

DYING BY INCHES

Anorexia nervosa doesn't necessarily begin with childhood trauma. It isn't necessarily sparked off by someone saying 'you're fat'. It doesn't necessarily involve surviving on a slice of apple and a cup of black coffee a day, nor need it lead to heart failure or time on a hospital ward being drip-fed.

My anorexia was much less dramatic than that, and became its own inevitable cause: beyond a certain point, malnutrition itself created the mental rigidity that perpetuated the eating disorder. It started like ordinary teenage dieting, and even at my skeletally lowest weight I never ate less than 1600 calories a day. But it consumed me and my whole life for more than a decade: it made me wraith-like, solitary, and scary; it gave me depression and obsessive-compulsive disorder. Here I want to tell the story of anorexia as a quiet but dreadful illness of starvation that replaces character with ritual, and life with survival. I also want to make it clear that such a story can have a happy ending: despite what many people say, it is possible to recover fully from anorexia, and, in the past two and a half years of my life, I have done so.

When asked where it all began, I usually fall back on the memory of a family ski holiday in France, aged 16; I got quite drunk on the last evening, and couldn't join the others for a last morning's skiing, instead sitting in the car with my hangover, and suffering all the way down the hairpins into the valley when it was time to leave. That evening my queasiness remained, and I couldn't eat anything except a few salty crisps. I still remember the exact place where I was sitting cross-legged on the living-room floor of the house where we were staying the night, when I realised that – contrary to all my previous experience – it felt good to feel hungry. I felt lightened in body and mind, exhilarated because of, not in spite of, my hunger-induced weakness, and entirely indifferent to food. My diaries before then are scattered with remarks about thinking myself too fat and therefore unattractive to boys – but this was, I think, the first moment at which the possibility of eating less became something that appealed in itself, rather than as a means to the end of getting slimmer.

This isn't to say that I had no interest in being thin or losing weight whilst I was ill. In some ways this was the primary obsession: by the latter years, I was weighing myself every morning, fearing an 'inexorable rise' and longing for a 'magic drop', checking my tummy in the mirror dozens of times a day, inspecting upper arms, spine, sternum, ribs, and hip bones every time I undressed. It always made me feel good when the numbers on the scale were lower than ever before, and when the bones and hollows of my body were more clearly visible. Long before I became ill, I was writing in my diary about 'the flat tummy I've always wanted', and that was also the centre of my compulsive checking and mental measuring habits: I'd turn this way and that in front of the mirror, pressing my tummy in, breathing in, wishing it could always be as flat, or as concave, as it was when I breathed in – wishing nothing I'd ever eaten could be seen there, so that it could look perfect in the present.

At the same time, though, there was no practical point to those infinite 'checks': what numbers or what body shape I saw never caused me to alter anything of what I ate or when or how much, or how I exercised, because my rules about those things were, by about six years in, not debatable. Eating less was almost as inconceivable as eating more: the only possibility was perfect predictability. The point, then, was not to lose weight; it was to live life with the illusion of perfect control. This illusion could survive only if control was of a negative kind, of not allowing myself to eat more – but the amount I ate changed through the years (as did the type and the timing of food), even though at any given time the current routine felt like the single possible type and time and tiny line between too little and too

much. The equally urgent point of it all – the deferral, the restriction, the minute weighing of every gram – was to be able to get through the day without misery overcoming me – and that was possible, I believed, only because I had the guiltless ecstasy of perfectly orchestrated food to look forward to at the end of it.

Paradoxically, then, the ultimate goal of the anorexia, in the later years, was to allow food to be the ultimate pleasure. I couldn't believe that any other pleasure people told me their lives contained could be comparable to the agonised anticipation, throughout the long hours of hunger and cold and tiredness, and finally the half-delirious consummation of the act that was eating my nightly 450 calories' worth of cheap milk chocolate (nearly a whole 100 g bar). That act made my muscles relax and my mind soften with the sheer delight of feeling the squares of dissolving, creamy sweetness in my mouth, with the sensual bliss of chewing them rapidly, in bed with eyes closed, the entire day having been a prelude to this moment, and nothing more to do now but turn off the light and sink down into the covers, warmed by the electric blanket I needed even in the summer, and fall asleep in the brief calm of the sugar high. My aunt told me I should want to go to parties, go skiing, have boyfriends, have sex – but I found most people dull, I feared the cold more than anything, I needed privacy and predictability more than anything, and I felt no physical desire for anything but food. No one else understood how complete the delight of guilt-free eating was for me; no one else who wasn't starving could possibly understand. I felt I'd found the key to the most sublime happiness possible on earth – and yet the tiniest thing could make me cry, and laughing was far too much effort.

All the arguments for change that were put to me by my family, by my few remaining friends, and, in my bleaker moments, by myself were completely impotent because of my certainty of two things: firstly, that without this all-defining entity that was the anorexia, I would no longer know who I was, or have any identity at all; secondly, that life would be even more unbearable if I relinquished this way of giving every day structure, and purpose, and certainty.

As to my identity: to me, 'Emily' became nothing more or less than anorexic Emily. My blank or distraught or irritable or fragile moods, my need for routine and privacy, my slight figure, my lack of friends and my worship of academic achievement, all seemed like innate parts of me, and there seemed no reason to believe that eating breakfast or lunch would make a difference to any of them. The extent to which 'I' was the product of years of malnutrition and the rigid, ritualised mental life and physical limitations that malnutrition itself created was not something I was capable of comprehending, since to do so I would have had to imagine my life as otherwise than it was – and I had neither the ability nor the desire to do that. It was a perfect vicious circle: the anorexia had become so completely what I was that I couldn't see how completely it had taken over 'Emily', nor could I therefore have any motivation to try to find her again.

