

# Heavy

by Erin Elizabeth McConnell

*"I know that God never gives us more than we can handle;*

*I just wish He didn't trust me so much...."*

Mother Teresa

Just as a former alcoholic often scrutinizes the behavior of those around him, seeking signs of his former addiction, so you, too, watch the habits of your peers — mainly women — seeking the tale-tell signs of your own demons. The girl in your sociology class who speaks to no one, her lips as drawn and puckered as the rest of her body; the young woman at lunch, who loads her plate with food, and ends up giving most of it away to her dining companions; the track coach who lectures her runners about proper nutrition, while they watch the wind send ripples down the loose gatherings visible in her running tights. The symptoms are much more prevalent than they used to be; it seems like now, there's almost an abundance of studies, articles, support groups. At the present time, you notice that "eating disorder" exists in the vernacular vocabulary — though not every one can understand or sympathize with the illness, a widespread knowledge of its existence has infiltrated households — almost to the point of saturation. You may have a naturally thin friend who eats massive amounts of food, but the first time she declines a meal because she's honestly not hungry, people flash her a knowing look, ask her when's the last time she ate, automatically make her dietary habits *their* business, and her protests are deafened in the roar of their assumptions. But it wasn't always like this; not ten years ago, not for you.

You've always had a preoccupation with diets, if only because your mother and older sisters continually struggled with their own weights. You and your sister have always been relatively thin, if only because you both were nearly as active as your imaginations. Yet this did not deter your own ventures into the dieting community. You want to feel grown up; you want to be able to relate to the constant complaints and crash diets of the women in your family. In first grade, you pack your lunch one day and decided that you, too, will go on a diet; so you make yourself a mayonnaise and cheese sandwich — honestly believing that pounds will come plummeting off in the absence of meat. Again, in fourth grade, you embark upon the comical fitness routine of riding an exercise bike with a bag of potato chips in

one outstretched arm. In actuality, you probably burn only a fraction of the calories you manage to consume, but no matter, you feel like you're making vast improvements in your health. But in fifth grade, shortly after they separate the boys from the girls and show you those God-forsaken movies that scare the hell out of you, you notice *those things* happening to your own body.

1) Your tummy rounds and you one day realize that you are the biggest (and heaviest) in your class.

2) A guy that you have a crush on calls you "fat."

3) Your mom comments that it's time for you to get a bra — a remark which has delighted your classmates, but sends you into spasms of horror; and when you finally get one, you refuse to wear it — it's so uncomfortable that you feel like a bony boa constrictor has settled around your midsection and decided to squeeze your rib cage into geometric shapes of its choice. Besides, it's embarrassingly scanty — looks more like eye patches or horse blinders than the enormous silk concoctions that you see in the laundry every week.

And you decide that, so far, this growing-up experience is definitely not your bag...

Soon — before you even have the chance to realize the enormity of the loss — you are shuttled from the comforting refuge of your elementary school, into the realm of chaos which is euphemistically known as junior high. Childhood, as you know it, is shattered into a thousand, irrecoverable pieces, and you are now faced with the prospects of changing classes, coed dances, daily fights in school. Amazonian girls — bigger than you, even — threaten to beat you up unless you allow them to copy your homework, and you comply, since your only previous combat experience has been with your smaller (and less aggressive) sister. The boys in your class — especially the ones who you've started to feel funny around — make fun of everything about you:

1) your hair (which remotely resembles Carrot Top's in both style and texture)

2) your clothes (which seemed fine when your mom picked them out)

3) your studious behavior (you had previously, and mistakenly, thought that it was actually cool to be smart)

