Late at night, the supermarket is garish and dazzling in the cold glare of neon light. I walk in, trying to look as calm, competent, capable, as possible. I try to blend in, to be unobtrusive, to draw no attention to myself. I'm here on a raid, a heist, and I want no one to notice. I'd wear a hood over my head if I thought I could get away with it. Casually I pick up a plastic yellow basket, choose some yogurt and a loaf of bread. Then, very casually, as if I just happened to think of it, I take a look at the boxes of day-old bakery goods. I flip through them, looking for doughnuts. I act as if it doesn't matter much whether I find any or not. I'm the only one in this store who knows I'm looking for my "stuff." I'm here to get the goods. I don't have to use a weapon or threaten anyone. I don't have to hold anyone up: I have the money for my drug of choice, which is food. But I'm as hard-core as the guy on the street corner who stops passersby to demand money for his fix.

"Hey, girlie," he calls out to me in a tone at once wheedling and belligerent, "ya got a little something to help a guy?"

I pretend to be deaf. I look away, quickening my pace. I make no eye contact, acknowledge no connection between us—me, a well-dressed, well-educated young woman; he, an unshaven hustler with no known address. I conceal the truth, but the fact is this: we are compatriots under the skin. We inhabit the same dark land. What differentiates me from the addicts
who roam the park and sleep on grates is that my drug is legal, I have the money to get it, and I can still pass as normal.

When I arrive in the supermarket, I sometimes spot a fat person with lonely eyes already picking over the bakery goods. As with the drunks and the junkies, I pretend we have nothing in common. I approach without saying a word, peering over the stranger's shoulder, impatient to get my hands on the boxes of day-old cookies and pies. I suppose I could buy fancy, name-brand cookies, and sometimes I do, but it's the leftovers that tend to attract me most—scraps, cheap goods that go down fast. I disguise my urgent, anxious greed; I keep my face calm, a mask of repose. I hope that anyone looking at me will assume it's only an accident that I—a person of average size, a thirty-year-old woman who looks perfectly normal—happen to be scavenging beside someone so fat. But I never even look around to see who might be watching. When the fat person steps away, I make my move. I finger the baked goods and make my selection as fast as I can, trying not to reveal my hurry. I'm intently focused on the task before me. I keep my head down, eyes forward. In the Star Market at 10:00 p.m., I meet no one's eyes if I can help it.

Every act of addiction is a criminal act, the most ferocious of criminal acts against the self. Like many crimes, addiction insists on stealth, secrecy, and isolation. And it ends in shame. The addict in the middle of a binge doesn't want to be seen by anyone, neither friend nor stranger, and most of all, not by the addict herself. All authentic human connection must be severed. As I put my basket on the checkout counter and open my purse, I'm elaborately deadpan with the clerk (You see? I came in for yogurt and bread. It's just a coincidence that I bought these lemon crullers; they happen to be boxed by the half-dozen, so that's why I picked up six).

Every con artist guards her secrets.

Then I calmly leave the store, clutching my stuff in a brown paper bag. I know better than to break into a run. A getaway must always be calm, unless you're under fire. Safe at last in the car, I sit huddled with the windows rolled up, eating one doughnut after another. If I could shoot up the crullers, I would. If I could mainline them straight into my brain, I'd do it in a heartbeat. Other addicts might try to swig their troubles away, but as for me, I'm going to take a big hit of sugar and shove it into my body. I'm going to blot out the pain any way that I can, as quickly as I can, as thoroughly as I can. I'm going to stuff down my fear, anger, and sorrow until I feel nothing at all, until I'm stupefied and numb.

Tomorrow, maybe, I won't eat anything to speak of. I'll go for a long run, maybe plan another diet. Maybe I'll stop doing this, stop having to stuff myself like this. Maybe tomorrow everything will be different. Maybe.

I've often wondered how I got so trapped. What half-truths did I consume as a child? What lies? How did my desires go so awry?

So much was unspeakable when I was growing up. To the outside world, my family presented every sign of happiness and success. My handsome father was a dashing, high-spirited professor of English at Harvard University, a popular lecturer among the students, the youngest faculty member ever invited to serve as master of a Harvard house. My mother was the beautiful, Radcliffe-educated daughter of a wealthy Midwestern newspaper family. A trustee of Radcliffe, she served on its admissions committee. She faithfully attended Christ Church every Sunday, kept an immaculate house, and, as wife of the Master of Quincy House, was responsible over the years for entertaining thousands of Harvard faculty, staff, and students.
As if repeating a refrain that is sung to comfort and to soothe, we four children told ourselves again and again that we were having a happy childhood.

