

Introduction

'A good supper and strong tea restored their strength'

There is nothing like hunting a tiger to work up an appetite. So Bevis and Mark find after a day punting a raft around their island, tracking prints at the water's edge. Some tiger or Red Injun or Man Friday has been stealing their rashers of bacon and they are out to find him.

The boys, heroes of Richard Jefferies' *Bevis*, return to their camp an hour after sunset, defeated by a rising gale. No sign of the bacon thief. Morale is low. There is only one thing to be done. The boys lose not a moment. 'The gate was padlocked, the kettle put on, and they sat down to rest. A good supper and strong tea restored their strength.' When I read *Bevis* for the first time, aged twenty-seven, on a July day as hot and clear as boys with a raft could wish for, I paused at this island picnic.

'A good supper and strong tea restored their strength.' Such a throwaway sentence. All the more so in a book in which Bevis's eager imagination conjures sea voyages to the Tropics, battles between Roman legionaries, spitting cobras, witches and genies, without ever leaving his father's grounds.

Other readers would have pressed on to find out if Bevis and Mark, taking turns on the night watch, manage to shoot the tiger through their stockade. (They don't. Bevis

falls asleep with his back to the wall. That's what comes of a good supper.) I kept turning the line over and over. 'A good supper and strong tea restored their strength.' It seemed to strike at something that had eluded me for a long time. Fifteen years.

A day later, I was still worrying away at the sentence, as if it were a linseed stubbornly stuck between two teeth. What comfort, what warmth there was in that supper and strong tea. What a lifting effect it has on the boys. And what a strange and unfamiliar idea it presented to me: that a good meal might restore a tired body and defeated spirits.

For fifteen years before taking *Bevis* off the shelf, I had been hungry. Sometimes acutely so, sometimes less, but always going to bed each night empty and cold. For two of those fifteen years, I had been starving. How we misuse the word. 'I'm starving!' we announce over elevenses biscuits because breakfast was at seven and lunch won't be till one. 'Starving' – it sounds so overdone. But I was. I cannot pretend to know what it is like to starve because your country is in famine or because you are held political prisoner. But I do know what it is like, slowly and with quiet and determined purpose, to starve your body near to death.

Let us call it by its proper name from the beginning. Anorexia. It is a difficult word. It does not come easily. *Anorexia nervosa*. You cannot mumble it under your breath and hope no one has heard. I do not like the length or unfamiliarity of the word, nor its harsh X, like a pair of crossed femur bones. You think of X-rays and skeletons.

Obese, plump. These are rounded, greedy words: well-fed vowels and full, buxom Ps and Bs. Peter Paul Rubens lends his name so seductively to fleshly bodies – *Rubenesque* – not just because his painted ladies, his Graces and

Delilahs, are so comely, so peaches-and-creamy, but because that rolling R, that bouncing B insist on ampleness and appetite. Skeleton, starving, anorexia. These are thin words. Their Ks, Ls and Ts are like spines. That V is a pelvic bone. The X of anorexia is angular and alien.

Through my many years of anorexia I have shied away from the word. When I have told people of my thin, starved teens I have often couched it in some feeble half-truth: 'I had some difficulty eating.' At other times I have been vague. I talk of a mystery 'illness' or 'an eating disorder'. This is too general. It might describe an illimitable appetite for junk and sugar, or bulimia with its bingeing and purging. No, anorexia is the only faithful description of my particular illness.

Besides, 'eating disorder' is wrong. This baggy catch-all is to blame for many of the failings in the way such illnesses are treated. It is the mistake of some doctors to treat only the disordered habits of eating. A patient is admitted to a clinic and prescribed a meal plan. If she eats what is advised, she will gain weight, and, all boxes ticked, can be sent home. But left to her own devices, left to feed herself, the anorexic reverts to the old, destructive ways. It is not disordered eating which defines this illness. It is the disordered mind.

How can I fully describe the chaos, misery and misrule of an anorexic's thinking? The mess and devastation of an illness that, while starving a body of its flesh, strips the mind of all rational thought?

