



HUNGRY

CRYSTAL RENN
with Marjorie Ingall

SIMON & SCHUSTER

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To Mom, for her endless love, patience, and support. No daughter could ask for more.

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INTRODUCTION

This is a story about two pictures.

The first is a photograph of the supermodel Gisele. Taken by the photographer Steven Meisel, appeared in *Vogue* in 2000. Gisele is in a clingy white gown, posing in a studio against a seamless gray backdrop. Her skin is golden and gleaming. Her hair is windblown, as if she's been surprised by a breeze from an open window just out of view. Her hands, her eyes, the curve of her back—everything is graceful and expressive. She's mesmerizing.

I was fourteen years old when I saw that picture. It was the first time I'd ever leafed through a copy of *Vogue*. I'd never cared about any fashion magazine; I'd looked at that one only because a man I call The Scout had handed me a copy. He was working for a major modeling agency—let's just call it The Agency—in New York. His job was to troll the back roads of America, visiting junior high schools and suburban malls, in a ceaseless quest for the next top model.

I had never met anyone like The Scout before. He was urbane and kind, smooth-talking yet sincere. I was dazzled by his shirt. Tailored to perfection, it was probably more expensive than my entire wardrobe. When he opened *Vogue* to Gisele's picture, he knew exactly what he was doing. He was planting a fantasy. In the few seconds it took me to absorb all of Gisele's beauty and allure, I constructed a new idea of female perfection. It was Gisele.

That's when the Scout said, "This could be you."

And even though I was only fourteen and weighed sixty pounds more than Gisele and had all the sophistication of a girl from Clinton, Mississippi, population twenty-three thousand, I believed The Scout.

The second photograph is from 2007. It shows the naked back of a curvy woman, her dark hair curling into tendrils at the nape of her neck. Her body is half draped in rich red fabric. She's gazing off into the distance, lit from the side in a soft northern light. She looks like a Greek goddess or an Old Master painting—a Vermeer, a Titian. There's an eye-catching weightiness to her. As she leans slightly to her right, two modest folds of flesh collect at her waist. (If you were a snarky sort, you might call this lush abundance "back fat.") The picture was taken by photographer Ruven Afanador for the Breast Cancer Research Foundation. It was a public service ad, designed to look timeless but also of the moment. The objective was to show beauty and strength, to offer hope of a healthy future for all women. It ran in every major women's magazine, from *Vogue* to *O* to *Bon Appétit* to *Prevention*. The woman in that photograph is me.

Hungry is the story of how I got from the first photograph to the second.

A straight line may well be the shortest distance between two points, but for me, the journey from the first picture to the second crossed continents and set the numbers on my bathroom scale spinning backward and then forward like a time-lapse sequence in a 1930s black-and-white melodrama. The interim was a time of triumphs and humiliations, a jagged line of drastic weight loss and brushes with fame and success and failure and emaciation and eating disorders, until I finally said: Enough.

I started to eat. I stopped churning mindless circles on an elliptical cross-trainer for seven or eight hours a day, my arms and legs jerking like a marionette's. I stopped obsessing about chewing a single stick of sugar-free gum. I got heavier. I put on pounds by the dozen and leap frogged dress sizes—from 00 to 12. But I honestly didn't mind the weight gain and the loss of my matchstick limbs. I made a choice to stop starving.

Here's the strange part: Call it crazy or ironic or simply perfect justice, but when I stopped starving

myself, my career took off. That was when I shot five international editions of *Vogue* and the cover of international editions of *Harper's Bazaar* and *Elle*. That was when I starred in Dolce & Gabbana ad campaign. That was when I worked the runway as the final model in Jean Paul Gaultier's prêt-à-porter show in a gauzy, breathtaking, form-fitting fairy-tale dress covered in an explosion of tissue-paper-thin silk flowers. That was when I appeared on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. That was when I became the highest-paid plus-size model in America. That was when I became a favorite model of the man who took that amazing picture of Gisele in 2000: the great Steven Meisel. And I did it all at the weight my body wanted to be.

I was hardly alone in my descent into weight obsession and madness. Five to ten million Americans have eating disorders. A 2005 study found that over half of all teenage girls and nearly a third of teenage boys use unhealthy methods to try to be thin, such as skipping meals, fasting, smoking cigarettes for the express purpose of losing weight, vomiting, and taking laxatives. Even women without clinical disorders spend a heartbreaking amount of time obsessing about their weight, hating their bodies, and thinking that if they were only thinner, their lives would be richer, fuller, happier.

I'm the embodiment of the truth that it doesn't have to be that way. You can learn to love the size you're supposed to be. I had to lose seventy pounds (along with lumps of hair, muscle mass, the ability to concentrate, and any sense of joy) before finding my sanity. I regained the weight and, in the process, became an infinitely more successful model. My self-acceptance led to a return of the intellectual curiosity I'd had as a child, before I got on the weight-loss express. It led to a better career. It led to romance. I'm proof that life doesn't have to wait until you're skinny.

1 WE ARE FAMILY

I find it! I find it!”

Like an ecstatic little pinball, I ricocheted around our Miami backyard in search of Easter eggs. Striped ones! Sparkly ones! Color-washed ones in the blues and greens and purples of Monet’s water lilies! I’d triumphantly seize an egg hidden in a glazed stoneware flowerpot or in the crook of the staghorn grape bush and shriek with joy, plunging it into my already overflowing basket. There seemed to be an endless supply: Eggs were behind the bayberry bushes, nestled in the fronds of the staghorn ferns that filled our terra-cotta planters, peeking out from under the birds-of-paradise in the flower beds. Mom and grandma, giggling, replenished them as quickly as I could scoop them up. I was oblivious to their sneaky helpfulness. I was three years old, and all I knew was that there was an infinite supply of glittery prizes. When I was exhausted, I sat in Mom’s lap in the cool grass, carefully sorting my pile of jelly beans, marshmallow Peeps, bright foil-covered eggs, and chocolate bunnies.

I loved Easter. But then I loved being in the backyard all year ’round. To me, it was a fairyland even when it wasn’t teeming with gold and silver eggs. We had our own pool surrounded by feathered fishtail palms, pink-flowered bougainvillea trees, and hanging orchids. When I was two, Grandma held me in the water and taught me to breathe through a straw. I was a water baby, enrolled in swimming classes at the University of Miami at twenty-six months. I loved splashing in the water with Grandma or just playing in the yard by myself. I had tea parties with imaginary friends, scattered Pogs (brightly painted little discs every kid seemed to collect in the halcyon days of the early nineties) in the grass, chased dragonflies, and caught tiny green frogs. I had my own wooden swing set—I’d always try to swing high enough to see the ocean only a few miles away.