But much of our lives could not be acknowledged or named, neither to ourselves nor to each other nor to anybody else. When I was ten years old, my best friend asked me why my mother always seemed so serious. I couldn’t answer her. I’d never noticed it. My mother’s almost perpetually somber mood was too familiar, too linked with who she was for me. Even more invisible, more unspeakable, than my mother’s depression was my father’s drinking. The acute panic before the beginning of classes that could be relieved only by Scotch; the lengthy cocktail hours that triggered a predictable slide into melancholy; the late evenings alone, sitting in front of a blank TV screen, talking to himself and nursing a drink—none of this could be noticed or named, much less discussed. A taboo arose among us, all the more powerful because it seemed to come from nowhere, and because it seemed as invisible and essential to life as the air we breathed. Don’t say what you see, don’t feel what you feel, don’t speak, don’t ask questions, don’t rock the boat.

We are told by clinicians that children who grow up in alcoholic homes never witness or experience real feelings, but only the defenses against feelings. When parents, for whatever reason, can’t bear their own desires and fears, they find it difficult to tolerate and respond to their children’s feelings in a way that will help the children trust their own inner experience. Such children grow up mastering all kinds of strategies for ducking, dodging, and burying their feelings.

I know I certainly did. I became expert in the art of avoidance. I knew how to be a superintellect, able to rationalize, minimize, and argue myself out of a feeling at a moment’s notice. I could be a superachiever too, so busy accomplishing, performing, and proving my worth that I never had to stop and feel my basic loneliness and sense of loss. Sometimes I avoided feelings by focusing on the “rules.” I was a perfectionist bent on getting every detail “right,” ready to pounce with condemnation on anyone—myself included—who got it “wrong.” Sometimes I played the comic, the ever-cheerful, perpetually smiling mascot who made my family laugh. “Look how happy we are!” my grateful family seemed to cry. “No problems here!” Then there were the obsessions I could get wrapped up in as the years went by—smoking, eating, drinking, working, shopping, finding someone to yearn for obsessively, or someone to rescue. All these tactics left me numb, deadened to any vivid feeling, confused about what I really felt, really wanted. There must be an infinite number of ways to avoid the deepest feelings, the deepest longings of the heart.

So who knows what I felt, who knows what I was really longing for, when as a child I would secretly slip a piece of bread into my pocket after lunch. I certainly can’t recall any inner voice explaining it to me. Who knows what I told myself? I had no idea what it was—a compulsion, a need, a desire, an unspoken something or other—that caused my small hand to dart out, reach for an extra slice of bread, then slip it quietly, unseen, into my pocket. A secret known only to myself, but not even to me.

Certainly I was not hungry for food. Perhaps it was human contact that I missed. Perhaps there moved within me a hidden yearning to speak my grief about my sad mother, a desire to express my confusion about my volatile and sometimes frightening father, a longing to share a child’s anger, wonder, sadness, and joy with another human being. But I could find no one to hear me. None of these longings could even be named. I could not have said what it was that I wanted. All I knew was that I was starving.

And that was the game that I’d play in my room after lunch: I was a wild horse alone in a blizzard, starving in the snow. Back and forth across my bed I cantered and trotted, walked
and staggered, slowly dying of starvation, my head bent down, my windswept mane heavy with snow. I was lost in the storm. I was starving and alone. And then—Aha! I found a piece of bread! I nuzzled it. I licked it. Slowly I nibbled at it. The blizzard still roared around me, but now I had a bit of nourishment. I would see how long I could make it last. Maybe I would live after all.

Quincy House was built for adults, no doubt about it, nine stories of brick, concrete, and glass rising on the outskirts of Harvard Square, just a stone's throw from the Charles River. We moved into the penthouse on the top floors of Quincy House right after it was built in 1959. I was almost eight years old. To me, everything about the place was impressive. I was proud to live there. My father must be important, being in charge of all this, so it followed that I was important too. Besides, no one else in my third-grade class had an elevator.