Imagine a healthy mind as a library. As pleasant a room as a reader could wish. The books are shelved in glass-fronted cases, alphabetically and by subject. High, shuttered windows give a view of the sea, a garden square,

or chalk downland – as you wish. There is an armchair, with a table and lamp, and a polished top stacked with favourite titles. In an ordered mind, this light, tidy library is a refuge, a retreat from a tiring world, a room where you can sit and read and gather your thoughts.

Now let me describe a different sort of library, this one belonging to the disordered, anorexic mind. The bookcases have fallen, their glass fronts smashed, their contents in disarray across the floor. The windows, too, have shattered. Rain and damp have got at the books, spoiling their bindings and soaking the pages. The chair, in which you have been accustomed to sit your whole life, has been knocked on its side and cannot be righted under the weight of the toppled cases. The table is splintered and the lamp cracked. What is to be done with a room as desolate as this? What is there to salvage? It is not a retreat, it is wreckage. At fifteen, this was the state of my mind.

Anorexia is an illness of wretched isolation. It traps you inside your thoughts and those thoughts become more and more frightening, less and less in your control. You want desperately for someone to help, to heave cases upright, set your chair by the window, return books to their shelves, while at the same time fearing more than anything that intervention might mean being forced to eat. I would sooner have taken my chances with the chaos than be made to eat a baked potato.

One of the great unfathomables of any mental illness is why this person and not that? Why are some people equable, cheerful, take misfortune in their stride and others subject to irrational glooms and torments? Another is: why that manifestation? Why anorexia, and not depression?

Self-harm, and not drugs? Drink, and not gambling?

In my own case, I can only answer that it was temperament. I take things to heart; berate myself for past mistakes; feel my own failures keenly. I am anxious, perfectionist by nature and dismayed by any falling short. These are traits common to many anorexics. The wish to impose checks on one's body – to make it lean, unobtrusive, spare – is the result of this sort of character losing its grip on reason. So, when I experienced a prolonged period of unhappiness in my early teens, more lowering and debilitating than the usual adolescent growing pains, it was anorexia which seized me, not drink or drugs or an obsessive compulsive disorder.

It is difficult, when it comes to any illness of the mind, to mark the moment between well and unwell, before and after – the tipping point between low spirits and consuming depression. But in my case, there is a date in the diary. Every day before was without anorexia, every day after marked by it.

I was thirteen and it was towards the end of the 2001 summer holiday. An eight-week release from a school which was to me more hateful than Nicholas Nickleby's Dotheboys or Jane Eyre's Lowood. At eleven, I had moved from a cheerful, mixed primary school to an academic, unsisterly, all-girls' school. I did not take to it. I was small, slight, shy, sick with nerves on the school bus each morning, and sicker as we approached the gates.

I had some friends and an adored Latin teacher. But it wasn't – *I* wasn't – a good fit. I felt diminished and oppressed by the dark-red brick of the main school building and the chequered marble of the central hallway.

The first year was unsettled, the second miserable. It

was a brutal, competitive place. Two-thirds of the girls in each year group went on to Oxbridge and there was what the school called ‘plenty of healthy rivalry’ and I would call bullying. It was generally dismissed as ‘high spirits’ or ‘hormones’. Whatever it was, it was soul-destroying. I was more shrunken – only mentally, not yet physically – and more cowed each term.

Late in that summer holiday between the second and third years, anxious about the September start of term, something in my mind gave way. It was a fine, amber August day of high blue skies. Gloucestershire, where we were spending the holidays, might have been Granada. We had been swimming outdoors and I was wearing a black swimsuit. Standing on the edge of the pool, wet from the water but drying off quickly in the sun, I felt, for the first time, that there was something wrong, irreparably wrong, with my body.

My skin didn’t seem to fit. I was ugly, formless, lumpen. I was revolted by the heaviness of my limbs and my swollen, inflated stomach. To any outward observer, I was the same slim girl I had been ten minutes before. But there had been some internal tremor, some shaking of that carefully ordered library, and a bookcase, perhaps more than one, had come crashing down.