If you’d seen me swinging into the sky, making tiny bouquets for the fairies out of bougainvillea blossoms or lying on my back watching the clouds, you’d never have thought: When that girl was fourteen, she’s going to hate her body so much, she’ll nearly kill herself to change it.

Back then I was blissfully happy. Mom and Grandma created a world for me—filled with books, songs, games, and egg hunts—in which I felt serene and secure, the center of the universe. I enjoyed being with them, but I also enjoyed my solitude. When I was small, I never felt the absence of my “real” mother.

I knew Mom wasn’t actually my mother; she was my grandmother. I knew Grandma wasn’t actually my grandmother; she was my great-grandmother. But I called them Mom and Grandma because that was who they were to me.

My birth mother—we’ll call her Lana—was a teenager. She was the fourth of Mom’s six kids. Let’s just say she was absent for much of my childhood. I’m not comfortable going into Lana’s story. It’s not my story. Her demons were different from mine.

My story is this: Lana dropped me off at her mother’s when I was three months old. I was a preemie, and tiny. No one knew who my father was. I was quite sick with a bronchial infection. I couldn’t turn over. My head was totally flat in the back from spending all my time lying in a crib, staring up. I had major intestinal problems. My motor skills were terrible. “You were like a little vegetable,” Mom says now.

Lana had told Mom she was going away for a few days, but weeks passed and she didn’t come back. That may sound sad, but it was a blessing, because that’s how I became Mom and Grandma’s little girl. They’d talked it over and decided that when Lana returned, they’d ask her if they could have custody of me. But since Lana was flat-out gone, Mom got an adoption lawyer, went to court, and

became my legal mother. I was three months old. She'd already raised her six kids to adulthood and wasn't expecting to have a seventh at her age, but when the need arose, she stepped up. She was my North Star—she was how I learned to navigate the world. Sparkling, steady, and always there, she gave me room to soar and to make my own mistakes. To me, she'll always be Mom.

At first Mom spent a lot of time with me at the pediatrician and at the physical therapist. She did all kinds of exercises with me; putting me on my belly so I'd develop muscles in my neck, bicycling my legs, dangling toys above me so I'd reach for them. Eventually, my motor skills developed. I gained weight, and my head lost its flatness.

Mom was always matter-of-fact about who Lana was; she never lied to me. And she never gave me more information than I could handle. When I was little, she said simply, "Your mother couldn't raise you because she was too young when you were born, and I was so happy when you came to live with me." For a few years, that was all I needed to know. Mom was Mom, and Lana was a very young woman who occasionally visited, shifted uncomfortably on the living room couch, then disappeared again for months.

I know now how much Mom grieved about Lana's absence. But when I was little, she never shared her agony with me. She created a beautiful life for us, surrounding me with comfort and glamour. Mom loved ornate things. She drove a pink Cadillac, a testament to her prowess as one of Mary Kay's top saleswomen. A brand-new pink Caddy appeared in our driveway every couple of years. The walls in our home were covered with big oil paintings in carved, gilded frames—no insipid pastel seascapes or *Miami Vice*-meets-nail-salon posters for her. The house was full of gold-leaf house-plants, a huge lamp shaped like a heron, sinuous Egyptian art, intricately filigreed antiques about which I invented colorful ghost stories and secret histories. That chest was smuggled out of Russia by the fur-clad daughter of a czar; this bureau belonged to a noblewoman in a powdered wig in some ancient French court.

Mom had come a long way from her childhood as a self-described hillbilly from Tennessee. She lived in a succession of southern cities as her dad, a chemical engineer, moved from job to job. When she was in her late teens, the family settled in Connecticut, where Mom got married too young and had two kids. After her divorce, she up and moved to Florida "because it was warm and because it wasn't Connecticut." To support her children, she worked in a fancy beauty salon as a receptionist, modeled for the showrooms of the Miami International Merchandise Mart, and wound up performing dolphin shows at the Miami Seaquarium. "I'd never even swum underwater or touched a dolphin," she told me, "but I've always been a don't-put-me-in-an-office kind of girl!" She was beautiful, and the Seaquarium folks could tell she was smart. She learned fast, developed a real rapport with the dolphins, and became one of the attraction's most popular performers. "They built me an underwater tank with an air hose," she recalls, "and I was photographed underwater, swimming with Caroline Snowball, the only albino porpoise in captivity, for *National Geographic*."

That *National Geographic* shoot must've gone really well: Mom wound up marrying the underwater cameraman. She quickly joined him in his business; her intellectual curiosity and innate smarts helped her pick up both still and motion picture underwater photography skills. Together they shot the underwater footage for such shows as *Wild Kingdom* and *American Sportsman*, as well as for a Frank Sinatra movie called *The Lady in Cement* (in which Frank goes hunting for one of the many treasure-filled Spanish galleons sunk off the coast of Florida in 1791; during one dive, he finds a beautiful woman at the bottom of the sea, her feet encased in cement. A mystery ensues. It always does). Mom and the cameraman had four more kids, but that marriage was as ill fated as her first. Mom desperately wanted it to work. She had six kids to support. But after twelve years of ugliness, even Mom's kids were begging her to dump the guy, and eventually, she did.

That was when she got into selling Mary Kay. Our fleet of pink Caddies was proof of how good she was at her job. ~~She supported not just her own children but other family members off and on as well.~~ When her mother, Frances, was diagnosed with breast cancer, Mom moved Frances in with her.

Four years after her second divorce, Mom got married a third time. You can probably predict how this story ends. That marriage dissolved, too. “Now it’s three strikes, I’m out,” she told me, stroking my hair. “But I couldn’t be happier with the life I have.” That life wasn’t always easy, taking care of her own children, her mother, and then the grandchild who was foisted on her, but she lived it with such grace.

Sometimes I played in her home office as she did inventory and made phone calls, listening as she worked her sales magic. I quickly learned to mimic her sweet ultra-southern phone manner. “Hiiiiiiiiiii!” I’d trill in a high-pitched Tennessee-tinged baby voice. Mom was peaches and cream on her telephone sales calls. She would turn her accent on and off like a faucet. As part of her sales pitch, it was astonishingly effective. She always seemed to know exactly what her clients yearned for. Did a particular customer want to be younger, entice her distracted husband, feel more glamorous, take time out of a dreary day to feel treasured and pampered? Mom could zero in on her customer’s secret desires and make the act of shopping feel like therapy. “Mary Kay is like an honorary degree in psychology,” she told me modestly. Mom always understood that beauty makes people feel good. I don’t think it’s coincidence that I, too, grew up to be someone who sold the fantasy of beauty. It wasn’t until much later that I learned how beauty could be a double-edged sword.

