

Cynthia Ritchie

## **HUNGER**

My older sister has anorexia. She's pale and thin and takes medicine for her heart, which almost failed her a few years ago. She is self-conscious about her body and covers her arms with long sleeves and sweaters. She's always cold. And hungry. She stares at food with such longing that it embarrasses me, as if I am witnessing something forbidden, as if this hunger of hers is something obscene.

And it is, because it is slowly killing her.

When we were growing up, she was my favorite of my three sisters. Because she and I were the closest in age and lived on a farm, isolated from our nearest neighbors by more than a mile, we learned to curve ourselves around each other's behaviors. It's almost like a marriage, that kind of closeness, when you are together from morning until night, when you know someone so well that everything, from the way her breath smells in the afternoon to how fast her toenails grow, is familiar to you. It's beyond love; it has nothing to do with love. It's love in its purest, most basic form.

My sister travels around the country now, living in one place until it becomes too intimate and then packing up and driving somewhere new. I don't know what she's looking for, or why she's so afraid of settling down. Maybe it's the way the light slants through the window, the same small squares over the same pieces of furniture, day after day. Or maybe it's that sense of exhilaration from being someplace new, that almost giddy feeling of not knowing anyone, of believing you can recreate yourself into someone else.

When she calls me, which is more seldom than it used to be, her voice is high and overly-cheerful. I sit on the couch, my son running through the hallway, the dog and cat curled up beside me, and I feel so far away and disconnected from her that I don't know what to say. I twirl the phone cord around and around. After I hang up, I sit at the kitchen table and eat: corn chips,

cereal, frozen burritos half-cooked in the microwave. When I finally stop, my stomach is so round and hard I can't sleep. I lie in bed, my hands cupped around my belly, the same posture from when I was pregnant. Only this time it's my sister I'm trying to nourish.

I come from a family of secrets. We don't talk about what has happened to us, how our lives have followed jagged, sometimes painful paths. When we are together, at rare family reunions, we laugh too much, play cards, and joke until tears run down our faces. It's a hysterical type of laughter, a way of releasing tension, of letting all unspoken words surface.

We look the other way when C cleans things with a sterilized cloth, when D, impeccably dressed, clears her throat over and over, when I slap cards on the table, revealing the pale scars on my arms from when I was sixteen and spent the summer in boys' cars, cutting myself after each time as if keeping score.

So when my sister drinks Diet Pepsi and eats only butterscotch candy, we don't say anything. We sit at the table, almost squirming with the effort of our silence. It is so deep, this silence, so embedded inside of us that to speak, to utter one word would be sacrilegious. It would be like turning away from God.

The last time I saw my sister three years ago, she had forty-eight cans of Diet Pepsi in her refrigerator and nothing else, the shelves so bare and anonymous they reminded me of a hospital room. There wasn't a hint of food, not one smudge of ketchup or a drop of milk. Thinking of my own refrigerator back in Anchorage, stuffed with bread and fruit and the broccoli that always rots in the crisper drawer, I was suddenly frightened. I stood there, with that cold, stale air blowing over my legs.

"You're killing yourself, don't you care that you're killing yourself?" I yelled.

My sister leaned against the windowsill and lit a cigarette.

"You're going to be dead in a couple of years, don't you care?"

She stood and stared until I dropped my eyes, as ashamed and embarrassed as if I had caught her in an intimate act: taking a shower or slowly, tenderly touching herself.

Growing up, my sister was chubby and I was too thin. She had dark eyes, dark hair and tanned so deep she looked foreign. I, on the other hand, had blonde hair and blue eyes and the kind of skin that tanned but never lost its yellowish cast. Since we were opposites, we didn't have to compete. Which was a good thing. Growing up in a family where there was little affection, where encouragement and compliments were almost nonexistent, we easily could have hated each other. Instead, we leaned into one another, like those old married couples, one taking up where the other leaves off.

I don't know when this all stopped, when we separated from each other and moved off in opposite directions. Perhaps it was high school, which was hard on all of us. Or maybe it was the summer I turned thirteen, when my hair bleached blonder and I started attracting the attentions of boys and men.

I was always hungry as a child. Even though we lived on a farm, my mother cooked measly little meals. My stepfather got the best, the largest, thickest pieces. My chair was next to his and I ate as fast as I could to escape his loud chewing, his sloppy manners, his country habit of wiping his mouth on his sleeve and slurping milk between each bite. My sister sat on the other side of me. Even then she was picky, cutting everything up into small bites and moving it around her plate. She never mixed her food or splattered gravy over her potatoes. She ate sparingly, almost critically, a dissatisfied look across her mouth.