I had been happy and relieved to be away that summer, out of school, in the garden with my brother Ed. It was the contrast of that relief, I believe, with the prospect of the return to school the following week that impressed so heavily. I had been unhappy before, but something new had asserted itself. I went back to school troubled by new compulsions. I must be smaller. I must be quieter. I must be less conspicuous.

I resolved not to visit the tuck shop at morning break. I was not to eat sweets or chocolate, biscuits or crisps. There was to be no wavering, no giving in to temptation. It was easy, remarkably so. Once gone, I didn't miss them. How firm I was in my determination. But how plump and ungainly I was, how lacking in self-control when it came to other foods. I made a new resolution. I would give up all red meat: steak and hamburgers, salt beef and bacon. That, too, was easy.

I gave up chicken and fish, then pasta, potatoes, bread and rice. But even on this restricted diet I was fatter, slower, more lumbering. I gave up eggs, cheese, butter, yogurt and dairy milk. I gave up any snack between meals and all desserts. I would not eat in the school dining room or in the street or on the bus.

Through that third year at school, I pared my diet thinner and thinner. The summer between my third and fourth year, when I was fourteen, we went to France, where I was aware for the first time of an anxiousness before meals. I trailed Dad around the French supermarket filling the trolley with tofu, mushrooms, soya milk. What a relief that they had such things even in *foie-gras* and *cassoulet-de-canard* France. I was skittish when lunch out at a restaurant was proposed and frantic when the meal arrived with chips.

Those two weeks in France also mark the first time I felt hungry. Not hungry immediately before meals, but hungry all the time. I went to bed hungry and woke up hungry. I was hungry every hour in between, a distracting, preoccupying hunger that ate into every thought. When I could no longer concentrate on the book I was reading – it was the summer of *I, Claudius*, *Great Expectations* and *Blandings* – I would go down to the kitchen, take

one *reine claudé* plum from the bowl on the counter and tell myself it must last until dinner.

I was stricken by any family member taking a photo. I did not want my thunderous thighs on camera. Though I flinched from the lens at the time, some photographs were taken. I can look at them now and see pale, spindly legs beneath a denim skirt and a narrow body in a white jersey.

By the time I went back to school in September 2002, I was in a bad way. I would not eat dried fruit, fresh fruit, tomatoes or rice cakes. I would not eat any food cooked in olive oil. I would not use seasoning – not salt, not pepper, not vinegar, not soy sauce, not herbs, nor any garnish – on my food. I would not have any meal cooked with garlic or onions when I could have it plain. I would not have soup, unless clear broth. I would not drink anything but water or mint tea.

I had been taking vitamin C and cod liver oil tablets, but I would not take them any more. Each contained two calories, according to the packaging, and I was an exacting reader of packaging. No monk every laboured over his manuscript as devotedly as I did over tables of calorie, fat and sugar content. I would no longer take the Nurofen tablets – in a sugar casing – I had been relying on to ease appalling headaches. I had them every day, screaming, crippling hunger headaches. And still I seemed to swell, growing fatter even on this lean diet.

You might reasonably ask why no one had noticed. No parent, teacher or friend. I can't blame those around me for not seeing what I was doing to myself. Anorexia makes schemers and deceivers of its sufferers. I had always had a 'huge lunch' at school, an 'enormous sandwich' on the way

home. And you do not see incremental change. If I lost a steady pound a month and wore great baggy jeans that trailed on the pavement, any difference in my weight was not obvious.

There came a point, though, early in the New Year, when no pair of jeans, however baggy, and no amount of bluster about 'vast helpings of lasagne' would help me. Brushing my hair pulled whole skeins loose. There was soft, grey down all over my stomach, back and arms. My clothes hung on shrunken arms and legs. My chest hurt when I walked up the three flights of the school fire escape between lessons in the January cold.

So disturbed was my thinking that I convinced myself that if my lungs ached, it was because I was unfit. If I was tired, it was because I was lazy. If I was cold, it was because I was not running far enough on the treadmills in the school gym. I took up jogging in my lunch hour to improve, as I reasoned it, my circulation. I certainly didn't need that hour for lunch.