Grandma loved pretty things as much as Mom did. She collected Asian and Egyptian art, and she relished the beauty of words. She’d studied at Columbia and Rutgers, spoke several languages, and would read to me for hours. All that said, she was a little intimidating. Before her illness, she’d been a teacher for highly gifted children with emotional and developmental issues. By the time I came along, her cancer was in remission, she had a ton of energy, and I became her next big educational project. While Mom sold Velocity moisturizers and Facial Highlighting Pens, Grandma turned her considerable focus on turning me into a well-read, well-socialized young lady.

Grandma was like Mary Poppins—from the books, not the movies. She was brisk and efficient, very stern, with the tiniest hint of twinkle. She always wore skirts and dresses; she didn’t own a pair of jeans. Her huge collection of white gloves—Mom laughed that she kept wearing them long after everyone else stopped—were a staple in my dress-up trunk. From infancy on, Grandma had me working on eye-hand coordination, diction, music appreciation, good manners, and most of all, literacy. Just like Mary Poppins’s, her lessons took. By the time I was four, I was reading on my own. At seven, I devoured *Charlotte’s Web*, poring over it again and again, making myself weep melodramatically at the loving, unconventional family Wilbur found in the barnyard. When I cast the book as a movie in my head, Grandma played Mrs. Arable. I was Wilbur. Mom was Charlotte, weaving together many lives and saving mine.

In third grade, I read *Romeo and Juliet* and *Hamlet*. (I’d heard people talking about Shakespeare being an important writer, so I thought I’d get a jump on reading him.) I finished both plays, though I wouldn’t say I fully understood them. Still, I was steely in my determination to power through. I hated to give up. Once I was done, I decided I could leave Shakespeare alone until high school, when I probably know more words like “gibber” and “bodkin.”

Even before I could read, I was full of questions. Mom tells a story about when I was maybe fifteen months old and starting to put sentences together. She and I were driving to the supermarket.

“Trees are big,” I announced from my car seat in the back. “There are green trees and trees with flowers.”

“That’s right, honey,” Mom said absently, turning the wheel.

“There are big trees and little trees.”

“There sure are,” Mom answered.

“Who makes trees?”

“God makes trees.”

“Who is God?” I asked.

Mom, gulping, explained that God was a force that set the universe in motion, creating all life on earth and allowing people to make choices. The answer didn’t satisfy me.

“That’s not who!” I said. “Who is? Who is?” My voice started to rise in pitch and urgency. “That’s not who! That’s not who!” I wailed.

Distressed and frustrated, Mom pulled over. She turned around to look at me over the back of the driver’s seat. “I don’t understand what you’re asking or what you want me to say,” she told me gently.

Through my tears, I looked into her eyes and replied, “I don’t have the words to tell you, Mom!”

Mom loves telling this story to anyone who’ll listen, as an example of how my teeny mind worked and as an illustration of how challenging it was for her to deal with my ontological dilemmas. I wish I could remember what was causing me such agita! I know only that I had huge questions about the universe from a ridiculously early age, and twenty-two years later, I’m still trying to find answers.

Another time, when I was three or four, we were driving past the cemetery on the way back from ballet. (Because of her concern about my early, stunted physical development, Mom kept me in a constant stream of muscle-building activities such as gymnastics, softball, and dance.) “Who is in the ground there?” I’d ask. “How do they get there? What is dead? How do you know they are dead? Is it like asleep? Where do the souls go? What is heaven? Are there stairs? Does each dead person have a star?” Once again, my existential anxiety was rearing its head. Mom finally stopped driving by the cemetery. She’d drive ten minutes out of her way to get back from ballet because she’d run out of metaphysical answers for me! Still, I kept on asking questions. Then and now, whether I’m struggling with epistemology or a decision to buy a pair of Ann Demeulemeester boots, I’m obsessive and single-minded.

Mom and Grandma respected my questions about the nature of being. They were churchgoers with a strong faith in God. I loved the ritual of dressing for church—and the suspense about which of Grandma’s many kooky vintage hats she would wear—as well as the pageantry, the shiny wood of the pews, the pretty hymns. We didn’t go every week, more like once a month, but I was never a kid who whined about having to go. Mom let me bring my Pogs, and I’d quietly sort and study them in the pews during the boring parts.

Once, when I was five, an unfamiliar woman approached Mom after the service. “Excuse me,” she said. “Have you ever thought about getting your daughter into modeling?” She proffered a card.

Mom, ever polite, took it. “No, thank you,” she said sweetly, turning to continue her conversation with Mrs. Canella from down the street.

“Are you sure?” the woman interrupted insistently. “We’re always looking for great child models.”

“Quite sure,” Mom said with finality and a smile. And then, in her inimitable way that brooked no further argument, she changed the subject. “I declare, I just love your hat. Wherever did you find it?”

Mom never made a big deal about my looks. Thanks to her experience doing floor modeling at the Miami International Merchandise Mart, she wasn’t seduced by some abstract notion of modeling as an inherently thrilling, self-esteem-boosting profession. Unlike some moms of kids who model, she didn’t have churned-up, unexamined desires to have her child crowned the fairest of them all. Her

sense of self wasn't tied up in my being perceived as beautiful.

I knew Mom loved me. I knew she thought I should dress nicely, comb my hair, and display good manners. But she never rhapsodized about my prettiness in front of me. I was unaware that other people thought the way I looked was anything special. I knew I was the tallest kid in kindergarten, I knew that even though my early development had been stunted, I'd caught up fast under Mom and Grandma's ministrations. My pediatrician told Mom he thought I'd grow to be six feet tall. (Alas, only he'd been right. My agency would be beyond thrilled if I were three inches taller!) I knew that sometimes the other moms cooed about my long, curly brown hair, wide-set dark eyes, and olive skin. I knew I didn't look anything like Mom, with her clear green eyes and pale skin. But those were observations, not value judgments that were central to my identity. My looks never really meant anything to me.

I was a happy kid, despite my tendency to dwell on the mysteries of the universe. I was not a wide-eyed Keane painting or a deadpan little character from a Tim Burton movie. I had a wild imagination and roving gangs of imaginary friends. I had a white-canopied fairy-tale bed, my own small TV on a white wicker stand, and plenty of input into how I wanted my bedroom decorated. At five, I chose a leopard-print comforter (my love of animal prints has stayed with me to this very day) that I adorned with a huge menagerie of stuffed animals. I was indulged but not spoiled. I loved to play dress-up. I had a trunk full of vintage slips, one of Mom's red nightgowns I kept "liberating" from her dresser, a selection of Grandma's old-fashioned hats. My favorite was a truly hideous veiled turquoise number from the 1950s. The myriad aunts, uncles, and cousins who came to visit always admired my imaginatively lunatic outfits.