At night, I would get up and eat. My sisters would often be in the kitchen, where we sat on the cool linoleum floor, cramming crackers and cheese and slices of sweet, white bread into our mouths. We felt hungry, although we always had enough to eat. We sat there almost crying with hunger.

I can still feel this hunger inside me, right below my breastbone: an absence, a sharp stab, a fluttering of emptiness I try to fill with food and books and the sad, blurry motions of sex.

My older sister's back is ridged with bone. Small, almost beautiful juts of bone stick up through her skin. The last time I saw her, I watched as she leaned over the sink to wash her face, the white strap of her bra smooth and almost translucent. She was very pale, even though she

lived next to the beach. She wouldn't go out in a bathing suit. She knew how she looked, her knees large and knobby, her thighs as thin as most women's arms.

Her feet struck me as the saddest, sadder than her sunken stomach, her flat chest, her pinched, skinny neck looking too fragile to hold the weight of her head. My sister's feet are round and arched, almost lush, the only part of her that holds any weight. Seeing those feet, the kind of feet that should be encased in sandals, the toenails polished, a bracelet flashing around the ankle – seeing those feet on the bottom of my sister's pale, wasted legs was like watching a small animal walk across the road, unaware of the car speeding towards it.

When my sister first started throwing up, we didn't know what to do. We didn't understand it, not back then, more than twenty years ago. There was no such thing as an eating disorder; it wasn't discussed. She was hanging out with a wild crowd, shoplifting, drinking, staying out late. Her boyfriend, a thin, long-haired football player, drove a car with a bad muffler. I would hear that car in the driveway at two or three in the morning, and then my sister would wander in, reeking of beer and cigarette smoke. Sometimes I heard her stumbling up the hall, tripping into the wall, barely able to walk. The next morning, she slouched at the breakfast table, refusing my mother's poached eggs and toast with butter melting over the top. After my sister escaped into the bathroom, I ate her toast. I jammed it into my mouth and chewed until my eyes watered.

I am attracted to men who like to cook, who spend time in the grocery store comparing cheeses and produce. I am careless when it comes to cooking. I need to do it, yet I don't want to care about it. So when a lover spends hours in the kitchen making a homemade sauce that tastes almost the same as Ragu, I become angry. I often pick fights. I don't like myself for doing this, but I can't stop. As if food highlights something I don't want to see. All of my yearnings and sorrows. All the things I've wanted but wouldn't let myself have. It's almost as if my hunger rebels against such care, such tenderness: a large hand carefully cutting peppers or crumbling cheese over a pizza. Surely such things are more than I deserve.

The last time I saw my sister, I took my then seven-year-old son to the small apartment where she was living. She had very little furniture and sat on the floor when she worked on her computer, which was propped up on an old coffee table. Books lined the living room, many of the same ones I have. Because I was exhausted from a day spent visiting with my family, I went in her bedroom and lay down. There wasn't much in there, either, just a table, a few boxes with clothes, a bed with thin blankets. I recognized a quilt I had made her years ago, and held it up to my nose. In the other room, my sister's voice mingled with my son's, and I fell asleep like that, with her quilt over me, and the sound of her voice filtering in through the open door.

I didn't cry until I went into the bathroom and noticed how thin and worn the towels were. It suddenly seemed like a terrible injustice that my sister would end up living in such an apartment, with nothing on the walls except pictures cut from greeting cards. Almost as if she were exalting in her poorness, her thinness, her lack of need. Depriving herself not only of food but of soft towels and perfumed oils, of chairs and thick blankets and all the things we see but don't acknowledge, those little things that remind us we are worth something.

My mother never liked my sister. She loved her, but she never liked her. Growing up, we all knew this, in that unconscious way we know the secrets of the people we live with. It was inevitable that my sister would become the scapegoat, battling her way through childhood, stuck in the middle between a beauty queen and two younger, athletic blonde sisters. I remember the games we played, and how fierce my sister was, how fast her fists struck out. She hit hard, she wasn't afraid of holding back, and since I was younger but not the youngest, I got the worst of it. This should have made me hate her, but it didn't. If anything, it drew us closer. I understood that she was doing this because she had to, that every slap, every kick, punch, or harsh word was a testimony, a confession, a relief. If it weren't for her, I might be in the same place.

