

My Family and Friends

Thought I Was the Golden Girl Who

Won Trophies and Top Grades. But Every Time

I Looked in the Mirror, All I Saw Was Fat. I Was Willing

to Do Anything to Be Thin. By Caroline Adams Miller

DYING TO BE THIN

I wanted to eat. I wanted to eat ice cream. I wanted it immediately.

My brain, crammed moments before with facts for a history paper, clicked off. Nothing mattered now except getting my fix.

I pushed away notes and papers and looked outside. It was starting to snow. It was always snowing or getting ready to snow in Cambridge during the endless, gray winters. Harvard's founders had probably delighted in this grim atmosphere, I often thought to myself during my four years there. With such unappealing weather seven months of the year, compounded by a bone-chilling wind that whipped off the Charles River and ruined even mild days, there was often no choice but to hunker down and study.

Harvard managed to look breathtak-

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ing during only two periods of the year: in September, when students arrived for classes and proud parents wandered dreamily about, and in June, when alumni returned for reunions and the dazzling weather and manicured lawns made donations a bit less difficult.

But tonight's bleak skies and blizzard forecasts could do little to alter my plans. As I shut my books and filed the notecards away, I mentally rehearsed my now-familiar routine. On the way to Harvard Square I would stop at the ice cream shop that had recently opened. There I would get several scoops of some exotic flavor with Oreo cookies crushed in it.

That would be step one on this evening's self-destructive journey.

I remember, even when I was very young, being extraordinarily concerned about whether or not I was fat. One of my earliest realizations that eating was not guilt-free came as I sat in a Howard Johnson's surrounded by my family and heard my father say playfully to the waitress, "And the vanilla milkshake goes to the heavy one."

I was shocked and mortified. My eight-year-old mind snapped to attention. Was he talking about me? A new, uneasy feeling crept into my being. I had just heard an adjective used to describe me that was totally unfamiliar. I was used to hearing people call me bright, funny, tall, big, athletic, and helpful. But heavy?



At age twelve, Caroline Adams Miller lived in the Spring Hill area of Bethesda and was a year-round competitive swimmer with the Amateur Athletic Union and on the Maryland country-club circuit. She broke local and state records in several strokes; here she holds an individual-medley trophy at Kenwood Country Club. It was, she says, one of the last times she didn't feel obsessed with her weight.

As a senior at National Cathedral, Caroline seemed to have everything going for her: She was editor of the school paper and a Bishop's scholar and had been granted early acceptance at Harvard and Yale. No one would have guessed she had been practicing a form of addictive weight control for almost two years.

Although my father had been teasing, the remark firmly implanted itself in my brain and I started looking in mirrors in a new way, usually turning this way and that, checking myself for telltale bulges and always deciding that I could afford to lose a few pounds. I also made a new enemy: the scale. This mechanical monster had the ability to ruin even bright, sunny days if the numbers didn't meet with my approval. More than once after stepping onto it—naked and before even a drop of water had crossed my lips in the morning—I dissolved in tears, cursing myself and my bloated body, resolving to be more vigilant in my pursuit of perfect thinness.

I wasn't alone in my obsession. At the age of nine I enrolled in Washington's all-female National Cathedral School, where most of my classmates shared the same interest in skinniness. Starting in fourth or fifth grade, we regularly made comments about one another's bodies, sparing no feelings. If a girl tended toward pudginess, we wasted no time in telling her. If she was very thin, she was put on a pedestal. And if at lunch one of us made the mistake of taking a helping of mashed potatoes, another would quickly chime in that it was fattening, and that a lake of butter in the center—with 100 calories per tablespoon—would make her even more corpulent.

Outside I shivered. It was colder and more slippery than I had anticipated. Under my blue parka I wore only an old sweatsuit, and my worn-out Nikes were a poor match for the rapidly forming ice base coating the streets. I had also forgotten to bring my

gloves, but none of this should have surprised me. When I decided to binge, all unrelated thoughts were relegated to the back of my mind.

I passed through the House archway and waved to the security guard. Kirkland was one of the thirteen Houses into which Harvard and Radcliffe students were divided during the final three years of undergraduate life. This was one of the smaller ones, with a reputation for attracting athletic men and women who majored predominantly in economics—one of the easiest, or "gut," fields. Because of Kirkland's high concentration of athletes, conversations at meals tended to revolve around meeting the goal weights set by coaches. I often felt that looks and weight were all that mattered to the intelligent people surrounding me, but I always joined in the conversations with enthusiasm.

Once outside the Kirkland walls, I headed left up Dunster Street, nodding at Betty Friedan, who was living on the campus for a year while she did some writing and teaching. I could only imag-



ine what kind of lecture she would give me if she knew what I was about to do. *You are throwing your God-given female power down the toilet in a vain effort to fit into a male-dominated society!* I could hear her shouting.