Still, I was somewhat daunted by our new quarters; clearly the penthouse had not been designed with children in mind. A long hallway ran half the length of the eighth floor. It was lined with my father's collection of eighteenth-century prints and opened onto a formal dining room and living room. Beyond the parquet floors and Oriental rugs stretched a gravel-covered terrace with a trellised arch down the center. Who could say how many guests would gather here over the years, indoors and out, their hands reaching for countless delicacies laid out on countless trays, innumerable streams of cocktails easing their way down countless throats, the distant sounds of laughter and impassioned conversation floating down the long hall to the children on the other side of the house? My siblings and I learned, when company came, to smile politely, pass a tray, perhaps, and then disappear quickly behind the door that divided the public side of the house from the private living area.

We retreated to the playroom, the library, the master bedroom, or our own bedrooms downstairs on the seventh floor, out of the way of the grown-up world.

I always got the feeling that children didn't quite belong in Quincy House. The front-door buzzer was too high for us to reach, too high, in fact, for the average adult, so that an extra stone step had to be placed on the ground beneath it. Looking back now, it seems to me that something about the whole place was too high for the average adult, no less the average child, and that none of us could quite live up to it. So many of us got lost there, adults and children alike, as if we had not paid enough attention to the map, or the woods were overgrown, the trees too high, the path too dark to see.

The first one of our household to go was the smallest. Early one morning shortly after we moved into Quincy House, I saw our dog fall off the roof. Corky was a Welsh corgi, a short little dog with wiry brown hair and a stub of a tail. He had the run of the terrace, eight floors up. Somehow, in all the bustle and distraction of the move, no one had paid much attention to the fact that the chain-link fence encircling the terrace wasn't finished yet. Corky liked to slip through the hole in the fence and run out along the terrace ledge. Obviously there was a risk that he might fall, but where else could he run? We lived in the city and had no yard. Besides, my father said, the fence would be finished soon enough. Corky was a nimble fellow. He could fend for himself for a while. My parents had more important things to attend to than this one little dog. Unpacking and moving in was only the beginning. My father had lectures to prepare, classes to teach, exams to write, papers to read, hundreds of students to oversee. My mother had a large household to manage; a new staff to hire, train, and supervise; and soon there would be hordes of guests to feed and entertain.

I was standing right beside the ledge when Corky fell. We'd gotten out of bed before dawn to watch an eclipse. A few
CHAPTER 3

Body Language

Here are some things you won’t find in this book: stories describing the sensual, aesthetic pleasures of delicious food. You won’t find any lingering accounts of flavor or aroma. You won’t read any titillating descriptions of oral sensations, such as how one sort of food melts on your tongue, or how another crunches against your teeth. Compulsive eating is thoroughly nonsensual. For me, anyway, bingeing involved no savoring, no pausing to take pleasure—almost, in fact, no tasting at all. Except for a brief flash of flavor in the first bite or two, the food went down so fast I hardly bothered to notice how it tasted, much less to appreciate how it looked or smelled.

It’s as much a mistake to assume that compulsive eaters love food or love to eat as it is to assume that sexually promiscuous persons love the partners that they seduce and discard. In my years of compulsive eating, I never loved food. I craved it, I needed it, I felt greedy for it, I used it, but I never loved it. I would have loved to have loved it. I would have loved to know what it was I really wanted, what it was I really felt. But since I had no clue what, if anything, I really loved, and since it surely wasn’t food, I never paused to give thanks for the plants and animals whose bodies I consumed. I never considered with gratefulness the human labor that had gone into growing, harvesting, or preparing the food that was in my hands. I never paused to contemplate what I was about to eat; to notice its texture and temperature, color and shape. I never tasted the food with full attention, never swallowed it with delight. I certainly never understood how the act of eating—even solitary eating—might deepen my connection with other human beings, with the natural world, or with God.

Overeating had very little to do with providing fuel for my body, with giving myself pleasure, or with opening my heart to love. It had everything to do with desperately trying to communicate after ordinary methods had repeatedly failed.

Overeating is a language with its own grammar and vocabulary. If I was unable to express my anger to my parents, at least I could express it to myself. I could grab, I could bite, I could gnaw, I could force as much food into myself as I wanted to, even when my body begged for rest. I could take the anger out on myself. And I could imagine my father or mother reading my body like a text.

“See how angry I am at you?” I was silently saying to them. “It’s written all over my body.”

A binge often began with an angry mind, but by the end of the binge, the anger would be comfortably cloaked and soothed. Carbohydrates left me in a stupor, my body as smooth and thick as the snow in Robert Frost’s “Desert Places,” “with no expression, nothing to express.” I was motionless. I was numb. The anger, for now, was gone, the angry bones hidden. I was a sheer and vacant surface, a blank piece of paper with no message for anyone.

