannot move my seat. Logic tells me that the noxious odor is all over the bus, anyway. I want to put my eyes elsewhere. I close them. But this worsens the nausea. Suddenly, I am aware that I am salivating. My mouth, full of saliva. It comes out of the corners of my lips, everywhere. I wipe my mouth with my sleeve. Again. And again.

Two seats vacate closer to the front, and I move. The bus is emptier now. I hold my knapsack tightly in my lap. I am just about out of Gatorade. I have consumed nearly 130 calories' worth, an entire bottle. Yet it was just enough to keep from collapsing. *Better that than eat.*

A tap on my shoulder from a fellow leaving the bus. Our eyes meet. He hands me a business card, and leaves the bus. I accidentally drop it on the bus floor. Waves of dizziness hit me as I bend to pick it up, then straighten. As the bus lurches, I slide into another passenger's lap.

“Lady!”

“Sorry, lost my balance.”

“That’s okay. I was startled. It’s okay. Really. Here’s the card you dropped.”

He hands it to me without looking at it:

TRANSITIONS EATING DISORDERS. WE HAVE GROUP SESSIONS SELF HELP.
CALL NOW NO FEE.

How dare he. How dare he recognize me. How dare he try to take away what drives me, my daily ambition, what I strive for, plan for, my daily scheming, my goals. How dare he try to break down what I have built for myself. Yet I put the card in my wallet, where I keep my change. I put my wallet away. Then I take my wallet out, open up the change section, and look at the card again. Eating disorders self help. I don’t want help. I put the card back in my wallet, though, carefully.

All the years of “groups” and “treatment” that have done no good. All the different T’s I’ve had. All the years of non-treatment, misdiagnosis, depression, and total lack of understanding on the part of people that were supposedly helping me. Telling me to eat was like closing a door in my face. I was called “treatment resistant” and some therapists refused to work with me. I was turned down from “programs” and “groups.” Even hospitals refused to admit me. Not that I ever wanted them. And I sure want to avoid them now.

It was true with Nina, too. I don’t know which one of us is in worse shape right now. Nina, sick all along--me, on and off, mostly sick. I cry when I think of the five years I collected disability for “clinical depression” when all it was was my eating disorder in disguise. All the medication in the world wouldn’t make me eat. It just made me sick and tired.

Yeah, my weight’s been okay at times. Up and down the scale. Overweight even, from the pills they gave me. The last one made me gain a huge amount of weight that I had a bitch of

a time taking off. Quit taking the medication once I realized it. The doctor wasn't too pleased. I felt no different off of it, better, in fact, maybe because I was home again, skinny again, or at least approaching a weight that felt more like home to me.

Home. Home is that dark place with only one chair where I am alone with my thinness. Home has no familiar odor, no friendliness about it, and it is not warm and inviting. There is no cat to welcome me when I arrive at this home, and I do not take my coat and hat off at the door; I leave them on because it is so cold, and I am hungry in my soul. Cracks and scuff marks riddle floor, walls, and ceiling. A lone lamp lights the room, then the bulb burns out and there is nothing.

Here, on the bus, sitting near the front, with no one looking, I begin to weep. I have cried on buses before. No one sees me. I wipe my eyes and nose with my jacket sleeve because I have brought no tissues. More tears form and I wipe them again. And again. I am not weeping for all the years I have wasted; those are gone. I weep for who I am today.

Again, I wipe my nose and eyes with my sleeve. Someone looks up, sees me, and goes back to her book. Just another skinny girl crying on the bus. Maybe skinny girls have a good reason to cry.

I decide I need Diet Coke to fill me up so that I don't have to eat. I suppose every anorexic knows this old trick. I don't even know if Diet Coke fills you up or whets your appetite. No matter. I want some. Mini-Mart is on the way home, so I decide to stop there, and they have it on sale for a 99 cents plus deposit. You can't beat that.

As I approach the shop some cops are outside with their radios and guns slung in their belts, their arms folded across their chests, big guys. Their cop car lights flash obnoxiously all

over the street and off of the store front windows. I hear them talking but can't make out the words; they speak so fast, like another language, another world. My mind wanders to their lives, the births of their children, their neighborhood basketball games, the Cub Scouts, their wives' cooking, cooking, cooking, and the last bone on their plates.

Inside Mini-Mart, I am listening to music and don't want to hear anything else. All is color in here and the colas are lined up for the picking. So is all the food. I try to drown out the radio music playing on the loudspeaker but cannot. I try to drown out the music that is coming from the various foods, the invitations from the food and the drinks in the coolers, but I cannot: "Eat me." I inspect the mustards, just for show. After all, I don't want to go in there and look like I'm only going in there just for diet soda, do I? Then, it will be apparent that I am going to go in there and buy diet soda, and come out and bring it home and drink that and eat nothing, because then the world will know that I have anorexia, the skinny girl in the convenience store, the girl with the tricks up her sleeve to keep herself from eating.

I inspect the potatoes. Only russet, no Idaho. I must, must, must make it appear that I am going to the store to buy more than just soda. I approach the counter. Asian woman. Young. I have seen her before, and I am hoping she doesn't recognize me, but a big smile pops onto her face.

"Do you--do you sell anything besides russet potatoes? Do you sell Idaho potatoes?"

"No, sorry, we don't. We just sell what our supplier brings us."

Good. "Oh, that's too bad. I *only* want Idaho. I don't want a whole bag of russet." I don't want potatoes at all.

I check out the candy. M&M's, Mounds, Snickers. They are so colorful, so inviting; they seem to speak so many different languages to me, but not my own. I pick one up and wonder if I

should buy it, just for show, just so that it will look like I eat. I put it down again. After all, I might end up *eating* it. I pick up the candy bar again and check out the ingredients and calorie count, then look around to see if anyone's watching me reading the label. No one. I lift my glasses up so that I can read it properly. Satisfied, I put the candy bar back down again, making sure I've put it back properly in its place so that there's no evidence anyone's picked it up. Leave it for someone *normal*, maybe for some teenager, some kid who has just fallen in love with her first boyfriend, or has just gotten her license, someone who is just embarking on a big, wide journey and will never know the darkness of an eating disorder.

Finally, soda. They keep it in a cooler off to the side. The Coke brand on one side, the Pepsi brand on the other. Coke stuff is on sale for 99 cents. I always mix up which side is which, but this time, I find the Coke side easily. You can tell by the shapes of the bottles. I don't want anyone to know what an expert I am at this. I don't want to admit it.

I find the Coke stuff off to the corner. Diet Coke in the silver bottle, two liter. I grab a cold one. I don't care if it is cold or warm. I will drink either. But this one is cold. Then I go to the Pepsi side and grab a Diet Mountain Dew.

What right do I, skinny girl, have to buy "diet" soda instead of "regular"? Shouldn't I, by all means, be buying "regular"? Won't people look at me funny? After all, don't I *need* the zero calorie. What business do I have buying "diet" when there are others who really could use it? It's like being skinny and buying diet pills. Plenty of anorexics do that. I wouldn't be caught dead buying them; I'd be too embarrassed. I wouldn't even steal them because if I were caught, *they'd know right away who I am.*

When no one is looking, I turn around the first bottle, the Diet Coke bottle, and make sure it is "diet." I check again. Then I read the label. Zero calories. I lift my glasses to make sure

the label says “0” and not “8” calories. It’s important to know, and these digits can easily be confused. I check the label again to make sure it’s “diet” Coke. Satisfied, I put it in my basket. I check the Mountain Dew to make sure it’s “diet.” Check again. And again. And read the label, making sure no one sees me. Finally, I am done.

Suddenly, I see a couple of old neighbors from my old building: Corinne, the nurse from the third floor, and Nonnie from the second floor. I don’t want them seeing me. I stay behind, waiting for them to leave the store. They don’t see me, so I decide to buy my things and hope I can pass them by without being seen. I am invisible, after all!

I walk around the far aisle. Corinne and Nonnie come around the second aisle, looking at soups. Their heads are just above the aisle, but they do not see me. If they could, they would surely notice the weight loss, or maybe, maybe they wouldn’t recognize me even. I have my line to distract them, “Yes, my hair is different now,” to get the focus off my weight, and then, “How is everything over there?” would be my next line, I decide, if they see me and recognize me and if I have to face them. But they do not see me. They head out the store and I am safe.

I bring my sodas to the counter and take them out of the basket. The cashier smiles her knowing smile. Then she moves away and fusses with the other cash register. I check one more time to make sure that both sodas are “diet.” She returns to me, smiles. “Why are you wearing a hat?” she asks. “It is so warm out. You are so warmly dressed.”

“I am so cold,” I say to her.

“That’ll be \$3.08,” she says. “If you don’t have eight cents, that’s okay.” And then, “Hey, you have a sticker stuck to you.” She points. Yeah, I have a label from Goodwill that must have come off onto my jacket. I pull it off. The label says, “\$1.50.”

I hand it to her, amused. “You can throw this out, I guess,” I say. “I guess I’m just worth \$1.50.”

“I’m sure you’re worth more than that,” she says.

“At least the sodas are.”

I fumble in my wallet for money. I have change but no bills. The business card from the support group falls onto the counter, face down. Quickly, I snatch it up and put it back into my wallet, more securely this time.

“Sorry, I don’t seem to have cash,” I say.

“Then you don’t want these?”

“Huh?” I remove my headphones.

“You don’t want these?” Despite the fact that I can now hear her, the cashier speaks loudly.

“No, I do. Can I pay with a credit card? Do you take them?”

“You want to pay by *credit card*? For those?”

“Yeah.” Yeah, I’m a skinny girl that desperate.

“Sure.” She takes my card, looks at it, and swipes it. When she hands it back to me, she looks at it again, and says, “Thank you, *May*.”

As she starts to bag my sodas I explain, “I don’t need a bag. I have my shopping bag. I stuff the sodas into the canvas bag I have with the clothes from Goodwill. I turn away and fuss with my headphones, putting them back on, and head quickly out of the store. Safe.

Just then, I get a tap on my shoulder. I hadn’t heard my former neighbors appear out of nowhere. I had my music playing. They must have heard the cashier say my name. “May!

May! Great to see you. Hey, you've lost weight! You look so skinny! I've lost weight, too! Can you tell?"

I ignore her. "Yeah, my hair is different. Do you like my new hairdo? How's everything? How's the old building?" Not that I want to hear. "Hey, I'm in a hurry." For some reason, all I see is the mole on Corinne's face, placed on her upper lip off to the left side, that moves up and down as she speaks. I stare at it, trying not to. Then, to avoid doing so, I focus on Nonnie, who is looking up at Corinne as she speaks.

Nonnie then says, "Corinne, don't forget that envelope you've been carrying around."

Corinne says, "Yeah. May, you skinny girl you, I've got something you must have dropped on your way out. You were in such a hurry. Don't know but I saw it and it's got *your* name on it:

May Golub. From "Your Friend."

Calhoun. It can only be him. I don't know his handwriting but I'm guessing by the messy scrawl--yeah, he *would* have messy handwriting, I'm guessing--that it is his. After all, who else would give me an envelope saying "Your friend"? I put the envelope in my purse, say nothing. Corinne and Nonnie don't know a thing.

But they ask: "Who? Who's that from? Open it! It's photos! Let's see!"

"I'll open it when I get home. Probably of my new nephew. I actually probably already have copies. You've seen him."

"Aw, let's see!" Don't they know I don't have a nephew? Of course, I've fooled them totally.

"Sorry. I just don't feel like opening it right now. My hands aren't clean. Later." Why don't I want them to see these photos? They're probably of me, *fat*. That's why.

What is fat, and what is thin? Are they meaningless? Who is fat? Are normals in fact fat? Do I see others, everyone around me, as fat when they in fact are thin? Do I see myself as fat the way I did when I was younger, when in fact I was very, very thin? No, now, I see myself as horribly thin, only desperately trying to lose more and more weight by means of starvation, the diet of death. Anorexia is contradiction. It makes absolutely no logical sense. We are, in fact, delusional. Even knowing this does no good. That is one fine line between anorexia and psychosis, a line that some sufferers cross over. I wonder if I already have.

Walking home with Corinne and Nonnie as far as my building. I have no choice as I must do so to be polite. They must walk a bit further to get to my old building.

“You *must* come to this party we’re having at the building, May. We’d all be delighted to have you. Calhoun would be thrilled to see you again. He’s mentioned how much he misses you. He seems lonely.” Corinne.

Nonnie: “They’ll have *food* there.” Like they want to fatten me up. Like they need to see me fatter, healthier, like they *know*. Maybe, they’re even concerned. Maybe, they see me as just hungry.

Corinne says, “Yeah, burgers, steak tips, corn on the cob and stuff like that. It’ll be a blast. All on the grill. We’re all pitching in. You won’t have to pay a cent, being a guest. Please come.”

Burgers. I imagine the odor and my mouth immediately waters. I swallow, again and again. My nose drips as if I had a cold, and I sniffle a little.

Then Corinne turns to me, looks me up and down, especially at my legs, for a while, as we walk along. Does she *know*? “Of course,” she says, “You don’t have to eat *a lot*. And we have diet soda, too.”

Nonnie reiterates, “You’ve lost so much weight, May. So has Corinne. Look at her. Skinny.”

“The Atkins Diet,” says Corinne, proudly. “I’ve lost seven pounds.”

I say, “Good for you.” Disgusted whenever I say this.

I cannot believe what happens next. I trip and fall. My pocketbook and diet soda and clothes everywhere. I check for broken bones: I am okay. Corinne and Nonnie help me up and get my stuff back together. Then, I notice: The Diet Mountain Dew isn’t “diet.” It’s regular. What a trick! How was that done? How could I have made that mistake? Didn’t I check, over and over, that it was indeed “diet” and not “regular” Mountain Dew? What the heck am I going to do now?

“Where did you get these clothes?” asks Nonnie. “They’re nice.”

“Yeah, where?” asks Corinne.

“Goodwill,” I reply, sighing.

“Gee, such tiny, tiny sizes.”

After we depart, I approach my building--with caution. Even though I am invisible, I still make a point of making sure I am not seen. Taking the side door or the front door, my two choices, is a big debate. Neighbors hang out by the front door, so it isn’t always the best choice. They speak in Armenian constantly and that’s enough to get anyone walking by a bit paranoid--me a lot paranoid because I am convinced that they are talking about my weight by the way they gawk and stare at me, and mumble in their language. I try to walk by fast, but cannot because I am so weak these days. I try to hide my thinness. It won’t be easy in the coming months, if I live that long. I’ll be rolling up my sleeves and they’ll see my skinny arms. It’s bad enough that

no matter how hard I try, I cannot hide my skinny legs no matter what the season. Baggy pants just don't work.

I choose the side door. Here, I must use the elevator to get up to the residential floors. I enter the building hoping not to run into anyone, and the coast is clear. Good. The elevator area is empty so far. I press the UP button and wait. The elevator comes quickly. I get on. Up to Floor 2. I get off. Here, I run smack into someone from Management.

“Oh, May! Hi! How are you? Did we get the heat in your apartment okay yet?”

“Yes, it's fine, thank you.”

“Great. Gee, you're looking thin. Don't you eat?”

“I'm fine. Really.” I rush off down the hall so the lady won't make any more comments.

I reach my door, get the key out, turn it, I'm in and safe. Home. Turn on the lights and try to figure out how I'm going to deal with the “non-diet” Mountain Dew. Finally, I have a plan. Management is leaving in a few minutes. Not many people will be in the hall. I'll wait until no one's looking, then put the bottle in the “giveaway” box for someone to take. No one has to know. No one will care who put it there. No one will catch me if no one sees.

So I wait till around 4:45. I am safe. Cover up with a jacket to make sure that if I'm seen, no one sees my body. I can fake anything if I have to, pretend I'm bringing the soda to a neighbor. Not that I know anyone here. I slip out the apartment door, the “non-diet” Mountain Dew cradled in my arm so no one can see that I am carrying a bottle of “non-diet” soda, so no one can see whether it's “diet” or “non-diet.” It's nobody's business and I don't want anyone knowing anything, don't want anyone suspecting anything about me. I check to the right, to the left. No one. I walk down the hall trying to look confident. It is tough because I haven't had the

apple I promised myself today. Finally, I stumble upon the “giveaway box” and place the soda, still in its bag, into the box. A noise in the hall and I am caught.

“Hey, what are *you* doing?”

“Huh?” I turn to see a man around my age that I haven’t seen before. He is bearded, wearing dark clothing, and uses a cane. He carries a small purse of sorts, and a plastic bag with a box in it.

“What’s in the bag?”

“Oh.” I hand it to him, figuring I have no choice. “Soda. I have an extra bottle. Want some?”

“Ooh, lets see. What is it?”

“Mountain Dew.”

“Diet?”

“Lemme see. I’m not sure.” I turn the label around and around, pretending I can’t tell which it is. “I think it’s regular.”

“Oh, I can’t have the sugar. I’m on a diet. But otherwise I’d take it. I’ve got some pastries I was going to leave in the box. Here. Take them. I insist. I don’t need the extra calories. Take them.” He hands them to me. “Where do you live? I’ll walk you back to your apartment. Hey, you seem kinda unsteady on your feet. You okay?”

“Yeah. I didn’t think it was that noticeable.”

“Huh?”

“I didn’t know people could notice.”

“You sick?”

“No.”

“Epilepsy, or something?”

“Maybe. I guess.”

“Hey, I’m new here. My name is Keith. If you ever need anything, anything at all, let me know, okay--okay, what should I call you?”

“May. May Golub.”

“May I call you May?”

“That’s what they all say.”

“If you ever need anything....” He eyes me, then asks, “Can I bring you more food? Listen, enjoy the pastries, okay?”

Once he is gone, I close the door and make sure it is locked. I am glad to be rid of the “non diet” Mountain Dew. I open the pastries. Apple fritters, four of them. I close the box, and throw them in the trash. Then, thinking again, I take out the box of fritters, open the box, pour water on the pastries so that I will not eat them, close the box, then bury the whole thing deep, deep into my trash.

I unpack the shirts I have bought, decide to try them on again. First, the blue shirt. Plaid, sort of, browns and dark blues and whites, pleated up the front, clear buttons. I button it up, struggling with tight-fitting button holes, but finally get it. I like the cuffs. I check myself in the mirror, then try rolling up the sleeves. If I roll them up three-quarters, you can’t see my upper arms; if I roll them up further, you can. I have to be very careful not to expose myself to those I don’t want knowing how thin I am.