Though you were formerly known for your prowess at fighting back — indeed, was a veritable bully in kindergarten — this is foreign territory; you're caught on your back with your belly exposed. They play unfair, hit below the belt, seek out your places of greatest vulnerability and strike when your attention is elsewhere. So you begin to shrink into your-

self — not only refuse to respond to their badgering, but refuse to speak at all. They can't mock you for what you *don't* say; and yet they do, tease you for being so quiet, mock you for never talking. And you feel as though they are merely confirming all of your insecurities. You *are* fat and ugly — a boring bookworm with absolutely no personality. Since you can't let your grades slip (your parents would kill you), you look for other ways to mold the real you into the ideal you (only whose ideal, you're not sure). So you fall back on what you know best — and you know, *you just know*, that if you can lose that "chicken fat" (from a song you used to perform exercises to in kindergarten class), then things are bound to — *things must* — get better. Then you can be closer to thin and beautiful, like Shannon Smith, your petite blonde classmate who always had her choice of boyfriends (never mind the fact that you were neither petite nor blonde).

And so it begins....

At first, the changes you make are small, barely noticeable.

1) You pack less for your lunches each day — maybe a sandwich with only jelly and no peanut butter, carrot sticks, water to drink. This is quite a drastic change from the first few days of sixth grade, when you reveled in the glory of a la carte lunches, and ate hot dogs and french fries for the first month of school, but you deal, tell yourself that it will be worth it.

2) To speed the process, you run — at first not very far (you are winded after a block), but you keep at it, run a little farther each day. And while you're running, you think of the baby fat melting off of you as easily as the droplets of sweat that pepper your sweatshirt.

3) As a way of charting your progress, you weigh yourself every morning — before you have anything to eat or drink, without an article of clothing — and eventually you start to watch the needle dip towards a lower number, and it's not so hard to see over the protrusions of your abdomen as the days turn to weeks turn to months.

By Thanksgiving, you're looking lean, and all of your relatives notice, comment. Your mother rubs your back encouragingly as you refuse seconds of anything (a tactic previously unknown to you). Your sister looks on, unaffected by the streamlining of your figure — has become the center of a giggling gaggle of girls who think that she is just *the end*. She's heard what people have been saying about you, realizes that you're not exactly considered cool on your side of the building, but doesn't seem to mind being the sister of a geek, handles everything in stride. Admittedly, you are somewhat hurt that she has all of these new friends who won't have anything to do with you, but tell yourself that it's all for the best, that friends

would only distract you from your program of self-improvement as you watch them scarf whole pizzas of ham and green peppers.

By Christmas, you are noticeably thinner and all of your pants balloon around your reduced figure. Your mother buys you new jeans for Christmas, tells you to “get rid of those sloppy ones” that were snug when you bought them this fall. One day, you realize that you have gone past your goal weight and momentarily consider going off of the diet — but only for a moment — you change your mind and decide to continue this weight-loss plan because:

1) You’d probably just balloon right back up, and it would be nice to have a couple of pounds “cushion” (or lack thereof) in case you started to get fat again.

2) If you look, *really* look, at your reflection, you realize that the girl in the mirror doesn’t appear all that much thinner than she did at the start of the school year.

3) You’re on a roll. Why stop now?

Over the course of several months, you continue to cut back on your eating for good measure, until the only meal you actually eat is dinner with your parents at night, so they won’t know that you aren’t *actually* eating. They can be so controlling, and you wouldn’t want them interfering with your progress. So as they become absorbed in their nightly bickering

1) Your sister scarfs her dinner and asks to be excused, but you —

2) you are grateful for the periodic moments of raging, when

3) you can easily slip whole portions of food into a napkin.

But you cry after dinner, in the recesses of your room, because you can still hear them shouting at one another. Because you are so incredibly hungry. The dull aches that radiate the length of your stomach, the dry mouth, the dizziness and distorted vision of dehydration — all have become as routine to you as the fights that season family meals.