If it was loneliness and grief that I couldn’t bear, I could always snuggle up to food. I could always fill up the emptiness, plug up the hole. Food would never abandon me. Food would never leave me behind or shut me out. Food would always be there in as large a quantity as I wanted, whenever I wanted it, for as long as I wanted. Food was my friend. Eating when I was
sad was a way of comforting myself: "I, at least, will never leave you. I am here for you. You can have what you want. Take it. Eat it. Stuff it. It's yours. Have as much as you want."

But the language of compulsive overeating is tragically jumbled and ineffective, as multitonee and mutivoiced as Cerberus, the dog who stands at the threshold of hell in Greek mythology, each of its three heads barking independently. A person who stands at the brink of addictive behavior is listening intently to conflicting inner voices: voices that urge her on and hold her back; voices that goad and that counsel caution; beguiling voices that lure, beckoning with promises; and savvy voices that warn her of traps. Which one should she listen to? Which is worthy of her trust? The voices that swirl in the addict's mind can be as bewildering and incomprehensible as the languages that suddenly multiplied at the Tower of Babel. Every addict thinks and speaks in tongues. Forked tongues. The message is always garbled.

It would begin with a small, seductive voice that made promises it couldn't keep. "Here, I'll take care of you," it would murmur in my ear. "I see you're feeling a little down. Let's just comfort ourselves with a bite to eat, shall we?"

"Oh no, not again," another inner voice would object in alarm. "I'm not going to eat right now."

"But why not?" the first voice would wheedle insistently. "It's just this once. You feel so sad. Let's do something to make you feel better."

"But I can't. I shouldn't. I'm not hungry. I'm sad. I want to cry."

"Hey, you don't have to feel that sadness. Don't give in to it. Leave it alone. Come with me. Let's go see what's in the pantry. Just a little something to eat, that's all you need."

"No. Go away. I really don't want to eat right now."

"It's OK. Just a bite, that's all. Who's gonna know?"

"But I shouldn't. I promised myself I wouldn't do it again."

Body Language

"Never mind about that. You can be good another time. Have a little something, just a little bite, maybe a cracker or two. It's no big deal."

The argument would escalate rapidly, inexorably, until my mind was filled with the din. In effect, I'd be distracted from the grief, and the voice of sorrow would be silenced. The clamorous debate would absorb my attention, eclipse my awareness, extinguish every other concern, smother every nuance of feeling, until absolutely nothing mattered to me but the single question: Should I eat right now or not?

Once that question was looming before me, I could never get away from it. I couldn't shake it, couldn't turn my attention to anything else. It was a question that demanded an immediate answer. And once that fearful question was posed, once the competing inner voices had funneled all their energy into that urgent and utterly absorbing question—to eat or not to eat?—I always came up with the same answer.

Practically clapping my hands over my ears to stop the racket, I succumbed to the voice that promised quick relief. I yielded to the temptation to eat. Maybe I'd start with just a cracker, but before long I'd be eating my way through a loaf of bread or a pan of brownies. Stuffed to the teeth, crammed full of food, I'd turn for solace to the little voice that had promised to take care of me, but by then it would have disappeared back into the shadows from which it came. Nobody would be there. I'd be alone, suddenly remorseful and confused, my hands and mouth still sticky with sugar, my heart choking on stifled grief.

In the same moment that I was trying to soothe myself with food, I was also abandoning myself. Like a desperate mother who deserts her children because she can't handle their demands, I was walking out of my house and never looking back. All that I was giving myself was food, when what I really hungered for was embodied love. It wasn't doughnuts or
brownies or cheese that I needed, it was companionship, the compassionate attention that could help me explore my feelings, give voice to my anger, release my tears. But I was too shy to ask for such help, too proud, and too ashamed. With every bite, I was saying to myself, “Look, you don’t need to ask anyone for help. I’ll take care of you. Here’s something to eat.” But I was also saying to myself, “I can’t listen to you now. I can’t bear to hear your sadness. Be quiet.” In the confused language of overeating, I was simultaneously comforting and ignoring myself.

The messages that the addict sends to other people are as confused as the messages that she sends herself. With every defiant bite or slug or hit, the addict declares to the outside world, to her parents, to her friends, “I don’t need you. I can handle my feelings by myself. Go away. Get lost. I can take care of this alone. And you know what else? I know how to get to you: I’m going to deprive you of me.” But with every bite or slug or hit, the addict is also willy-nilly declaring to everyone around her, “I can’t cope with this! I can’t handle my life! I need help!” Every act of addiction is a plea for help that is retracted in the very moment that it’s uttered, a cry for relationship that is throttled before it can be fully expressed.