In a much more pragmatic sense, anorexia gave structure to my day and to my life. The majority of my anorexic years were spent at the University of Oxford, first as an undergraduate, then as a Masters student, and finally as a doctoral student. I lived on a traditional English narrowboat in the marina in Oxford, with a friend for a year, and then with my brother, Joly, for a year (while he too studied at the university), and after that alone. The marina was pretty and quiet, and the boat a perfect size for one person – and living there in the latter years meant that there were no intrusions on a life that was as completely controlled as a life ever can be, once one has ceded all control to an illness that allows one to pretend that this is not the case. There was no longer the guilt and resentment of sitting wraithlike in my armchair wrapped in rugs while my brother lived a real life – a life in which he would have liked to invite people back to his home, but couldn't expose them to my cold stares and superior-seeming, life-draining presence. Once he'd graduated and moved out, I got up when I wanted, went out on my bicycle straight after getting up, shopped for myself, 'cooked' (i.e. boiled vegetables) for myself, counted the hours of solitary academic work which were how I earned the right to eat, made

my daily series of drinks at their proper (always a little later) times, kept the place cold so as to burn more calories keeping myself warm, and kept it dim (for I lived mostly at night) so as to save money and make it feel more romantic, or give the world softer edges. How odd it feels to look back on all that, and to wonder how I survived even a day like that, let alone so much of my 20s, whereas at the time I didn't believe I could survive if I did things any differently.

I simply couldn't imagine not riding my bike for an hour first thing, on one of two routes, one for weekdays, one for weekends; I couldn't imagine not going to a supermarket nearly every day for more lettuce or cabbage or apples, or cheap bread or chocolate, or low-fat margarine, or low-cal chocolate drink powder, or three different sorts of milk according to which meal it was for, or two unvarying types of cereal, or the particular brand of 'yoghurt break bar' that marked the daily transition from just drinking to starting to eat.

I couldn't imagine not returning to a cold and silent boat to prepare my food – not to be eaten till many hours later – whilst listening to a favourite radio programme, or not then sitting down with my laptop on my rug-covered knees, to begin to read and type with hands encased in fingerless gloves, the first of two cups of tea (with milk) beside me to help the words and the thoughts flow.

I couldn't imagine not following those two teas (both made with the same teabag) with a cup of hot fruit squash (the amount carefully gauged by eye), or the squash with a cup of milky coffee, always aware of how long a two-pint bottle of semi-skimmed milk should last, and trying to reduce the quantities I used against an imagined norm so that there would be more left to add, indulgently, to the mixture of skimmed milk and water with which I ate my muesli, one day in three.

I couldn't imagine not deferring the preparation of each of these drinks, because the longer I went without, the later it became, the stronger and more implacable I had been, and the more quickly I might then legitimately consume all the food that was to come, with a pleasure tinged with well-earned urgency.

I couldn't imagine not resolving, every day, to get to bed earlier and failing, every day, to do so, because failing was also a sort of success in that my will-power was proven – even as it was disproven.

I couldn't imagine not making the cup of Highlights (artificially sweetened chocolate drink) to have with the yoghurt-coated GoAhead bar, and finding something that needed to be done whilst the drink cooled to a drinkable temperature, and always taking a little too long with whatever it was I was doing, so I ran the risk of letting it cool too much, and it being ruined because it could then be drunk too quickly, imparting no warmth.

I couldn't imagine not longing for the moment at which I'd open the cereal-bar packet (having weighed all six in the box to make sure that throughout the week I ate the lightest first and had the heaviest left till last), turn the two pieces of yoghurt-covered biscuit over so the biscuit was showing, find a magazine article of a perfect length to finish just before I finished eating, and eat whilst reading, using the trashiness of a short hotel or restaurant review or a recipe or a fashion article as a completely neutral foil to the sensation of, at long last, eating.

I couldn't imagine not then crouching by my bed, 'pre-reading' the hoarded magazines and newspaper supplements which I would skim for matter light or food-related enough to be suitable to accompany my nightly feast – crouching in order to induce a bowel movement, in order that I might go out to the toilet block and empty myself as much as possible, so that I should be as desirous and worthy a recipient as possible of the food that was now imminent.

I couldn't imagine not wearing myself out with pointless compulsions. On the way to and from the loo I would, in the last year or so of my illness, get caught up in nonsensical obsessive-compulsive habits that I found it impossible to refuse: I had to memorise all the writing on the hand-dryer and the toilet-roll dispenser before leaving, then I had to memorise all the number-plates of the cars parked along the track to the boat, and pause or return (this all in the middle of the night) if I couldn't recite each one back to myself; then I'd often start to worry whether the plants round the boat had been watered recently, and whether they needed slug pellets putting down, and then had to check that my bike was locked securely – all things I never gave a moment's thought until this time of night, just before it was time, at last, to eat.

I couldn't imagine not returning and finally allowing myself to turn on the electric heater, because although I found the cold relatively easy to bear before it was time to eat, I would somehow grow unbearably cold as soon as I began – I don't know how much because my body then needed its little available energy for digestion, and how much because I couldn't bear the loveliness of eating to be marred in any way by the cold that had plagued me since I'd woken.

I couldn't imagine not being reduced rapidly to cursing rage or tears if anything at all should interrupt this sequence of events, this ascending arc to brief happiness. I couldn't imagine life being bearable without such an internal structure: without each day rising to a peak, but instead just dull flatness with a little bump now and then where meals were. I couldn't imagine that anything but food might constitute a feature in one's mental landscape.

As for the food and the eating itself – it was, like so much in the existence that anorexia creates, a thing of paradoxes. Its perfection mattered more than anything else in life, but I threatened that perfection myself by the compulsion I felt to delay it, suffusing it ever more with guilt and with the sadness of knowing myself incompatible with the rest of the world. I threatened it, too, with my compulsion to record it. For many years I wrote my diary once a day, at varying times, but towards the end I started to find it necessary to write down every aspect of the build-up to eating, and the act of doing so, pausing between bites to take up my pen and scrawl something predictable and nearly illegible. I don't know whether this was because the pleasure of eating grew greater the thinner and more chronically malnourished I became, or because this was just one of the obsessive-compulsive behaviours that took an ever stronger hold over me in the very last months of my illness, as my body and brain shrivelled into the repetitive litanies of thought and action – or whether this was my way of pretending to myself that there was any real pleasure there at all, rather than just a total emptiness that had to be clothed by words in some grander garb. Perhaps all of these.