Do I want my sisters knowing, or not? Do they care? If they see me, will they be at all concerned? Or have they given up? Do they know I’ve relapsed? *Sometimes, the family is the last to acknowledge....*I read that somewhere, and I believe it’s true. Denial, giving up, not

caring, or...do they think this is all a *game*? Do they think I'm *faking* this? How can you fake weighing eighty pounds? Can't they *see* me? Do they have eyes? Don't they know this is dangerous, fatal even? This is *not* a game! Wake up!

I remove the blue shirt, try on the brown one. I instantly love it. I love the collar, the way it frames me, the way it *covers* the dips in my neck. In fact, it covers me nicely. The cuffs have three buttons each. The material is thick and will do for a spring day. Maybe tomorrow. I remove the shirt. Then I try on the clingy shirt. As soon as it's on, there's a knock on the door.

I open it. Keith. He stands, stares at me in the shirt, with my arms exposed, he's just looking at me, maybe expecting to be allowed in, looking at me some more, silent, his eyes wide, maybe shocked, his eyebrows dark, thick above his eyes, forehead wrinkled, hair a bit disheveled, sweaty, panting. He holds a box.

"A package has arrived. It's for you. Thought I'd bring it down."

"Thanks." He doesn't hand it to me just yet.

"It's got your name on it. No apartment number, but I remembered where you lived, May Golub."

"Thanks."

"You've got the place nicely fixed up."

"Thanks." I cross my arms over my body.

"I like your curtains. Hey, did you like the pastries? Have you had them yet?"

"I froze them. For my sisters. They're coming over soon." I take a step back, allowing him to take a step forward into my apartment. He still hasn't handed me the package, but then again, I haven't reached for it.

“Hey, nice shirt. Looks good on you.” Then he screws up his face, like maybe he’d said something inappropriate, and says, “I mean--I mean, er, looks like you just got it. Where can you shop around here? Like I said, I’m new to the area.”

“There’s a mall. And a few shopping centers.”

“Well, look, if you ever want to go shopping, I’ll take you. Be sure to eat some of those pastries, will you? Here’s your package.”

He hands it to me, and leaves. I watch him walk down the hall, his hands in his pockets, whistling nearly inaudibly. The hall is otherwise vacant.

I bring the package to my kitchen, and check out the return address. “AV.” Angel View Cemetary. Helios. I shake the package gently. Something clunks. The package weighs maybe a pound. I do not want to open it.

I have promised myself an apple, so I go to the refrigerator, and find one. I’ve got three left. I bring it to my counter, and cut it into slices, then cut each slice in half, and eat the pieces. After I find myself choking on one of them, I throw the remaining slices of apple in the trash. I drink water to wash down what I have eaten of the apple--fresh, cool, filtered water. The calories in the apple are flooding my system with energy enough to last me for hours, but I have eaten it just in time. The Gatorade I drank wouldn’t have held me much longer. I put the knife away. Then I open the refrigerator and check on my supply of Gatorade, to make sure I’ve got enough for the next week. I wash out the smaller bottle I used today so that I can use it over for another trip out. No sense in throwing out a good bottle if it can be used again. Then, I measure four ounces--25 calories--of Gatorade into a measuring cup and pour this into the bottle, and add filtered water to the top. I’ve made a 25 calorie drink I can carry around with me “just in case” I need just 25 calories to keep me going. Why I still bother measuring is beyond me. I label the

Gatorade bottle carefully, “4oz”--four ounces of Gatorade, diluted, so I know what I have. I put the bottle in the refrigerator, reminding myself to take the label off when I go on the bus, so no one will see, and *know*.

I carry the box to the living room. Helios. Then I bring the box back to the kitchen, grab an Exacto knife, and slit open the tape holding the box shut. It opens easily. The contents are wrapped in bubble wrap. I slit the bubble wrap. Inside is a metal container, taped up. Helios.

The container is three inches high and three inches diameter, gold-colored. I shake it gently. It sounds like something solid is inside, not powder at all, and it doesn't take up much space in the container. So this is all that is left.

In the end this is all that will be left of me, too. Ashes. Nothing but bones. No flesh left because it has all been burnt off. I set the container on my coffee table, sit on my couch, and weep. I weep for Helios. I weep for myself. I weep because my sister Susie and everyone else did not understand my affection for him. My own three sisters who do not understand me and never will. My own three sisters who do not see me, do not listen, and do not care that I loved a rat. Even Calhoun found Helios “disgusting.” Calhoun especially. Calhoun...why am I thinking of him *now*?

I peel off the tape and open the metal tin. Inside is a plastic bag full of something off-white. I put the bag back into the tin and close the lid. Then I go to my bedroom and find my jewelry box. Helios' ashes will go inside this box.

Inside is one remaining ring, the one from Jeffrey, that he gave me the day before he left college, too big for me now. The energy from the apple gives me strength to do this now. I take the ring out of the box. I bring it to the kitchen, and put it in a bag. Looking both ways, I leave my apartment and walk to the trash room. I drop the bag into the trash compactor.

It is raining now, the kind of rain that washes away the trash on the street, all the dog piss on people's yards, all the vomit that has been vomited outside of bars, the kind of rain that people say, "We needed this rain" but really, we didn't. This is the kind of rain that makes sneakers slip on pavement, that makes dogs drink out of puddles, that brings out the worms on the sidewalk afterward, when the sun shines and dries out everything, and all is forgotten.

CHAPTER THREE

“Turn up the heat for May,” says Susie, as soon as I hop into the back seat of Nancy’s Buick, next to Deb. “She’s always so cold.”

“Okay, cranking it.” Nancy has her hair down today, and it has obviously blown somewhat in the wind. I am seated directly behind her. She wears a decorative scarf around her neck. Nancy starts the engine.

Deb gives me a little hug and kiss. “Great to see you, May.” Then she blushes, covering her face. “I’ve--I’ve gained a little weight.”

“I didn’t notice,” I say.

“I try to exercise. I do ‘Walk Away the Pounds.’” The car pulls out of my driveway and we head down my street.

“Oh.”

“Otherwise, I’m fine. Glad you’re here.” She’s holding a small bag of M&M’s, eating them. “Want some?”

“Er, no thanks.”

“Sure?”

“Yeah.”

She lowers her voice. “You have *self control*. I don’t. I guess we shouldn’t discuss it, eh? Me and you.”

“Hey, are we stopping at Starbucks?” Susie.

Nancy says, “It’s up to me and I say ‘Yes!’ Cawfee! Are you guys up for it? After that marathon, I am!”

Deb explains to me, “May, we went to see the Boston Marathon this morning. Watched it in Newton. Saw the runners running by. I mean, we actually *watched* them run. Wow. They were really moving. I can’t imagine running that far. Twenty-six miles!”

Susie corrected her. “That’s twenty-six point two, Deb. Point two.”

“Okay. Point two. Whatever you say.”

Susie says, “You should have *seen* their skinny arms. You didn’t *see*, Deb. You weren’t in the right spot. Just like May’s. Skinny.”

“Are they anorexic?” Nancy asks.

“They’re runners, silly.”

“Are they anorexic?” Nancy asks again.

“No. All their muscles, all their weight is in their legs. That’s why. They don’t have anything left for their arms. Or so I think.”

“Bet some of them had eating disorders. Bet some of them did. They had skinny arms. They were so skinny.”

“If you don’t eat, you can’t run 26 miles, silly.”

“Twenty-six point two.”

Suddenly, I am glad I am wearing a jacket. I am glad I’m covered up. This isn’t going to be easy. I notice Deb is looking at my thighs. Her brow is wrinkled. I cover my thighs with my hands. I feel stupid. “How are you?” I ask, looking ahead, not at her.

“I told you, I’m okay,” she says. She stares at the side of my face.

I don’t want to look at her, and I don’t say anything.

“Okay,” she says, “I won’t ask you how you are. I don’t want to hear about how you are starving yourself to death.”

“No, really,” says Nancy, “how do you run 26 miles? How?”

“Twenty-six point two,” Susie says.

“Point two, okay, point two, how do you run 26.2 miles? How do you do it?” asks Nancy. “I can’t even run around the block.”

“You have to train for it,” said Susie. “You know, practice up. Like, build yourself up to it. Rome wasn’t built in a day.”

“Body-building,” said Deb. “You have to train your body to do what you want it to do. Mind over body.”

All three of my sisters nodded in agreement. Mind over body.

We stop for coffee and I have no cash, so before we get out of the car I suggest that I use my credit card and treat everyone. This suggestion is turned down strongly, but I get my credit card out anyway, and in the process, the card from the support group slips out of my wallet.

Nancy picks it up. “What’s this? May? ‘Transitions Eating Disorders.’ Support group, eh? Is this group any good? Deb, look at this.”

I tell them, “I don’t know. I don’t go to it. I just have this card.”

“May, you have to do *something* to help yourself. We can’t watch you starve yourself to death. Come on. Me and you, May, let’s go in and get the drinks, and bring them out for everyone. We’re all going to the park.”

Nancy and I head into Starbucks for everyone’s coffee. The place is steamy and crowded. Waiting in line seems unbearable. I want to lean on Nancy so that I will not fall. I want to buy a cookie and nibble on it so that I will not faint, but I don’t want the calories. Suddenly, Nancy says, “What’s this? ‘From Your Friend.’ What friend?” She holds up the

envelope from Calhoun. Apparently, I dropped it from my purse. I want to snatch it back from her. “Your friend, eh? Who is it? Who, May? What friend?”

“I don’t know. Someone just gave me the envelope and I haven’t opened it yet so I don’t know.”

“Why don’t you open it?”

“Now? Naw. Later.”

“Open it now.”

“Later. Not now. Please. Don’t make me open it now.”

“Looks like photos inside. ‘Friend,’ eh? You’ve got a new friend, or this is someone you’ve known? Who is it, May? You can tell me--I’m your sister. Cuz I think it’s someone special. Is it? Is it?”

“There isn’t anyone, Nancy. I wish we didn’t have to talk about this here, in this line.”

“Well, I think you need someone. A boyfriend or something. We’ll talk about it. Okay, I’ll shut up. Don’t you want cream in yours?”

“I take mine black.”

“Oh, wouldn’t that figure. Calories.”

“Yeah, calories.”

“Yeah. Trying to stay thin, aren’t you?”

A woman with a baby glances at me, hearing what Nancy has said, shakes her head, and turns away.

My sisters and I end up at the park near my home. The sky threatens rain, but so far, the rain has held off. We sit at a picnic table. I watch the ants crawl by while Susie talks about her kids some, then Nancy says, “Let’s get pastrami sandwiches to go with our coffee.”

Susie agrees that this would be a good idea.

Deb says, "What about May?"

Susie says, "What about her?"

"What'll she eat?"

"Nothing. I mean, I *hope* she eats a sandwich, right, May?"

Nancy says, "Eat a sandwich, May." Then they all chime in. "Eat a sandwich, eat a sandwich, May."

I am starting to feel queasy. Nancy gathers her pocketbook and goes to a nearby outdoor vendor and returns with four pastrami sandwiches and lemonade. "Here, everyone! Eat! You too, May!"

We are all seated, Nancy, Susie, Deb, and I, with the sandwiches in the center of the table, ready to be grabbed. Susie is first, then each person takes one. Finally, I take the last sandwich. Each sister opens her sandwich and eats. I am nauseated by the smell of the meat. I do not open mine. I focus on Deb, watch her chew hers, watch her mouth gnawing each bite of sandwich and swallowing. She washes it down with a sip of lemonade. I am afraid to drink mine because of the calories. But I take a few sips, just to hold me for now.

"May, will you at least open it?"

"Yeah, May, open it up at least."

I shrug. "No, I'd rather not. Why don't one of you gals take it home with you? I don't really like pastrami."

In the other corner of the park, a homeless man fishes in a trash bin, pulls out a bit of trash, extracts a half-eaten burger from it, and eats it.

"I thought you liked pastrami, May. You used to like it."

“No, I never liked pastrami. Take it home with you and give it to the kids, Susie. They’ll like it.”

Another homeless guy passes by, this one with a cart of returnable bottles. He peers at us, apparently looking for more, but, not seeing any, leaves us alone.

Birds flock nearby, eating our crumbs. I shiver.

Nearby vendors are selling pretzels with mustard. “Let’s get some,” says Susie. “Who wants one?” Nancy and Deb want some for themselves.

“Don’t bother getting one for May,” says Nancy. “She won’t eat it. It’ll just go to waste.”

When all the food is finished, Susie says, “May, we brought you here for a reason.”

“Yeah, a reason,” says Nancy, biting a nail. “Listen up.”

“Huh?”

Susie says, “We want to tell you something. It’s important. No more fooling around here. No more fun and games. We’re fed up.”

“Huh?”

Nancy says, “May, just listen to Susie. We’ve been talking. Just listen to her.” She licks her fingers, takes another bite of her pretzel, licks her fingers again. “Listen to Susie.”

Deb puts her pretzel down on the table, looking down into her lap. Her hands are folded.

“May,” Susie begins, “We have to be straight with you. We’ve been watching you through this eating disorder for years. Look at you. You haven’t eaten any food.”

I shrug.

“You’re starving yourself and we can’t take it anymore. What would Dad say, if he were alive? Huh? Why are you doing this to Dad?”

“Dad is dead, Susie,” I say.

“What would he *say*?”

“I said, he’s *dead*.”

“May, we just can’t watch you starve yourself to death.”

“Dad didn’t even know I had anorexia.”

“That’s beside the point.”

“He thought something was wrong with my metabolism. He even said that. He said I should get it checked out. That was what he *said*.”

“May, there’s nothing wrong with your metabolism. *You don’t eat*.”

“Listen,” says Nancy, “we only mean well. We don’t mean to hurt you. It’s just that we’re at the breaking point. We have to think of our *families* at this point.”

Susie says, “May, I have two kids at home. They need my attention. I can’t worry about you starving yourself to death all the time. I can’t worry about you *slowly killing yourself* when I have two hungry mouths to feed at home. Understand?”

Nancy says, “May, Susie has to think of the kids. I’m putting my boy through college, and it’s tough, too. We had to take out a huge loan. Think of that. We have a lot to worry about. We can’t afford to worry about anything else right now.”

I hang my head. Then I say, “I *tried* to eat. I’ll do better next time.”

Susie says, “It’s not just this time. It’s *every* time. You are slowly killing yourself. You make excuses every time. You don’t eat, May. We can’t take it anymore. And we know you’re not eating at home, either.”

“I tried.”

“Trying isn’t good enough, May. From now on, when you’re with us, you have to eat.

We cannot accept your eating disorder anymore. We will not accept it.”

Nancy says, “We love you May.”

Susie says, “We love you, May, but we don’t love your eating disorder.”

Deb munches on her pretzel, then says, “Yeah, May, we don’t love your ED.”

Deb’s lips move in and out, in and out with the bits of pretzel. How many pretzels will she eat, later on, when she is alone and everyone has dispersed? How much ice cream will she eat tonight, alone with the TV, when Susie and Nancy are busy with their families, and her friends are not around? I close my eyes and see Deb eating ice cream out of the carton with a big spoon, putting spoonful after spoonful into her wide mouth, whenever the commercials come on. And later, she orders chicken fingers for herself, and eats them--yeah, with her fingers, licking them afterward.

Susie says, “Quite some time back we were going to see if you could move in with Nancy, but this is no longer possible. We cannot have you around us anymore, May. It is simply not healthy for us. We have to think of ourselves. Unless you eat. We want to see you eating. We no longer wish to be enablers. We want to spend time with you but no longer want to watch you die. Unless you’re eating again, unless you get this eating disorder under control, we can’t be with you.”

Nancy says, “We love you, May. We are saying these things because we love you and want you to be well. We *support* you.”

“Yes,” says Susie, “we support you, May. You can consider this tough love. We’re going to take you home now. Come back to us when you’re well. We only want to hear happy things from you from now on.”

After they drop me off at home, I realize that I said nothing the entire ride back. In fact, very little was said at all. Nancy made a point of remembering to turn the car heat on for me, begrudgingly. Susie opened the window and stuck her arm out. Deb got her knitting out and fussed with it. She tried to get me interested in something about it, but I didn't care, really.

Now, I have nothing to say to them. They want to hear happy things, well, nothing, ever, is happy. There is nothing left. Stripped of my eating disorder, I am nothing, nobody. I am my eating disorder.

I fling my jacket over my chair. *I am my eating disorder. I am nothing else. It is cold in here.*

I turn on the space heater and plop myself onto my couch. *I am my eating disorder. Nothing else. I am nobody. I have nothing to say to them anymore.* I grab a tissue. I feel like crying but no tears come. I glance at Helios' cage, stare at it, he is not there, I cannot take him out and hold him, have him on my shoulder, pet him and play with him and stroke his belly. Mentally, I put him back in his cage, close the lid. I feel like I'm closing the lid on my life.

I get up and go to the refrigerator, open the door, look inside. Nothing, just like my life. An apple in the drawer. I take it out, cut it up, eat one slice, put the other slices in a container and put the container in the fridge. I turn on the water and feel it run over my hands, then wash them with soap, dry them on a dishtowel. I pour myself an eight-ounce glass of filtered water, drink it. Water has no calories.

In the bathroom, I remove my scale from its hiding place and put it on the floor. I pick up the toilet lid and pee, flush the toilet. I strip down. It is cold in here. I fold my clothes and put them in the corner of the bathroom. Then, I take a deep breath and step on the scale. Taking a deep breath always gives me good luck.

I am not satisfied with what I see. I step off. Wait for it to zero back in. Step on it again. Wait for it to zero back in again. Step on it a third time. All three times, it has read the same thing. Subtract a half pound for the eight ounces of water I drank.

This is the third scale I have owned in the past year. They have all been good, and I still own all three, but this one is the one I use, the one I rely on, the one I trust. It is silver, the color of water. I bought it from e-bay brand new. I even asked the vendor if it came in an “unmarked box.” The day I received my package, I carried it up the back stairs, so no one would know I had it. I pulled down my window shades before opening the box.

I find my secret notebook in my bureau, deeply hidden in my underwear drawer, where I write my weight, the time, and additional notes. It is the third time today that I have recorded my weight. I keep a special pencil for this purpose. I’d write in pen, but sometimes, I make mistakes and have to erase. I have made sure that the pencil has a good quality eraser. This notebook is one of hundreds that I have kept. Sometimes, I have not kept notebooks. Generally, I toss out the notebooks once they’re about six months old. I remember that I tore out each page of the last one and shredded it in the paper shredder. This one is blue, a simple spiral wire-bound five by three inch notebook with 80 sheets that I bought at the drugstore. I leaf through it now, making careful note of when my weight has gone down and when it has remained the same. Some of the numbers aren’t written as neatly as I would have liked, and some are written too large. I wonder what I felt as I wrote each number. Surely, I must have felt disappointment or anger when my weight was higher than I would have liked, right? I am about a third of the way through this notebook. Does the notebook know what it is being used for? Does the notebook laugh at how ridiculous I am? After all, I *know* this is all nonsense. I *know* this is sick. I *know* I

do all this because I have an eating disorder, and only because I have an eating disorder, and that this is not normal behavior, that it is based on delusion and compulsion. *I am my eating disorder.*

I have nothing more to say to my sisters, nothing. I shock myself every time I tell myself this. Because I have always had things to say to my sisters.