But even when I was very young, my obsessive streak was evident. Exhibit A: my unending questions about the nature of existence. Exhibit B: my need to amass an inhuman number of Pogs. I also collected snow globes, Beanie Babies, bottle caps, stamps, and a menagerie of Tamagotchis that all went dark and died (I filled a drawer with their tiny electronic corpses). I went through a yo-yo phase during which I got yo-yo books from the library and practiced for hours. My yo-yo finger developed a blister, which sounds like a euphemism but isn't.

Many years later, I read that anorexia is often correlated with obsessive-compulsive disorder. (The connection between anorexia and OCD is much stronger than any connection with bulimia or binge eating.) Thanks to my own purely anecdotal experience, I believe there's a link. My collecting obsessions bordered on mania and were vital to me; I had extraordinary discipline about them for as long as my engagement lasted. Any article you read about anorexia (and believe me, I've read most of them) talks about how it's tied to issues of control and achievement. In my own experience, the fiercest drives all came together.

Some armchair psychologists might also suggest that a yearning for my birth mother or the grief of being rejected by her were what detonated my future problems with anorexia. Those people would be wrong. My problems derived from a perfect storm of factors, but none of them triggered by my childhood.

This isn't to say I wasn't troubled by my relationship with Lana. By the time I was five, I was dwelling on the mathematical problem of how this woman I barely knew could be simultaneously my mother and not my mother. Mom was my mother. Lana was the person whose body had made me. What did the word "mother" really mean, anyway? I wasn't sad, precisely, but I was confused.

Mom was hyperalert when Lana came over. Sometimes Lana was exuberant and huggy. Other times she was monosyllabic and hollow-eyed. She never stayed long. At some point—Mom and I aren't sure when—Lana came back to Miami, sought help for some of her troubles, and moved into a trailer park across town.

One day when I was five and a half, Mom sat me down in the living room and told me we were going to visit Lana.

“There’s going to be a baby there,” she told me. “Lana had a baby. You have a half sister.”

My mind reeled. I had a sister? Some of my friends had sisters. Would she live with me? Would we get a bunk bed? Could I give her a bottle? Would I have to share my toys? Would she be smelly when she pooped?

“Lana has a husband now,” Mom went on. “His name is Trip.” I studied her face for clues about what I was supposed to feel. I looked to the kitchen doorway, where Grandma leaned against the door jamb, one eyebrow raised. I sensed that she wasn’t happy. Was she mad at Lana or at Mom for telling me about Lana? I liked to please; I wanted to make the right face. Should I try to look excited or serious?

Mom buckled me into my car seat, and Mom and I pulled out of the driveway. From inside the screen door, Grandma watched us go.

We drove to the other side of Miami. The tidy flower-bed-surrounded ranches of our neighborhood gave way to hulking warehouses and crumbling housing developments. We pulled into a trailer park. Tacked-up plywood covered the windows of several rusting old trailers. Stained, cracked concrete slabs with crabgrass poking through the jagged scars marked the spots where long-gone trailers had once stood. Mom held my hand as we made our way through the LEGO-like maze of block structures. There stood Lana, holding open a door, her eyes clear and shining. A chubby, burbling ten-month-old baby was on her hip.

Mom and Lana made small talk as I sat on the floor, playing with the baby. We stacked blocks. Curious rather, I stacked them and the baby knocked them over. The baby found this hilarious, and I loved hearing her laugh. The baby’s name was Angelica. She had huge blue eyes. They were heavily lashed like my eyes and Lana’s, and she had our arching brows.

A man was there, too. That was Trip. He was very tall, with broad shoulders and salt-and-pepper hair. His face was ruddy and rugged, with a fine network of burst capillaries across his nose and cheeks. I wasn’t terribly interested in him, or in Lana, for that matter. I viewed my birth mother the way I did my piano teacher or my pediatrician—as someone you have to see because someone else decrees it. But I hoped I’d get to see the baby again.

We stayed for a half hour or so, then Mom stood up, rubbing her hands briskly. “Time to go home, honey,” she said to me. I kissed Angelica goodbye and rubbed her nose with mine. She giggled. I was proud that I was so good at making her laugh. I kissed Lana with the same sense of duty I always did, then somberly stuck out my hand to shake Trip’s. He took my little hand in his big one, amusement in his eyes.

As we drove home, my thoughts raced. “Is the baby going to live with us?” I asked Mom. “No, hon,” she replied.

That meant the baby was going to stay with Lana and Trip. Mom had chosen me, but she wasn’t going to choose this baby. If the baby was my half sister, was Lana my half mother? I wasn’t distressed, just baffled. I twisted various queries over and over in my head like a Rubik’s cube, but ultimately, I chalked everything up to the mysteries of adult behavior. It wasn’t until I got a bit older that I needed solid answers.

In 1992, when I was six, everything else took a backseat to the forces of nature. Hurricane Andrew came to Miami. As the very serious TV newsmen droned on about Dvornak numbers and circulation centers, I followed Mom around the house while she moved the porch furniture into the garage, took down the hanging plants, closed all the shutters, and checked the batteries in our emergency

preparedness kit. I helped by self-importantly wheeling my bike into the garage. Some of our neighbors fled the city for higher ground, but Grandma, ever deadpan and ever amused, thought they were being great big drama queens. The sky darkened. At eight, my bedtime, the windows were starting to rattle.

Mom crouched down to my level and told me with great enthusiasm that Grandma and I were going to have a sleepover. She moved us into the back bedroom, the guest room, because she thought it was the safest in the house. It had only one window, and there were no trees nearby that could fall on it. Grandma got the daybed. Mom piled up a bunch of blankets on the floor for me. This was a real adventure. "You can play Princess and the Pea!" she told me. She pretended to slip a pea under the bottom blanket. Thrilled, I cuddled up with my toy guinea pig, innovatively named Guinea. Grandma read me two chapters of *The Cricket in Times Square*, and I fell asleep as I always did, repeatedly rubbing one spot on Guinea's flank with my thumb.

Overnight, Hurricane Andrew blasted South Florida. It was the second most powerful hurricane of the twentieth century, a Category 5 storm with peak gusts of at least 169 miles an hour.

Though Mom had sealed off every other room in the house, she'd forgotten to cover the air conditioning unit in the guest room wall. The rest of the house was cooled by central air, but this one small outpost still had a window unit, and the driving rains poured through it. Grandma and I slept through it all. When Mom came in to check on us at around five A.M., she found me, still in my nest on the floor, curled in an inch and a half of water.