The physical distress, though, was nothing compared to the mental. Every shelf in my mind's library smashed; every book splayed, spine bent back; the glass in all the lamps cracked; wreckage and ruin from skirting board to skirting board. Every day the clamour in my head was louder. I was fat. I was disgusting, sluggish, worthless. A pig. Blubbery, blubbery, not fit to be seen.

In February 2003 I was taken to see a doctor. No girl of fifteen should be so tired, nor so cold. My parents were worried, though uncertain of the diagnosis. I was certain: I was too fat, ate too much and exercised too little. I was prepared for the doctor to weigh me, measure me, calculate my BMI and tell me that I was overweight, grotesquely obese.

I had given in to an apple the previous week, I recorded in my diary, hating myself for having been so weak-willed.

I was weighed, I was measured and I was found wanting. My body was skeletal, nearly two stone underweight. I told the doctor my hair had been falling out and perhaps this was because I had stopped taking the cod liver oil. He shook his head, called Mum in from the waiting room and made his diagnosis. Anorexia.

Writing this does not come easily. When I think of the worst of my illness, it still stirs something close to grief, mourning those years lost to hunger. I want to write of my recovery, of learning not only to eat again, but to take pleasure in food and in cooking. To relish, as Bevis and Mark do, on the first day of their expedition, a picnic of 'huge double slices of bread-and-butter done up in paper, apples, and the leg of a roast duck', which the boys have pinched from the pantry.

I settled on the image of a library to describe my mind. I wonder how others would understand theirs: as a garden, a greenhouse, a painter's studio, a cricket pitch and its pavilion, in greater or lesser states of repair. It would depend on the person.

I am a bookish person. I always have been. At primary school, I borrowed the permitted eight books a week from the Swiss Cottage children's library every Wednesday and read them after lights-out in the shaft of light from the hallway which fell across the foot of my bed, feet tucked under the pillow.

At university, studying history of art, I lugged crates of books back and forth each term, more than there was ever room for in the car or in my cramped first- and second-year

rooms. Today, my attic flat is always out of book space. Once a year I ring Max the carpenter and ask him to put up shelves in some new cranny under the eaves. If the floors collapse, the books will be to blame. Even at my weakest and most frail, confined to bed, invalided out of school, I read with a ravening appetite that I was missing in all other respects, devouring books at a rate of one a day.

Mum took me once a week to the doctor, twice a week to a therapist, a specialist in anorexia, and once a week to the Daunt bookshop on Marylebone High Street. In between, I was put back to bed. No running on the treadmill, no walks in the cold. What else was there to do but read? And so I did, piling books on the floor by my bedside table. If words had been calories, I would have been gorged. Reading was an escape when I was most desperate. Later, it was medicine of a different sort.

When I was first diagnosed with anorexia, at fifteen, the doctor warned that I faced a five- to ten-year recovery. It seemed impossible at the time. So long a treatment and convalescence was to my mind unending and unconquerable. But he was right.

The first three years were often so frightening, so exhausting that I swore again and again to abandon recovery and let the disease do what it might. Every mealtime was a battle, every new food a cause for terror and panic. That I survived those three years is thanks to Mum's nursing, her inexhaustible patience. She sat with me at every meal, coaxing and reassuring, as I picked my way through small portions of despised foods. How did she endure with such outward calm those awful mealtimes? I would weep until I choked with tears over a bowl of yogurt or a slice of toast, raging that I would not, could not eat it.

I remember with shame the day she baked a fruitcake and offered me a slice at teatime. Hysterical, screaming that I did not eat cake, I threw the piece she had cut me on the floor. At meals, when I was told I must try some new food I behaved like a captured animal chained to the table leg, wild with distress.