I pick up my cell phone, and erase all my sisters' numbers from its memory. Susie, Nancy, Deb. I erase Mom, too, then put her back on. I take the photos of my sister Susie's step-kids off the walls, and hide the photos in my drawer under some clothes I haven't worn in years. Then I find a studio photo of us four sisters, taken ten years ago, sitting on my desk.

Why did they bother taking this photo? Susie has her hand on my shoulder, always the boss, never out of protectiveness, always manipulative, always controlling. Her mouth is contorted into a toothy smile. She seems to be saying, "All is mine." Nancy, too, has her agenda. She has her eight-year-old at home at the time, in advanced classes at school, always on top. She is proud of him and ashamed of me. Deb is set aside from the rest of us. Plump already, Deb has her hands folded and seems to be deep in thought. I sit next to Deb and you can't tell what I am thinking. I place the photo in the drawer next to the photos of Susie's step-kids.

I can no longer ask them for money. Lord knows how I'll pay the rent.

Of course, I don't need money for food. Not that.

I erase their numbers from my cordless landline phone. No numbers are left except Nina's.

Nina. She is all I really need. We are going out in a few days. Nina, whom I have trusted all these years. She will come through for me. Nina *understands* these things. She *knows*.

She knows because her own family has not supported her. Such denial. *The family is often the last to acknowledge...* And in the case of Nina--and me--this acknowledgement has never, ever happened. Sure, my sisters *see* me, see how skinny I am, and laugh about it, but they never understand what starvation is really like for me. How can they? When they are starving they eat. Hungry equals putting food in your mouth. What could make more logical sense? Anorexia isn't logical, so they just don't get it, and Nina's family is the same way. Denial.

Nina, sure, Nina is there for me--and Calhoun. I haven't thought of him for so long, but it's true: Calhoun is someone I can *really* talk to. He listens. He's a friend. We used to have coffee together. I miss that. Maybe...maybe I should go over there and say hello. I pick up the phone, dial his number, he isn't home. I program his phone number into my cordless phone. It is already in my cell phone. I dial his number again, leave a message.

The jewelry box still sits on my coffee table, waiting. I remove the lid and bring the box to the kitchen. I open the bag of Helios' ashes and pour the ashes into the jewelry box. Finally. I close the lid and set the box on my table by the door. I'm not absolutely certain that this is the best place for the ashes, but it'll do.

A spoonful of sour cream now will last me another couple of hours, so I get myself some, and calculate my calories for the remainder of the day. I do it on a dry-erase board. I have to erase on it a lot and re-calculate. Counting all the Gatorade I've had today, which wasn't much, the calories will come to 555. If I can bring it down lower, so much the better. A quick calculation tells me that I can have egg salad for supper. Egg salad is a good idea because it keeps me from getting up, starved, in the middle of the night, and eating to save my life.

I study my weight record for a while, going back several months, then years. My records are spotty back two years ago. For some reason, I have last October 25 starred on my calendar--

why? What happened then? There is no explanation, just a star. I look up in my journal to see what I put for that date. "Calhoun and I had sex. It was gross." I had put this out of my mind. Calhoun and I had had sex, it was gross, and it didn't matter anymore, did it? I had refused him ever since. Why had I starred that date? What happened special that day?

I open the envelope. Here are four photos. Nude models. Performing sex. These are dirty pictures of a man performing sex, anal sex on a woman with a dildo. Photos from Calhoun. The word "rape" enters my head again and again and this time, does not leave me.

I am trapped.

Into the cabinets and the fridge. It's time to do this. English muffins, pasta, sardines. I empty the 12-pack English muffin package into the trash, four English muffins at a time. I open the package of spaghetti and dump raw spaghetti into the trash. I open the sardines and dump them into the sink, wash them down the drain and run water over them, then wash the sink. I dump a loaf of bread into the trash. I dump out three quarts of yogurt. I wasn't going to eat all that anyway. I cut up apples into pieces and throw out the pieces. I do likewise with oranges and pears. I peel bananas and throw out both the banana and the banana peel. I dump an entire three loaves of bread into the trash. Then, as the trash bag fills, I take it all to the trash room, and line my trash barrel with a fresh bag. Time to empty the freezer. Ice cream gets melted and goes down the sink; the ice cream carton goes into the trash. A container of frozen meat loaf goes into the trash, but I save the empty container. Kool Whip gets dumped. Frozen pizza--dumped. Cheese--dumped.

Then, the photo. I don't want to see it, but for some reason, I look again. Does the man look a little like Calhoun? Doesn't he? He is *looking at me*.... Thinking I'll rip up the photo,

then change my mind entirely, bury it deep, deep in the trash under wet food. Done. Gone.

Calhoun gone. Or so I'd like to believe.

I go to my closet, pick out my huge shirt that once was Jeffrey's, and put it on over my clingy shirt, which I am wearing, though I'm not certain why I am doing this. I am shivering. I hug myself and cry. Then, I pour myself a Diet Coke.

CHAPTER FOUR

“Hey, May! May!” I am coming out of my building and I hear Keith behind me. I pretend not to hear him. “May!”

“Hi. Sorry,” I say to him, “I’ve forgotten your name.” I want to appear as disinterested as possible. “I’m really--sorry, I’m kind of in a hurry. I’m meeting a friend.”

“It’s Keith,” he says. “How did you like the pastries I gave you?”

“What pastries--er, they were fine! Fine! My sisters liked them!”

“How did *you* like them?”

“Just fine, Keith. We ate them up just fine.”

“Were those the girls that dropped you off the other day? Those three other girls? I was just peeking out my window and saw you, so I thought I’d ask.”

“Yes, those are my sisters.”

“I have a couple of brothers. Married, both of them. You know how it is when siblings marry. You kind of lose them. They go off into their own world.”

“My sisters Susie and Nancy were like that.”

“My older brother Rick kind of divorced the family as soon as he got married. Didn’t want anything to do with me anymore. It was like I lost a big brother.”

“I hear you about families divorcing certain members.”

“Especially once they have kids.”

“My sisters care a great deal about their kids.”

“I expect to see my brother David *after* his kids turn 18. Then he’ll come up from underwater.”

“I don’t think I’ll see much of my sisters anymore.”

“Huh? They’re busy?”

“Yeah, I suppose.”

“You can see me. You know, families aren’t always the best of people. Families don’t necessarily have the ability to care as much as we’d like. Your friends, in the long run, are the ones that are going to be the ones that understand you most. Just hold onto your friends. That’s what’s important.”

“Thank you so much for your kindness. I don’t know what to say. You can’t imagine what I’ve been through with my sisters. It’s just so unreal.”

“Look, May, if ever you need anything, please, I am retired, have no commitments, nothing, nobody to answer to. I am around all day and you can talk to me. Please stop by.”

“Maybe I will.”

“You do that. Where are you headed now?”

“Oh, going out with a girlfriend. I’m meeting her somewhere. Just leaving now.”

“Can I drive you there? You seem in a hurry.”

“No. That’s okay. I’ll be fine. I need to stop somewhere on the way, anyway.”

“Where are you meeting her? I’ll take you.”

“No, really, I’d rather walk. It’s nearby. Just The Top.”

“Oh, The Top. I’ll take you there someday, okay? It’s a nice, quaint place.”

“Yes, it is.”

“You sure I can’t take you there?”

“No, really, I have to stop at the store on the way. Please. Leave me alone.”

“I’ll take you sometime, okay? Soon?”

“Soon. I promise.”

Hurrying away from him, I take the long way around the block so that he won't know I'm headed for the Mini-Mart. I don't want him knowing I'm going to a *food* store before going to the Top to eat a meal with Nina. In fact, I don't want Nina to know I'm stopping at Mini-Mart, either, but I know she'll be approaching the Top from the other direction, anyway, so chances are she won't drive by and see me walking out of the store. I step inside and buy a Diet Coke.

"No bag," I say, once I pay for it.

"No bag?" the cashier asks, appearing incredulous.

"No bag. I can put this in my purse." I snatch up the Diet Coke, which really is "diet," and drop it into my purse "for later." I don't want Nina knowing I have it. I leave.

I wait for Nina, waiting in line at the Top by myself, surrounded by fat people. Everywhere. Fat people talking on cell phones. Fat mothers and fathers with fat babies. Maybe all babies are fat, but these babies seem especially so. A fat mother gives her fat child a popsicle to lick. The child holds it and it drips down the child's hand and onto his sleeve. The fat mother says, "I *told* you to be careful!" She snatches the popsicle from the child and it falls to the sidewalk. I want to pick it up and eat it myself, I am so hungry, but instead I watch it melt into a red puddle.

Two fat men are holding hands and whispering into each other's ears. Love. Jeffrey and me, maybe. Maybe the boy Nina dated in her twenties, the one who got her eating for a while until he joined the service. Maybe that's what I need. Love. Maybe I should take Keith up on his offer, repulsive as he is. The two men laugh loudly and pull apart from each other, and then embrace before disappearing into the Top.

The line is getting shorter and Nina still hasn't arrived. I am close enough to the entrance to smell the food inside. Scrambled eggs, toast, bacon, home fries. French toast with syrup. But

also lunch: fruit salad with yogurt and homemade bread soaked with butter. Homemade rolls wrapped in towels served in baskets. Ham and cheese sandwiches, turkey sandwiches, grilled cheese and tomato sandwiches, grilled cheese, sprouts, and avocado sandwiches, pea soup, chicken noodle soup, Soup of the Day. What is the Soup of the Day? I am salivating for Soup of the Day.

“Are you by yourself, Miss?” The waitress looks me up and down, gives me a funny look.

“No, I’m waiting for one other.”

She looks like she doesn’t quite believe me, just stands there.

“I’m waiting for someone else. For a friend.”

“Two people, then.”

“Yeah, two people. A table for two, please.”

The waitress motions me to follow her and seats me at a table where Nina will be able to see me easily when she comes in, gives me four menus. “These are both breakfast and lunch,” she explains. “For you and your friend.”

It is cold in here. I carefully check to make sure the menus are the same, that the two breakfast menus match up, and the two lunch menus match up, that the same foods are offered, and that the photos are identical. Both breakfast menus are sticky. I want to lick the stickiness off the menus. Inside is a photo of pancakes with syrup dripping over the sides. The syrup dribbles down my chin and into my lap in my imagination, and falls to my feet in a puddle. Land of plenty.

I look around. The couple next to me hasn’t received their food yet. They are enjoying their homemade bread first, spreading their butter generously onto thick slices, and shoving bite

after bite into their welcoming mouths. They talk between bites, sometimes with their mouths full. I want to snatch the bread out of their hands.

“So, what did Mary say?”

“Not much, just a few comments about Ben’s portfolio.”

“She should get a life.”

Returning my gaze to the lunch menu, I note the salads: Monty’s, Great Scott, Funny Bone, Caesar, garden, Greek, chef, Top Special. None look like anything acceptable. If I tell them to put the dressing on the side, the chances of them forgetting and putting it in the salad are fairly high. And it looks suspicious if I have them send it back.

“Hey.” It’s Nina and she looks totally different. I can’t figure it out. The look on her face or the clothes that she’s wearing, her hair, all looks the same but drastically changed.

“Hey to you, too. You look great.” Only an anorexic can say that to another anorexic and have that not be a hurtful insult.

“You haven’t ordered anything?” Her voice. Different. Deeper.

“What do you expect? I was waiting for you.”

“Iced coffee, then.” She removes her jacket and slings it over her chair. Her protruding belly. I try not to look. She smoothes her blouse over her stomach and then sits, snuffles, and takes out a tissue. Blows her nose, then leans her elbows on the table and cradles her face in her palms, covering her cheeks with her hands. I wait.

We sit there for a moment, then she says, “Iced coffee okay with you?” Suddenly, she leans back and gets something from her purse. A mirror. Lipstick. She arranges her hair a bit. Touches her cheek. I have never before seen her with a mirror. She puckers her lips and applies lipstick, then wiggles her lips to spread it around, checks it in the mirror. Touches her cheek

again, feels the side of her face, then the other side. Instinctively, I touch the two sides of my own face. Nina sticks her hand out for the waitress. “Two large iced coffees, please.”

“Two? Cream and sugar?”

“What do you want in yours?” Nina asks me.

I sit there, incredulous. Nina *knows* I drink mine black and so does she.

Nina says finally, “Two large black iced coffees.”

Then Nina says to me, “I have a lot to tell you.” The Top has been at full capacity all morning as far as I can tell. The tables are arranged closely together and steam covers the windows. Up toward the front of the door are old family photographs, probably antiques. There is a runner carpet at the entrance, but otherwise the floor is bare linoleum tile.

Tea sets, probably never used, sit on the back shelf where people come in. Remembering having tea with Nina after we both dropped out of school, in our twenties, and were working meaningless jobs. Nina sips her tea, makes a face. I sip mine and it is too hot.

“No calories in this stuff,” she says.

“Licorice,” I say, “is supposed to be sweet. A hundred times sweeter than sugar.”

“Then I wonder why no calories.”

“Shit, we’ve tapped into an anorexic trick.

“I suppose we have.”

Wondering now if Nina even remembers this.

The waitresses appear very, very busy. Ours, named Sharon--so I know from the name tag she’s wearing--frowns while she works as if to tell people to mind their own business, she’s got an agenda of her own. And I suppose she does. Her gray eyes match the gray of her cropped, somewhat disheveled hair. Waitressing must burn a fair amount of calories. I follow

Sharon with my eyes but do not turn my head. She takes orders, buzzes from table to table, goes behind the counter, returns with coffee, and then, suddenly, returns with ours.

Nina's grin seems way too wide. "Thanks a bunch," she says.

"Nina," I say, once Sharon has left, "There is cream in our iced coffees."

"Take a sip and see if there's sugar, too."

"I am *not* taking a sip of this."

Nina unwraps her straw, sticks it in the iced coffee, takes a drink. "It's good," she says.

"Try it. Nice and strong."

"I am *not* drinking this. Did they put sugar in it, too?"

"Yep."

"I am sending it back. You should, too."

"Go ahead."

"You're *drinking* yours?"

"Look, this place is busy. It's going to be a hassle for them to dump these out and replace them."

"Get real, Nina."

"Do what you want."

It takes me a while to get Sharon's attention. She nearly bumps into our table. "Did I screw up your iced coffees, girls? Of course I did. I *knew* you didn't want cream. Of course--" she looks at us--"you drink it without cream--that's how you stay thin, right? Right-o. I'll replace them pronto."

I hand her my iced coffee, but Nina has already drunk a fair portion of hers. "Mine is fine," she says.

“Okey dokey,” says Sharon. “But for *you*, I’ll get you a new one.” She disappears.

“Huh?” I ask Nina after Sharon leaves. “Huh?” I say again. “You’ve gotten weird, Nina. What’s with you?”

“Look, this embarrasses me.”

“It embarrasses me, too. She was downright rude.”

“Let’s not talk about it.”

And we don’t. We study the menus. Nina says, “I’m going to order fruit and yogurt with wheat bread. What are you having?”

“Nothing, probably.”

“Come *on*, May. Have something for me.”

“Are you actually going to eat the bread, Nina?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. Depends.”

“On what?”

“If I like it.”

“You know homemade bread is the most fattening kind. Besides, you don’t know how many calories are in it.”

“May, when you and I get together--I don’t know, we *enable* each other. It’s not good. See, I’ve come to realize a few things at this point in my life. There have been some changes.”

“Like what? Do tell.”

Just then, Sharon returns with my iced coffee. I notice a spill on her apron. Ketchup. “Here’s your coffee. By the way, I think I know the two of you! From high school! May and Nina! I’m Sharon Beasley! Remember me? From softball?”

“Sharon Beasley!” says Nina. “Oh yeah, Beastly! Yeah!” But her face doesn’t register the same emotion as her voice.

“You two were great runners,” says Sharon. “Just great. You two could run the bases like no one else. Hey, wow, you both got so *thin!* I did nothing but pack on the pounds over the years.” She pats her stomach as if she were pregnant, round and round. “Look at my fat arms! Flab all over. What have you two been up to?”

“Odd jobs, Sharon,” says Nina.

“Anyway,” says Sharon, “can I take your order?”

Nina orders what she had planned, the yogurt/fruit combo with bread. I order another iced coffee--no cream, no sugar, please--and a glass of water.

“That’s *all?*” asks Sharon, her eyes wide.

“Yeah,” I respond.

“You will waste away if you don’t eat, you know.”

“I ate already.”

“Okay. I’ll get you all that, Nina.” She makes a note on her pad, puts it in her apron pocket. “Great to see you two. We should get together sometime. Come in and we’ll arrange something, okay? We can talk about old times. I gotta run. See ya.”

Nina smiles at me and I smile back. We know it’ll never happen.

“May, you need to know something,” Nina says between bites, “about me--and, and everything. Everything about everything. About what went on in the hospital.”

“Hospital? Nina, you were hospitalized?”

“Yes, I was. I got out three weeks ago.”

“Huh? What for? Don’t tell me it was--”

“Yeah. It was.”

“Holy--”

“It wasn’t the same.”

“Shit, Nina, that was the last thing you needed.”

“I’m telling you, May, it wasn’t the same. This time--”

“Nina, all those places are alike. They pump you full of high calorie whatever and then send you out into the world and you’re fat.”

“No, not like that at all.”

“Well, then, tell me. Because those places are all the same. They design them to beat you down. I *know* this even though I’ve never been to one. I’ve seen you coming out of them heavier than you came in, and you hate yourself and want to die until you lose the weight, and then you’re happy again. I know you very, very well, Nina. We’ve known each other since we were little, little kids. And we just want to stay that way--little. That’s anorexia in a nutshell. And there’s not a damn thing we can do about it. Hospitals suck.”

“It was different this time, May. I’m telling you. This time, it *worked*.”

“Naw, I don’t believe you.”

“Well, you’d better.”

“Nina? You? After all these years? What was different about it? Was this place--was it special, magical, better than anyplace else you’ve been to? Tell me.”

“Well, it was the same with the feeding tube and all. They had me gaining about four pounds a week. They *say* two or three, but it ended up four or five, actually. I did the math.”

“Holy fuck, Nina, that’s bad for your heart.”