The South Coast was devastated. At least sixty-five people died—probably more, since it was impossible to account for all the migrant workers in the area. The hurricane cost around \$27 billion in damages. A quarter of the trees in the Everglades were destroyed. Fortunately, except for some serious damage to our roof, we were all fine. No one in our extended family was hurt or killed. But we were without electricity for three months, and all of our neighbors came by to get water from our pool to flush their toilets.

Years later, when I was glued to the news footage of Hurricane Katrina, I felt as if history were repeating itself. I remembered the government's slow response to Andrew as I watched all the disaster footage while sitting next to Mom on the couch. Back then Dade County's emergency management director exclaimed on national TV, "Where in the hell is the cavalry on this one? They keep saying we're going to get supplies. For God's sake, where are they?" President George Herbert Walker Bush did send in relief after that. But a decade later, Katrina was even more devastating than Andrew, and the younger President Bush's response made his father's reactions look timely and generous.

As Miami (as well as the the rest of Florida and Louisiana) picked itself up, dusted itself off, and started to rebuild, I went back to work, too. I was in first grade at the local public school, which I loved. Until third grade, school was a cinch for me. I loved the feeling of a perfectly sharpened pencil and the sight of a clean notebook page. I loved our class trips to the school library. I felt warm toward all books, as if they were friends. I didn't make much distinction between Corduroy, my stuffed bear, and *Corduroy*, the book: They were equally real, warm-blooded, and loving to me.

I loved school supplies. This was nearly my downfall. A few months after the hurricane, Mom happened to take me to Get Smart, an educational supply store that sold accessories for teachers. The moment we walked in the door, I saw the clouds part and heard the angels sing. I was surrounded by enticing "Good job!" stickers, colored chinks, rubber stamps, hole punchers, plastic pots of glitter. It was straight-A-student paradise. I was hypnotized. I couldn't restrain myself. When Mom's back was turned, I grabbed two big handfuls of erasers with smiley faces and stuffed them into my pocket. Unfortunately, I forgot to take them out that night. When Mom decided to do laundry, she came into my room, picked up the hamper, took it to the washing machine, and promptly found a hundred or so

erasers in my pants. The next day she took me back to the store and made me give back the erasers and apologize to the owner. I was mortified. That was my last brush with theft.

However, it made Grandma take notice. From her experience in teaching very bright kids with learning differences, Grandma had figured out that I had attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder. I didn't fit the stereotype of kids with attention issues—I was never disruptive, loud, or fidgety. But Grandma felt that those erasers could be an indication of a problem with impulse control that had the potential to get worse. And she worried about my distractibility. She knew I could be a laser beam when I wanted to be. She also knew that my brain was perpetually whirring and my attention could dart about like a hummingbird.

I'd get so distracted by a butterfly passing the classroom window that I'd stop hearing the teacher's voice. I perpetually had a million ideas going at once. If a teacher didn't engage me completely, I'd forget it. She might as well have been one of the adults droning in a *Peanuts* cartoon. And when I was bored or distracted, I was a dithering mess. I was always exhausted at the end of the day; the sheer effort of staying on task or, conversely, letting go of a task I was obsessed with required Herculean strength from me.

So in the spring of 1993, Mom and Grandma took me to a neurologist who agreed with Grandma's ADHD diagnosis. He put me on the lowest dose of Ritalin. The change was unbelievable. I could focus on my schoolwork instead of daydreaming about what would have happened in *Matilda* if one of her parents had been nice. When I was supposed to be doing math, I could keep all my attention on sums instead of simultaneously wondering who was inside the sarcophagus at the Bass Museum, how long it would have taken him or her to decompose, and what he or she might have looked like as her eyeballs were disintegrating. (I liked pondering decomposition. Maybe I did have a little bit of Tim Burton inside me.) Ritalin helped me compartmentalize and to stop the interference in my brain. It made life easier, and I think it made me less obsessive in general.

We were in a good place, Mom, Grandma, and I. When I think of that time, I think of coming home from school to delicious smells. My great-grandmother was an unbelievable cook—she made all kinds of veggies and meats, stuffings and desserts. She made artichokes with special dips; when I was a baby, I was already able to pull the leaves from an artichoke one by one and scrape off the flesh with my teeth. Mom's friends always thought it was hilarious when she served me an artichoke on a chip plate while I was still in a high chair. I was never the kid who wouldn't eat lima beans or recoiled in horror at okra—I loved everything.

My favorite after-school snack was cream cheese and marmalade on raisin bread, which seemed a sort of elegant and English to me. Grandma was supposedly descended from English nobility on one side—perhaps that was where her proper posture and diction came from. Eating marmalade and scones and cucumber sandwiches made me feel like a character in a children's book. Grandma was supposedly part Cherokee on the other side (hmm, maybe that's why I was olive-skinned when everyone else in my family was so pale), but she didn't seem to know anything about Cherokee food. I'd read in a children's book about the Trail of Tears, when the Cherokees ate raccoons and squirrels, so I decided not to ask her to explore that part of our heritage, at least not at lunchtime.

Mom was a fine cook, too, if less adventurous than Grandma. She loved to bake, and she was great at it. Her specialty was an angel food cake with royal icing. When I was small, I thought it looked like a beautiful castle. With the golden glaze dripping down the sides, it seemed like something a prince would have after her four-and-twenty-blackbird pie. I'd start salivating, Pavlov-style, the minute she took that special pan out of the cupboard. My other favorite dessert of hers was a lot less pretty, but it sure tasted fine. It was pecans, canned cherries, cake batter, and buttlloads of butter all dumped in a pan; and it went by the appetizing name of dump cake. It had to be the unhealthiest thing you could

eat, but oh my, it was a jumble of paradise in a Pyrex dish. I loved to help her make it. In the mornings, even on school days, Mom would make croissants with jam or blueberry muffins. I like mine split in half with a slab of butter in the middle, then put back together like a sandwich. She always made sure I had fruit in the mornings before school. She was a big “It’s the most important meal of the day!” person, a one-woman public service campaign.

My favorite errand was going to Gardner’s, one of the oldest and fanciest gourmet shops in Miami which had an amazing bakery. Mom let me pick out whatever I wanted. We’d get their perfect croissants, and she’d serve them for Sunday breakfast. She’d split one in half for me and put a pat of butter between the sides, and I’d nibble and peel off the flaky exterior until I was left with a wad of butter-saturated dough. Another favorite treat was Gardner’s key lime cake, a round, pretty delight made with fresh key lime juice, so it was moist and tart and sugary all at once. I also loved the black-and-white half-moon cookies, even though I only liked the vanilla side. Gardner’s was the only place I knew that carried them. When I first moved to New York and discovered that black-and-white cookies were sold at almost every deli on almost every corner, I knew I’d found the place I was destined to live.