No matter. I knew that I was addicted to food and that there wasn't a lot she or anyone else could say to deter me from my binges. I had tried to stop these food orgies on my own, but the results had always been disappointing. I was resigned to the idea of practicing my expensive and harmful habit for the rest of



Even Caroline's college sweetheart, all-American lacrosse player Haywood Miller, had no idea she was bulimic. As they left on their honeymoon in 1983, she hoped that marriage would help her leave her destructive behavior behind.

night to continue on my way.

Before I hit the next ice cream parlor, I had to swing by the drugstore to get another tool I used in my endless quest to be thin—laxatives. Although I was planning to find a bathroom where I could throw up the thousands of calories I was in the process of ingesting, the massive dose of laxatives I would take afterwards would scour out any remaining culprit

calories.

I wasn't planning to buy the laxatives, however. I was going to steal them, a habit I had fallen into early in my bulimic career because I hadn't wanted the drugstore clerks to suspect that I had an eating disorder. Stealing had also become a form of denial that I was abusing my body: If I wasn't actually buying the laxatives, I wasn't really engaging in the crazy behavior.

I walked into the Rite-Aid and headed for the medications aisle. Reaching for the familiar pink box of pills that I knew from experience would act like Drano on my intestines, I was about to slip it into my pocket when I noticed a security guard sauntering down the aisle.

My heart started to pound. I was going to be arrested. *Wouldn't that be something?* I thought to myself. Just as I was preparing to exit college in a magna-cum-laude blaze of glory, I would destroy it all with an embarrassing shoplifting charge.

My parents would be stunned. *You have the money to buy things*, I could hear them say. *What were you thinking of? What did you need laxatives for?* And then I would have to tell them about the bulimia, which I couldn't do. No one could know that I was anything less than perfect, especially my parents. I needed approval too badly.

I feigned disinterest in the security guard. I would have to try to dispel his suspicions. I quickly loaded my arms with things I didn't need: toothpaste, cotton balls, Tampax, sugarless gum. Maybe now I would look like just another student taking a break from studying. I hustled toward the counter with my

my life—partly because I couldn't imagine ever telling anyone the full extent of my sickness and partly because I flat-out didn't want to. I liked food too much.

Within two minutes I was standing in line at Steve's Ice Cream, scanning the choices I had already memorized. Coconut-cream, banana-mocha, fudge-swirl, and butterscotch-marble ice creams all beckoned. I wanted everything but knew I'd attract attention if I ordered four scoops. So I settled on a sedate coconut-chocolate combination with crushed Oreo cookies and took a seat in the corner.

I had managed to avoid the extreme dieting phase until I entered National Cathedral's middle school: seventh and eighth grades. At that time, just about everyone was talking about boys and bodies, and I learned quickly that a good body attracted a guy and fat was a turn-off. Figurines, scale numbers, and various bizarre diets became universal concerns. Whenever I heard that someone weighed less than 100 pounds, I flew into a tizzy. Although I could never be described as chubby, I was taller than everyone else in the class and outweighed most of my peers by 10 to 50 pounds. It never clicked that taller might equal heavier; I just wanted to be the same as everyone else.

But having a good body—good enough to attract one of the prized St. Albans boys—involved more than being thin. It meant having breasts, too. But the Adams women were not known for their curves, and I was no exception. I often soothed myself with the knowledge that as a competitive swimmer I had less weight to drag around in the water. It

didn't erase my strong yearnings for a Gina Lollobrigida bustline, however.

Boy-girl parties, then cropping up with regularity, became the bane of my existence. While everyone else seemed able to snare and keep a boyfriend, I remained dateless, gradually convinced that I had a fatal personality flaw, a defective body, or both.

I could tell my parents were equally stymied by the lack of male attention. One night, after returning home from yet another party where I had sought refuge in the cake and pretzels after watching everyone else pair off in the corners and bedrooms, I went into my parents' room to let them know I was home.

"How was it?" my mother asked tentatively, half expecting me to burst into my familiar storm of tears.

"Awful, as usual," I said mournfully, trying my best not to cry.

As I closed their door and headed down the hall to my room, I heard my mother say anxiously to my half-asleep father, "Bill, have we done something wrong?"

Self-hatred began to fill me as I pushed my sundae glass away and prepared to leave Steve's. Just that day I had been surveying my body in the mirror, vowing that I would drop at least one dress size by the time of my wedding in several months.

I had written down instructions to myself about what to eat and what not to eat, ordering myself not to binge. Well, that resolve had disintegrated within a few hours. *You really are a loser if food has got such a grip on you*, I thought to myself as I stepped back into the chilly

buys, hoping the ruse was a success.