“No kidding. But it worked. May, I *needed* to gain weight. I was at an unhealthy weight, a dangerous weight. Don’t you see? That’s the purpose of the feeding tube.”

“I know what those tubes look like. They insert them into your nose and they go down into your stomach. Then they pump stuff through the tube, right? Well that--that I could not--”

“Well what? You just don’t want to let go of your ED, May.”

“Nina, we’ve had ours forever.”

“Yeah, true--”

“And--”

“That doesn’t mean--”

“Yes it does! You can’t just expect it to go away overnight! The hospital can’t make it go away! Impossible!”

“Have *you* ever been hospitalized. No! So you don’t know. I’ve changed, May. They changed me. They convinced me to give it up.”

Even the clanging in the kitchen stopped.

“They convinced me, May. They changed me. I eat now. Three meals a day and three snacks. They made me gain weight and I eat. I see a nutritionist. I cooperate with my treatment team and they all say how I’ve improved and made a big turnaround. And it is. Like a miracle, May. I’m different now. A new person. And I can’t return to the old life, the life I knew. There is no turning back.”

I picture Nina in the hospital as best as I could, given that I had never seen the inside of such places before; I had only heard about them in detail from her (I had never been allowed to visit as she had generally not been allowed visitors). Nina learning to knit, surrounded by teenagers, also knitting, all knitting scarves perhaps. Nina is knitting a black scarf, all black.

Nina and I knitted together in elementary school. We had forgotten how. Now, she probably knits all the time, having relearned the skill in that horrible place.

I picture Nina in a “group,” surrounded by other skinny girls, mostly girls with feeding tubes inserted, the click-whir of the feeding tubes permeating the room, everyone plugged in.

I picture Nina doing a drawing for art therapy, drawing her own coffin, labeling it “E.D.”

I remember our dolls. I remember how they were so skinny, so perfect, and we imagined that we looked just like them. I remember Nina’s straight A’s. I remember eating nothing but ice cream sandwiches for lunch.

And I remember Nina coming home after freshman year at Wesleyan, and I, home from Bennington freshman year, Nina skinny as Twiggy, how we went to see *Young Frankenstein*, which was supposed to be a comedy, and she wept throughout the movie! Astonished, I asked her about this.

“I found it sad,” she says.

“But Nina, it’s supposed to be funny.”

“The monster is sad. Deformed. Different from others. That’s how I feel. I feel like I’m defective in some way.”

“You’re damned skinny. That’s why you’re different from others,” I said. “Gain some weight, dammit.”

“No, that’s not what makes me deformed. Skinny makes me unique. Skinny makes me special.”

“So you want to be different, and you don’t. A lot of sense that makes.”

I picture Nina, lying on her bed, held down by two nurses, while a third inserts a foreign object, the end of the feeding tube, into an orifice of the body, her nostril. Suddenly, I am gripping the arm of another customer's chair, trying to keep myself from falling.

"Hey, you okay?"

"Get her some help."

"No, it's just my chair that fell. I lost my balance. I'm fine. Really."

"You looked like you were fainting."

Nina says, "May, your face turned white. Pale white."

"Nina, *I didn't fall! Only the chair fell! I'm fine!*"

Sharon comes and picks up the chair. "May, I thought we'd lost you there. You okay? Anything spilled? Looks like that iced coffee got mighty close to the edge of the table! Glad you're okay, though."

"Nina, eat up," I tell her, "and let's get out of here. I want to go."

"Let me finish my food, first," she says. "May, when was the last time you ate?"

"Take a doggie bag or something."

"I said, when did you eat last?"

"Yesterday. Take a doggie bag. Like we used to. Remember? Like the old days. You're almost done, anyway. I don't know how you finished all that."

"This isn't the old days, May. Listen, if you ever feel like you might pass out, call 9-1-1, okay?"

"I'm not going to pass out, Nina."

"You sure looked like you were gonna there for a minute. Promise me you will. Promise me you'll go to the hospital if you have to. Make that promise to me."

“I can’t promise you that, Nina.”

“You disgust me. I’m going to the bathroom.”

While Nina is gone, I take out my wallet to pay my portion of the bill, about three dollars. In my change purse is the support group business card. “Transitions Eating Disorders.” I put the card back.

When Nina comes back from the bathroom, I ask her what is in the large bag she has brought with her.

“Clothes,” she says to me. “For you. A bunch of clothes of mine. I don’t want them anymore. Take them. They’re yours.”

I don’t even bother looking in the bag. “Nina, you haven’t looked at me once since we got here. Not really. You just glance around. Like we’re not connecting anymore. Like we’re not--”

“It’s going to be really hard for us to be friends now, May.” Her arms are folded across her chest, as if she is hiding herself. “Let’s go now.” She tosses 15 dollars on the table. “Take the clothes.”

CHAPTER FIVE

I decide to dump my T. It's not so much her, it's me. I am not worth it anymore. Nina is getting better and I'm not. Nina is way, way beyond me now. If I'm going to get better, I'll do it on my own. No therapy can help me.

Picturing her thick calves, her overflowing ankles, her orthopedic shoes...I dial her number. Her chubby hands picking up the phone. I get her voicemail. "You have reached the office of..." I leave a brief message, hang up the phone.

There, done.

I remember one session, the fat couple arguing in the waiting room. "I thought *you* had it," she says.

"No, you had it in your purse," he says. "You took it out at the grocery store. Remember? You couldn't remember the PIN number."

"It would have helped if *you* had written it down!" the fat woman says.

"I think the cashier took it," he says, "and didn't give it back to us. "How much was left on it?"

"We get \$179 a month."

"How much did we spend?" The fat man wipes his perspiring hands on his pants legs.

"Look, you lost it, not me!"

Imagine spending over \$179 a month on groceries. I don't spend half that much. Their couples counselor calls them into their session and they disappear. I saw them frequently in the waiting room. Now, I will probably never see them again.

Maybe I will even date Keith. Go places, see things. Maybe go out to movies, see museums, go on trips, go into Boston, go for rides in his car. Maybe he'll take me out for coffee. Maybe he'll take me out to fancy restaurants like that sports bar nearby, and I'll order beer, and turkey tips dipped in special sauce over seasoned rice or pasta, specially cooked, marinated turkey, tender and moist, smothered in onions and secret seasoning. Or maybe I'll study the menu forever. Maybe I'll order a huge salad with all kinds of meat on it, and eat every juicy bite of it, even the bread, and have delicious dressing on it, the kind with cheese and bits of bacon in it. Maybe he'll take me to the Top and I'll order French toast, dripping with real maple syrup, and he'll order scrambled eggs, and I'll watch him put every bite into his mouth.

The phone rings and it's my T. "Surely, May, I would advise against this. This is an *unwise* idea. You really shouldn't be doing this at this point in your treatment."

I respond, "It is pointless to go on with treatment."

"You *need* treatment, May."

I take a deep breath. I am shaky and sweating. "Treatment is doing me no good. It is making me worse."

"That is untrue and you and I both know this. Did something happen?"

"No."

"Did something happen? Tell me."

"Not really. I just want to stop therapy."

"May, please consider going into the hospital. I can arrange it. You are at a dangerous weight and you are not taking care of yourself. It is time. If you are not willing to come to therapy I think you need to consider hospitalization."

I cannot think of anything to say, so I say nothing.

“May, why don’t you just get ready to go now. I’ll call them and get you in. It’s early enough in the day--”

“I’m not going. I refuse. You can’t force me.”

“You’ve never been to an eating disorders unit before, May. Have you ever seen one? Do you know what they’re like? They’re really not too bad. The staff at this one are very well trained and understanding.”

“I don’t care. I’m not going.”

“You need your health back, May. The staff at the unit will give you the tools to cope with weight gain and a new eating regimen. You need to normalize your eating. You need to introduce new foods. You need to eat a lot, lot more calories than you are now. You will come out of there a healthier, new you. How about it?”

“The thought of it turns my stomach.”

“You’re not purging, are you?”

“I just want to stop therapy.”

“Are you purging?”

“No. I want to stop therapy and not go to the hospital. I want to stop all treatment.”

My T wants me to come in one more time, to “terminate properly,” but I refuse. I hang up the phone, and sob.

I decide that I’m going to go out and buy a red sweater to celebrate the ending of “treatment.” I’ll go to the little shopping center in town if I can get there. It’s within walking distance but I frequently poop out walking there if I don’t have enough fuel. I need to stash enough Gatorade to get me there and back safely. I pour myself four bottles: One bottle of

filtered water, one bottle of four ounces Gatorade, the rest filtered water, one bottle Gatorade straight up, and one bottle “low calorie” G2 Gatorade. I label the cap of each bottle carefully with tape and a marker. These bottles are heavy to carry, but necessary for anorexic survival. I set my knapsack by the door.

Opening my wallet, I find the business card for the ED self-help group. I find the number, pick up the phone, dial it. Maybe a self-help group is the answer, so long as it’s free and not run by a professional “therapist.” Another of my silly theories. Of course. Anything that doesn’t help. Anything that doesn’t work. Anything that doesn’t successfully rescue me from my ED. Because I will do anything to protect my anorexia, to shelter it within me, to keep it and cherish it. A recording comes on. I hang up.

As soon as I put down the phone, it rings, and it’s Calhoun. “Hey, Babe,” he says, as if it were yesterday that I had moved out.

“Hey.” Why did I even pick up? What the heck is call waiting for if I don’t use it?

“Babe, are you dressed?”

“What kind of stupid question is that? Yeah, I’m dressed.”

“How are your tits?”

“Look, I can’t talk right now. My tits are fine.”

“How is your pussy?”

“I’m on my way out. My pussy is fine. I can’t talk. I’m going now.”

“Where are you going?”

“Out.”

“Can I drive you anywhere? I have a car, you know.”

“I can walk. I’m going to buy a sweater. At the little shopping center, and it’s within walking distance and I’m walking. I don’t need a ride. I’ve even got my jacket on.”

“What color sweater?”

“Er, red.”

“I’m going to drive you and help you pick it out, okay, Babe?”

“I can walk. I have to go now.”

“Babe, when are you moving back?”

“Never. I have to go now.”

“I thought this was temporary, that you were moving back, coming back to me. Aren’t you? Why don’t you move in with me, Babe. I’ve got a spare room here. We can fuck all day long if you want. Or we don’t have to. I won’t even charge you rent. Please, come back.”

“I *have* to go, Calhoun. I’m out the door now. I’m going to buy a sweater now. I’ll see you.”

“Soon? Yeah, soon, Babe.”

I still have the phone in my hand when I get a knock on the door and it is Keith. “I just wanted to see how you were doing,” he says, his head lowered, as if the door frame was too low for his height. “You seemed--well, kind of upset last time we saw each other, and you mentioned that you were dizzy. Are you feeling better now?”

“Oh, Keith. Yeah, I was just on the phone. Sorry.”

“I don’t mean to interrupt.”

“Yeah, I am about to leave. Thanks for your concern. I’m fine. Just going out, that’s all.”

“You don’t look too well, May.”

“I’m fine.” I go to hang up the phone, then return to the door. “Thanks, Keith. You are so kind to stop by. I will be okay. It’s so good to have caring neighbors. I’ve got to get going.”

“You’re dressed warmly for this weather.”

“I’m about to go out.”

“It’s not cold out.”

“Yes, it is.”

“Well, gee, if you need a ride anywhere, I can give you one, so you can stay warm, May. Look, anytime you need a ride, anytime you need help--”

“I don’t need help, Keith.” I grab onto my lamp for support, feeling dizzy suddenly.

“You don’t look well, May. I just get a feeling something’s not right. Are you okay? Come, sit down. Sit down on the couch.” He motions to me, then steadies me, holding my arm with his hand. “Here, let me help you get to the couch. Sit down here.”

He sits beside me, and says, “Be honest. When was the last time you ate?”

I finger a hole in the couch. I meant to replace this couch years ago, just didn’t have the money. Nancy has a couch she wants to give me, but I can’t have it now, can’t accept their help now. My sisters are past tense.

“This morning,” I tell Keith.

“And what did you eat?”

“Well, coffee.”

“What else?”

“Nothing.”

“May, coffee isn’t food.”

What do I want from this man? Caring? Compassion? Do I want him to break into my little world, to cut through the wall that my eating disorder set up to keep people away? Right now, I want no one inside that wall.

He says, "May, you're anorexic, aren't you?"

I have to tell him. "Yes."

"You need to eat. Let's see what you have."

He gets up, leaving me on the couch. He opens the refrigerator. "Nothing." Closes it. Looks in cabinets. "Nothing. You need food in here. That would be a good place to start, don't you think? After all, if you have food, you're likely to eat it, right? Just cook food and eat it, simple as that. Cook food. Eat. What do you like? I'm going to go pick up some food for you. Just tell me what you like and I'll get it. Do you have paper? Let's make a list. What do you want?"

I shake my head.

"What do you want, May? Think about it. Any food. You *have* to eat. Start simple. We can buy food. Start with something simple you can eat. I'll pay for it if you want. Where's some paper and a pencil? Gee, it's dark in here."

"No paper. No pencil."

"May, we have to do this. You can't sit here and starve. I know you have anorexia. I know you are thin. You can't just not eat. I want to help you. Please, let me. For god's sake. We barely know each other but I have seen you and I want to help you."

"No list. No food. Please."

"What kinds of food do you like?" He sits beside me. "What is your favorite food? Tell me."

“I don’t like food.”

“Sure you do.”

“I don’t eat.”

“I know you don’t. But when you did, what did you like? Tell me. What food was your favorite? You must have had a favorite.”

“Favorite food? Yeah,” I answer. “Pizza.”

“Pizza? From a pizza place? Where did you go for it?”

“I don’t know.”

“Did you order it delivered? Take-out? Let me tell you. There’s a place called Telly’s I used to go to. They made the best crust. I used to watch them knead it, then shape it the way they do--I don’t know how they do that--then put all the delicious tomato sauce and toppings on it. They put real olive oil on it, just sprinkles, and fresh mozzarella, too, that they grated right on the spot. Fresh parmesan. And the freshest ham and pineapple, fresh, not canned pineapple, and bake the whole thing up right in front of me. I’d take it home and eat several pieces right when it was hot. What kind of pizza do you like?”

“Oh, I don’t know.”

“Cheese? Pepperoni? Hamburger? Come on.”

“I don’t *know!*”

“Yes, you do. You know.”

“I do. Veggie. Veggie pizza. Okay. Veggie. But I won’t eat it. Not now. I don’t eat much these days.”

“May, can I buy you a veggie pizza? Not a hot one, but a frozen kind? That you can heat up in the oven, or the microwave? Come on. Try it.”

“It’ll make me sick. I can’t eat that stuff.”

“I’m going to get you a pizza.”

“No, please don’t.”

“What do you want, then?”

“Nothing.”

“Okay, I have an idea. This is what we’ll do. I’ll take you to the grocery store. Later.

You can get your own food. You can pick out what you want. I have a car. I can take you. Sit tight for now, get some rest. Don’t go anywhere. Take off your jacket and stay put. You are too weak. I’ll bring you some juice and toast. You’ll eat that, won’t you? Just wait here. I’ll be back.”

Rather than wait for Keith, I sneak out to buy my red sweater and trust my Gatorade to get me through. I need the entire bottle, though, and must stop at Mini-Mart for more. Why is a skinny girl buying Gatorade? Don’t skinny girls buy Diet Coke? Makes no sense, this paranoia about what people think. So I buy a 20-ounce bottle of Diet Coke and a 20-ounce bottle of Gatorade, and a bag of chips, so they won’t suspect anything. A *small* bag of chips, regular, not fat free, because if I bought the fat free, they’d think I was on a diet. Skinny girls don’t have any right to be on a diet and if I bought the fat free potato chips, they’d *know*. Or could I make some excuse, like that I had high cholesterol? Do I look like I have high cholesterol? What the fuck. I grab Gatorade, the regular kind, not “low calorie,” so they won’t suspect, plus a Diet Coke, plus a small bag of potato chips. And just to prove that I eat, as soon as I leave the store, I rip open the bag of chips, eat one, and when nobody is looking, throw the bag out. I drink what I estimate

to be two ounces of Gatorade: 12.5 calories. This will give me the strength to get to the supermarket and back without falling. I am satisfied.

The store is on the end of a block of stores in a shopping center not far from the center of town. I can get there if I rest twice, once at a concrete bench area near a bank, and the other a bench where the bus stops. But because I am buying this red sweater to celebrate my freedom, my stopping ED treatment at last, this will all be worth it. I do not need therapy because it was doing me no good. If it was, I would have “recovered” long ago. Don’t be fooled. Recovery is a pipe dream. If starvation doesn’t get you, some other horror will.

I stop first at the bank seat, finding the concrete cold, and too hard for my bony butt. Still, I need to sit and rest. I try putting my hands under my butt but the concrete is too cold for my hands. I give up on this idea and just sit, wishing I still had the bag of potato chips. I need another chip, as the salt would do me some good. I get the Gatorade, take another sip, cap the bottle. Electrolytes, supposedly. I could use a few.

I move myself to the bus stop bench, and sit there for a bit, resting, again wishing I had a chip. There is a half-eaten burger on the ground. If I ate that stuff, I’d grab it right now. Thankfully, burgers aren’t in my repertoire. Of course, I’d probably toss the thing out, anyway. Anything, anything but eat, let alone something I find on the ground. I am not a tramp.

The bus swings by and stops. “Miss, you getting on?” asks the driver.

“Huh?”

“I said, ‘Are you getting on?’”

“Naw,” I say. “Just sitting here. Sorry to bother you.” Then it occurs to me I could have taken the bus the rest of the way to the shopping center. I stagger onward.

Color, color, color! Bright colors must be in fashion, because they are everywhere in this store. I can find everything except the sweater I want. Something warm. Something to celebrate stopping therapy, slinking out of ending up in the hospital, taking care of *myself* for a change and not bowing down to what my T thinks is right for me. What does she know? Hospitals are for teenagers, not for me. After all, I should get to weigh whatever I want to weigh, not what the charts say. Those charts are for other people, and I am different from the others. I *should* be at a low weight. I *need* to be skinny. I am special. I can be as thin as I want. At least I'm not fat. At least not that.

I find various sweaters but they don't look warm. I feel afraid to ask the saleslady where the warm sweaters are. After all, skinny people need to be warm, and I don't want to give away that I don't have enough body fat, do I? Asking for a warm sweater would be a dead giveaway. So I search for 100 percent wool on my own. At last, I find it, and search for XS in red. There is no XS in red, and no way am I going to ask for it. Too scary. What right does anyone have to wear XS? Isn't that considered disgustingly thin? Don't you have to be "naturally skinny" to wear XS, or something like four foot six? I am not supposed to be "naturally skinny" and I don't want to disgust anyone, even though I probably already have. At last, I find it. Red. XS. One hundred percent wool. No way am I going to try this on, so I just bring it to the register to buy it. Either it fits or it doesn't; either I like it or I don't. And I will, because it's my celebration sweater. Freedom at last.