The addict may ache with loneliness, but every act of addiction, large or small, tangles the threads of human relationship. Eventually those threads start to break. The longer the addict depends on eating, drinking, or any other kind of acting out as a way of communicating with herself and with the outside world, the more isolated and confused she becomes, torn loose from the fabric of human community.

The more I stuffed myself with food, the more I kept myself hungry. The more I forced my body to enact the suffering that I couldn’t speak, the more difficult it became for me to express—or even to know—what it was that really troubled me, what it was I really wanted.

**Body Language**

It would be years before I’d find a language that could make sense of this confusion of tongues, this cyclone of voices that wracked my body. It would be years before I could do anything as “reasonable” as weeping with others when I was sad, expressing my rage when I was angry, or even looking at a pie without gobbling it down in a single sitting.

In those years of overeating, I was trapped in a web of warring desires. It wasn’t that I wanted too much, but that I wanted disparate things. What did I really want? I didn’t know. I wanted everything. I wanted opposite things. If you’d offered me a questionnaire designed to probe what I was longing for, I’d have marked a yes in every box.

I wanted to make a speech as pointed and pungent as anything uttered in the eighteenth century, and I wanted to make my father listen to it in silence. He’d be spellbound, astounded, as a smile of amazement and respect spread slowly across his face.

And I wouldn’t have dared to utter a word. I knew I was defeated. I knew I was unprepared.

I wanted my father to light up when he saw me. I wanted to run into him on the street one day, maybe somewhere near Widener Library, and to hear him exclaim, “How good it is to see you! You’re a chip off the old block! Let’s go sit down somewhere and have a cup of coffee together.” He’d put his arm around me and we’d walk together, we’d laugh and talk, enjoying each other’s company without any strain or fear.

And I could barely imagine such a possibility, so deep ran my fear of disappointment, so raw was my dread of again being criticized or attacked.

I wanted my father to scribble something on a piece of paper, fold it up, and pass it to me with a mischievous grin. I’d open up the note to find these words written in bold black ink:
“I love you, Margaret. Daddy.” For a long moment we’d smile at each other, and then we’d hug. That little scrap of paper would mean more to me than any degree I could ever receive. It would be worth more to me than any of the diplomas that hung on my wall.

And I wanted nothing of the kind. I wanted no unexpected notes from my father, no surprises, no possibility that I’d be caught up short, again found wanting.

I wanted to weep in my mother’s arms. I wanted her to take my face gently between her two hands and to look me steadily in the eyes. I wanted her to say to me, “I love you. I am here. I’m not afraid of your feelings. It’s OK to cry. I feel it too. I know how hard it is. I am with you. There’s nothing you can’t tell me or share with me.” I wanted her to say all this, to convey all this, in a way that made me know it, and believe it, and feel it, and trust it.

And I wanted to run away from such intimacy. I wanted no such self-exposure, no such vulnerability. I wanted to protect myself from the possibility that she’d disappear, or flinch, or—worst of all—go dutifully through the motions of caring without actually being present emotionally, as if she were only playing the part of a mother. I wanted to avoid the possibility of her eyes meeting mine and going blank, of her face becoming reserved and uncomprehending.

I wanted to live inside every inch of my body. I wanted to feel its motion, enjoy its rest, be completely at home inside my skin. I wanted to accept and welcome and listen to my body as I would a cherished friend. I wanted to be free from the grab in the stomach, the clutch in the throat, the tightness in the chest, the unshed tears that gave me a headache.

And I wanted to be rid of my body. I wanted to ignore it, avoid it, escape it. I wanted nothing to do with it. I wanted to punish my body for its needs.

Body Language

I wanted to disclose my sorrow and my anger. And I wanted no one—not even myself—to know the depths of what I felt.

I wanted to be awake. Present, vital, alive. And I wanted to be asleep. Entirely numb.

I wanted my life to be unpredictable and fresh. I wanted to face life as it is, to be open to mystery and surprise. And I wanted everything to stay the same. I wanted to be in complete control.

I wanted to live in the truth. And, if I got scared or overwhelmed, I wanted to live a lie.

I wanted to be real. And I wanted to be perfect.

The fact is, I had no idea what I wanted. I didn’t know how to make sense of these conflicts, how to live with the contradictions. Like the winds in Gogol’s fictional St. Petersburg, my desires were blowing in every direction at once.