After my father died when I was six and my mother remarried, the dynamics of the family shifted, and my sister, with her bad mouth and sulky moods, became the center we revolved round. We pushed her into the spotlight, heaped our unhappiness on her shoulders, delighted when she rebelled, kicking and screaming and breaking all the things we ourselves were afraid of breaking.

Of course, my stepfather didn't like my sister; he didn't like children, but he tolerated the rest of us. He was a selfish man, a nervous man, and my mother, afraid he might leave her to raise four daughters on her own, made sure we stayed out of his way. But we couldn't get far enough, and by the time we were teenagers, he was creeping into my sister's room at night. Sometimes he came into mine, those hands, that breath. I wanted him to die. That is what I used to pray for, each night before I fell asleep.

So it's not surprising that my sister finally had enough. One day she leaned over the toilet, stuck her finger down her throat, and threw up all of the anger, pain, and frustration she had swallowed for years. It must have felt good; it must have felt victorious, like a baptism or a communion. She must have felt suddenly pure.

I am afraid of being hungry. And cold. When people come to my house, they are surprised at how many quilts I have, folded over chairs and tucked across couch cushions. They can't help but comment on how much food I have in the kitchen, cupboards stocked, freezer packed, refrigerator crammed with vegetables we'll never be able to eat. I spend too much money on food; I end up throwing a lot of it away.

Yet, at night when I can't sleep, I find myself in the kitchen, opening cupboards and staring at all of those cans and boxes, those frozen packages of waffles and egg rolls tucked safely in the freezer. It comforts me that I will always have enough food. I stand with a quilt wrapped around my shoulders and can't begin to describe the satisfaction I feel that for all of my failings, my son has never had to go hungry. That I've been able to keep him fed.

For a brief time during my adolescence, I hated my sister. I wanted her to leave. I wanted everyone to leave. Sometimes I imagined everyone except my youngest sister dying in a car crash, or catching some horrible disease. I imagined coming home to a house bathed in light, with polished floors and plants hanging from the ceiling. I imagined warmth. And food: a table set for two and all the food we could eat spread out before us like one of those smorgasbords my grandmother took us to.

During this time, my sister was especially cruel to me. She chased me with knives, locked her fingers around my neck, and whispered in my ear, "I could kill you; I could just snap your

neck and kill you.” Sometimes in the middle of the night she charged into my room, screamed that I was ruining her life, she hated me, I’d better sleep with one eye opened, for she was going to get me.

About that time I stopped eating. I told myself I wasn’t hungry anymore, I could resist food, I was better than food. I watched with fascination as my weight dropped to ninety pounds, then eighty. My clothes hung on me; my hip bones jutted out. People complimented me, said I looked like a model. I’ve seen pictures of me at that time, and something hovered in my face, a knowledge that gave me an almost deadly beauty.

The only way I could resist food was by taking pills and sleeping so I wouldn’t be tempted to eat. I dreamed of food every night: cream puffs, brownies, roast beef sandwiches. I can’t remember when I started eating again, or why, but a year later, I was on the track team and became obsessed with food once more, playing around with proteins and carbohydrates, sure that the winning edge would come through the food I ate.

I almost slipped when I was in college and the competition became fiercer. The coach told me I needed to lose weight and build myself up with muscle. I dieted down to ninety-five and slowly built myself back up with weights until I hovered around a hundred and four, yet there was a moment when I flirted with going on, with diving down and welcoming that heady, giddy feeling of hunger.

My sister exercises, one of the lures of her disease, the constant need to be in motion, to burn as many calories as possible. Even though she’s too weak to hold a job, she still rides her bike, works out on her Stairmaster, does sit-ups and leg lifts every night. With all this exercise, she still has no muscle tone. Stuck in a constant cycle of starvation and exercise, her body eats whatever muscle she manages to produce.

I remember riding my bike with her a few years ago, and how afraid I was at the sight of her pale, undernourished legs pedaling in front of me. Legs that looked like toothpicks, like little girl legs, those starving girls you see in the commercials. I was sure she was going to collapse. I kept asking her if she wanted to stop and rest but she shook her head, shrugged, said she wanted to keep going.