The bored girl at the cash register looked familiar. Was she in one of my classes? Now I couldn't openly pay for the Correctol; I would just have to manage to steal it without getting caught. I slipped the box into my pocket with a practiced move, praying that all my other purchases would keep the clerk too occupied to notice my actions.

Hurry, hurry, I mentally urged her as she rang them up. Not only was I eager to get out of the store, but the sundae had whetted my appetite for more food. I knew my mind wouldn't be stilled until I had eaten as much as I could possibly hold, but I also had to work fast during these binges because the longer the food stayed in my stomach, the less chance I had of getting it back up. If that happened, I would have to deal with the thought of gaining weight—a tormenting

prospect. The food had to come up at any cost.

I made an innocuous comment about the weather to the clerk, glancing around to see where the guard was. She responded halfheartedly, which meant she probably hadn't noticed anything amiss about my behavior. As I nervously headed for the door, zipping the bag into my knapsack, I held my breath, hoping the security guard hadn't noticed my theft. I felt perspiration under my arms despite the frosty night.

I got outside without a question, half expecting to hear alarms clanging or to feel the firm grasp of the guard on my shoulder. But I was safe again. *One of these days*, I chided myself, *you are going to get caught*. The possible future consequences of my actions didn't interest me much, however. Instant gratification was the name of the game.

Not having to worry about dates in high school brought several bonuses, not the least of which was having the phone silent most of the time. The other benefit was the time it afforded me to pack my résumé with good grades and college-application-enhancing jobs and hobbies. Getting good grades at Cathedral was no easy feat, however. The 60-plus girls in my class had achieved mightily to gain admittance, and those same 60 now sought to rise to the top of the class and outdo one another in every way.

One of the most dreaded courses was medieval history, which older students had warned us about as sixth-graders as one of the toughest classes we would ever encounter. This fact was driven home to me in one of the first sessions.

"How do you spell 'medieval'?" one unsuspecting girl asked.

"It has 'die' in it," the teacher answered, only half-jokingly.

The class moved at a fast pace, covering everything from the fall of the Roman Empire to the Byzantine period. Homework assignments ranged from lengthy readings in difficult religious books to creating a mosaic masterpiece out of construction-paper scraps. But what gave me the most trouble was memorizing the various routes the Visigoths, Huns, and Crusaders had taken over the centuries. The night before the biggest exam of the year I burst into tears, terrified that the multicolored routes on the maps would never register in my brain.

I walked into my parents' bedroom, tearfully holding the stained maps. "Will you love me if I don't get a good grade on this exam?" I asked my father. "I'll never learn all this by tomorrow."

My dad took a look at the map and said, "You can learn it. You can do anything you set your mind to." He had also made a point over the years of telling us that he had been number two in his high school class but that he should have been number one. The message was clear; I went back to study for a few more hours until, exhausted, I fell asleep.

The rest of high school was filled with courses like medieval history, and our grades became increasingly more important. We knew that the cut-off year for getting bad grades—anything below a B, many of us thought—was eighth grade; in ninth grade everything went on a transcript that would be sent on with our college applications. And admission to Ivy League institutions, or places of comparable reputation, was the Holy Grail of which most of us were in hot pursuit.

Sometimes this college scramble led people, including me, to do and say

Where to Find Help in the Washington Area

Here is a guide to local self-help, outpatient, and inpatient programs for bulimia and other eating disorders.

Self-Help

Overeaters Anonymous (locally, 642-3437; world headquarters, 213/542-8363). Adapted from the successful twelve-step program of Alcoholics Anonymous, this is a no-scales, no-diet, no-dues, no-fees organization that creates a strong mutual-support network. OA offers more than 100 meetings weekly throughout the Washington area, and the emphasis is on positive reinforcement and voluntary action: It is a "suggestion program" that does not use coercion.

The National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders (ANAD), Box 7, Highland Park, Ill. 60035; 312/831-3438. Hotline and free referral service for therapy and self-help groups.

Outpatient Programs

Center for Behavioral Medicine (6191 Executive Blvd., Rockville, 20852; 468-8980). Sixteen-week program of individual and group therapy. Group therapy, \$45; individual therapy, \$30 to \$90 per session. Affiliate centers in Baltimore (301/764-7462) and Richmond (804/270-4111).

Chevy Chase Psychiatric Center (525 Wisconsin Ave., NW, Suite 603, DC 20015; 966-0050). Individual, group, and family therapy and nutrition counseling. Fees range from \$40 to \$60; sliding-scale fees available on an individual basis.

George Washington University Medical Center (2150 Pennsylvania Ave., NW, DC 20037; 676-3457). Individual, group, and family therapy. Rates range from \$55 to \$65.

Georgetown University Hospital (3800 Reservoir Rd., NW, DC 20007; 625-3674). Individual and outpatient psychotherapy for eating disorders. A ten-week bulimia group program (\$250) meets once a week. Individual therapy, \$55.