The things eaten were a paradoxical mixture too. On the one hand they were the ultimate diet foods, the tired clichés of 'moderate' anorexia: lettuce and boiled vegetables, the lowest-calorie margarine to be found, skimmed milk and soya milk, low-fat yogurt, All Bran (fewer calories per 100 g than any other breakfast cereal, as far as I knew, and I'd scoured many supermarket shelves checking). These foods made it possible to enjoy a great deal of eating – the sheer act of filling one's mouth with food, chewing, swallowing, feeling one's stomach fill – without sacrificing too many calories. On the other hand, some of the things I ate were the antithesis of diet foods: a substantial amount of bread (150 g), cheap and filling muesli (100 g), a selection of sickly sweet things making up 850 calories on the night when I didn't eat cereal – a token half an apple preceding instant custard or Angel Delight (a mousse-like sweet dessert, in chocolate, strawberry, butterscotch and other flavours), cakes and biscuits and chocolate – and of course the 450 calories' worth of chocolate on the two cereal nights. These foods were what it was really worth stopping fasting for, because the rapture they imparted was unlike anything else on earth.

How did the 16-year-old who weighed 61 kg (135 pounds) and skipped breakfast turn into the 26-year-old who weighed 38 kg (83 pounds) and whose nocturnal life was nothing but longing for food? The transformation was a gradual, insidious one. I was a happy teenager, working too hard perhaps, but with enough friends and more than enough energy to go out drinking and dancing with at weekends. No one noticed that I started to go to school without eating breakfast, and my family didn't think it anything much out of the ordinary when I refused to go to the canteen at lunchtime, and instead took little bags of dried fruit and nuts to eat secretly in the library. For some time I at least ate dinner with the family in the evening, and they assumed that must be enough to keep me going, and things couldn't be too bad. But when I went travelling in Europe on my own, the summer after my first public exams, aged 16, there was nothing to keep me from eating as little as I liked, ostensibly to save money, and increasingly because I couldn't help it. Restricting what I ate had become an end in itself, and ignoring hunger had become the norm, although I saw how it separated me from the people I met: in my diary I wrote that 'Everyone else is eating dinner – I'm a bit hungry but I shouldn't be – maybe I'll buy some more bread and fruit at the station' (13.07.98). When I returned I'd lost a lot of weight (11 kilos, or 24 pounds, in six months), and my mother, Sue, realised something might be really wrong, as did I: 'I've been looking at myself in the mirror and I've just realised, my body's disgusting. I'm too fucking bony. It's horrible' (13.09.98). Nothing about food was calm or easy anymore: when eating with the family, I'd constantly compare how much everyone ate, and ensure I ate more slowly than everyone else, and I'd avoid eating with others at all, whenever I could. I vacillated all the time between hunger and nausea, between revulsion at my thinness and addiction to it and my hunger, between not caring about the way it was all going and acknowledging the danger. I felt crippled by the confusion of trying to reverse, or at least stop, the process of losing weight which the past six months had been consumed by, but still not quite daring to want to gain weight:

Oh I'm so confused. I don't know whether I want to put on weight or not. I know I don't want to lose any more, that's all I know. Which is a bit ironic because that's what I've been trying so hard for the last six months to do – all my will power's been concentrated on not eating, on refusing desserts and beer, on finding bread and fruit instead of anything else. And now there are no rules that I have to stick to – my self-imposed restrictions are pointless now. So today I've again eaten more (Gayle [my friend] even bought me crisps today – I think she was amazed I allowed her to) and again I feel sick, my stomach feels bloated (if it's shrunk, I don't want to make it bigger); but I look in the mirror, I tell myself I ought to keep on eating. It's just I feel so much better if I don't... Is this anorexia? I'm beginning to wonder. (22.09.98)

My periods, which had only recently started, stopped; I had a stern talking-to from a pastoral tutor at school; I struggled to eat with the family, and my father, Tom, started to bring special meals to my bedroom – peeled apple with sugar, chocolate, boiled eggs. I veered between gratitude and anger, between being a contrite and loving invalid and an angry victim; the crying, the shaking, the wanting to throw up made me hate him for bringing me the food and aware of how wrong everything had gone. I binged, for the one and only time, on chocolate. It never happened again: I despised the weakness of bulimics, who admitted by eating that they couldn't resist their appetites, and fooled themselves that they purified themselves afterwards by getting rid of it. Mine was the infinitely superior power: not to succumb in the first place.

My mother read up on anorexia; I felt my life drifting away from me, and the frightening attraction of quietly wasting away into oblivion. She asked me several times throughout my illness whether I wanted to die, and I always said no. In my diary I mentioned now and then the desire to die, but it was usually only a brief emotional response to the nausea that food induced: 'Tom keeps forcing me to eat Milky Ways and he's about to bring me sausages. I can't bear it, I want to die. I don't want to think, talk, have any contact with, food, ever again. That's why I'm killing myself, I suppose' (17.01.99). When other people told me that they were scared I would die, it always moved me to

improve things, however briefly and minimally. It was hardly bearable when, years later, Adam, my mother's partner, a grown man and not even related to me, emailed me in Germany to say: 'thank you for your lovely email. I cried as I wrote the last one, for I am exceedingly fond of you and hate the thought of you dying. If I can help in any way, including getting on a plane, please let me know. Let's face it, if one of us is going to die, it should be me, since I have done everything useful that I am going to do, whereas you are just stepping off into what should be a fabulous life. May it be so!' (01.03.03). The guilt and sadness of having made kind and loving people feel like that is still hard to bear.