The cashier checks the tag and starts to ring me up, checks the tag again, looks at the size, even takes off her bifocals to see it, looks at me, looks at the size again, looks at me, screws up her face. "Will this be cash?" she asks.

I fumble with my wallet. For like the zillionth time, the business card for the self-help eating disorders support group falls out, this time, face up. She looks at the card with the bottom of her bifocals and I assume she can't see it because I have already snatched it up, then dropped it. I bend over to pick it up and whoosh! I get a dizzy spell. I straighten myself but gradually collapse to the floor. "Sorry," I say quickly, and try to get up but can't.

She just looks at me.

"Hold on a sec and I'll pay for it," I say. Before I do anything I put the card back in my wallet. "I'm a klutz," I tell her. "I must have tripped or something. I'll be up in a jiffy. Nothing's broken." I slide my butt on the floor while everything spins.

"You need help getting up?" she says, finally, not moving.

"Please, no," I say. "I can get up. I just need a sec." I pop four Tic-Tacs into my mouth, chew thoroughly, and swallow. One point nine calories each. The sugar floods my system. I wait a second or two until the sick feeling leaves me and then I slowly get up.

Why I didn't see that mom-and-pop pet store next to the clothing store before I'll never know. I decide to escape the clothing store and go in to look at rats, if they have them. Of course, no buy, just look. They say not to get a new pet too soon after the old one dies, after all. What kind of mama can I be to another creature if I can't even take care of myself? How on earth did I manage to take care of Helios? I took *good* care of Helios, dammit! But what right do I have to own a pet, really? What level of responsibility can someone who starves herself have to feed a pet when she doesn't feed herself?

But what am I thinking? I have no intention of buying. I am just looking. I will reassure them that this ridiculously skinny girl has no intention of starving one of their animals because she isn't buying. So there.

Into the store and I find the rat I want. While I am holding him he shits and pisses on my hand but I instantly love him anyway. Celebration. The young freckly kid working at the store must be working on commission, because he is pleased and doesn't care that he is selling this rat to a misfit. I pay by credit card and they put the rat in a little cardboard box for me. Even before I leave the store, I've got a name for him: Pizza.

I instantly recognize the bright red Mitsubishi with the license plate, ZA, outside the clothing store: Calhoun. "I've been waiting an hour for you," he says, "you cunt."

"Asshole," I say to him. "An hour? Whatever for? For me?"

"Babe, I'm going to take you home."

"Naw, I'll take a cab. I was just going to call one. I have a rat in this box."

"A what?"

"A rat."

"Uh, that's okay, Babe, just put the rat in back and your tits up front and we'll have some ride for ourselves."

"Calhoun, I don't need a ride."

"Oh yes, you need a ride from me. Don't pay for a cab. Hop in. Take a ride from the Cal."

I walk around to the passenger side and slide in, but keep Pizza, in his box, in my lap.

"Put that thing in the back," says Calhoun.

"I will not."

“Do as I say,” says Calhoun, “and I’ll give you a little something you’ll like. A present.” He pats his crotch. Then he moves his hand toward my thigh but I move away. “Ooh, touchy,” he says. “You’re skinnier.”

I don’t say anything.

“I know those titties are just as juicy. Turn this way. Lemme see ’em.”

I keep my body straight ahead. He starts the engine.

“I really miss you, you know,” he says. “I miss your body. I want to have sex with you again and again. What we had was beautiful.” Pizza wiggles around in his box. “Real beautiful, Babe. Show me those titties. Come on. Show them to me.”

“Just drive me home.”

He pulls out of the parking lot, watching the road, then turns to me when we get to a traffic light and says, “So, how are you?”

“Fine.”

“No, really, how are you? Do you eat? You look skinny, Babe.”

“I’m fine.”

“It’s fucking freezing back at the old building. They are rationing our heat. I am so cold in my apartment, Babe. I need you to keep me warm.”

“That’s weird. I’m cold, too.”

“Then we need each other. Don’t you see? You need to move in with me. Keep the Cal nice and warm until summer comes. Maybe take a vacation together. How would you like that? Travel a bit. Maybe Florida or something. Someplace warm. Just you and me.”

“I would like to be someplace warm.”

“I would like to be snuggled up with a warm person like you. Just you and me, Babe. Like the old days.”

Like before you blew it, Calhoun. Like before you did something that was very, very stupid. Like before, when I trusted you. Because I can never, never trust you again.

“There are no old days, Calhoun.”

“What?”

“Just what I said. No old days. Just days. Fucking days.”

“Days for fucking, you mean.”

“Fuck you.”

“I love it when you swear. So sexy.”

He swings into an abandoned parking lot. “Calhoun, I--just drive me home, will you?”
My heart quickens.

“Relax.”

“Calhoun, *I want to go home.*”

“Just gimme a sec.”

“Calhoun, *now.*”

Calhoun reaches over, near me. I squirm away from him. He opens the glove compartment and removes a scratch ticket. He leans the scratch ticket against the steering wheel, takes a nickel out of the ashtray, and begins scratching the scratch ticket, eyes wide, then grabs another out of the glove compartment and scratches that one. His skin seems very pale at that moment, and his eyes so deep set that they are going to settle right into his brain. I have a Red Sox cap identical to his that I never wear.

Calhoun swears. The scratch tickets were losers. He takes me home.

Now that I have no money, I am going to have to get some, because I need to buy food if I am going to beat this ED. After all, I can no longer get money from my sisters. So I check online for jobs. There is not much, but I notice some positions at the local supermarkets--the Stop & Shop, Shaw's, and Hannaford, the ones I can get to by bus. I print out all three applications and fill them out. "Apply in person," they all say. Imagine: me, working in a grocery store. Me, with all my food issues. Maybe I could be a bagger. People with all kinds of educational backgrounds, all kinds of employment histories do that sort of work, as full-time jobs, part-time jobs, second jobs, or as re-entry positions. Or if they're desperate. Not one of the applications asks me to write in my weight.

So I figure I'll wait for Keith to take me to the Stop & Shop. Leave off the application then. That'll be a start. It's two o'clock and he's due around now. I put on the coffee and wait.

Pizza plays in Helios' old cage. I will let him get used to things for a couple of days before trying to tame him. He cowers in his shelter, shaking, peering out at me now and then, afraid of the world, this new home. Kind of like when I moved here. I stayed in my apartment, cowering, shaking, until I got used to things. I didn't go out, was afraid to, really. I didn't socialize with the neighbors. I was afraid to let anyone into my apartment. I still panic whenever anyone comes in.

I still don't socialize, or didn't, until Keith came along. But he is no different from the others. I don't know why I trust him. He will probably let me down just like everyone else.

I realize now that I when I moved I had just escaped Calhoun. I realize now that it is because of what he did to me. Why do I still go to him? Why, after what he did, did I talk to him

on the phone earlier this morning, tell him where I was going, then get into his car? Didn't I realize the risk I was taking?

Sometimes, I still cower and shake in here, just like Pizza is doing now. Sometimes, I feel like a newcomer to life, like I was never ready to be an adult in the first place, not ready to take on the responsibilities that adults take on, not ready to take the next step in life. When I moved, I felt like holding onto the old apartment and never giving it up, yet I was desperate to get away from Calhoun without, at the time, knowing why. Now, I know. It is the contradiction, the push-me-pull-you, the not wanting to give up the old way yet wanting to move on, that makes me a very, very little girl.

I pour myself a cup. The coffee is strong and burns my mouth and makes me a little sick. I finish it anyway and put the cup in the sink, take some Tums, write down five calories for the two chewable tablets. Keith should be knocking soon but he hasn't yet. I open the refrigerator, close it again, open it, take out an apple, cut it up, remove the core, put the slices in a microwave storage container, put the container with the slices in the refrigerator. Then I wash my coffee cup and sit. No Keith.

I decide to go knock on Keith's door because it is getting late. If I can't find him, I'll walk. I'm afraid I won't make it up the stairs so I take the elevator. I know he lives on the third floor, right above me.

He doesn't have a door mat. Very few people in this building do, as they get stolen--fast. His door isn't decorated, but he's got a tiny sign on it that says, "Support a Vet." I knock.

No answer. I knock again.

Somehow, I knew he'd forget, or that something would come up. Maybe, I'm not that important, or maybe he considers me too much trouble, a "red flag" in his life, now that he

knows I'm anorexic. Maybe he doesn't want to associate with a freak. Maybe the thought of dealing with a girl that doesn't eat upsets his stomach. Maybe he pictures my bony body and turns away.

People get uncomfortable around folks with eating disorders, or the idea of ED's. They don't want to hear about it. Like my sisters. Sure, they could joke about my skinny arms, but when it came to the fact that this disease is dangerous and I might actually die of it, they run in the other direction. They don't want to associate with someone that might die, because it makes them face their own mortality.

People are uncomfortable with anorexia because it is so contradictory. Why would a person want to starve herself to death? It makes no sense. People are uncomfortable with suicide in any form.

I watched my father die a slow death from cancer, yet I stayed away from him because I was dying my own slow death and I did not want him to see me. My death was secret and special. And in the long run, it didn't happen. I didn't die. It wasn't in the cards. He did, and I wasn't around to watch.

I knock again. No answer. No Keith. I am free. I sneak down the elevator and into the world.

For a change, it isn't raining, and I am determined to beat my eating disorder and buy food. I have my application for Stop & Shop tucked under my arm and hope I won't drop it into a puddle. I am wearing dark jeans and a well-fitting jacket, and a beret. If I wasn't so weak, I'd have a bounce in my step.

I arrive at Stop & Shop. The place is huge and impersonal. Flowers are displayed outside, drenched in water. The automatic doors slide open for me and I step inside. It isn't any warmer inside than it is outside.

I haven't been on the inside of a supermarket for a couple of months. I have only been to convenience stores. People mill around and mostly ignore me, except those that think I should move out of their way. I decide to drop off my application before doing anything else, so I head to Customer Service. I am faced with a long line of people. The person ahead of me holds three scratch tickets. Up ahead, a woman argues with Customer Service about her groceries that she is returning. Once, I returned "extra large" eggs because I didn't know how many calories were in them; I only knew how many calories were in "large" eggs, so I made the exchange. The guy thought I was nuts.

I get to the front of the line and finally am at the desk. I show the guy my application. "Sorry, personnel won't be here for another hour. Why don't you hang onto your application and bring it back then?"

"Okay," I say.

"You can do your--er, grocery shopping, or whatever--" he glances at me--"or whatever, until then."

I grab a cart and start shopping. First, the dairy aisle. Yogurt. I want a quart of it, plain, fat free. I don't want to be seen buying fat free yogurt because what right does a skinny girl have to buy *fat free plain* yogurt, anyway? Why not lowfat? Why not vanilla? Why should I, skinny girl, be concerned about calories? Surely, if people see that I am buying fat free plain yogurt, it is a dead giveaway. So I put the yogurt into the very corner of the cart, and cover it with a stray newspaper, and then, thinking this too obvious, uncover it.

Sour cream, my trick. One tablespoon of full fat sour cream will cut my appetite for hours, and it's only 30 calories. I choose a full tub of it. This way, no one will suspect anything, because I'm buying something with fat in it.

Next, eggs. I don't want to make the same mistake I made before of buying the "extra large" eggs that have an unknown amount of calories in them, so I make sure I'm buying "large" this time, and check each carton for the date. I wiggle each egg to see if it is broken. Finally satisfied with one of the cartons, I put it in my cart, then check once more to make sure they are "large," and not "extra large," though the price is the same. I guess I'm talking to myself because someone gives me a funny look. I move on.

Cheese sticks. Mozzarella. No, not "reduced fat." It doesn't taste that good, and besides, that's too obvious. Part-skim. Why does it have to be part-skim? And don't I want less calories? Aren't less calories better? Looking to make sure no one is watching, I check the calorie content. Eighty calories for "reduced fat," 90 for regular. Is it worth it? The price is the same. I choose the "reduced fat," and place it face down in my cart.

I swish down the bread aisle, buying nothing, though it smells good. I am afraid that if I buy a bag of six English muffins, I will eat all six at once and then not eat for days. Peanut butter is in the same aisle, but what do I need peanut butter if I don't have anything to put it on?

Soda. Yeah, I need soda. It is cheaper here, and if I drink soda I don't have to eat. Yeah, I am getting rid of the ED, but I won't always want to eat, will I? I choose "diet" soda and place it in my cart so that no one can read the "diet" on the label.

Next, cereal. So many different kinds. Corn flakes, wheat flakes, oatmeal, Cheerios. I choose "high protein low carb" cereal when no one is looking and place it face down in my cart, and cover it with the yogurt. Then I grab a second box, and place this over the first, face down,

and replace the yogurt over it. What right do I, skinny girl, have to buy low-fat, low-carb, low-calorie, low-everything, tasteless cereal? Especially since I'm not buying milk because it's too high in calories? To top it off, I choose some low-carb, low-calorie, low-fat breakfast bars as well. One hundred thirty calories each. I check the calorie count when nobody's looking, and hope that when I get to the cash register, the cashier doesn't pay attention to my groceries, and *doesn't* look at me.

I go to the pet food section and pick out some rat treats. "For rodents. Mice, guinea pigs, and rats." Surely, Pizza would like something special. I imagine him in his cage, and wonder if he's gotten used to being there. I toss the treats into my carriage and move on.

Tuna, beans, soup, peanut butter, tomatoes, barley, applesauce, celery, nuts. I have no list, just work by instinct. Bananas, apples, potatoes, grapefruit. I put the grapefruit back. Dried apricots, raisins. Ham, mayonnaise, rice. I put the more "fattening" foods on top. What right do I have to be skinny? As I approach the checkout line, I grab a bag of chips, just for show.

Into the checkout line. The fat lady ahead of me puts diapers on the checkout counter, also a large bag of chips, Fruit Loops, ice cream, Kool Whip, fried chicken, frozen French fries (lots of those), canned spaghetti, a bakery cake saying "Happy Birthday, Joseph," chicken pot pie, a gallon of 2% milk, Weight Watchers frozen pizza, and yes, Diet Coke. The bill comes to \$95 and she pays by check.

The tabloids loom at me: LOSE TWELVE POUNDS THIS MONTH. LOSE TEN POUNDS NOW. HOW I LOST 40 POUNDS AND KEPT IT OFF. If I lost 40 pounds, I would halve my body weight. I feel like vomiting. No, on the other hand, I don't feel like vomiting.

“May! May! So good to see you now that I have time to talk! Let’s get out of this joint and catch up!” It is Sharon, the waitress from the Top that Nina and I had seen when we were there, the one we’d known in high school. “May! Don’t you *see* me? It’s Sharon! Hi!”

“Oh hi, Sharon, fancy meeting you here!”

“Oh, so that’s what skinny people buy. Interesting. I should buy that kind of cereal, too. How many carbs in it?”

“I just bought it for my neighbor. He wants two boxes for some reason.”

“It’s expensive cereal.”

“Yes, well, that’s what he asked for.”

“He must be on a diet or something.”

“I suppose. How are you?” Then I say to the bagger, “Plastic, please.”

“Oh, fat as always. I’ve gained 30 pounds since high school. Twenty of that was after I had my baby. Oh, don’t you want to see a photo of Jeremy? Plastic for me, too, please.”

I wish I could escape to a far off place, maybe Maui, where the weather is always 80 degrees, where I never shiver and never have to put on the heat or a hat or a winter coat, where I can walk the beaches and enjoy the forever ocean, where I can escape the perpetual cold of New England, the April rain that seems to fall non-stop this month.

On the other hand, there is no escaping my eating disorder; it follows me everywhere. It follows me every waking hour. It is with me in my sleep, when I wake up, when I walk to the store, when I go to bed, when I dream, when I put the kettle on. It is with me when it rains and when the sun is shining. It is with me when I am alone and when I am with others. If I could pray, it would be with me then, too.

“Let me show you a photo of Jeremy! Oh, May, we have so much to catch up on! Here, let me show you. Let’s get out of the way of these people here and sit down on this bench over here. Look here, it’s in my wallet. Isn’t he gorgeous?” She shows me a photo of a baby that looks like every other baby I’ve seen.

“Yeah,” I say. “Gorgeous. What’s his name?”

“His *middle* name, you mean?”

“Yeah, yeah, his middle name.” My stomach rumbles. I feel that I need my Gatorade now in order to go on, to be able to stand without falling. A few potato chips won’t have too many calories in them.

“Edgar. Jeremy Edgar Beasley Roman.”

“What a cute name. You must be so happy.” I reach in my knapsack for my bottle, and grab the chips I’ve just bought out of the shopping bag, trying to not look too hungry or desperate. “Want some?” I ask, though the last thing I want to do is share *any* of my food.

“Naw, I’m on a diet,” Sharon says, putting away her photograph. “Do you want a ride home? You’ve got a lot of groceries. That’s a lot to carry.”

“Naw, I’m okay. I’m sticking around because I’m applying for a job here, and taking a cab home later.”

“Well, good luck. We’ll have to get together. How did you lose so much weight?”

“I’ll see you.”

I sit and review my application. High school class of 1975. Bennington College dropout. Last two jobs: Happy Days for Tots, child care. Deacon Marketing Research, telephone interviewer. Neither job lasted that long, but at least I’m an honest person and willing to work. Whether I’m able to get here every day and healthy and strong enough to lift the bags of

groceries is quite another story. Suddenly, I realize that I have forgotten to add my signature to the bottom of the application. I fumble for my pen and then smell the rotisserie chicken.

First, the smell is faint. Someone is walking by with one of them in a plastic bag. I smell the herbs and the meat, and imagine the juiciness, and the color of the wings, the way they hang off the chicken, the string holding the chicken together, the way it is packaged inside its container so perfectly, the way it is heated up inside the container so perfectly warm, perfectly seasoned and tender, the legs nearly hanging off, the way the breast meat is moist and never dry, and my mouth begins to water, a little at first, and then more and more, and my stomach moves in my body like an engine starting up, I am so hungry suddenly, and I crave the hunger more and more, and want this deprivation and denial for myself. And the more I smell the chicken, the more I crave the emptiness and extreme level of starvation I have cherished for the months and years of the horrors of anorexia nervosa I have lived. It is all I have known. How can things be any different? Why did I expect my life to change?