The Growth Center (11119 Rockville Pk., Rockville, 20852; 984-0234). Psychiatric therapy to change the pattern of disturbed eating and understand the problems that led to the disorder. Individual therapy, \$65 to \$75; group therapy, \$35.

Roundhouse Square Psychiatric Center (1444 Duke St., Alexandria, 22314; 836-7130). Six-month program consisting of individual and group therapy. Costs range from \$60 to \$100 per session.

Southern Maryland Family and Child Center (9135 Piscataway Rd., Suite 240, Clinton, 20735; 301/868-8280) and **Greenbelt Family and Child Center** (7525 Greenway Center Dr., Suite 104, Greenbelt, 20770; 982-3437). Individual, group, and family therapy. Initial consultation, \$95; subsequent sessions, \$35 to \$85.

Inpatient Programs

Dominion Hospital (2960 Sleepy Hollow Rd., Falls Church, 22044; 536-2000). Individual, group, and family psychiatric therapy for adolescents and adults combined with physical therapy, nutrition sessions, and educational classes. Fee is \$415 per day, plus an \$80-an-hour psychiatric fee. Free outpatient support groups for individuals and families.

Springwood Psychiatric Institute (Rt. 4, PO Box 50, Leesburg, 22075; 703/777-0800). Individual, group, and family therapy. Inpatient fee approximately \$18,000 monthly; outpatient therapy \$80 to \$90.

—JANIS BERMAN

things about others that resembled guerilla warfare. Once a girl in my short-story class received a rave review from our attractive male teacher about a composition she had written. She was a talented writer, but her good grades became suspect and before long a rumor about her and the teacher was making the rounds, always ending with a smirky comment about how she earned her A's.

I wound my way through the narrow Cambridge streets to a popular soda shop where I had become wonderful friends with the thick milk shakes that this famous old saloon had been dishing out for decades.

Just seeing the ads for the quaint store, with its offers of free sundaes at certain hours of the day, made me start to think binge thoughts.

Once inside, I gave my order for a double-thick vanilla frappe, as they called it in New England. I gazed at the rows of toppings lining the marble counter and listened to the whirring blender. Colorful jimmies, peanuts, chocolate chips, coconut, and other ice cream accoutrements beckoned. I wanted to ask the woman to toss some jimmies and chocolate chips into my shake, but I knew normal people didn't do that

kind of thing. And I was striving to look and act normal even though I was feeling crazier by the minute.

I paid for the drink and headed back into the cold night, pulling deeply on the straw and enjoying the icy sweetness. Just as I was letting myself surrender to the numbness this behavior always brought on, I noticed some people I knew coming toward me on the street.

Panicked, I ducked into the Harvard Square newsstand and buried myself in the corner. I didn't look or feel out of place there. On my left were some beefy Italian men ogling spreads in the porn magazines lining the shelves. On my right were two young women wearing long, saffron-colored robes and white turbans, intently discussing the "Path." Harvard Square had a reputation for attracting a diversity of people and activities, something that had thrown my parents when they first deposited my older sister at Harvard in the fall of 1978. Buddhists, drug dealers, magicians, and musical performers were part of the changing scenery; among this mélange I just felt like one more weirdo.

In eleventh grade, my obsessive focus on getting into the "right" college reached a new height. The

first major hurdle my classmates and I faced was the Preliminary Scholastic Aptitude Tests, affectionately known as the "peesats." Taken near the beginning of the school year, these innocuous multiple-choice exams had the potential to make or break students' college applications and self-esteem. Doing well on them could vault a student into the National Merit semifinalist ranks, while poor performance could drive her into a self-doubting abyss of despair and push her to enroll in SAT-preparation courses.

The day the scores were available at school, a long line formed outside the college counselor's office. I joined the throng, my heart beating impatiently. Perhaps the numbers would bear me out as an intellectual fraud, which I felt I was a great deal of the time. I could BS on the essays and exams we were given as well as the next person—usually getting the required high grades and laudatory comments from teachers—but there was no fooling the multiple-choice sheets and the number-two lead pencils.

Finally, it was my turn to enter the counselor's office. "You did very, very well, Caroline," she said, smiling brightly. "You are in the 98th percentile of the country in intelligence!"

I glanced at the two numbers, quickly doubling the verbal score and adding the math to it. The total indicated who would be without honors, commended, or a semifinalist. "Will I be a National Merit semifinalist?" I asked hopefully.

"No, you'll be commended. The District of Columbia's cut-off this year is higher than ever. You fall short by four points."

My heart sank. "But I live in Maryland!" I protested.

"That's true, but because you go to school in the city, you are judged on those standards. If you went to school a few miles down the road, you would be a semifinalist, but then you wouldn't have the privilege of getting the education you are getting here."