Over the years, the long weariness of starving sometimes made me feel I couldn't be bothered with anything any more, wouldn't ever care about anything any more. But my later routines of perfect food helped ward off that deep tiredness with life, because there was at least one pleasure left, one thing to care about. I had no idea what full or hungry meant any more; I drove away my boyfriend with my physical and emotional coldness. At age 17 I started seeing a child psychiatrist, and made a recovery plan, put on weight (reaching a high-point of 50 kg, or 110 pounds, exactly), went clubbing every weekend, got together with my boyfriend again, drinking instead of eating, juggling exams and piano practice with drugs, being offered a place at Oxford, losing weight again, making determined plans to gain weight, succeeding, delighting in the success that freed me from the grotesquery of anorexia as cliché:

A lazy day – the one burst of activity was cycling to the hospital for my appointment with Dr. Shoebridge, who seemed much reassured by my weight and reports of post-dinner chocolate-eating. We had the shortest session yet – less than half an hour – and we're to meet again in two months' time. It's reassuring to me too, to go there and compare my state to how I was eighteen months ago – I feel in control now, and it's not an illusion anymore. What brought my relief home to me was the smallest thing – he opened the door to the 'weighing room' without knocking and there was another teenage girl in there on the scales, her doctor peering anxiously over her shoulder – and the utter ridiculousness of it all overwhelmed me: we all think we're so new and special and important, we stupid anorexics, but we're not, we're among millions of women equally self-centred and short-sighted, and it's not a clever thing to do. It doesn't make you special. It makes you a tormented bony creature perched on a weighing scale. (21.06.00)

So I went up to Oxford having pleased the psychiatrist with my excellent recovery. At my all-female College I felt instantly out of place, superior intellectually and in life experience. I took pride in being abstemious where everyone else excitedly stayed out and got drunk with new freedom. I was *sensible* in a way more like my pre-teen self, but very lonely. In the second year I moved from longing for my boyfriend's visits to dreading them; I didn't eat breakfast; I ate lunch only when the friend I lived with on the boat was out; I ate less and less and worked more and more, discovered the joy of muesli and chocolate for dinner, 'entirely alone. Nobody knows me. I don't know anything about myself or anyone else' (18.08.02). I went to Germany for nine months in the third year of my BA, having split up with my boyfriend for the last time, and drowned my anguish in hunger, and terrified my parents, and myself. I made, then, my most concerted ever effort to bring about a full recovery – but despite the weight I gained, I lost it again during a miserable summer in Switzerland, and by my final year at Oxford everything was set in the pattern it would retain for the next four years. The rigidity of thought and habit, the mental and behavioural patterns that my starved state made so hard to tackle, were too much for me. Late attempts at compromise, like the plan of my eating with my mother and her partner just on Sundays when at home, were abandoned when my fear of it all week, and my visible suffering throughout the day itself, made it more of a burden for them than a solace. I simply couldn't make it through the pain of a day without the comfort of knowing I had gone hungry and in the end could legitimately eat.

No step deeper into illness was noticeable except with hindsight, and each was made inevitable by the ever greater mental rigidity born of malnutrition, which made food the centre of all thoughts and behaviours. Thus everything in the final iteration of my illness had its precursors in more benign variations. The ultimately unvarying alternation of three different 'menus', for instance, was something that emerged out of a less deathly pattern: in the earlier years, one of my meals was proper pasta with a sauce of fried vegetables and crème fraîche and pine kernels, but I gradually found reasons why it would be a nuisance to have to cook – especially when I still lived with my brother, and he might interrupt. Thus cooking was gradually reduced to nothing more than boiling the cabbage or other vegetable to go with my bread and margarine – except when I was at home with my mother and her partner, when I'd cook elaborate and beautiful meals and watch them eat, delighting in all contact with food, and in the vicarious experience of eating I had from watching them eat.

The 'main course' of bread etc. was also a bastardised version of something that had started off quite lovely and ordinary: I remember how back in my school and early university days I used to buy fresh rolls and spread them with butter and cream cheese and a few lettuce leaves and a sprinkling of salt and pepper, and just eat. Then I started to weigh the bread to check I wasn't having too much, and swapped rolls for cheap loaves, and then I swapped butter for margarine. By the time I went to live in Germany, I needed the lowest-fat cream cheese and then watery fromage frais instead; and a couple more years and the 'cheese' had gone altogether, and the calories saved were then transferred to allow me to have 450 of chocolate rather than just 400. I could no longer just spread the margarine on a couple of pieces of bread, either: I had to cut four very thin bread fragments of graded sizes and leave them plain, to pile with vegetables, and have one very thick piece to eat last, which I smeared very thinly with the margarine except in one bottom corner, which I would pile high with most of the 25 grams of it (weighed with electronic scales, with spare batteries always to hand), so that my very last savoury mouthful was an indulgent excess of starchy bread and slimy fat, and a great deal of salt.

I craved salt and still more salt on everything – I knew that this was typical of anorexics, and that it was probably a symptom of all sorts of mineral deficits, but didn't feel shame or anxiety at this, or think of doing anything to deal with the underlying cause. I just felt undebatable need, and ground more and more salt on to everything – and allowed myself two raw cloves of coarsely chopped garlic on muesli nights, just to make it all taste more. The whole 'meal' makes me feel quite sick now even to think of it.

Similar implacable progressions towards the deviant and ultimately unalterable happened with all the other things I ate too: the milk with my muesli shifted from semi-skimmed to skimmed, and was then stretched out with water, and eaten with a tiny teaspoon so that it lasted as long as possible even though I ate (couldn't help eating) as fast as I could, burping in the brief intervals between mouthfuls; a reasonably sensible mixture of bread and savoury biscuits congealed into the collection of the sweetest chocolate-equivalents imaginable.

My meal times had used to be distinct and reasonably normal too: breakfast was abandoned and reintroduced several times over the course of years getting worse and trying to get better again, but lunch was for a long time a separate meal from dinner. Only when I spent nine months in Germany as part of my Modern Languages degree, and taught in a school several mornings a week, and thus had a reason for lunch to be delayed, did it start to creep back and back till it became an integral part of the day's single meal, once all the work was done and I could sink into my mindless magazines and a brief relaxation of my will power.