Of course, when I first moved to New York, I wasn’t eating at all. That would pretty much make me Tantalus in the ancient Greek myth. You remember him—the guy they named “tantalizing” after. Punished by the gods, he was condemned to spend eternity standing in a pool of fresh water under a branch dripping with fruit. Whenever he bent down to drink, the water would recede; whenever he reached up to pluck a fruit, the branch would rise out of his grasp. To belabor a metaphor, those damn black-and-white cookies were my punishment from the gods of anorexia. Sitting in their plate-glass windows and waxed-paper nests, they taunted me with their untouchable sweetness every time I walked by on my way to a casting.

But that was later. When I was a child, food held no terrors for me, only pleasures. I loved the rituals of mealtime. We always had nice dinners on china plates; Mom thought it was uncivilized to eat standing in front of the fridge or on the run. It was all about the southern sit-down, socialized don’t-be-a-heathen meal. Occasionally, we’d go to fancy restaurants. I was always proud to step out with my glamorous mom and dignified grandma. We dressed for dinner. Grandma wore one of her dainty hats; my slender and graceful mom wore one of her many brightly colored suits; and I wore a dress with a sash or a skirt and round-collared blouse. I wasn’t the fidgety kid desperately swinging her legs under the table, blowing the paper off her straw into the head of the person in another booth, or whinily ordering plain pasta with butter or chicken nuggets in an elegant *boite*. I knew how to behave, and I ate what Grandma and Mom ate. I tried to keep my culinary adventurousness under wraps at school, though. No one else ate marmalade or artichokes. For lunch, I had Mom make me peanut butter and jelly every day. Peanut butter was awesome, don’t get me wrong, but I was also becoming increasingly aware of how mean kids could be. I didn’t want to give anyone any fuel for teasing me, especially since I didn’t have a conventional family like other kids.

When I was seven, everything changed. Grandma died.

There was no warning. There was no slow decline. On April 1, 1993, she said, “I have a stomachache.” She never complained, so the fact that she mentioned feeling ill was uncharacteristic. It must have hurt a lot. Concerned, Mom asked her, “Do you want to go to the doctor?” In her perpetually amused, clipped tone, Grandma brushed the suggestion off.

I wasn’t worried. I knew Grandma had been sick before I was born, but her breast cancer had been in remission for as long as I’d known her. And my attention was elsewhere. Mom had told me the morning that we were going to stay in a hotel for a few days while the house was being tented for termites. I loved hotels. I was thinking about Eloise at the Plaza and about room service. Mom drove

me to school and dropped Grandma at the hotel.

My uncle Donnie, Mom's brother, picked me up at school that afternoon. I loved him but was surprised to see him—Mom or Grandma always picked me up. Was there a problem with the term people? "Grandma's in the hospital," Uncle Donnie told me gently. Mom was with her.

Uncle Donnie and I played Go Fish and Old Maid and War in the hotel room. It was April Fool's Day. I'd thought of a prank to play on Mom—I'd gotten my art teacher to give me some white crepe paper, and I was going to wrap up my arm and tell Mom I'd broken it at recess.

Uncle Donnie and I ate dinner together in front of the hotel room's TV. Somehow room service wasn't as much fun as I'd hoped, even though my ice-cream sundae had come with an assortment of little glass bowls of candy and sauces to dump on top.

Mom came at bedtime to tuck me in. She had shadows of exhaustion and fear under her eyes. She kissed me, straightened the covers around me, and brushed aside my questions about Grandma. "She's very sick," Mom said. "The cancer has moved into her bones and her liver."

"Will she get better?" I asked.

"We can pray, honey," Mom answered. She went back to the hospital.

The next afternoon after school, Mom walked into the hotel room. Donnie and I were playing cards on the bed. I took one look at her face and I knew.

"She never woke up," Mom said. "I never got to say goodbye."

I cried, but Mom didn't. I never, ever saw her cry. Perhaps after everything she'd experienced in her marriages, and after everything Lana had done, she didn't have tears left.

A few nights after Grandma died, she appeared in my room. It was late at night; moonlight danced across my bed. She was sitting in lotus position, which was pretty astonishing, since she'd been old and stiff and rotund in life, not exactly a nimble yogini. She was glowing as if backlit, and she gave me a smile. I knew she was telling me she was all right and that Mom and I would be, too.

Perhaps Grandma's death was what lit a tiny spark of longing in me. I wanted more family. I wanted to see Baby Angelica again. Only a couple of weeks after Grandma's death, Mom told me that Lana had given birth to another girl. "Can we see her?" I asked. "Now's not a good time, sweetie," Mom answered. Shortly after that, Lana and her new family moved to Mississippi. I wondered what the new baby looked like and if I'd ever get to meet her.

I often thought about Angelica's life with her new sister. Was it hard to be a big sister? Did Angelica and her baby share a room? Did the whole family still live in that same trailer but in another state? Did they pull the trailer from Florida to Mississippi, and if so, did Angelica ride in the car or in the trailer? Did she remember me at all? And now the hint of a new question: Did Lana ever wish she had three daughters instead of two?

Mom kept me too busy to dwell on such questions. Grandma was gone, but Mom was determined to follow her educational and physical development program for me. I had to keep taking piano, and Mom continued to search out athletic pursuits that might engage me. She never forgot that I'd lagged behind my peers in muscular development as a baby, and she wanted to make sure my coordination continued to improve.

So when I was in third grade, she enrolled me in a martial arts class. I was immediately smitten. By age eleven, I was a brown belt in Chinese Kenpo. I danced with a fan, spun with the bo staff, swung the three-section staff. While other girls dreamed of majorette batons, I was whirling nunchakus—two sticks connected at the ends by a chain—in perfect arcs. I imagined myself a ninja, doing upside-down flips off walls and engaging in covert assassination-type activities. (I wasn't exactly sure who I would

assassinate, but I was ready for the assignment.) The sensei's studio felt like home to me. Sensei could be a little scary; when the boys didn't listen, he'd shoot at them with a loaded BB gun. But he didn't shoot at girls.

The nunchakus were my favorite weapon. In fourth or fifth grade, I was ranked first in Florida nunchakus in my age group—I won a six-foot trophy that towered over me. I studied other weapons, too: metal whip, fan, double fan, bo staff, sword, throwing stars. (Geeky boys always get excited when I tell them I studied the throwing stars. I think it taps in to some primal anime or *Star Trek* kid longing.)