One of the privileges of going to Cathedral was hammered home as I left the office and immediately had the test results yanked from my hands by one of my classmates. "We have the same score!" Sheila chortled, holding her results next to mine. Everyone in the line looked at us as she told them what we had gotten. I was furious, partly because she had invaded my privacy and partly because everyone would now know I was "only" a commended student. Angrily, I grabbed the precious scores and headed for the phone to call my parents with the news.

Later that day, I chanced upon the nosy Sheila in study hall, going from one member of my class to another, asking

Eating Disorders: A Reading List

Here are books about bulimia and other disorders recommended by specialists:

Bulimarexia: The Binge/Purge Cycle, by Marlene Boskind-White, PhD, and William C. White Jr., PhD (Norton, 1983). The Whites, who have treated more than 2,000 women, define bulimia as a learned behavior that can be unlearned, and explain their group-therapy program.

Bulimia: The Binge-Purge Compulsion, by Janice M. Cauwels (Doubleday, 1983). This straightforward book provides a comprehensive overview of bulimia and is supplemented by interviews with patients.

Fat Is a Feminist Issue: A Self-Help Guide for Compulsive Eaters, by Susie Orbach (Berkley, 1978). Written by a psychotherapist, this book uses case histories and discussion to help readers understand "fatness" in a societal context and free themselves from compulsive patterns.

Fat Is a Feminist Issue II: A Program to Conquer Compulsive Eating, by Susie Orbach (Berkley, 1982). In this step-by-step guide to destroying the binge-purge cycle, the author explains how to liberate yourself from an obsession with food.

Feeding the Hungry Heart, by Geneen Roth (Bobbs-Merrill, 1982). Roth approaches eating disorders within the context of a woman's hungers, such as those for attention, love, and identity.

The Hungry Self: Women, Eating, and Identity, by Kim Chernin (Times Books,

1985). In this controversial book, Chernin explains her theory behind eating disorders, which is based on the identity crisis caused by today's ambivalence toward traditional womanhood.

The Obsession: Reflections on the Tyranny of Slenderness, by Kim Chernin (Harper Colophon Books, 1982). The author explores the reasons behind society's demand that women be thin and the result that women are forced to dislike their bodies.

Starving for Attention, by Cherry Boone O'Neill (Continuum, 1982). Singer Pat Boone's oldest daughter tells of her ten-year struggle with anorexia and bulimia, and her triumph over them.

When Will We Laugh Again: Living and Dealing with Anorexia Nervosa and Bulimia, edited by Barbara P. Kinoy (Columbia University Press, 1984). Written in collaboration with the American Anorexia/Bulimia Association, this book describes the experiences of sufferers and their families in phases of their illnesses and includes a comprehensive discussion of treatments.

Why Are They Starving Themselves? Understanding Anorexia Nervosa and Bulimia, by Elaine Landau (Stein & Day, 1984). In this readable book, which balances patient accounts with general description, Landau discusses the personality types, physiological effects, and treatment philosophies of bulimia and anorexia.

—KATHERINE DUNBAR

them their scores and revealing all the ones she knew about. Such is the stuff of private schools.

Cathedral was not unique in this sense, however. Other schools had stories that rivaled the ones circulating in our halls, but we liked to think that our classes, our students, and our college-acceptance results were better than those at other local private schools, especially Holton-Arms, Sidwell Friends, Georgetown Day, Maret, and Madeira. And we liked to talk about the plethora of ambassadors, senators, and Cabinet members whose daughters graced the school, as if the line of gleaming black limousines and chauffeured cars outside the school every afternoon justified the grim competitiveness that permeated every minute of the long days.

Once again certain that the danger of detection had passed, I pressed on to my next destination, David's Cookies. The sugar I had eaten was racing through my body, giving my cravings an even keener edge. My robot personality took over.

David's was redolent of melted butter and chocolate. I quickly picked out two pounds of cookies, which were rolling out of the big Dutch ovens as I watched. They all looked divine, but I settled on a combination of chunky fudge, peanut butterscotch, coconut macaroons, and pecan shortbread. I crammed a few cookies in my mouth while I paid, put the rest in my deep coat pockets, and kept going.

By the time I reached eleventh grade I had been practicing a form of addictive weight control for almost one year, and it was sucking me in deeper and deeper despite all my attempts to extricate myself. Although I believe I would have picked the behavior up eventually because of my perfectionist personality, a simple lunch one day at school had been enough to get me going.

I was in the Cathedral cafeteria late one afternoon with two friends, Cheryl and Gina, when I noticed that they were eating an extraordinary amount of food. Cheryl had just finished her third bacon, lettuce, and tomato sandwich loaded with mayonnaise and catsup and was preparing to down a stack of ice cream sandwiches that were piled next to her plate.