Naturally these complex necessities made spontaneity impossible, and any extended departure from the boat fraught with difficulties and the paraphernalia of sickness. I couldn't go on holiday without weighing my frail frame down with an enormous rucksack full of kitchen scales and special milks and

cereal bars and cereals and margarine, and lots of books to read for work – because a holiday from work was unimaginable – and hot-water bottle and warm clothes whatever the destination. There wasn't much point in relaxing holidays anyway, since I would sleep all morning and then need to go for a long walk to tire myself and burn some calories, and after all that, even on the Greek islands where we often went as a family, the sun would be too low in the sky for me to be warm enough sunbathing, and I'd be ashamed of my body anyway (even whilst also secretly proud), and then the evening of the others drinking and eating would have to be endured before I could start on my sequence of drinks – sitting out in the mosquito-filled darkness with just a candle or two – and then finally eat again, as it got light. I love sunlight so much – and always have done – that it pains me to think of how many years I spent living mostly in darkness.

Relationships of any degree of intimacy were also made impossible by all of this. I had one long-term boyfriend, a lodger with my father, for about four years starting in the first year of my anorexia, but once I left for university I became ever less able to take time off work for him to visit me, or to go out to eat with him – deferring the pleasure of his visits until a perfect time that never came, because once he was there all I could think of was the time being wasted that could have been used to work, and the food that I couldn't delight in on my own because I had to eat with him. My desire for sex diminished until I found the very idea of it made me sick, and my temper shortened till almost everything he said and did made me snap at him with impatient disdain. Nonetheless, when he officially broke up with me just before I left for my year abroad, I was devastated, and drowned myself in the emotions that welled up with photos of him and the music we'd listened to together, even whilst I starved myself more and more rigidly to stop myself being able to feel anything at all except a constant low ache. Two men, one in Germany and one back in Oxford during my Masters year, were both driven away by my secrecy, my impatience, my sexual deadness and emotional flatness, and my all-encompassing obsession with work.

My anorexia brought me closer to my mother and alienated me from my father. They had separated when I was eleven, but had become better friends over the following years – until their disagreements over how my illness should best be dealt with caused a deep rift again. My mother refused to throw me out of my teenage home, and my father believed she was colluding in my sickness, and that I needed to be sent far away from home and from Oxford (Oxford never was 'home' till I got better and finally grew up enough not to need my mother's home for holidays) in order to be forced to start and new and healthier life.

Ultimately, I don't think any such radical tactic would have made the slightest bit of difference: I would have continued to live in the only way I knew how, with all the more freedom to do so for being in Manchester or Moscow or wherever else. I would visit my father, who lived quite close by, when I was home for the vacation, but neither of us understood the other, and there was nothing we could share except tea or a little wine, and the deep sadness and perhaps residual anger that the prospect of my being like this forever brought him. As a child, when his parents were splitting up, he had used not eating (and not sleeping) as a way of stopping them arguing, but once at boarding school, where no one really cared whether he ate or not, he had learnt to eat normally again. I don't know whether he thought my anorexia was in any sense a (belated) reaction to his and my mother's separation – I'm not sure myself – but in any case, there was with me no such obvious cause: I think I longed to be left alone to do as I pleased rather than seeking to attract attention, and the effect on my parents and their relationship was only negative. I was similarly alienated from my brother, who lived a full and sociable life at university, bought himself a house and a car and started a PhD, and believed that he'd lost his sister forever. My mother's partner found things very difficult too: not just the incomprehension and anger, but also the day-to-day depressive effect of my sleeping most of the

daylight hours and sitting at the dinner table unable – or unwilling – to partake. As my mother put it in a radio interview with me:

He got exasperated, and we tried to have a rule that she had to be up by lunchtime, even though we knew she wouldn't eat lunch with us; and even that, she didn't seem able to manage. So imagine the depths of winter, in the city: we've got up at seven, or whenever, and been working, and had our lunch, and by sort of half past three, four o'clock we've done most of our day's work, we're having a cup of tea, Emily finally wakes up. It's already getting gloomy, in December or January; she goes out on her bike, she's terribly terribly thin, puts on layers of clothes, and you *know* she's still going to be freezing cold and need me to rub her hands when she comes back – and she goes out and bicycles for an hour, with no food in her; and then she's back at five o'clock or whatever it is, and her whole day is starting then, in the dark.

My mother was the one person I felt understood me and my inability to change how I was. This wasn't to say that I didn't feel her sadness, or her fear or worry, but she was the only one with whom I could discuss all the dangerous paradoxes of anorexia, all my perceptive reflections on the reality of my situation, and the impossibility of translating that lucidity into any sort of remedial action. Perhaps those analytical yet emotional conversations, and her patience and ability to understand, helped turn the anorexia into a sort of intellectual curiosity, or sheltered me from the full impact of being isolated from the whole world by it, but I don't think so. She had her moments of rage, too, and the rest of the time it was simply a slight softness in a life of hard edges – pain, hunger, fear – to be able to talk to her. I even managed to laugh with her, occasionally, at the sheer ridiculousness of it all: I took her a tiny fruit cake for birthday breakfast one year, and made myself swallow a tiny crumb of brown cake, and a white one of icing and a yellow one of marzipan, and laughed at how grotesquely silly it was, to try to keep myself from thinking of how difficult it was. Since recovering, I've realised that many of the traits my mother has been defined by all her life – valuing her academic work and intellect above all else, suffering guilt at Western wastefulness and over-privilege, not tolerating stupidity or the waste of time – were also those that defined my anorexia, and that maybe this was why we were so close when I was ill.