I cannot stand it any longer. I run, with the last bit of strength I have. I run, carrying five bags of groceries. I run, past the two sets of automatic doors, past the carriages, past the fundraisers, the Boy Scouts, past the grandmothers, the mothers with babies, the couples pushing carriages, the people with returnable bottles, the customers entering and exiting the store, outside to the parking lot where cars are pulling out of their spaces, and I deftly dodge the cars, nearly getting hit, with my groceries bouncing here and there, to where there are few cars, and find a trash bin. Into the bin go the yogurt, the sour cream, cheese sticks, tomatoes. Into the bin go the tuna and dried apricots. The apples, too, go into the trash. The two boxes of low carb cereal. The eggs I place carefully in the trash so as not to break them, so as not to make any noise. On top of all the food I place my application, then, thinking again, bury it deep under the food. I

save only the bottle of Diet Coke and the treats for my rat. I roll both the bottle and the treats into a canvas shopping bag and then put the canvas shopping bag into my knapsack. It isn't until I am safely out of the supermarket parking lot and into a secluded, private area that I take out the bottle of Diet Coke, check and double-check the label under the waning sunlight, and make sure it is indeed no calorie, sugar-free, "Diet" Coke.

CHAPTER SIX

When I get to Calhoun's apartment, his door is open and I let myself in. I find him watching a TV game show, his shirt off, lying on his couch, remote in his hand. He acknowledges me, flips the channel, nods, flips the channel again. He is wearing his usual Red Sox hat that covers his thinning white hair, khaki pants. His blue pressed shirt is slung over the couch. There is a pocket in the shirt that in years past he may have used for cigarettes, but he quit long ago, which may account for his good health now. He is 65, retired this year.

"Maybe, Calhoun," I say, "too much time on your hands has done you no good."

"Hey," he says, "you fucking shit, how's it going?"

"Not bad, Calhoun, not bad," I say.

"Come here and give me a kiss."

"Sorry."

"Sorry what? Give a dirty old man a kiss. Want some food? I have hot dogs."

"No thanks. Just wanted to stop by and say hi."

"I've missed you. When are you coming back here to live?"

"I'm telling you, Calhoun, I've moved there permanently. I'm not coming back. It's my home there now."

"Well, I'll be darned. Want a pastry?" He touches my arm. I move away. He takes my hand and holds it, kisses it. I feel tingly and make no effort to pull away. "I love this hand," he says, "and I love the other one, too." He takes the other one, and I don't object.

Suddenly, he's got me behind my head, and pulls me toward him, kissing me on the lips, holding me against him, my head against his, forcing my lips against his in a kiss. I struggle to get away as he forces his tongue into my mouth again and again. Then with his other hand he

takes hold of my breasts and squeezes tightly, lets go, squeezes again. And again. “Love those titties,” he says. Then he takes hold of one breast and shakes it violently. “Oooh!” he says.

I place my hands on his chest firmly and try to push him away, but I cannot. “Calhoun, let me go!” I say, again and again. “Let me go, you asshole!”

“Want some pastries?” Calhoun says at last, going into the kitchen.

“I’m only here for a little while. Just to see how you’re doing.”

“I’m sorry I grabbed you.”

“Apology accepted. Just don’t do it again.”

“I’ll make coffee. Just like the old days.” I check out the photos on display in Calhoun’s living room. I am surprised I haven’t seen them before. Photo of his wife and three teenage daughters, or that is who I assume they are, now full grown. I eye her carefully. She looks distracted and vacant, as if she is elsewhere--having an affair, perhaps, in love with another, something extramarital. I imagine her getting into her car and driving off to see this man at night, when Calhoun is in bed, meeting him at a convenience store perhaps, then going out to a car and driving somewhere....I assume there was a divorce, maybe a nasty one. Why? What possessed her to marry Calhoun in the first place? Good conversation? Good in bed? Or was she pressured, was this marriage something pushed on her by some outside force, such as a parent?

A photo of a younger Calhoun in an army uniform. I imagine him stationed in Germany somewhere, kicking the dirt around, spitting on the ground in front of German women who are waiting for a sign from American soldiers that they want to stop and play with them. Calhoun receiving a photograph of his girlfriend, soon to be his wife, in the nude, and then I look back at the photo of the woman who I assume was his wife and I imagine her naked and I cannot.

Calhoun talking guy-talk with the other soldiers. What do guys in the army talk about, anyway? I can only speculate. Another world.

Sounds of guys spattering words out on the police radio. I can only hear “ten four” periodically, and a few crackles. Everything in code, like the codes I write in my journal, so that after my death nobody would know what the heck I was writing about. Mostly, I hear crackling on the police radio, and wonder why Calhoun has it on all the time. I also wonder if I ever have to call an ambulance, if Calhoun will find out from his police radio if it’s me being carted away, and why.

I glance at my clothes and wonder why I wore my clingy shirt on this occasion. What was I thinking? Did I do this deliberately? Was it to seduce Calhoun? Or was it for Calhoun to seduce me? Why was I wearing the Red Sox baseball cap that matched his, that he had given me? Was this because I wanted to look like him, or show him that I wanted to cooperate with him on some level? I hated him, didn’t I? Then why was I in his apartment in the first place?

“I’m going to make burgers for you,” he says. “Then I’ll get you to eat them.”

“No, please, I won’t eat them. I don’t care for burgers,” I reply.

“Yes, you do.” He takes some burger patties out of the freezer.

“Calhoun, if you cook them, I won’t have any.”

“Okay, I get it, you’re on a diet. All girls like you are on diets.”

“I didn’t say that. I just said I wouldn’t eat them. Put them away or eat them both yourself. Please.”

“Then what do you want?”

“Just sit down and talk to me, Calhoun. Don’t make food for me. I don’t need food. I need--something else. Like companionship. Support. Friendship. Understanding.”

“Sex. You need sex. Say it.” He sits across from me at his table.

“That’s not what I said, Calhoun. I said friendship. There’s a difference.”

“So what do you really want?”

“Calhoun, I feel like a jerk asking this, but I need some money right now. Like a lot. Or a fair amount. My sisters--” I start to get teary-eyed--“my sisters cut me off.”

“Okay, okay, I have money. Don’t cry. You poor thing. You know, I had sisters. They died. Don’t take your sisters for granted because they may not be around next year. Know what I mean?”

“Shit, do I ever know what you mean.”

He gets out his wallet and hands me \$200 in \$20’s. “Take it. I won it at bingo. Take it and don’t argue. I won it last night and won’t miss it. I’m your friend and you’re my friend and we *trust* each other too much not to do favors for each other in times of need, right?”

“I guess.”

“I’ll do a little favor for you right now.” He pats his crotch. “How about it, Babe? A little action? When will I see those tits of yours again?”

“Forget it, Calhoun. Look, thanks for the dough.” I take my wallet out of my pocketbook.

“A little action, now?”

“Thanks for the dough. No action. I’m no prostitute, Calhoun. I don’t stoop that low.”

His eyes make little slits, then he rushes into the kitchen, saying, “Okay, coffee’s ready, and I’m making those burgers!” He pours two cups of coffee. “How do you want yours? Cream and sugar, right?”

“Black, Calhoun. Black.”

“Black?”

“That’s what I said.”

“No cream?”

“No cream.” Calhoun comes in with the coffee, then darts back into the kitchen to make the burgers. “Just make one for yourself, or eat them both, okay?” I ask him.

He cooks the burgers anyway, no matter how hard I try to convince him otherwise, and sets them both on the table. “Eat,” he says, taking a bite out of his. “I gave you the money, now eat.” He takes another couple of bites.

“I’m a vegetarian, Calhoun. You know that. You eat them both. Go on. You’re hungry, aren’t you?”

“Hungry for you.” He licks his fingers.

“Calhoun, I’m leaving. Thanks for the money, okay?”

“Wait.”

“For what?”

“Wait. I want to give you something.”

“You’ve given me enough, Calhoun, and I’m grateful. I’ll pay you back. I gotta go.”

Calhoun hands me two candy bars. “Take these for the road,” he says. “Milky Way. The universe is yours.”

Leaving Calhoun’s, I stop at Dunkin Donuts to use the restroom. The sickly smell of doughnuts and pastries seeps into my nostrils, even into my ears and eyes, and makes my mouth salivate, and drool spills over the corners of my lips. I imagine a doughnut, maybe a glazed doughnut, in my mouth, gliding over my tongue, scraping the roof of my mouth. All the sugar

would surely give me a stomach ache, and blisters in my mouth. But the experience would be divine.

I slip into the ladies' room, making sure no one sees me entering. I unzip my jacket and remove it. I take off my baseball cap and place it on the sink. Then, I remove the clingy shirt I'm wearing. Nothing remains on my upper body except my bra. I can count my ribs. I turn back and double-check to make sure the door is locked. I quickly put my jacket back on, over my bra, and dump the shirt into the trash, buried under some paper towels. That clingy shirt had to go. Calhoun contaminated it. I put my baseball cap back on. Dressed in only a jacket and no shirt underneath, I leave the bathroom.

I stand in line for a doughnut. Up on the board are listed prices and choices and various combinations of products that customers can buy. Up on the racks are piles and piles of various kinds of doughnuts and pastries. Chocolate covered, glazed, chocolate glazed, cinnamon, Boston crème, strawberry crème, French cruller, chocolate cruller, jelly stick. I choose the French cruller because I have heard that they have fewer calories, but I don't know if this is true or not. I hold it in my hand as if it were a jewel, so soft and delicate.

Keith, my neighbor, is sitting with a cup of coffee up in the front of the store. I try to avoid him but he sees me. His hair is disheveled as usual, and he is wearing a long overcoat. He motions me over. "Sorry I wasn't there," he says.

"That's okay. I made it to the grocery store," I respond.

"You okay?" He nods at the doughnut I have in my hand.

"Yeah." I have the urge to hide the doughnut behind my back even though he has already seen it.

"Something came up."

“Yeah.”

“Nice hat. I like the Sox, too.” He takes a bite out of his bagel and returns his gaze to the newspaper.

“Yeah, I guess something came up,” I say to him.

“Glad you got something to eat,” he mumbles, but he is deep into his paper now.

When I get outside, I say to myself, “Fuck him,” and I break my doughnut in half, consider taking a bite, but then throw it into the trash.

I head down the street toward home. Calhoun, that bastard, why do I keep going back to him? Because he has money? Is that the only reason? I don’t think so. There is something else about him, something basic that tempts me so strongly that I cannot resist him, even after what he has done to me. I *know* I should stay away, for my own good, for my own safety. It is a no-brainer. Anyone else would stay clear of someone who had assaulted her, who had beaten her down, worshipped her body so much that she would, in response, have no choice but to hate it. Calhoun doesn’t love me. Calhoun loves what he can do to my body. He can do that to any woman, and probably has.

I reach a corner of the street and cross. Here, there is a grassy area, and then a funeral home. Some folks are smoking outside, and I think I recognize someone. Upon closer look, it is Nina’s brother George. Standing next to him is Nina’s other brother, Carl. I haven’t seen them for 20 years but these two men are decidedly George and Carl. So someone in Nina’s family must have died. She had mentioned an aunt who was in poor health but in my heart I have a strange, sinking feeling, and my steps quicken. Nina! Nina! George calls out to someone on the patio and I recognize the name of a friend of Nina’s from high school, and then I know it’s true.

“May? I didn’t recognize--Do you remember me? Charlie? From high school? Nina’s old boyfriend?”

“I was just walking by. I didn’t know. No one told me. No one called me.”

“So sad. This just happened a few days ago. A shock.”

“Charlie, what happened?”

“Great to see you, May, but it’s a pity it has to be under these circumstances.”

“What happened? I saw her the other day.”

“I don’t know, May. I don’t know. She had some issues. Some health issues. I don’t know the details. Her brothers might be able to shed some light on it for you. You poor thing. They didn’t even tell you.”

Health issues, you bastard. She had anorexia nervosa. But Nina was eating. Nina said so. Nina had stopped starving herself and was doing well. She had gained weight. She felt hopeful. She had progressed. Why this? Why now?

Charlie says, “May, you look great. You have such color in your cheeks.” I am so cold, you shit, I am shivering. “And you’ve kept your weight down. Me, I’ve developed this beer belly over the years.” He pats his stomach, trying to make a joke. “But you--”he looks again--“Well, you, er--”he pats his stomach nervously--“You look fine, just fine, a little thin but that’s good, though. Better thin than heavy like me, you know, over the years, that’s not good. You can get a heart attack if you’re not careful. At our age, that’s a common concern. You know, some people in our graduating class have already died of heart attacks.” He then goes on to tell me some of the people from our high school who have died, all from natural causes. “You can drop dead anytime,” Charlie says, “anytime. That’s probably what happened to Nina. She just dropped dead. Come, let me take you to George so we can find out for sure.”

“No, Charlie, I don’t want to talk to George. Not now.” I don’t want to face George. I don’t want him to see the weight I’ve lost recently over the past couple of years. I don’t want to break his heart.

Out of the corner of my eye I see my sisters Nancy and Susie but they don’t see me. I want to keep it that way, so I go inside, incognito.

A small gathering. Nina didn’t know too many people, naturally. It isn’t like people with anorexia nervosa are social butterflies, and her family wasn’t large, the same size as mine pretty much--five kids but they didn’t have many kids themselves, and Nina of course never married. What chance did she have at romance? What chance did she have at happiness over the years? She was as cheated by her eating disorder as I have been by mine.

I move away from the relatives of hers that I think might recognize me, and toward some people that look more like distant family, and I hear someone say, “Nina had an accident. It was an *accident*. She didn’t mean to do it, Arthur.”

And then I know exactly how she died. Or at least what she didn’t die of. And I know she didn’t do it by accident, either.

Nina, you little sneak.

Nina, you lied to me. You said you were happy. You said you were “recovered.” Well, bullshit. Anorexia is insidious and it gets you in the end. A huge amount of people affected by anorexia nervosa commit suicide because they can’t take it anymore. I guess you just couldn’t. I guess it took its toll on you, Nina. I can be angry forever and I can be hurt and I can cry all I want but that won’t bring you back to me or to anyone else here. Accident, my foot. It gets you in the end.

I get to a small table with photos of Nina posted, and I decide to have a look. One with Nina and the neighborhood kids, and I'm in it in the back, holding a soccer ball. Looks like we just had a tumble, the bunch of us, grass stains all over our clothes, the magic of touching without being sexual.

Nina in a bathing suit with us girls, in junior high school, not worrying about wearing bathing suits, not self-conscious about our bodies, not worried about our body size or our weight or being fat. Not worried about whether we ate or overate or what the scale said. Not associating what we ate with what we weighed. Not measuring our waists or measuring ourselves against each other or comparing our bodies in any way. Just enjoying the ocean and the spray and the sunlight and the warmth and the salt and the moment as the camera captured the magic of all of us.

Nina with her brothers, one dead now, and her sister, Christine. George, the oldest, seeming protective of Nina, always sheltering her from the world, Christine, too, trying to keep Nina from harm.

Nina, you weren't ready to go out into the world. You weren't ready to leave home to go to college, to Wesleyan, and I wasn't ready to go to Bennington. Neither of us was ready to leave.

I remember the day we left home. Nina and I, sitting together at the park where I recently sat with my sisters on that awful day when they abandoned me--that very same park--on a double swing that had huge rope handles. The swing is no longer there. We hung on and let the swing guide us up, then always pull us back to earth, but then one day, we left home, and weren't pulled back again, and when we did return, skinny, we were never the same. Ever.

I examine the photograph again. Philip, the brother now absent, died of a brain tumor just like my Jeffrey, in his thirties, not long after he married. When the tumor was discovered, the family rallied to his side. Were they as devoted to Nina the times she nearly died from anorexia? Apparently they didn't think anorexia was as "serious" an illness. Or maybe that Nina had "brought it upon herself," that it was "her own doing," that it was her "fault," and therefore, she was not to have their support, love, guidance, or even a bouquet of flowers when she was ill. In her darkest hours, she often didn't even receive a phone call from them.

Now, the family--Nina's siblings, that is--are all filing into some inner room where Nina's body is laid out for viewing. I'm guessing I should go in there and offer condolences, but I want to avoid Nancy and Susie, who are in there now, so I head over to Charlie again.

"Nice photos over there," I say to him. "I'm in one of them."

"Yeah," he says. "I saw you. Did you see the one with me in it?"

I hadn't. So he brings me over and points it out to me. Nina, next to Charlie, he a foot taller than her, he looking off to the side, she looking straight ahead, but not at the camera. The photo is in black and white and she has dark shadows on her cheeks, and seems preoccupied, distant, a vacant look.

"Charlie, when was that taken?"

"The summer before we all went off to college. Before Nina and I split and we all went our separate ways." Charlie wipes a tear. "I should never have let her go, May. Never. It would have turned out differently. I blame myself for this. For her--her--you know--always did. When she came home, and I was still working for my dad, and I saw her, May, I just did know. I didn't know what it was back then. Nobody knew. I hadn't even heard of it." He swallows, choking. "I lost her then. I went into a serious depression, though that's not what they called it back then.

That's why I quit my job. Moved away. Just didn't want to go on with things the way they were. I worked in different places, odd jobs, really, married, divorced, but Nina, she's always been in my heart."

"I'm so sorry, Charlie."

"You said you saw Nina recently?"

"Just the other day."

"You were still in touch with her."

"Charlie, she was always my *best friend*."

"Jesus. I'm sorry."

Finally, I get up the guts to go in the viewing room to offer condolences to Nina's family, because I have escaped my own--my sisters seem to have left. People are milling around the room and everything seems haphazard. Finally, I find some semblance of a line, and I join it. I shake hands with Nina's brothers and end up introducing myself because they don't recognize me. "May Golub," I say to George.

"Oh, God, May," George says. "I forgot about May."

Carl says, "May, little May Golub. Nina loved you so much. Thank you for coming. I didn't see you over there. You must have snuck into the line, you're so tiny, like Nina was. The two of you little girls, always into mischief. Thanks a bunch for coming. It means so much to us."

"I'm so sorry," I say, shaking both their hands.

Carl's hand is sweaty. He says, "Your hand is so cold, May. Frigid. Maybe you're coming down with something."

"No, I'm always cold," I say.

“Well, take care of yourself and get some meat on your bones. That’ll warm you up.”

I move in line to Nina’s only sister, Christine. She has aged considerably. Her soft, round face is now harsh-lined and ragged. Her hair, once flaxen, is now gray and streaked, almost green, brittle, haphazard in appearance. Clearly, she has dyed it many times. She has it pinned in an unflattering style atop her head. Her weight appears the same but she is bulging in places, as people tend to do when they get older, and she is wearing a blackish shift with no attempt to hide her figure.

“Christine,” I say, fairly certain that this is she. “I’m sorry. You remember me, don’t you? May Golub?”