I enviously asked how she managed to stay so slim while eating foods I had only dreamed of since beginning one of my countless diets in eighth grade. At that time I had come to the painful decision that I was far too fat and that all traces of excess weight on my body had to be eradicated. I had bought a number of diet books and memorized the calorie counts

of everything from an egg (80) to a slice of chocolate cake (300) to a stick of gum (10), resolving to keep the daily tallies under 1,000 calories while swimming three to five hours every day with a competitive swim team.

Just about every food outside the vegetable family had become verboten at that point, and in a fit of pique I had even announced to my parents that I was going to become a vegetarian because meat was too fattening. "Also, I won't eat anything that has a face," I had informed them dramatically. From then on, dinner—and every other meal—had become a contest of wills with no apparent winner.

At my question, Cheryl glanced over at Gina, who was also eating a massive amount of food, and laughed knowingly. She chose not to answer, so I just continued to watch her march through several more plates of food, interspersed with ice cream breaks.

There was nothing Cheryl and Gina omitted. Both ate several bowls of cottage cheese, a few apples and oranges apiece, mountains of mashed potatoes swimming in butter, and stewed tomatoes. Cathedral's dining-room style was buffet, so they just made several trips back and forth to the serving tables, weighing down their plates every time.

My own tray forgotten, I kept my eyes riveted on my companions, fascinated by their eating. Cheryl swam several hours daily, too, but I knew that activity couldn't begin to burn off the gargantuan number of calories she was ingesting. Unlike me, she had a slim, muscular body that cut through the water quickly in workouts, so if she had some kind of training secret, I wanted to know what it was.

After what seemed an endless orgy, the two girls groaned and patted their protruding stomachs, looking at each other and laughing. "Are you ready?" Cheryl asked Gina. Gina, whose normally flat stomach was straining the buttons on her green seersucker uniform, smiled and nodded.

I followed the two as they dumped their empty plates in the kitchen and headed for the building's front door. They detoured, however, as we neared the exit, instead walking upstairs to the deserted second floor. I followed. "Where are you going?" I pestered.

"Don't tell anyone," Cheryl said conspiratorially as we mounted the stairs, "but we're going to throw up now."

My mouth dropped open. So that's why they had been eating so much. I vaguely recalled hearing about this kind of thing from a classmate several years earlier who had commented that her older sister and college friends put feathers

down their throats after meals to get rid of their food and stay thin. I had been surprised, but it hadn't had much impact on me. Later I had read articles about how bulimia—the binge/purge syndrome—was sweeping the country, but I had never knowingly met anyone who actually indulged in the practice.

I stood outside the bathroom and listened to Cheryl and Gina lose their lunches. I began to feel queasy as I heard

My mind whirled with what I had just witnessed. Maybe it wasn't such a terrible way to keep weight off, I reasoned.

them heaving and gasping for several minutes. A few times they called out to each other, either urging the other on or laughing about what had just come up. "It's great how the ice cream comes up so easily," I heard Cheryl say gleefully.

I was glad the second-floor hall was empty. I would have been appalled if anyone had come to use the bathroom. I could just see myself explaining that my two friends had the flu.

Finally Cheryl and Gina emerged, their faces red and puffy, eyes watering. But they both appeared happy, even jubilant. "Do you both do this a lot?" I asked tentatively.

They nodded, looking at each other and giggling. "Don't tell anyone," Cheryl warned. "If my parents knew, they'd kill me. Besides, my mother is happy if I can just be thin and swim well. She doesn't need to know how."

I promised not to divulge their secret. "How did you learn to do it?" I pressed Cheryl, a little hurt that she had never confided in me about it. She and I had traded diet secrets for years, going so far as to police each other, especially during the intense summer swimming season.

Cheryl jerked her thumb toward Gina. "Her mom told her how," she said. Gina's mother was a beautiful former model, married to a prominent senator.

Gina chimed in. "My mom says all models do it. It's the only way to be as thin as the agencies want them to be. She doesn't mind me doing it. Sometimes we even do it together!" she laughed.

I walked back across the street to school with them, my mind whirling with what I had just witnessed. Maybe it wasn't such a terrible way to keep weight off. In fact, it sounded like nirvana. If I could eat all my favorite foods—as much as I wanted—and not gain an ounce, then it wouldn't hurt to try it, I reasoned. So as Gina and Cheryl

merrily discussed what they would binge on for dinner that night, I decided to give this new diet a shot.

Baskin-Robbins was next. My eyes were glazing over, and my head felt as if a wad of cotton had been inserted where my brain ought to be. Impatient with any delay that prevented me from completing my rounds, I became belligerent, striding down the bumpy sidewalks and making my displeasure known to anyone who impeded my progress.