I had only about three friends, one from school, one from university, and one a former teacher. In their various ways they managed to put up with my weirdness. Everyone else I drifted away from, and barely even felt any regret at doing so. Less and less mattered except the academic work I did and the food I deferred for so long and then ate so feverishly. Emotionally everything was almost entirely flattened by starvation-induced depression and by the starvation-induced irrelevance to me of anything that could not give me the pleasure food did. Anorexia was its own protection from the horror of realising its full awfulness, and only some chance occurrence might now and then shock me into seeing what I was doing to myself with complete and devastated clarity.

One such moment was when I'd returned to a clothes shop to look again at a beautiful chocolate silk shoulderless evening dress which I'd noticed there before, and decided to try it on. The sight of myself there in the harsh changing-room light, my deathlike torso sticking up out of the lovely softness of the dress that I'd never be able to wear because it looked so horrific, because I'd be too cold in it, and because I never went out anyway, made me cry uncontrollably. Any accident or upset in my routine could reduce me to tears and deep despair in an instant:

The day began badly because of the weight [being higher than expected]. And it hasn't improved much. When, this afternoon, I'd just made some tea and then Joly did the same, and I was sitting there listening to him slurp, and feeling quite ill, and unable to drink my own, I began to cry. The very fact of my cup of tea – so long longed-for – being spoilt – and the knowledge of the triviality of this momentous pain – were unbearable. (21.05.04, 43kg)

And although it never happened, I knew that any physical accident or illness could easily have killed me. When my mother fell off a horse in Corfu and broke her hip, and had a dreadful time in the hospital there, being operated on incorrectly and contracting MRSA, my love for her and pain at her suffering was all the sharper for my terror that she might die before I could eat with her again, and for my knowledge that in her situation I would probably die.

This brings me to the time at which the awareness of what my life had been reduced to started to have an effect. It did so for many reasons, none of which could have sufficed alone, but which taken together made seeking some sort of escape – or at least trying something different, with however little belief that it could help – a necessity. Many of the triggers to awareness came from other people. My mother and her partner were moving out of the house we'd lived in since I was eleven, and realised that they couldn't bear the thought of me – a collection of anti-social habits, food-related secrets, and deadening moods – coming to install myself in their new home. The first I knew of this was during one of my usual Sunday-evening phone calls with my mother, in which I was talking about how I'd have to find a doctor in the new place, and whether I'd bring my bike down each vacation, and the certainty suddenly crystallised for her that 'You are welcome at our new house, but your anorexia isn't.' When she said this, it seemed to me like being rejected by my own mother, and I was devastated and furious that she could presume to draw a meaningless distinction between me and my anorexia, as though there were any way in which I could separate myself from it. In practical terms, her unplanned honesty had the effect of making me proudly pack up all my things and decamp completely to the boat in Oxford, and psychologically it contributed to a vague sense that there was no refuge for me as an anorexic, nowhere except the tiny boat where it was acceptable to live as I did. This didn't immediately make me wonder whether I could live differently – everything in me veered away from the mere hint of that.

But then two friends stepped in. Phoebe, more or less my only friend from my undergraduate days, had previously not noticed that I was really ill: I'd been good at concealing the extent of my thinness and at avoiding situations where eating was necessary, and she'd thought I was just naturally the way I was. But in the last year of my illness, my weight was for the first time consistently below 40 kg (88 pounds) – a boundary that my body had for a long time somehow refused to move below, and which marked a rapid deterioration once crossed – and at last she couldn't help realising. She spent days researching anorexia and treatment possibilities online and by phone, and found an eating-disorders clinic in Oxford (The Centre for Research on Eating Disorders at Oxford, CREDO), and came with me to my doctor to get a referral for a first assessment there, and a prescription for Prozac, which quite quickly, in a small but crucial way, helped to loosen up how I thought and felt. Without her, I would never have known about the treatment-research programme being conducted at CREDO, and would have missed their deadline for accepting new patients. Without the nine months of cognitive behavioural therapy that I received there, I would never have recovered with the completeness that I now have.

One of the many paradoxes of my anorexia was the condition upon which I entered treatment. The programme was an out-patient programme, and since they had no medical support team or medical training themselves they couldn't accept patients with a Body Mass Index of less than 15, because of the significant risk of heart failure and other medical emergencies. When I went for a second assessment session, my BMI was 14.2, which meant that if I wanted to make it on to the programme, I would have to gain 6 pounds (3 kg) in the next seven weeks. My mother was with me, and we were told that the maximum reasonable weight gain I could expect was a pound a week, and that I would therefore have to start immediately, on my own, and be consistently successful – and both of us heard the scepticism in her voice that I would ever do it.

Partly I was proud: proud that whilst moving from academic success to academic success I had managed to reach a weight that made me too thin for the anorexia treatment programme. Partly I was angry: this was supposed to be a treatment to make anorexics fatter, and I was told I had to get fatter myself to qualify for it. Partly I was frightened at the alternative prospects: if I didn't do this now, and carried on getting ever so gradually thinner, in the future my only means of recovery would be the shame and complete loss of control that was in-patient treatment (I despised anorexics who were reduced to that even more than I resented the achievement it represented in them) – that, or death, which I occasionally acknowledged to myself as never far off. Partly I was frightened at not knowing whether I could do this now, whether I dared, what would happen if I did.

My other friend, Edmund, came up by train that evening, and we went out and drank wine and talked and talked about whether I could, should, and would really make this decision to change my absolutely unchanging daily diet, and eat enough more to put on those three enormous kilos. After some number of hours it was finally clear that there was no way, any more, of avoiding the momentous necessity of trying something different at last. Edmund came with me then to the supermarket, and wandered round with me suggesting things that might make up the 500 extra calories I'd been told were the right amount to add. I'm not sure why I knew that I wanted to start having breakfast again, and something in the afternoon, rather than just adding the calories to my evening feast, but I was, somehow, sure of that. Perhaps there was still something in me which not only longed for breakfast, but could somehow already imagine the sheer delight there would be in breaking the rule which for years had made it impossible to eat before dawn at the end of a day. We decided on a pain au chocolat for breakfast and a custard tart for a teatime snack, and he bought me four days' supply, because I couldn't bear to spend money on the food (and its effects) I was terrified of. Keeping a meticulous record of everything I spent, and working out monthly and annual totals, and working out what proportion had gone on food, had been a habit since first going up to university, and I couldn't have coped, on top of everything else, with the compulsive calculations about how many loaves of bread, lettuces, or bars of chocolate I could have bought for the same amount as these relatively expensive pastries cost. In my diary that night, Friday 19th July 2008, I wrote:

40. 1 kg. 1.27 am: All is changing. All has changed. Today is my last day of starvation – and I feel as though I'm losing, bidding goodbye to, my most beloved companion. Yet already all *has* changed, today hasn't been starvation; I drank so much wine *so* quickly with Edmund, talking about the appointment, the need to reach 42 kg by 4th September, the practicalities of how to do it, and now I still feel quite disconnected, weirdly blithe at all the mess here, and I've eaten so much today already – crisps at lunch time, a whole brownie with the coffee we had while waiting for the taxi that never turned up, bread when I got back from seeing Edmund, then the licked lid of the prawn cocktail, then a slice of brie, then a bit of Sue's muesli, then a handful of cooked rice, then finally just now the After Eight I'd taken from the hairdresser and, as ever, left to go squishy and sticky in the depths of my bag – I found it, unwrapped it, ate it, felt an undercurrent of fear – mustn't go down the binge-eating/bulimic route – but mostly the indifference, the ease, the pleasure of eating it. And so – I'm to have a breakfast of pain au chocolat (241 calories), and an afternoon tea of custard tart (235). Edmund had to try to choose stuff for me, and then buy it for me; I couldn't. He's been unimaginably generous. [...] Sue got back home at 11ish; we spoke and I told her tomorrow's provisions. I don't know how terrified I am. [...] 3:15 am: I should try to record all this as best I can. [...] In a way, just in a tiny, scared, guilty, whispering way I'm really looking forward to it, the hot chocolate croissant before my bike ride. Is this really me? What am I turning into? For now, though, lovely low-cal soya milk to finish. Still as me.

In the following months Edmund was unstinting in giving his time, money, and emotional support, coming by train from Bristol to Oxford with more supplies of food and encouragement and analytical or humorous discussion. I never believed that any of this would change anything, but perhaps he knew that it would.

Many other things in life conspired to make the decision to eat 500 calories more every day possible, and necessary. Obsessive-compulsive behaviours emerged and worsened with a speed that made me feel I was going mad. Waking up freezing cold to a wintry sunset for a night's work was only slightly more depressing than closing the curtains against a sunny summer morning for a day's sleep. There were episodes like that of the evening dress, in which I became sickeningly aware of the awfulness of my own body. There was a day down by the seaside, on which I sat for hours staring at sand and sea while my mother handed me grapes, and I experienced what it meant to live in the present moment, rather than be eternally deferring pleasure to heighten it – but thereby destroying life by living only in the future, in the brief ending of every day. There was another story in the news about an anorexic academic dropping dead of heart failure whilst carrying heavy bags of shopping up to her flat filled with the mess of hoarded objects. There was the sadness of not going skiing with the family, as I'd so loved to when I was younger, because it was too cold to be bearable, let alone fun, because I couldn't get to bed early enough to make a day's skiing possible, and because I was too weak to ski at all. There was, every single day, the dread, loneliness, and sadness of waking up in the afternoon and contemplating the joyless process of getting up out of the warmth of bed, cycling for an hour, getting trapped in a supermarket looking at labels, returning to make food and work and drink my drinks and work and finally eat my food. Occasionally there'd be a coffee with a friend, acquaintance, or colleague, or during the vacation there'd be dinner to shop for and cook, and a little wine to be drunk whilst the others ate. But I felt the total emptiness of my life every time I woke up to another day of it, and perhaps I knew that nothing could really be worse than this.

That first breakfast may have been the greatest pleasure I've ever experienced. It was a miracle to me. I woke at 2 pm, got my bicycle ready to go out on, lit the oven, and warmed the pain au chocolat. Then I ate it. I ate outside for the first time in years, with fitful sunshine warming me as the dozen delighted mouthfuls of crispy pastry and hot molten chocolate entered my mouth, entered my stomach, and signalled the start of something. I took my plate in, set off on my bike, and the rest of the day was the same as usual, except for the custard tart with my first cup of tea, which I ate quickly and delightedly. The extra eating made remarkably little difference to the rest of my life, given the extreme effort of will and internal negotiation it had taken to make it happen by breaking my so long-standing rules. Throughout the following months, as I negotiated the 'firsts' of recovery – first lunch with family, first birthday meal being able to eat, first steak in a restaurant with my father, first night without chocolate last thing to send me to sleep, first day waking up early in the morning without an alarm – all these rites of passage were striking in their total *ordinariness*. There was still a place for me at the table, there was a new and beloved boyfriend to snuggle up to, there was daylight to wake me. It was almost as though the ten years of impossibility had never been, or as though all through those years something in me had never forgotten how it was to do these things, and had never stopped wanting to, despite the many congealed layers of fear and refusal that I had overlaid that normality with.

A strange little help in the first weeks was that I *lost* weight in the first few days, and then for three weeks or so my digestive system couldn't quite cope with the increase. This felt as though there was some magic that meant I could eat but not gain weight, that I could be brave and do the right thing, but not bear any of the 'costs' of doing so; perhaps, I thought, my body had become so used to the previous amount of food that it had no use for any more. By the time the weight was consistently above 40 kg again, I'd had time to adjust to the new normality, and was able to bear its consequences. I was also deeply moved by the experience of the Western privilege of being able to reject food for all those years and of then finding it still there, ready for the taking, in any form and any quantity I wanted, once I chose to eat again; this tempered my fear with deep gratitude.