Mom came to every exhibition and match. As I practiced at home, she gave me the blessing of her full attention, letting me jabber on about why the *sansetsukon* was made of maple instead of teak and why I was frustrated by my inability to execute a loud crisp *crack* when I snapped my fan during wushu dance. “Well, that is just fascinating!” she'd say. I sincerely doubt any of it was even mildly fascinating, but she made me feel, as she always did, that my passions were worthwhile. “I cannot believe you remember all those steps!” she'd exclaim, shaking her head. “You are just so graceful!”

I would beam and work harder.

Martial arts held my interest in a way nothing else had. I enjoyed both the discipline and the performance. I loved feeling all eyes on me during my katas—dances with martial arts. I knew I was good. I loved the feeling of control and mastery over my body. The adrenaline I felt was a bit like what I would experience years later during runway shows: Both were about showing beauty and strength in motion. When I was ten, my desire for control wasn't yet the monster it would become when I was sixteen and anorexic.

Kenpo was what I needed. It was a release from grief after Grandma's death. It was a locus for my tendency to obsess. I discovered just how competitive I could be. I loved the sweat, the movement, the combination of strength and grace. I felt completely in touch with my body, confident in what it could accomplish. Years later, in the depths of my sickness, I found it hard to believe I ever could have trusted and loved my body that way.

Lana, who hadn't come to Grandma's funeral, began to visit now and then from Mississippi looking healthy and happy. I played with Angelica and her new sister, Brianna. We never had any warning about when they'd show up, and they never stayed as long as I wanted. I started to imagine myself as a stepsister in a folktale. Lana wasn't the wicked stepmother, but she was the master who had all the control. I couldn't ask her to come, and I couldn't make her stay. I didn't want her to talk to me with her when she and her daughters left, but I felt a stone in the pit of my stomach when I watched the car drive away.

One day when I was nine or so, Mom and I were driving home from school when she suggested casually that I might want to talk to a clinical psychologist. “That's a person who is an expert on feelings,” she said. “Grandma always thought that one day you'd have some sad or angry emotions that you'd want to discuss with someone outside the family.”

I don't remember much about the first appointment. I recall feeling that Debra, the lady in the leather chair, was trying to pull sentences out of me. She was fishing. I had to clamp my mouth shut to keep the quicksilver words from escaping. I wrapped my arms around my knees and stared at the coffee table, at the soothingly patterned box of Kleenex I didn't need. “Sometimes it takes a while for the emotions to come out,” Debra murmured afterward to Mom as I waited impatiently by the door.

After the second session, I decided it was okay to tell Debra that I was a little confused about what my family was. She taught me the word “biological.” We talked about how it was okay to feel seemingly contradictory feelings—love and loss, attraction and anger—at the same time. Suddenly

something clicked. I sailed out of the office into the waiting room, where Mom was sitting with a magazine. I planted myself in front of her, put my fists on my hips, and announced, “I’ve got this figured out! Lana is my biological mom, and *you* are my real mom, and that’s the way it is. I’m finished. I’m all done.” I was delighted with this solution. If Lana was not in fact my real mother, I had nothing to be tormented about. If Angelica and Brianna were Lana’s daughters, they were not my real relatives. They were just people we saw every few months. They were nothing to be confused about. QED.

Since I was very good at talking myself into things—five years later, I effortlessly talked myself into starving—I was satisfied with my solution. I had a gift for compartmentalizing. I shoved my confusion about Lana and her family to the dark shadowy corners of my consciousness for several months.

Mom continued to make sure I knew I was loved. Every Friday night, we rented a movie from Blockbuster and watched it while we ate microwave popcorn. It was our ritual. I’d put my head on Mom’s lap, and when the movie ended, she’d run her nails along my back, up and down, up and down until I fell asleep. Mom was never a big fan of TV, but on Saturday mornings, she let me watch *Sailor Moon*, my favorite cartoon. The protagonist is an ordinary schoolgirl who discovers she has hidden powers.

When I grew up, I decided, I’d become an astronomer, as familiar with space and the planets as Sailor Moon was. I papered the walls of my room with posters of the solar system, stars, and asteroids. I drew pictures of the planets and imagined discovering a new one. Then again, maybe I’d go to Yale and become a lawyer. (I’d seen a movie in which someone smart went to Yale. I looked up America’s best law schools on the Internet, and Yale’s name kept coming up). I’d fight injustice like Sailor Moon, but with a briefcase instead of a talking cat and thigh-high red boots. Maybe I’d be an astronomer *and* a lawyer.

Thoughts about the family I didn’t really know kept intruding on my fantasies. I thought about defending Lana in a court of law, or wearing a stylized sailor suit and tossing my blond superhero locks as I rescued Angelica and Brianna from a burning house.

The psychologist told Mom that I was idealizing Lana and my siblings because of their absence. Well, duh. I remember sitting in Debra’s office wailing, “I want to live with both Mom *and* Lana!” Of course, that was impossible.

In distress, I started to act out more. I’d promise to take out the trash, then fail to do it. I hung out with kids in my class who were less than stellar students, who laughed too loudly and didn’t do their homework. Mom didn’t yell at me. She always treated me like a rational person, asking me to talk about my feelings. Maybe because she’d already raised six kids, she was unshockable.

My teachers were not as patient. By fourth grade, I was openly rolling my eyes at any authority figure I thought was stupid. I started to talk back in class. I still got A’s, but I was developing a swagger my mom didn’t like. So when I was in fifth grade, she took me out of public school and put me into an evangelical Christian academy. That was a mistake.

I immediately disliked the school’s emphasis on the many ways one could go to hell. I didn’t like hearing about the vast numbers of sinners who were destined to go Down There for being, well, not like the teachers at the school. A partial list of the doomed included Jews, Muslims, atheists, people who read the book that was sweeping the country about a Satanist named Harry Potter, Hindus, people who listened to Marilyn Manson, people who wore short shorts, people who watched the Disney movie *The Sorcerer’s Apprentice*, people who had premarital sex, people who committed adultery, and trick-or-treaters. All were headed for the screaming agony in the fiery flames. Mom had taught me to be

respectful to everyone, but at the evangelical Christian school, respect was reserved for true believers.

The question about God I'd had as a tiny child still concerned me. I hoped the school could help me clarify my beliefs. I wondered about God's intercession in human history. Did I believe in a person God, a God who was an anthropomorphic white-bearded guy on a big throne, or a God who was simply a force or influence on human behavior? I didn't know, but my teachers were confident they had the answers. If someone suffered, it was because he or she was bad. "But what if he or she isn't bad?" I asked. Well then, God had a plan we couldn't understand.