As I walked into Baskin-Robbins, I felt tears starting in my eyes. I was out of control and nauseated from the richness of the food, but I couldn't stop. I wanted to be back in my room going to sleep. I wanted to be normal.

I glanced at a couple next to me, each buying a single-dip cone of vanilla ice cream. I was angry that they looked happy. I was also angry that they could order a single dip. I could no more order a single dip than an alcoholic could content himself with half a glass of wine. I needed that final gallon of ice cream to quench my sugar craving and to make me sick enough that all the food would come up easily.

I ordered a mixture of Pralines 'n' Cream and Jamoca Almond Fudge. I also asked for four spoons so the clerk would think I was going to share my gallon. No such luck. With the cookies in my pockets, I was planning to make a huge crunchy mess and finish it all myself.

I paid for my ice cream and headed for the history department's building, where I knew I would find an unoccupied bathroom. It was late, and there would not be many people there.

A few minutes later I locked myself into a musty bathroom on the bottom floor of the ancient building. This place was ideal: There was only one toilet, so I had complete privacy.

I sat on the floor, coat buttoned, and rested against the wall. I crammed the remaining cookies into the ice cream, sprinkling crumbs on the floor. I began to scoop the mixture into my mouth with two fingers, barely tasting what I was eating.

Faster and faster I worked. I felt as if I were about to give birth to a basketball, and the sweetness of what I ate was cloying. I no longer wanted it, but there was no turning back. I leaned on my elbow, hoping this position would ease the cramps and fullness.

Scenes of ancient-Roman feasts floated through my mind. I remembered reading in history books about lives of indulgence, about men and women enjoying multi-course meals punctuated by trips to the vomitorium. In all the illus-

trations the Romans leaned on their elbows, the position I now found myself in. We certainly are doomed to repeat the sins of our fathers, I noted mirthlessly to myself.

I licked the remnants of my ice cream from the carton and looked at my watch. I had left my room less than an hour ago, so my absence wouldn't look suspicious yet. I also had not let much time elapse since the start of my binge, so I would probably be successful in getting it all up.

I threw my coat into the corner of the bathroom and looked in the mirror with disgust. My face looked pudgy. I saw plain features and no cheekbones. I was breaking out, too. My outside reflected how I felt inside—terrible.

Even in my misery I recognized the ridiculousness of my predicament. I knew a lot of people would have loved to be in my shoes. I was from a fine, upper-middle-class family in Bethesda, Maryland, and had enjoyed many of life's finest pleasures. I had had awards and laurels heaped upon me from an early age for academic and athletic pursuits, and now I was at a school that many considered the finest in the world. I was going to get married in a few months to a wonderful man. We had begun dating in the waning months of my sophomore year and his senior year, but within two weeks I had announced to him that we were going to get married. While I had definitely felt in love, I had also had an overwhelming fear that no one else would ever have me. Luckily, he seemed attached to me as well, so I had been thrilled when he presented me with a beautiful engagement ring.

I had everything to live for. So why was I here again, angry, lonely, and depressed, standing in a bathroom with a grossly distended stomach and wishing I were dead?

Enough thinking: It was time to start. Putting the seat of the toilet up, I leaned over the antiseptic-smelling basin and held my hair back with my left hand. I jammed two fingers down my throat and felt the familiar bile rising. Harder and harder I thrust, gouging the back of my throat in the process.

All of a sudden the food came up in gushes, splattering all over the toilet seat, the floor, and my clothes. Disgusted, yet elated at my success, I kept probing, trying to make sure I was getting everything up. To make the food come up faster, I balled my hand into a fist and punched my stomach hard, repeating it with a vengeance. I would have black-and-blue marks there tomorrow.

For several minutes this torturous activity continued. The vomit became tinged with red streaks of blood from my raked throat. Finally I had nothing more

to give and was heaving drily, my stomach screaming in pain from the blows and repeated contractions.

Exhausted, filthy, and despondent, I slumped on the floor and began to cry. The back of my hand throbbed where my teeth had scraped away the skin, and my throat was so swollen and sore that it hurt to swallow. *When will this all stop?* I wondered in despair as I lay my cheek against the cold floor and let the sobs overtake my body.

No one who knew me would have recognized this emotional mess on the dirty bathroom floor. I felt like a closet junkie, slowly killing myself with food instead of heroin. While the choice of drugs was different, the obsession and misery were the same. Feeling utterly alone, I stood up and began to clean myself and the bathroom so I could return to my room.

I was bone-tired. Scared, too. While I hated these binges, hated the powerlessness and misery they stirred up in me, I knew that the degradation and pain would probably not prevent me from returning here tomorrow night to do the same thing again.