When we finally stopped, I sat on the grass and ate crackers and grapes. I thought these were foods my sister would eat, low in calories and bland, but she shook her head and said she wasn't hungry. She leaned against a tree and drank a Diet Pepsi, all the while looking at me and pretending not to look, the same expression I'd worn when watching a man I pretended I wasn't interested in, my mouth partly-open, my eyes squinting and sharp. She was watching me eat as if I were doing something erotic, something forbidden. I felt suddenly ashamed of myself.

"Take some," I begged, "please, I have too much."

She took one grape, popped it into her mouth, pretended to swallow. When I turned back to my bike, I saw her spit that grape out in the bushes and wipe her hand across her mouth, as if getting rid of a bad taste. Finally, she pulled the hem of her shirt up to wipe across her lips and her stomach flashed, pale and concave, ribs like fingers pushing out from her skin. My own stomach contracted in sympathy and suddenly I was so hungry my mouth watered. All the way back, I thought of food: spaghetti and biscuits, meatloaf and applesauce. When I got home, I ate so much I threw up, my stomach protesting this violation, this assault, but even then I couldn't stop. I ate until I could barely walk and then spent the next two days in bed, feverish and achy and trying to think of something, anything but food.

Although I am thin, I eat a lot; I'm always eating. I do this to regulate my blood sugar, but I also do it for the comfort of having something in my mouth, the way my tongue feels reaching towards that protein bar, that moment of almost blind sweetness when the honey hits my tongue. At work, I pour little packets of dried soup into a cup, add hot water, and eat it at my desk. I eat the same flavor over and over, and I never get tired of it. It's not the taste I seek but the warmth, the way the liquid feels sliding down my throat. It's a sleepy, almost erotic feeling, that moment when our bodies call forth something primitive inside us all.

After sex, I always look in a lover's refrigerator. I don't even think about doing this, it is so close to instinct. I already have an idea, from how he has been in bed, what will be inside: sharp cheeses or bland mozzarella, fluffy white bread or seeded whole-grain, sweet red wine or bottled mineral water. I always eat something: a handful of seeds, leftover pasta, a fruit salad sent over by his mother. I eat these with my hands, as if trying to get as close as possible to every taste. When I am finished, I go back to bed. I curl up with my lover, and if he is someone I want



again, I move my mouth down his skin, the taste of his food and sweat clinging to my tongue until I am almost weak. I am so hungry I can barely stand it.

I am so afraid of my appetites.

My sister is going to die soon. She has a few years left, at the most, before her body gives in. She should be dead by now but her will is very strong. She won't do anything to save herself, though. She teases death, lets herself get so close and then pulls herself back up, eats enough to regain her strength. Maybe she wants to get well, to live a small, simple life. But she can't manage it. She won't give up, that's the thing. She is still holding out, playing some game from childhood, and she's determined to win.

My other sisters and I discuss over the phone what we should do. "We can't just let her kill herself," we say. Then we talk about treatment centers, counseling, medications. These options comfort us. We talk about committing her to a hospital, forcing her into therapy, getting our mother to cut off her funds until she agrees to seek help.

In the end, we do nothing. My sister is smart and clever and sly. She knows how to fake wellness, how to eat just enough to stay out of a hospital. Years ago I read that most people are so afraid of change they will die instead of doing the one thing that will save them: throw away that cigarette, that drink, that last hit of speed. It isn't only the addiction, it's the way the habit fits into your life and slowly takes over: a cigarette in the morning, a snort in the afternoon, a bottle in your hands at night. If you're not careful, your failings can become your greatest loves, and like all loves, you'll risk anything to keep them.

So my sister must be in love with her hunger, her emptiness, the way her stomach feels sharp and bare and useless. She must be in love with the absence of love, with turning away, with that one shining moment of rejection. Though like anyone who is afraid of something, she must really long for it. Oh, how hungry my sister must be for love, for nourishment; how hungry she must be for the luxury of something in her mouth.

This is how I like to remember my sister: we were sitting in church together, years ago in Tucson, both of us bored and lonely and trying to find solace in God. It was an early evening service, most of the pews filled with elderly women praying for good fortune at bingo. During

the litany, as we were kneeling and I was nodding off to the priest's words, my sister's voice suddenly filled the air.

“Through him, with him, in him,” she sang, her voice strong and clear in that large room. The priest hesitated. No one else was supposed to be singing, but my sister didn't stop. She refused to back down. She squared her shoulders and raised her chin.

She kept right on singing.