The messages I got from my teachers didn't enhance my vision of a loving, forgiving God. Mom and Grandma had faith, but they also had tolerance. At my school, these two attributes seemed mutually contradictory. My sixth-grade teacher in particular seemed to enjoy delivering spittle-flecked fire-and-brimstone tirades. Once she went around the classroom asking each kid, "What is your personal hell?" She put her hands on our desks, leaned forward, and looked expectantly into our faces. The boys reveled in devising hideous tortures for the sinners—limbs being slowly pulled off by horses and chains, bodies being burned alive, people being made to eat grenades. That night I couldn't sleep. My brain burned with all the horrors I'd just heard described in loving, luscious, lurid David Cronenbergian detail. Was *I* going to hell for wishing my classmates would be more understanding toward other people's beliefs?

The rules of the school grated on me more and more. Though Miami could get awfully hot, we weren't allowed to wear shorts that came up higher than our fingertips when our arms were by our sides. (Some teachers were more vigilant than others. The cool girls rolled their shorts up and down all day depending on the teacher.) We weren't allowed to wear any makeup, not even lip gloss. If you wanted to use ChapStick, you had to be careful to get the kind that didn't have the slightest tint.

I didn't want to be a shorts-rolling girl. I wanted to be judged for my mind, not my legs. But I was also interested in clothes and the messages they could convey. So I wore huge JNCOs, super-wide super-baggy jeans that were popular then. Some of them had leg openings as wide as fifty inches—I could have smuggled an entire family of Harry Potter-carrying Jewish Hindu satanists under my hems. I was always the last kid to finish the mile run in gym class, even though I was acing martial arts competitions and was in amazing physical condition from all my Kenpo practice. I suspect I was slowed down by wind drag on my giant pants. I was all air resistance and bad attitude.

I wore my JNCOs with black Vans, like a skater, though I did not skate. I favored long-sleeved black and green velvet shirts, even in 90-degree heat. I wore tons of silver rings and let my hair fall like a curtain that hid my face. Sometimes I wore eyeliner, even though I was sent to the girls' room repeatedly to wash it off. Rumors would swirl that I was a Satanist or a witch. But I wanted to express myself through fashion even then. Clothing can mark you as a member of the tribe, or it can set you apart.

On Fridays after school, I'd put on black nail polish. On Sunday nights, I'd take it off. I was rebellious, but I wasn't an idiot; I didn't want to be sent home to get nail polish remover. I filled my room with candles so I'd look deep and spiritual. But I kept my posters of planets all over my walls. I didn't want to grow up to be a bassist in a Joy Division cover band or to own a mall-based chain of occult stores selling gold-plated pentagrams. I still wanted to be an astronomer.

Mom was patient through my Goth phase. She was always great at picking her battles, deciding when to lay down the law and what to let slide. From day one, Grandma had always told Mom, "Never make a decision for Crysti." (They both called me Crysti. Mom still does; she's grandfathered in on the nickname front. To everyone else, I'm Crystal, and anyone who calls me Crysti goes to hell with the trick-or-treaters.) Grandma had maintained that I was the type of person who needed to make her own way. For that reason, Mom always gave me choices: Do you want to wear this outfit or this one?

Should we go to the playground or the pool? She tried to make me feel that I had agency and power even when I didn't. That was antithetical to the philosophy of the evangelical Christian academy. We weren't supposed to decide for ourselves. We were good or bad. We were saved or we weren't.

The academy was where I discovered eating disorders. In sixth grade, I made a friend named Cara who was obsessed with her weight. She ate only SnackWell's cookies. I'd never heard of "fat-free cookies" before. At my house, we ate real cake, not these artificial-tasting, cloyingly sweet, crumbly lumps. When you ate my mom's angel food cake or Gardner's key lime cake, you knew you'd had *dessert*. But when you ate one of these cookies, you were hungry again the moment you'd wiped the crumbs from your lips. Cara alternated between the vanilla cream sandwich cookies and the chocolate mint cookie cakes. They were all she ate during the school day and whenever I went to her house after school.

Cara's house was huge. Her parents were professionals in high-powered careers, and she felt a ton of pressure to live up to their expectations. She felt that she could never please them. If she got an A they asked her why she hadn't gotten an A. But there was one thing she was great at: puking. She had a gift. She and I saw a TV show in which a flight attendant made herself throw up so she could stay there long enough to fly, and Cara got the hang of it immediately.

By sixth grade, most of the girls had learned to talk loudly about how fat and disgusting they were. It was just what you did. It was how you bonded. Many years later, I read a book by an anthropologist named Mimi Nichter called *Fat Talk: What Girls and Their Parents Say About Dieting* (Harvard University Press, 2001). In it, Nichter coins the term "fat talk"—the conversation in which one girl says, "I'm so fat!" and another girl rushes to say, "No! You're so skinny! *I'm so fat!*" It's almost a ritual. Nichter says it serves a social purpose. When we engage in fat talk, we're actually soothing each other. We complain about weight as a way to build solidarity with other girls, to ask for reassurance without looking desperate, and to get compliments without having to beg. It's a game like Tag or Duck, Duck, Goose—everyone knows the rules, but none of us remembers learning them.

I refused to engage in fat talk. Whenever a classmate wailed, "Oh, I shouldn't be eating this!" while spooning ice cream into her mouth or plunging her fork into a slice of birthday cake, I'd say brusquely, "Then don't." I didn't understand why these girls were wailing. What was the point in bemoaning what they were doing, but doing it anyway?

Two years later, I'd make their eating behaviors look healthy. But I didn't know that then.

I escaped from the strictures of school into music. I listened to the Smashing Pumpkins, Nirvana, and Bush. I listened to GWAR, a hard-core-thrash-punk sci-fi band, even though I didn't like the sound. It just seemed rebellious and raunchy but in a totally safe way. I felt supercool, pretending to like a band whose albums included *Phallus in Wonderland* and whose lead singer was arrested for performing in the South while wearing a "Cuttlefish of Cthulhu" prosthetic penis.

Mom wouldn't let me bring home records with parental advisory stickers; I had to borrow them from my pothead neighbor in secrecy. Scandal! A kid in my class heard from his friend that I'd listened to a Marilyn Manson record, and he informed me that he was sorry I was going to hell. After a long pause, he asked if he could borrow the album.

Once he'd listened to Marilyn Manson, he learned that he *liked* Marilyn Manson. So did a lot of my classmates. The CD made the rounds of fifth and sixth grade; everyone wanted to listen to my neighbor's copy because they sure as heck weren't allowed to buy it themselves.

Then some moron got caught passing it to his friend in the cafeteria. Both boys immediately ratted me out. I was plucked from another table at the caf, marched to the office, and accused of foisting ungodly music on the innocent ears of my classmates.

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