That one lunch in the school dining room in tenth grade altered my existence for the next seven years, wiping almost all joy, enthusiasm, and happiness from my life. Almost overnight I became addicted to binging on mountains of food and then purging—through vomiting, laxative overdoses, or compulsive exercising. I became an expert at concealing my binges, manipulating, hiding, and stealing to support my habit. And I angrily blamed the world for my disease, castigating a society that expected women not only to be bright, witty, exuberant, and beautiful, but also to fit into a pair of size-4 Calvin Klein jeans.

I had entered a seven-year phase of classic denial that nearly killed me several times, not unlike the denial alcoholics and drug addicts have to face before they can recover. When I entered Harvard University in September 1979, I naively thought that the change in scenery and meals would give me the independence and freedom to leave bulimia behind. Instead, the problem got worse, fueled by the dozens of men and women around me who practiced the same behavior—some openly and some not so openly.

The "geographical cure" failed me again in 1983, when marriage did not magically release me from the food prison. Although I was always able to stop binging and purging for periods ranging from a week to several months—which gave me the illusion that I could quit whenever I wanted—the bulimia always

returned with a ferocity that surprised and scared me. And still I told no one.

I finally hit bottom in early 1984 and sought assistance from a free, self-help fellowship for compulsive eaters, where I learned that I had a three-fold disease—emotional, physical, and spiritual. My whole way of thinking and reacting to stress would have to change, I was told, which would involve a complete overhaul of my personality. My disease had left me emotionally frozen at the level of a fifteen-year-old, so I had a lot of growing up to do—fast.

One of the hardest things I faced early in my recovery was accepting responsibility for my bulimia and not blaming anyone else, as was my tendency. Very gently it was pointed out to me that no one had ever held me down and made me eat.

I also came to realize that it didn't matter if my bulimia was the result of, say, having been dropped on my head as a baby; the future was all that really mattered. To those who spend vast sums of money on therapy to pin down the genesis of their disorder, I would offer a comment made to me: "Look back, but don't stare."

It is often said that the program I am in is simple, but not easy. It takes a commitment of time and energy, as well as a willingness to work continually with others who are still bingeing or are new to the program. I attend several meetings each week and talk on the phone every day with my sponsor and people who call me for assistance. I am aware that my food addiction is out there waiting for me to get cocky and pretend to be a "normal" eater.

I used to eat at the drop of a hat—sometimes bingeing and purging as often as fifteen times a day—so I had to relearn how to eat, what genuine hunger felt like, and what a normal portion was. With support from other recovering compulsive eaters, I began to stick to the program's guidelines: three meals a day with nothing in between, and complete abstinence from sugar and white-flour products—research shows that those products metabolize differently in many binge eaters' bodies and set off irresistible food cravings. Every morning I call someone in the program and outline my day's meal plan.

My program is also one of rigorous honesty. I have had to go back to people I have harmed or lied to, and return to stores I have stolen from, to make verbal or financial amends. Although this frightened me, I was told I would have to be thorough in my housecleaning or I would be likely to return to bingeing from unresolved feelings of remorse. I was also told that until I shut the door on my

past, I would be unable to become the honest, trustworthy, and happy person I wanted to be.

Probably the most important aspect of the program was its suggestion that we develop a Higher Power of our own conception that we could rely on for recovery and that would enable us to stop thinking that we alone—through the force of will—could lick our problems. For some people, a Higher Power means the wisdom of the program, Nature, or love. For most people, it means a personal relationship with God, which was a difficult step for me, a former atheist, to take.

I only began to believe that something greater than myself was working through me when the binges started to lessen in frequency and I was flooded with joy and hope. After a while, it was arrogant for me *not* to believe in the existence of a loving God.

Another difficult step to take was letting my family and friends in on my horrible secret.

My parents and my husband were shocked that I had been able to conceal it, but bulimia is one of the easiest disorders to hide. After all, what is more normal than disappearing to a bathroom after a meal to "powder one's nose"? And who is going to barge in to find out what is really going on?

What they found most difficult to accept, however—particularly my husband—was that there was very little they could do to assist me in my recovery. The only people I trusted and who said things that made sense to me were others who had risked their lives and reputations to do the same sick things with food that I had done. I had to immerse myself in my program and confide in other recovering compulsive eaters to get the depth of understanding and reassurance I so desperately needed.

I consider myself lucky to have escaped from my seven years of bulimia with only a handful of medical complications: heartbeat irregularities, dental problems, digestive disturbances, and menstrual and hormonal difficulties. Others I know have suffered ruptured esophaguses, goiters, ovarian destruction, intestinal ulcers, and completely eroded teeth. Some, like singer Karen Carpenter, have died from bulimic complications.

People frequently ask me if I plan to continue attending my self-help meetings, talking with other recovering compulsive eaters and working to spread the message of the program. I always respond that, God willing, I plan to. Just as a diabetic doesn't stop taking insulin, I can't afford to leave behind the medicine that keeps me alive and growing. □