That isn't to say that recovery wasn't terrifying, and difficult, at times. The hunger that was unleashed in me almost as soon as I began to eat more was the most frightening thing I've ever felt: now that I was eating, and trying to gain weight, the hunger no longer felt like power, like something chosen; it felt inescapable, uncontrollable, illegitimate, and infinite. I managed to avoid slipping into binge-eating or bulimia, but I'd never understood more clearly why that was where most anorexics end up. In my diary, I wrote:

Once you've opened the floodgates, what is there to stop the great flow of appetite? Only it's not flood gates, it's a small hole that's been opened up in the great dam of self-restraint; and as Sue said in a text this evening, having sent a lovely one this morning, wishing me well in my new life, I should just use the hunger to eat the 500 extra calories, and then stop. And I think that's what I've done.

It took a year, and over 30 kilos (66 pounds) of weight gain, till at last I realised that I wasn't hungry all the time any more, and that I was able to feel actually full, whereas till then I'd had to guess, and pretend, and wonder what it might feel like. In the time of recovery I couldn't stop thinking about food, because nothing was stable or self-evident any more, and because the calmness that I'd created by living at the bare minimum of what would keep me going (physically and emotionally) and my brain working well enough to think and write was completely gone. There were many moments when delight at being 'allowed' to eat more veered into deep nausea, deep internal resistance to anything that felt like being normal, being greedy, or being spontaneous, because all these could be the heralds of a spiral into obesity and a disordered life, and into the vacuum of no longer knowing who I was. There was the terror of feeling emotions again – of falling in love (with the man I now live with) and being initially rejected, and feeling the full depth of the dimensions of life I couldn't control. There were moments of succumbing to the cripplingly low self-esteem, self-loathing even, that my decade of illness had brought about, and that made me question my right to recover. There were chance remarks from other people about its being 'naughty' to eat pudding, or about some meal I'd also eaten having been too big, or about the changes in me and my eating, which threw me off balance and made me scared and miserable. There were times when I couldn't do what my therapist asked me to: couldn't eat within an hour of getting up; couldn't replace my breakfast porridge with something different; couldn't shift the chocolate drink and cereal bar from their position at the start of the evening's eating, even when they'd been made superfluous by all the rest of the things I now ate before them. But I did manage all these things, eventually.

There were other things that I've often heard reported as insurmountable obstacles to successful recovery from anorexia, and which for me simply weren't an issue. I had no trouble in incorporating long-untouched foods into my diet. Indeed, I loved the exploratory attitude of finding silly new toppings for my porridge, or weird cheap snack foods in the supermarkets. I'd been a vegetarian since age 11, but my cravings for meat were such that I soon loved it more than anything else (except chocolate). Partly this ease was due to the fact that my diet had always included very calorific things, so it wasn't a case of moving from one extreme to another. And then, I never planned to eat something and then failed to; I never sat down with food and failed to eat it, except on the occasions when, in company, I'd gone too long without eating, and my hunger had flipped over into nausea, or when there was some emotional tension with others around me. The company of my new boyfriend, who moved in with me six months after I began to eat more, also helped me to exchange the monotony of a private routine for the dynamics of routines shared, and to learn how close a bond food shared can be.

In the early days, the new routine was no more questionable than the old one had been: there was no option but to follow it. All those years I'd intellectually understood the illusory nature of the control I was exerting by not eating when I recognised all the reasons to eat, and now, at long last, I was able to translate this knowledge into positive action: I was able to reverse the polarities of my will power and

use all that determination to heal myself instead of making myself ever sicker. The hours during which I made the decision were more difficult than anything in the months that followed. After that, after knowing that I really meant it, it was just a question of doing what I'd decided to, even though I never believed it would make any real difference.

I often ask myself what single crucial factor – or what combination of factors – made this possible for me, where for so many others it's so different: they decide, they try, they flounder, they fear, they fail. I don't remember once asking myself whether I shouldn't put a stop to this, and go back to the old ways, perhaps because by the time the weight was going up consistently I'd already been granted a few glimpses of how life might be different: eating a biscuit in company, eating a whole lunch at a conference, not putting people on edge with my inability to eat, tasting a bright new flavour, feeling a little spring in my step, looking forward to something other than food, giving pleasure and hope to those who loved me.

It's been a long path since then: a path towards where I am now, which is still working hard but knowing how to relax of an evening, a weekend, a holiday; loving my boyfriend and living with him, being cooked delicious meals by him, laughing with him dozens of times a day; sharing food and drink and time with colleagues in an exciting research job; lifting weights in the gym and feeling my body still growing stronger and healthier and building up all its muscles and ligaments and cartilage; planning trips and gradually expanding my small circle of friends and interests; weighing myself once a month or so, and not particularly worrying about what the numbers will say; weighing 68 kg (150 pounds, BMI 24.7), and having never felt better. I still see thin women in the streets and feel envious or insecure sometimes, but more and more often I feel pleased not to be thus, knowing what it would require for me to be as they are; and I feel proud to exemplify an aesthetic that judges women by criteria other than thinness. I am still reminded sometimes how easily my eating can be thrown off balance by an argument or upset. I still worry now and then about the shape of my tummy or about having eaten too much. But these are things that few women (or even men) could claim to be entirely immune to, and I feel bizarrely blessed, now, by my history of anorexia.

Yes, anorexia more or less ruined what could have been one of the best decades of my life – but it's also taught me all I need to know about food, starvation, my body, my mind, and society's sicknesses. I am completely sure that I will never go back to anorexia, because I did it so well, with such complete control, that I have no doubt that all its promises are dead ends, and that to go back I would have to ruin my life again, and that to do it better I would have to kill myself completely. There is no romantic seduction left in starving, no uncertainty as to its consequences, no little surreptitious internal voice to ask me whether this or that wouldn't be better if I weren't just a little slimmer. I have all the answers now. I know what it's like to die by just eating a little too little, every day forever. I know what it's like to lose the will to live for anything but eating. I know what it's like for a concave tummy never to be concave enough, and a hollow sternum never to be hollow enough. I know that this can all happen on 1,700 calories a day. I have all the answers now, and know that anorexia has none.

Emily Troscianko, Oxford, February 2011