“Yes,” she says. “Christine. Her sister.” And she extends her trembling hand. We shake weakly. Her bloodshot eyes moisten. Then she holds out her arms to hug me. We embrace.

“May, she loved you so much. So much.”

“Thank, you, Christine,” I say, unsure that this is the right thing to say to her.

“She talked about you all the time. Said how much she admired you. Said how good you were in school, how smart you were, how clever and wise, how much *better* you were than she. She always said you were the one that could run faster, get better grades, win at chess, and beat up the neighborhood boys.” Christine smiles. “I think she thought she could never measure up to others.”

“Christine,” I say, “I always envied her that she had Charlie. I thought she was the more popular, smarter, more generous, caring, and loving one. And you know something? Her grades were absolutely spotless, whereas mine faltered some. So I don’t know why she might have thought that. I guess it’s just human nature.”

“Human nature,” Christine echoes.

“Yeah, I guess,” I say.

“You know, I pray for people like you, May--I mean, you and Nina--every day,” says Christine. “Every day.”

“Huh?”

“You and Nina. Like sisters you two. I prayed for you all the time over the years that you, you--”

Suddenly, I want to get out of there.

She goes on, “I prayed for Nina all the time, and now, the Lord has taken her. The Lord has taken my little sister.”

I wiggle my way out of the room and into the outer room, where it is less crowded. The immediate family is still in the inner room with Nina’s body. I have barely glanced at the open casket. It appears that Nancy and Susie have left already. At the doorway is some sort of stuffy-looking man; I take this to be a funeral director or owner of the place, as he is passing out pamphlets. I grab one:

NINA SENSA

1958-2010

BELOVED DAUGHTER AND SISTER

AMAZING GRACE

Amazing Nina. Always perfect. She was nearly at the top of the class in high school. She had perfect handwriting, kept her nails perfect, her shirts perfectly pressed; even her shoelaces were evenly tied. You’d think she measured the loops she was so meticulous about everything. I was sloppy by comparison. I felt so inferior around her, with my imperfect grades, inky penmanship, marked-up papers, smudgy clothes. *But she felt inferior around me.* That I

had never known. Nina, you thought you never measured up. I guess every girl feels she isn't adequate, isn't good enough, smart enough, tall enough, *thin enough*. Maybe that's one of the reasons some of us start our crazy diets in the first place.

But why is it that some are the chosen ones to develop anorexia, and some aren't? Why is it that while many girls feel inferior at some point in their lives, most don't develop eating disorders at all?

Nina, you and I were the chosen ones. You and I were special. We were above and beyond the ordinary. We could fly. We could breathe without air. We could go to the moon without machines. We could walk on water. We were gods.

You never should have left me, Nina. That last day I saw you, I knew something was wrong. I knew you weren't right. I should have held onto you and not let you leave me, should have held you tight, should have held you into my world, the world of anorexia, hell as it is. But isn't it the world of anorexia that you escaped by dying? Isn't it this world that you, by killing yourself, escaped--at last? Isn't it freedom--from deprivation, starvation, emptiness, loneliness, weakness, daily torture--isn't that what you wanted, by dying, to leave behind?

A pat on my arm. "May." It is my mother. Mom. Someone I am supposedly happy to see. She doesn't look a day older. She gives me an exaggerated hug while I stand there and feel nothing.

"It's awful, isn't it?" she says, pulling away. "May, didn't you hear me? I'm talking to you."

"Yes, Mother, it's awful."

"Nina was your friend."

“Yes, mother.” I want to shake myself off, shake the hug off my clothes and body.

Instinctively, I brush a piece of lint off of my shoulder.

“What did she die of?”

“I don’t know, Mother,” I mutter.

“I said, *what did she die of?*”

“I don’t know,” I say, louder. “It’s very sad.”

“I’ve been doing fine,” she says. “I saw Nancy and Susie here. Aren’t they doing so well? And Susie’s step-kids! So grown up! That little one could barely talk last time I saw him. He’s going to preschool in the fall. I wonder what she feeds them. Not junk food I hope. Nancy has gained a little weight, don’t you think? You stay so trim.”

“I suppose.”

“You must be in good shape. You must really exercise hard to keep so thin. You must really have a lot of energy. You always did have energy. I wish I had your stamina.”

“I suppose.”

“You look great, so rosy, except for that hat.”

I had completely forgotten that I was wearing my Red Sox baseball hat. Now, I was glad to be wearing it, just to spite my mother.

My mother goes on. “You must be doing fine at your new building--it shows! How’s that nice man, that *good friend of yours*, from your old building?”

“What nice man?”

“Are you still in touch with him? That handsome young man.”

“What young man?”

“Oh, I suppose he isn’t so young. Around retirement age. That good-looking fellow. Cal-something. Calhoun, I think it is. Are you still friends with him? He seemed like a person you should stick with, May. Stick with him and you’ll do well together.”

“Sure, Mother.”

“I’m going over now to eat with some friends. Do you want to eat with me? We’re having ravioli over at their place. Ravioli. It’ll be great. Smothered in my friend’s tomato sauce she’s had canned since summer. Really good stuff. You’d like it. Ravioli, always your favorite. Don’t you remember, in high school, eating ravioli out of a can? You got so *fat* on that ravioli. I remember that. You should come out with me and have ravioli now. You look like you could use a little something.”

The small crowd begins to thin as my mother leaves. I want to stay, though, and view the body to say goodbye to Nina once most people have left. But first, I see Deb approaching. It is unavoidable--I must speak with her now. She walks toward me slowly, her black hair shining in the artificial light of the funeral home, wearing a black polyester blouse with diamond designs on it. Deb looks more overweight now than ever.

I feel sorry for her. I feel sorry for anyone who is overweight, because I would rather die than be fat. I would rather die of this horrible illness than be even the slightest bit fat, if I had the choice. To me, being fat is hell. My self-esteem would plummet if I saw the least bit of true fat on my body.

As Deb walks, her neck jiggles. Her thighs scrape against each other. She is slightly out of breath because her body has trouble carrying all her weight. Her muscles haven’t caught up with her body weight increase. When I walk, I am slightly out of breath because I don’t feed my body enough to carry all my weight. There’s a difference. At least one of the two of us eats.

“It is good to see you, May. I hope you are well.” Deb speaks in a hushed tone, as if she wants no one to hear her.

I try hard to keep my face neutral. “I hope you are well, too.”

“Maybe I shouldn’t ask how you’re doing.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t.” Maybe you don’t want to know, Deb. “How are you? Or am I not supposed to ask that, either?”

Deb pats her nose with a tissue. She arranges her hair nervously. “May, I didn’t like the way Nancy and Susie handled the whole thing with you. Just thought I’d let you know that.”

“You’re telling me this *now? Here?*” I look around, feeling self-conscious all of a sudden.

“Why not? Are we on the moon? I’m just saying, I wish things could have been done differently.” She wipes a tear from her eye.

“How differently? What’s done is done. I have no sisters. You want me without my eating disorder. My eating disorder and I are inseparable. You want to hear only good news. There is no good news. Only bad news. Only tragedy.” I nod toward Nina’s casket. “Only death.”

Deb says, “May, you will die if you don’t eat. Eat, and you will live. It’s as simple as that. All you have to do is to reach into the refrigerator, and take the first bite. You are not even willing to do that.”

“No, I am not.”

“You see, May, we couldn’t watch you starve yourself. We couldn’t watch you die. We love you, but we do not love your ED.”

“Then you do not love me.”

“Of course we do.”

“You love me, but you put a condition on it. You love me, *but*. Always a ‘but.’ Always on your terms. You want me, but only if I follow your protocol. And I am unwilling--and more importantly, unable--to follow the standards you have set for me.”

“Please, come back to us, May. You seem to forget that we love you and want you back.”

The funeral home is beginning to clear out now, and Deb and I are standing alone in a section of the room. She is heavy and I am thin. My thinness seems like a contaminant to me now, a monster.

“Deb, I have never felt so unwelcome and unloved by anyone in my life. If you do not love *all* of me, then you do not love *me* at all.”

“I do love you, May. But as I said, I do not love your ED.”

“Deb, I am a person with an illness. You would love a person with cancer, wouldn’t you? Well, anorexia nervosa is also an illness. Would you tell the person with cancer that you love them but not their cancer?”

“Yes, I would.”

“Would you tell them they had to get rid of their cancer before you could love them?”

“No.”

“Is it any different with me?”

“You, May, have a choice. Eat or die.”

“I guess, then, my mind is made up.”

After Deb and most of the mourners have left the funeral home, I decide to seek out Nina’s body, to say goodbye. I step back quietly into the smaller room where the immediate family had gathered, where the casket is seated. The room is dimly lit except for spotlights upon

Nina's body. I can't see anything except up close. I approach slowly. Off to the sides of the room are tinted windows that let in very little light. I find it ironic that there is an "emergency exit" sign in this room. I ask myself where the door leads to.

Nina's casket is lined with what looks like white satin and lace. Her body is partially covered with a lace shawl. She wears a puffy white lace dress. A bible has been placed at her side. Her nails are perfectly painted red. I look into her face.

Nina, you look like a doll, with your cheeks made up so rosy, so round, so peaceful. No one can see your ever-present desire to be ridiculously thin. No one can see how little you're planning to eat today, or tomorrow, or the next day. No one knows how many times you may weigh yourself in a day, trying to find the absolute perfect number for yourself, because there is no perfect number, no number low enough to satisfy you, no matter how low that number is, it is never low enough, because the lower it goes, the lower the candle is left that is your life. No one knew just how desperate you were, Nina, even after you snuffed the candle out.

All the mourners have left the room. I check my pockets. Nothing. I check my knapsack. In the far pocket I find the two candy bars that Calhoun gave me. Milky Way. I examine, in the dim light, the letters on each candy: M. I. L. K. Y. W. A. Y. and check the calorie count. Yes, there are plenty enough. I put one back in my knapsack, and the other I keep out, holding it in my hands for a moment.

The universe is yours, Nina.

I open the wrapper a bit and sniff the bar. Sweet, juicy chocolate. Melts easily on the tongue. Creamy insides, caramel and fudge.

Into Nina's coffin, right by her arm, I place a chocolate caramel Milky Way bar, 254 calories, ready to eat. Just what she always, always dreamed of.

The outer room is empty as I pass through. The funeral directors are outside instructing drivers in the parking lot. I take one more last look at Nina's photographs. Above the photos is a small sign: NINA SENSA: 1958-2010. And in the corner, a photo I didn't see the first time I came to this table: Nina and me. I pick up the photo and study it.

We are 19. Nina, home from freshman year at Wesleyan. Me, home from Bennington. She, already suffering. The photo does not capture her thinness to the passerby onlooker, but to me--I can see it. I see it in her shoulders, the way she holds her arm around me, her baggy clothes, the way she stands, the way her sweatshirt falls on her body. I can see it in the air surrounding her. I can see it in her hollow cheeks. And I can see it in the expression on her face--empty. Because when you are starving, that is what you feel--nothing. You are left with no anger, no sadness, no joy--no feelings at all. You do not even feel hungry, yet you are always, always starving.

And me? I look into my own face. I am smiling, apparently physically healthy. Yet in only a handful of months, I, too, will be starving myself; I, too, will be steeped in the grand deprivation game. Was this truly unanticipated on my part? Did I look upon my dear friend, Nina, and not see only a reflection of myself?

I fold up the photo in its frame. I open my knapsack, and drop it inside. Nina, you and your family will forgive me, just this once.

I pass through the inner door. No one is there. The vestibule is as dimly lit as the outer room. Near the door is a donation basket with a sign: FOR SENSA FUNERAL. The basket is decorated around the edges with purple flowers, and is filled with one-dollar and five-dollar bills.

I dig into my pockets for my money. The ten \$20 bills that Calhoun gave me I've got folded into quarters. I unfold them and place all of them into the basket. Then, thinking again, I bury them deep under the ones and fives.

As I pass through the outer door, a man asks me, "Do you need a validation sticker?"

"No," I respond, "I don't. Thanks."

The sun is bright and the clouds seem to have cleared--for now. Yet I am so cold, and hungry in my soul. I suddenly feel weak. I am trying not to cry, but tears spill out of my eyes and onto the neck of my shirt. I wipe them with my jacket sleeve until finally I find a tissue in my pocket.

I walk to the bench by the bank. It is the nearest sitting-place, and I need to rest so that I can get home safely. I remove my Gatorade bottle--full strength--from my knapsack, and find that it is empty. I do, however, have water, but this will do me no good right now. I need just a bit of sugar to keep myself from collapsing so that I can get home. In my other knapsack pocket is the second candy bar that Calhoun gave me. Nina, I do this for you.

I unwrap a bit of the bar. I can smell it, even outdoors. The chocolate odor overwhelms me and nauseates me. I imagine the inside. Then, I take a bite.

The sugar blasts into my mouth, and spreads into my cheeks and upon my upper palate. Immediately, blisters form in my gums. My whole mouth stings from the impact. I chew. I take another bite. I am hungry. I ignore my stomach feeling. I swish my tongue around in my mouth, noticing the way it touches the candy and swirls it around and around. I bite into the candy again and again. I finish the bar, and then toss away the wrapper in the trash, stuffing it into someone's McDonald's bag, and closing the bag, and I toss the bag back into the trash.

Then, I go home.

CHAPTER SEVEN

I am alone in my apartment now, and I am cold. I try to turn up the heat, but it is already up to the highest the landlord will allow. I take an ice pack out of the freezer, put it in a bag, and hang the bag over the thermostat. In a few minutes, the thermostat clicks, and the heat turns on. Maybe I will stop shivering eventually. But now, it really doesn't matter.

I decide to take a shower to clean myself. I close the bathroom door behind me, not that it matters--no one else lives here, after all, but I want to keep the steam inside. I turn the water on the hottest. I strip down and inspect my body in the mirror.

The bones are all there. The bone by the side of my face, above my cheeks protrudes like a stick, my jaw bone firm. My neck, full of tendons. Ribs, all in place. The bones on the ends of my shoulders that shouldn't be there are there. The flesh around my clavicles sinks in profoundly. Under my ribs, my stomach area sinks in. My breasts barely cover my chest. I want to cut them off, sever them from myself, deny that I am a woman, a girl even. I always wanted to be a boy.

I untie my hair. My brittle, unkempt hair that I never, never let loose. It is far gone now, my hair. Every time I take out the elastic, a bunch breaks off. The color, too, has changed, and there is no shine left to it. I shake it loose, and run a brush through it.

I turn down the water a bit, and step into the shower. I let the water run upon me, over my head and down my body. I wash myself with unscented soap, trying, with difficulty, to wash my armpits completely because they are so sunken in. The water slaps upon my body. I shampoo my hair and rinse it, and rinse my body. I step out of the shower and it is steamy in here.

I dry myself with a towel, and then put clean clothes on. Nothing fits anymore, not even underwear. I put on a tight gym bra that flattens my breasts. I put my shoes on and tie them. Even my shoes are looser.

I spray stuff on the mirror and wipe it with a paper towel to get the streaks off, and swish the toilet. I pick up lint from the bathroom rug. I brush my teeth. My gums bleed horribly. I clean the sink thoroughly afterward, disinfecting every surface. Then I straighten the towels and leave the bathroom alone.

I sweep the kitchen floor. I wet a towel and get down on my hands and knees and mop the floor with it. I swipe the sink with a washcloth saturated with Clorox, then wipe the sink dry. I make sure everything in the refrigerator is straightened at right angles.

I pick the lint off the couch. I sweep the dust out from under it, and from under the side tables where it has accumulated over the past couple of months. I take the books off of the coffee table, and place them neatly on the bookshelf.

Then, I find my copy of *The Scarsdale Medical Diet*. The book is 30 years old. The pages are brown and as brittle as my hair. The spine has cracked in three places, and the back cover is detached from the book. Dr. Herman Tarnower, I do not need you anymore. I turn on my paper shredder, tear off several pages at a time, and drop them into the shredder. Grapefruit and protein toast, I never needed you. I do not need anything now.

I find a piece of paper. I write down my online banking password clearly so that anyone can read it. I write down my e-mail password. I find my checkbook and leave it on the center of my desk. I write, "Donations to Bennington College." On another piece of paper I write Susie's name and number, and the words, "I have the medical condition of anorexia nervosa." I tape this to the inside of my refrigerator.

I remove the cover to Pizza's cage and bring him out to pet him. He is tame now, and has gotten used to me. I hold him gently. He shivers the way a rat can do sometimes, but doesn't pee on me. I place him on my shoulder. He wiggles around on me, holding on tight to my shirt, then moves to my other shoulder, tickling my neck. I bring him down and caress him some more. I hold his little paws one at a time and inspect each. Such tiny toes. I pet his funny-looking tail. Why do people object to rats' tails? Aren't they just something that should be accepted simply because it is a part of them, the way my eating disorder is an integral part of me? It has been with me for thirty years now, two-thirds of my life. It is as attached to me as Pizza's tail is attached to him. Yet people reject my infirmity the way people are disgusted by a rat's tail, and reject the entire rat as an animal to be loved as a pet. I feel sorry for them.

I put Pizza back into his cage. Or try to. On the way back in, he slips from my hands and runs down the side of the couch and onto the floor, and then runs into the corner of the room. Damn. Pet rodents are hard to get back once they are in corners of rooms under furniture. "Here, Pizza!" I say, knowing it will do no good. I must go down there and get him now.

I find a flashlight in the closet. Although I cannot see Pizza, I know he is under the large chair in the corner, easily within reach if only I can shine the light on him so that I can pick him up. I focus the light on the corner. Then, feeling dizzy, I spin around, grab the table, but it is too late, I fall sideways onto my hand.

When I try to get up I know I've got a couple of broken fingers. I cannot straighten or bend them and my hand aches. Thankfully, it is not the hand I use; it is my left. An ordinary person would surely go to the emergency room for this. I am not ordinary. Emergency room means getting weighed means getting evaluated means inpatient hospitalization means force-feeding--like Nina. I would rather die than be force-fed. I will tape up my fingers myself. But

first, I must get Pizza back into his cage, and get him squared away. I place the flashlight on the floor, facing Pizza, and reach with my right arm extended, and find him, pick him up, cradle him gently, carefully, and rise to a standing position. I must put weight on my left hand to do this but the pain is distant to me now.

I gather together Pizza's food and his things, and put everything into a box, and take the box and his cage to the elevator. I press 3. Up on the third floor, I walk over to Keith's apartment, and knock on the door. No answer. I knock again.

The door opens a crack, then wider. "May," he says, "come in."

"I can't stay long," I say. "I just want to ask you a favor."

"I will do any favor for you, May," he says.