I played out the dilemma with food. If the part of me that was willing to feel my feelings had the upper hand, I ate with moderation and enjoyed the meal, tasting every mouthful. If the part of me that wanted to escape my feelings took over, I ate randomly and mindlessly, as much and as quickly as I could, without tasting a thing.

One day I’d be able to trust the desire to be open to life, and I’d eat lightly and with joy. The next day I’d be gripped by the desire to stay in control and keep life’s mystery at bay, and I’d binge.

On days when I was willing to face each moment as it came, I’d eat when I was hungry, stop when I was full. Other days, when I wanted only to escape from life, to hide out and avoid, I’d reach for the sugar, grab a bag of chips.

I dimly knew that some of my desires led me to fullness of life while others led me to a barren desert place. But I had no way of aligning myself for any length of time with the desires that gave life. Like a Ping-Pong ball, I ricocheted between
conflicting impulses and needs. Whenever the battle grew too intense, I succumbed to the urge to eat.

“This must be what I want,” I’d tell myself as I reached for more food. “Look how much of it I’m taking.”

Addiction divides the self. The mind becomes a tyrant and the body becomes its prisoner, the target of its assault. It’s not the body that wants another handful of peanuts or an extra slice of bread. The body watches in wonder and sorrow. What can it do? All the signals of bodily satisfaction have been sent to the brain. The stomach is pleasantly full. The belly already presses firmly against the belt. All is well in the body. There is food enough. Hunger is gone.

But an anxious, greedy craving still prowls restlessly in the mind. Addiction has its own voice. To the body it says, “I don’t care what you tell me. I don’t care what you want. I’m going to keep on eating. I want those extra bites. I can override you. Your voice doesn’t count. You can’t stop me. I’m in charge.”

Addiction silences the voice of the body. Addiction refuses to hear the body, to listen to its natural appetites. Addiction renders the body mute, so that its wisdom can’t be expressed or heard. Addiction distorts and substitutes the inner communication that makes any person a harmonious whole. It closes down the space that allows inner speech.

So I eat. I eat. I eat past the point of being physically full. I eat until I’m stuffed. I eat until I hurt. I eat until I feel nothing, until I’m numb, until I’m weary of eating and can eat nothing more.

A triumphant, angry mind, gripped by addiction, and a sorrowing, suffering body.

From the outside, I appear to be a single person, one organism, a unity, a whole. But within, there is civil war. The wounded and the dying lie stretched out over the battlefield. The victors gloat over them, but already, even now, they feel the first pangs of the guilt that will soon overtake them. Already they try in vain to run, to duck, to flee, but of course flight is futile: they are trapped within the very body that they have tried to kill.

The only way to blunt the sharp tang of remorse is to eat again, as much as possible, as soon as possible. To numb the body again, to kill it again, to put it to sleep again with sugar, starch, and fat, until the dead and the dying again litter the battlefield, and the victors again declare their triumph. The whole cycle repeats itself again and again, as relentless as a cog spinning in a vast war machine, beyond human arbitration or control.

Toward the end of my graduate career at Harvard, the obsession with food began to run my life. For several years I’d been living alone in a small house near Cambridge with no regular companionship except for several complicated and frustrating relationships with men, a few close women friends, and a solitary cat. I was like a runaway eighteen-wheeler going downhill at sixty miles an hour, careening off the road. My academic work was stalling out, on its way to screeching to a halt. Although I enjoyed my work as a teaching assistant, I couldn’t seem to pull together a prospectus for my dissertation. I’d spend days fine-tuning a single paragraph, tinkering with one sentence or another, while leaping up repeatedly from my chair to down a few more slices of bread. A paralysis of inertia and self-doubt was beginning to creep into my heart. I was increasingly tempted to dawdle, to procrastinate. Desperate for a change, I found a part-time job as a residential coordinator at a state mental hospital near Boston, where I began to work with a group of twelve men living with chronic schizophrenia.

During this period I also began to organize a family intervention into my father’s alcoholism. In a family that had long
cancer several years later, he persuaded his friends to smuggle beer and whisky into the hospital. After that one year of sobriety, I hardly ever heard my father’s voice without the accompanying clink of ice cubes, hardly ever drew close without picking up the smell of malt and hops.