Little by little, though, I did eat. A slice of wholemeal bread and ham, a grilled chicken breast, milk, vegetables, smoked salmon, even, eventually, a slice of fruitcake. By the time I went to university at nineteen, I could feed myself without Mum cheering me on. Not a lot, but enough. I ate with mechanical routine, small helpings of a very narrow range of foods, and never with any savour. I would try new foods with friends, but when eating alone over my books I would return to matchbox portions of a predictable, plodding diet. The same lunch every day for a term, known and reassuring. The same breakfast for three years. A tendency to prod and poke any meal dished up in college hall, more prodded and poked than eaten.

I might have gone on this way my whole life, eating just enough, not really at ease having dinner in company, not varying from safe staples: a little muesli, pasta with tomato sauce, chicken, sweet potatoes, roast vegetables, yogurt. A diet to keep one alive, but not one to relish.

I might never have struck the top of an egg with my teaspoon and hurried to catch the lava of yolk from the crater. I might never have smoothed melting butter onto toast with the side of a knife or fried sardines with salted capers for a midnight snack or nursed a cup of Earl Grey – ‘strong tea’ – in a favourite china mug with its superglued handle. I might have been deprived of all this if I hadn’t, a year or so after university, read Siegfried Sassoon’s description of

a breakfast of boiled eggs, eaten in winter. In *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man*, the first volume of his First World War trilogy, the poet recalls cold mornings before a hunt: 'We got up at four o'clock, fortified ourselves with boiled eggs and cocoa, and set off on bicycles to a cubbing meet about eight miles away.' Stopping in a copse, he has sandwiches, and on the way home keeps himself warm with thoughts of poached eggs on toast, tea and more cocoa.

All those eggs! All that bread! Hot chocolate! (I hadn't had a cup of hot chocolate in a decade.) Sassoon's exhilaration in the hunt, the fortifying effect of the eggs and cocoa at dawn, planted a thought: that hearty, warming food might lead to a richer life than the mean, restricted one I had been living. With Sassoon's help, I was on to something. But I didn't yet know what it was.

When I read Sassoon's cubbing-meet breakfast, I was twenty-four. I had nearly reached the ten-year recovery mark that had seemed so daunting in the doctor's office. I was better than I had been, but not wholly well. What was the state of my mind's library at this point? The chair had been righted, the lamp repaired, the glass in the windows and bookcases replaced. Some semblance of order had been restored, but the books, my thoughts, were still maddeningly disordered.

When anxious or upset, I saw myself as fat, and, under pressure from a job interview or a break-up with a boyfriend, as monstrously obese. My dresses and jeans may all have been the smallest size in the shops, but the reflection in the mirror belonged to another person. I thought of most foods with fear and disgust and lashed myself with a cat-o'-nine-tails when I thought I had eaten to excess. 'Excess' was not a packet of crisps or a takeaway burger,

but a handful of dried apricots or a single roast potato at Sunday lunch.

It has been the work of the last five years to pick up each of those mind's library books in turn and shelve them in their rightful place. To learn – and it has been a long, hesitating lesson – to eat not with grudging duty, but with delight. It began with Sassoon's eggs. His ham sandwiches eaten perched on a country gate. His slice of cherry tart at a very good cricket tea. My curiosity was piqued. Dare I say my stomach rumbled? I wondered: were there other writers with as hearty an appetite? There were.

This is not a book about the anguish – and it is anguish – of anorexia. Others have reported the worst of the illness with searing clarity and honesty. But their memoirs often stop at the first signs of recovery. This book is about what comes next. About the pouring in of sunlight after more than a decade of darkness and hunger. About Charles Dickens giving me the courage to try a spoonful of Christmas pudding. About crumbling saffron buns on a walk with Laurie Lee, and spooning yogurt, honey and walnuts at a breakfast with Patrick Leigh Fermor. About keeping the cold out with Robert Graves's bully beef, and picking teeth-staining mulberries with Elizabeth David. About (rapture, this!) stirring whole milk into my porridge with the Swallows and Amazons. About ginger biscuits broken in half with Virginia Woolf.

I want to write about the solace of reading, and through reading, putting my mind's shelves in order. About restoring my library, one book at a time.