"Keith," I say, feeling like I am speaking from behind dark glasses, "I am leaving town. Going far away. Here is my rat. My pet rat. He is very sweet and I can't take him. I love him but I can't bring him with me. His name is Pizza. Can you take him? Please? Can you give him a home? A loving home?"

"May. Oh, dear, May. Let me see. Let me see this rat. You know, I have always been an animal lover, May, all my life. I will be happy to take Pizza. Just set the cage down here. Are you in a hurry? Are you leaving town soon?"

"Yes," I say. "There was a death."

"I am so sorry."

"Yeah, I am, too."

When I get back to my apartment I receive a phone call from my mother, who is the last person I want to hear from. "And why don't you come over in a couple of days, for dinner," says my mother. "We'll have nice spaghetti."

“Sure, Mom, that sounds great,” I say.

“How about six o’clock? Deb, Nancy, and Susie will be there, too. All the wonderful Golub girls in one room together. We’ll all be a happy bunch.”

“I’m sure we will be.”

“You looked great at the funeral. So cheerful.”

After I hang up, I put the phone back on the receiver, stand up, and start to walk into the kitchen when a wave of dizziness hits me. I spin sideways, hitting the table, and grab onto the edge on the way down to the floor. The jewelry box containing Helios’ ashes falls to the floor, and smashes into a thousand pieces, right by the side of my bleeding nose.

The Charles River floods every spring around this time of year. Folks deny that this will happen, but it always does. In the outer suburbs, further from Boston, the towns close up buildings and roads, and people talk about the “water table” and flooding basements and the pumps needed to clean them out. Sometimes, people go to supermarkets and buy bottled water and supplies for days ahead without safe water. But closer to Boston, the effects aren’t as severe.

There is a path that leads to the center of town from the outskirts, shaded by deciduous trees, now sprouted leaves in the springtime. On a cloudy day, the path can be darkened by this shade, nearly dark enough so that it is difficult to see ahead.

On this path walks a very thin woman. She walks slowly, with great effort, scattering a small quantity of animal ashes, and then, just as slowly, retreats into the shadows.

CHAPTER EIGHT

“You never tell me you love me. Never.”

The phone crackles. I am sitting in the park where I last talked to my sisters, at the very same picnic table. It is cold out and I am shivering.

“Well, Mom,” I say, “I am telling you this now. I love you.”

“You always look so wonderful. Just stunning. So *thin*.”

“Sure thing, Mom. Bye.”

I close the phone and think about all the years that she didn't love me, or at least didn't see me. Did she not have eyes? Did she not have ears to hear me? Why was I doomed to have a mother so uncaring, so unsupportive, unloving, and unaware that I even have an eating disorder, even though it was staring her in the face, even though we all told her about it? Didn't she listen? Didn't she care that I was starving? Mom, where have you been all these years? Were you ever, ever there? And, why am I still, still looking for you, still seeking you out, still waiting, always, always waiting and hoping you'll be there for me?

Or, on the other hand, have I given up on my mother years ago? Is it my sisters for whom I truly grieve? Yet I have no desire to speak with them now. No, I don't need to say goodbye to them. We have already parted. Let our last time together be their last memory of me. I will never see them again, nor will they see me. Let them remember our day in this same park, when they told me, “We love you, May, but not your ED,” again, and again, and again. Because if I lose my eating disorder, it will be like the biggest part of me, the part of me that *is* me, has died.

So I open my cell phone again. I call the only person I have left, the only ally I have in the world.

“Calhoun. Hey.” I hold the phone closer to my ear, to keep traffic noise out and to hear Calhoun better.

“Hey, Babe.” I hear rustling in the background and know he’s just getting out of the shower. I picture his weak, pale, hairless, naked chest.

“Wazzup?”

“I broke my arm, Babe.”

“That makes two of us. I broke two fingers. I can’t even hold the fucking cell phone right.”

“How did you do that?” asks Calhoun. He hasn’t changed a bit.

“Fell.”

“You always fall.”

“I forgot to eat.”

“You didn’t forget, Babe. You didn’t eat. You don’t eat. You don’t listen to the Cal. Come over and eat for me, Babe. Come over and lick my dick.”

“Calhoun,” I say, “my best friend committed suicide. Her name is Nina. She’s dead.”

“Come over and lick my dick. Then you’ll feel better.”

“You didn’t hear what I said.”

“I heard you. Get those fingers taken care of. Bet you didn’t even see a doctor about them, did you? Bet you didn’t.”

“Calhoun.”

“You cunt.”

“Calhoun, I passed out twice in the past 24 hours.”

“You were only having an orgasm. Don’t masturbate so much. Girls like you shouldn’t have vibrators.”

“Calhoun, I mean it.”

“May, did you know that my ex-wife committed suicide after we divorced?”

“No. The one in the photograph? The one with the kids?”

“Yep, that’s the one.”

“Calhoun, I didn’t know that. I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, Babe. It was a long time ago. I loved her so much. Even after we divorced. She--she had another love. Gambling. She took chances on life. Took risks. Threw away her money. All the money she was earning at her little part-time job, she threw away. First, it was at the ladies’ pool, then, at bingo, then she tried poker. She hit it big in the lottery and didn’t need me anymore. I was out of the picture by then. I mean, Babe, we were still married, but I was out of her life because she was married to something else--to this unseen monster. Then it was the trips to the casinos. She flew to Vegas for a four-day trip with a friend, and stayed ten. She came into some inheritance money and spent that. She didn’t care about herself, didn’t care what happened to herself. How could she love others--anyone--if she didn’t love herself? Tell me? How could she possibly love me, if she loved her gambling so much? Babe, I lost her long before she divorced me. Long before she died, something inside her had died.”

“Calhoun, I am so sorry.”

“I have told very few people that story.”

A couple with four children passes by, one in a stroller, and three running about. The parents laugh to themselves and speak in another language I cannot understand. Above all of us,

the sun peeks from behind some very dark clouds. Then the clouds darken the sky once more, and a few drops of rain fall upon me. I shiver.

“Calhoun, that’s a sad story.”

“Do you know how I coped with it all? Do you? Can you imagine how I felt?”

“I can’t imagine dealing with something like that, Calhoun, I really can’t.”

“When someone with a gambling problem leaves you, they don’t really leave you. They are always there. You always feel the remnants of their disease speaking to you from beyond the grave, like it is calling out to you. Like it is saying, ‘I am the winner! Bingo!’ So that was how I felt for a long time. And I tried many things to cope. I smoked marijuana for a while to numb the pain, then realized that this was another drug, and quit it. I found new friends who didn’t stick around. I watched a lot of football on TV.”

“There are no answers, Calhoun.”

“But I did find comfort in one thing, one silly habit that hurt no one. Would you believe I took up knitting? Would you believe that, Babe?”

“You?”

“Yeah. I taught myself to knit. A little at a time. It was hard at first. But that blanket on my bed? I knitted it myself.”

The blanket. Forest green woven with pink. Deep purple zigzags. All the fringes and cloth patches, and the little smiley faces in the middle that said to me, over and over, “I’m fooling you, fooling you!” Such an intricate design, such trickery! Calhoun, you bastard.

And then, it comes to me, the real reason Nina took her own life: it was not because she couldn’t tolerate her anorexia any longer. It wasn’t because she hated her life of obsessing over calories, food, the scale, her weight, her shape. It wasn’t because she, like me, had her troubles

with paranoia every time she was in the public eye, when she went into food stores, or when people could see her body or her skinny limbs. It wasn't when she bought clothes and couldn't find anything in her size, or when society called her "so tiny they couldn't even see her." No, Nina, that wasn't it at all. I *know* now. I know why you did it. It was because you couldn't stand what they had done to you. You couldn't tolerate having your eating disorder taken away from you. You couldn't continue to exist without it. Nina, starvation tempted you back. It had you trapped in your own skin, and you knew you could never, ever return to it. You and your eating disorder were utterly inseparable.

And I--I cannot separate myself from myself from my anorexia now. I cannot escape it. We are one with each other, married, as Calhoun's ex-wife had turned to her money and her gambling and away from Calhoun, and eventually left him for it, never to return. I recall Calhoun's wife, the photograph I had seen on his dresser: she is married to another in the photo more than she is married to Calhoun; she is committed to her habit already, driven to her ultimate death.

Why? Why does this happen to people? Why did this eating disorder, this temptation take hold of me and grip me so tightly that I have never been able to break loose, the way Calhoun's wife had been gripped, and taken from the world by her demon? Why did the ED grab me, and not someone else? Why was I the chosen one? Why was my body ravaged, starved, beaten, broken down, deteriorated, shrunken? If I have been married to this eating disorder, and you could personify it, then it has been cruel to me, the ultimate cruelty--and it has truly, truly taken me in the darkest of dark, and stolen me away, and raped me.

Calhoun. Calhoun is the tempter. I cannot get away from him. Surely, Calhoun has seduced me, manipulated me, stolen my body, and given me absolutely no choice but to despise

my body and all it means to me. Calhoun has called me “tits” and “cunt,” hateful, demeaning words, words of the body--am I nothing but “tits” and “cunt,” Calhoun? Because that is all I am to you. Just something to be put on a pedestal, a pedestal that is locked in a cage. Just a vessel for your hatred of the body, and therefore, my own hatred. Because of your hatred, I have hated. Because of your beating, I have beaten. Because of your annihilation, I have denied myself, and in so doing, am dying before your eyes.

It is Calhoun that is the taker. It is Calhoun that is the murderer. It is Calhoun that is Death Himself.

You, Calhoun, and my eating disorder, anorexia nervosa, are one and the same.

And now, I must go to you. I need to tell you a few things.

CHAPTER NINE

With my little remaining strength, I climb the hill leading to my old apartment building, where Calhoun lives. It is a long stretch up Baker Street and the road is filled with pot holes. I stick to the concrete sidewalk that is smoother and easier to walk on, but the fallen branches play tricks on me and trip me, and I fall several times. It is near impossible to right myself again, but I manage.

Newly risen bulb flowers bend to me and beckon to me along the way, warning me against doing what I'm doing. They seem to be saying, "Kiss me and die!" I do not pay heed to them. A man pruning a bush stops and stares at me walking by, then returns to his work, shaking his head. I guess if you're determined enough, you can get anywhere you want to go no matter who you are or what you look like. I continue onward.

As I round the corner onto Howard Road, the wind picks up and the temperature seems to drop, yet I no longer feel cold; I do not feel anything anymore. I am beyond feeling. I am superwoman. I am strong. I can do anything now. Calhoun, you bastard, you asked for this.

I can smell it already, the smell of barbecue food. I know they're there. The neighbors. I wonder how many have gathered for the feast. I imagine the food: burgers on buns, hot dogs snuggled in little rolls, chicken wings smothered in barbecue sauce, Cajun rice, corn bread, baked beans, red, white and blue bakery cake. I can smell it all now, and taste it, and feel it in my mouth, and all over my body, and as it fills me up, it gives me a power so immense that I can overcome anything, anything at all.

I go toward the woods, but at once someone sees me as I step forward: Corinne, who has her car parked on the street. She calls to me, “May, May! You’ve come! I have just left and I’m headed over to my sister’s.”

“Well,” I say, “I am only staying for a minute. To take care of some business. I’ll see you. Gotta run.” And boy, can I run.

I am invisible, yet she sees me. She stands by her car with a plate of food in her hand. The temptress. The plate is covered with foil. “Look,” she says, “I’ve got this stuff.”

Bit by bit, she opens the foil. I can smell the rich corn bread, the wings, the creamy butternut squash, all arranged neatly on a stiff paper plate. “Don’t you want this?” she says.

I do not want it.

“Aren’t you hungry?” she asks.

I am not hungry.

“Aren’t you just starving for food?”

I will deny myself until I die.

“Look at this, it’s good,” she says. “Hey, what did you do to your hand? Let me see.”

“No, I’m fine, Corinne. I need to go now.”

“You need to get those splinted properly. Take the food. It’s yours.”

“I am leaving, Corinne. I am going away.”

“Well, if you don’t want it, I’ll take it to my sister’s.”

She takes the food away, gets into her car. I climb the hill further as she drives off with the plate of corn bread, wings, and creamy butternut squash with butter melted on top. I can feel the butter slide around on my tongue and absorb into my mouth, and down my throat. I can feel my stomach sigh with satisfaction. But I need nothing, nothing at all now.

I climb among the tall pine trees that are gathered in the small wooded area beyond the old building where I used to live, where Calhoun still lives. I can hear all the barbecue celebrations and hear the voices of my old neighbors, yet I recognize no individual voices and do not hear the voice of Calhoun himself, nor do I see any of them yet. The pine trees part for me, saying, "Eat, eat." Yet I do not eat, will not eat. It is my mission, the only mission I have ever had, a non-mission, a mission to deny myself everything I have ever needed and wanted. I do not know where this strength comes from, but I welcome it now, cherish it as if it were an infant in my arms. I note that I am still wearing the red sweater I bought the day Calhoun picked me up not long ago in the shopping center, the day I purchased Pizza, the rat I have now traded away. Well, Calhoun, you will see me in all my colors.

I can hear him now, but just barely. His voice is raspy, weak. I can hear the other neighbor's voices, too, louder than his, and none of them can see me at all in these woods, beyond these flowers, the roses, tulips, and azaleas. His voice is so quiet, nearly a whisper, and I cannot make out the words at all, just "Gimme, gimme," and the neighbors' hullabaloo goings-on around him.

His arm is in a cast, and the cast is in a sling. He holds the sling out in front of him, loosely. He appears limp, weakened. I imagine drool coming out of the corners of his mouth because he cannot contain himself. No, Calhoun, you cannot harm me now.

I will tell him. I will tell him at last. I will face him head on. Calhoun, you are nothing but a pathetic liar. You are a petty criminal. You are not the master-minder you make yourself out to be. Look at you now. I could pick you off so easily, so cleverly, simply by telling you exactly what I think of you.

So I go near him now, nearer and nearer. He sits close to where I am standing, very, very close, and I can hear him breathe--in and out, in and out, and almost feel his breath upon me, as I had that one night last autumn when he instilled fear into me and stole my soul--well, Calhoun, I'm here to take it back. I take a step closer to him and prepare what I will say. And then, I stand still.

I take another step forward. Then another. Then, I turn away.

CHAPTER TEN

As I climb back down the hill, I can smell no more, taste no more, feel no more. The rocks under me roll away as I step on them, but I do not fall. The hill behind me, the barbecue and my old neighbors disappears as I leave it all, all of it and Calhoun with them, all of them still eating, chewing, laughing, drinking, talking amongst themselves, never knowing I had been there. And, in fact, I hadn't. I am invisible.

Moving quietly now down Howard Road, I move onward, and the pavement softens under every step I take. The grasses on either side of the road bend toward me as if they are bowing before me and worshipping me. Birds, too, stop pecking at the ground, and look up at me curiously, nodding their heads up and down, up and down. Bees halt their humming and watch me. Even worms and tiny insects on the pavement move out of my way. The sand is already parted, even before I step on it. I cannot stop now.

I step lightly onto Baker Street, and past the bulb flowers that tell me to die. The sky darkens and lightens and darkens again. A bit of rain spits upon me now, but I do not feel cold anymore, but feverish and heated instead, and my vision blurs before me like heat rising from the pavement on a summer day, in waves, as if the air is buckling almost. Calhoun, I couldn't do it. You are who you are. You may not be my friend, but you have my respect.

I reach Garland Street and turn right. Here, children stop their baseball game to stare at me, a desperate skinny lady hurrying down the sidewalk, a woman on a mission, only passing by in the rain. A dog barks, then ceases his barking. I turn on Pleasant, then onto Q Street, then onto busy Main Street. I must go to Mini-Mart, to find the one only thing I can turn to that I have left, the one comfort that is to me like alcohol, a 20-ounce, calorie-free bottle of Diet Coke.

I imagine the fizz in the drink, the way it makes me feel full all day so that I do not have to eat for a long time, and how it deceives my stomach into thinking I've eaten, that I've nourished myself, the trickery of it, Diet Coke that fools me into thinking that I care for myself, that I love myself and love my body and am well and beautiful and young and have a spring in myself and never, never once went on the Diet of Death. Diet Coke! Diet Coke! It is Diet Coke that brings me to a place where Nina, dear Nina, never went on a diet, never went to Wesleyan, never left home and we never parted, and in fact high school never ended and we never graduated and were never perfect and were born boys. It is Diet Coke that deceives me into thinking that Jeffrey never died, that he never left Bennington and never had a brain tumor, that he stayed with me forever. Diet Coke will bring me back to Helios, to the sun, to a warmer place, and take away my breasts and make me small, and smaller, until I am nothing, nothing at all.

EPILOGUE

When the rain has just ended in the Boston suburbs in springtime, the worms come out on the sidewalks, and mist rises off the pavement and hangs above it like a towel a woman has left out to dry in the sun. Folks fold up their umbrellas and put them away. People in homes open up their windows and let in the air. Birds reappear, and people notice them, as if they had been gone a long time, saying, "Look, there's a robin, look, there, I've seen one!" and perhaps they snap a photo, and send it to their children who have gone off to college in far off places now, who have left Boston and the springtime and the newly blossoming trees. For it is this warmer weather, not too warm, that reminds us that summer is soon to come, when the grasses will need to be cut, when schools will be out, when the children will again fall, one on top of the other, and roll in the grass amongst each other, over, and over again.

Here on Main Street walks a very thin woman. She has in her pocket some money and a cell phone. She wears a light denim jacket, and under that, a new red wool sweater, and she now shivers, though it is not cold. She slips off the sidewalk and onto the asphalt, though not on purpose; she has no clue where she is headed now; she is delirious and without direction, just a crazy woman on the street. Her feet drag under her. She waves her arms, then they fall beside her; she waves them again, then she tries, and fails, to step back onto the sidewalk.

Perhaps she tries to call out to someone, but it is doubtful that anyone hears her weakened cries above the sound of heavy traffic, the trucks carrying office supplies and used cars and concrete, the police cars and ambulances, the Massachusetts Bay Transit Authority buses, the commuters now coming home from work. Some cars left-hand turners honk their horns at bicyclers, impatient cabs run red lights, motorcycles rev their engines. On the other side of Main

Street, a car passes with its windows open, blasting a rap song, "I love you, Babe, I love you!" Perhaps the very thin woman hears these words, but perhaps she is too far into her pain to hear any rhythm but that of her own frail heart anymore.

Perhaps someone honks their horn at her as she staggers onto the street. Perhaps someone calls out to her, "Stop!" Perhaps someone reaches for her, trying to save her, trying to nourish her, trying to help her fill herself with something, anything to stop her from stepping further.

But she does take one step, and another. And another.