What had become fully known to me during the intervention was the life-threatening, lethal power of addiction. I saw it, I spoke up against it, I stood up to it in my father’s life. But although I could speak directly, without compromise, to the life-and-death fork in the road that my father had now reached, I was not yet ready to face the same choice set before me in my own life. I knew that my father had work to do. The unspoken text, the hidden text, the text that I could not address, and certainly not with the conviction with which I faced my father, was the story of my own addiction. My own silence—not as saintly as my mother’s—was crippling my life, was sucking the very air and speech out of me, was drowning me.

I was completely unprepared for the aftermath of the intervention. It stirred feelings in me that I had no clue how to handle. When my father entered treatment, the relief and joy that I felt were intense but extremely short-lived. Right behind them flowed enormous grief and anger, and a sense of loss such as I had never known before. What had I lost in the intervention? I’d lost the illusion of having had a happy childhood. I’d lost the pretense that I had a father and mother with whom I could share my real self. I’d lost the mirage of belonging to a healthy family that encouraged honest communication and genuine contact. I felt orphaned, bereft.

My shock was as acute as if I’d suddenly discovered that the building in which I’d lived my whole life was only a facade. It was like discovering that only a paper shell had been surrounding me and protecting me all these years. Now it had collapsed and blown away, and I was left behind, staring with dismay into an empty space.

Suddenly I felt very alone.

Healing begins with the end of illusion, but the fire of truth burns even as it heals. I ran from its pain. The work of mourning was too much for me. I couldn’t bear the grief and rage. I couldn’t face my emptiness. In the months after the intervention, I ate as I never had before, in binges so frenzied that I was frightened. After spending a year focused on my father’s addiction, on what he was doing with alcohol and what I could do to get him help, I found to my alarm that my own addiction was taking on a virulent life of its own.

Journal entries:

January 10, 1982: I’m plugged up with food. My legs are swollen. They ache when I walk. My cheeks are fat. My stomach bulges. I hate my body. I’m ashamed of what I’ve done to it so quickly, so ruthlessly. There is such despair within the greed.

I went to a wedding. The bride and I whispered furtively over the remains of the wedding cake, the grand chocolate cake made so lovingly by her sister. The two of us grazed quickly through the leftovers, rushing from plate to plate, hurriedly grabbing clumps of cake and stuffing them into our mouths, while the wedding guests headed out the door, oblivious and cheerful.

Even as I stuffed myself, I knew it was hopeless. The cake would never fill me. Even if I loosened my belt and ate again until I bulged, still I’d be yearning for more. There is such despair in knowing this, even as I continue to eat.

I am bloated, burping, uncomfortable. I skirt the grief.
January 24, 1982: I tried to kill the day. A good job of it. I slept until almost 10:00 a.m., ate whenever I could, and watched TV with as dull a mind as possible. It works. You go blank. You get stupid.

I considered setting fire to the house, starting with a bonfire in my living room. That, or throwing everything I possess into the snow, all of it scattered like the wreckage of a plane. An Air Florida jet went down in the Potomac River. How many died? I forget. Investigators say they died from the crash, not from drowning or freezing in the water. I wonder if that’s true. I can imagine what that might be like, slowly freezing, growing numb.

A weekend of isolation and despair. What shall I do? Shall I go to bed? Or, before sleeping, shall I first go into the kitchen and put slices of bread in the toaster, cut some hunks of cheese, and watch TV standing up, until finally I’m too bloated to eat any more, too groggy to watch any more TV?

I don’t know what I want. I want to die. I want to be alive and happy. One or the other. But more than anything I want only this: to feel no more pain.

February 10, 1982: I don’t know what’s happening to me. Out-of-control eating began inconspicuously on Thursday night, when I couldn’t bear the sensation of yielding to sleep. It escalated the next day after I saw a former boyfriend and felt aroused, sexy, hungry, yearning. We’ve stopped seeing each other. Our relationship never worked. We always ended up hurting each other. But I still miss him sometimes. This time, we flirted a little and then we said good-bye. Afterward I didn’t know what to do with myself, didn’t want to feel a thing. It was too painful. I started to eat. The gorging took on its own dull rhythm, as if I’d suddenly jumped onto a conveyer belt and was now forced to act according to some mechanical pulse that is alien to my own.

My abdomen is as tight as a drum. I’ve gained eleven pounds in four days, and I’m still eating. Last night it was a whole batch of pancakes. Suicide food. And then, three or four hours later, another batch. What do I want? I want to hide. I want to be invisible, to pull down the shades and disappear.

I’m afraid of eating lightly and of being my real self. Why? Because, for one thing, if I feel my needs, who knows what will happen? I won’t be in control. Won’t be perfect. I’ll make mistakes that people see. Maybe life feels flat, even hellish, on the days that I binge, but at least I can predict what will happen.

It’s safer not to feel anything. My needs and passions seem enormous. If I allow myself to find out what I’m feeling, what if I end up needing the world? What if I need everything? It’s too scary. How can I dare to want? How can I endure the wait before a need is filled? What if it’s never filled? What if I never get what I’m longing for? Yes, it’s safer to suppress my hungers with food. To stay aloof from life. To feel nothing. Want nothing.

March 8, 1982: I’ve been undermining myself for the past five days. It’s like involuntary travel to another planet, like being abruptly transported to a familiar, hostile world that I despise. I hate going there. At first, everything was fine. I was dozing late at night in front of the TV set. Then suddenly I was calmly deciding to eat instead of go to sleep. Not openly self-hating, just calm. Coolly matter-of-fact. A murder in cold blood.
Afterward, I slept fitfully, my stomach aching.
I remember a day just last week when I lived somewhere else, some other place than this. It was a simple pleasure to walk, to feel my body move. I was filled with health and vitality. Everything that I perceived was clear and vivid. I felt awakened, alert. I felt the simple joy of physical well-being, the delicious sense of inhabiting my own body.

It would be a new way to live, to do the gentle, patient, probing work of finding my feelings. But how could I stand them? How could I bear to be awake? I’m afraid of life. It’s not death that frightens me most, it’s life. So I substitute this half-life. Numb, blurred, I cruise along, always on the surface. Always in a hurry. Always in hiding.

Part of me doesn’t want to live. I won’t literally kill myself, but a figurative death is fine. I want to get out of this life. I’m in a life I can’t live, in an unlivable life.

March 23, 1982: This can’t go on. Yesterday was worse than it’s ever been. Near despair, I ate cheese and half a grapefruit in the morning. Before a friend came over for lunch, I went to the bakery and bought an apricot pie and two cookies. I ate the pie very fast, standing at the kitchen counter. I ate a light lunch with my friend—how discreet I am in public, how normal, how apparently sane. After she left, I went out and bought more food: a coconut custard pie, a loaf of bread, and a box of English muffins. I ate them all.

March 25, 1982: I’m groggy with sleep. Stuffed with binge foods. From one bakery I bought a loaf of cheese bread and a small roll; from another, two brownies and a loathsome banana cream pie. I peeled the whipped top-

Body Language

ping away with my fork and flipped it into the sink. Finally, late at night, I cooked and ate a whole box of wheat pilaf. The dimensions of a binge are increasing. It’s scary. I don’t dare look at my body.

Last week I awoke with an orgasm for the first time in ages. In my current state of dissociation and emptiness, it was no more moving than a sneeze, a mechanical release of tension with no particular pleasure, liveliness, womanliness, or joy. Just a body, releasing physical tension. Profoundly anti-erotic.

I’m trying to find my way back to myself, to let myself again be embodied, to work mind, heart, and body back into integration, into one home together. Compulsive overeating makes everything fly apart.

My task as a residential coordinator was to help twelve men living with chronic schizophrenia to make the transition from long-term residence in a mental institution to living in a halfway house. I saw a reflection in these men of my own pains to stay connected with the world. In their struggle to maintain some semblance of coherence, their effort to preserve some continuity of self, I was reminded of my own difficulty in remembering who I was. Their enormous loneliness seemed to mirror my own. I felt for these men a compassion and a kindness that I found difficult to extend to myself. With the rest of the staff, I shared the pleasure of trying to be of service, trying to help others to find a way home, even if I myself was so thoroughly lost.

One night I ate supper at the hospital and attended an evening house meeting. Ted,* a client whom I particularly liked, was full of medication that night: Thorazine, Stelazine, lithium. He twitched incessantly.

* To protect their privacy, the names of clients and staff have been changed.

1. When she walks into the store what mind-games is she playing?

2. How do secrecy, isolation, and shame work together?

3. What is she trying to get out of food?

4. What was the effect of compulsive eating on her enjoyment of food?

5. What does she say this compulsive eating is really about?

6. How does she describe the beginning of a binge?

7. Apart from anger, what other issues did she deal with through eating?

8. How does she describe her inner monologues?

9. What does this inner battle do to her awareness/attention?

10. What do you think she really wants from her parents?

11. What does addiction do to the body?