In the spring, you and your sister join a soccer team — just club soccer, nothing serious — and you are secretly glad that you have to run laps before practice, and as you lope along, you are mentally adding these laps to the ones you ran around the neighborhood before school that morning. And then one day, before a game, you have to change jerseys because the visiting team’s colors are the same as your team’s, so all of the girls on the team race away from the boys and pile into an oversized van, where they whip off their shirts to reveal filled-

out sports bras. You don't even *have* a sports bra, couldn't justify asking for one from your mom when your own breasts are drawn flat across your sternum like a young boy's. So you turn around and modestly change your shirt in a corner. You hear the chattering stop, a single gasp shatters the silence, and you turn your head to see whether Adrienne, the team comic relief, has turned her eyelids inside out once more. But they are all staring at you, and as you regard them with startled, questioning eyes, one of the girls closes her mouth, points, whispers "*Your back.*" And of course you can't *see* what they are talking about, so you quickly pull the shirt over you head and slide open the heavy doors of the van to escape the deafening stillness.

Later, after the game, when you are back at home and changing out of your sweaty uniform, you rummage around in the bathroom for a hand mirror. You stand with your back to a full-length mirror, peer into your mother's plastic, pink-flowered vanity mirror. You tilt your head to several different angles, examining:

- 1) the knobby vertebrae which trail down your back like the stegosaurus (who was your favorite dinosaur in kindergarten);
- 2) the ribs that carefully demarcate each division of your rib cage — you would be a first year medical student's dream study partner for anatomy;
- 3) your shoulder blades, which protrude like a prowling tigers, swaying this way and that as you move your arms from the collar bone.

And you wonder why they were acting so weird about it; you kind of *like* the way your back looks, you think, as you reach around and rub the bumps which signal the beginning of your tailbone. But then you notice the seedlings for love handles that have rooted at your side, and quickly discard the mirror to perform a few hundred sit-ups.

Your parents are strangely silent at dinner tonight; you have absolutely no opportunities to slip most of your dinner into the huge pile of napkins with which you paper your lap. In fact, they're watching everything you do, until you can't stand it anymore and inform the whole family that you cannot possibly eat another bite with all of them staring at you like some circus freak. So they drag themselves from the kitchen, and you take this opportunity to quickly scrap the scattered contents of your dinner into the garbage can, being careful to wad up several paper towels so as to disguise its untouched presence.

Your mom re-enters the kitchen just as you are finishing the measures you take for camouflage. You jump, laugh a nervous greeting, accuse her of startling you on purpose —

anything to break her queer silence, block out the strange look in her eyes. You watch as:

- 1) she comes towards you,
- 2) practically pushes you aside, and
- 3) sticks her hand into the trash — where she rummages around and uncovers the former

contents of your dinner plate.

It is then that you notice the anger which soundlessly seeps from her pores, widens her already-enormous eyes, and you remember how you and your sister used to make fun of your mother when she was particularly angry by stretching your eyes wide open with extended fingers. Only now, with just you as the object of her wrath, it doesn't seem quite so funny. She grabs you by the shoulder, practically drags you to the back of the house, to the bathroom, where she demands that you get on the scale. You shrink away with horror, *beg* her not to make you — you just ate, you're too fat — but she remains resolute, and you finally have no choice but to comply. And you screw your eyelids shut as you step on this scaffold of shame, hear the needle waver back and forth with metallic mockery. When you open your eyes, you don't look at the scale, but at your mother, whose frown has deepened even further, furrows visible in her brow that only appear when she is extremely upset. And then — only then — do you look at the scale, see the needle dancing below the number ninety. You feel relieved, was thinking that you would weigh more at this time of day, but your mother does not share in your mollified mood. She stares straight ahead; not looking at either you or the scale, and you see her lower lip shudder a bit, like it does just before she cries. *But why would she be crying?* After all, you've worked so hard; you look much better than you did at the beginning of the school year. God forbid she actually be *happy* for you. But before you can articulate any of these thoughts that are tumbling through your head like a loose bag of dried beans, your mother exits the bathroom, closing the door softly behind her. *That was weird*, you think to yourself, and while you're in there, you might as well brush your teeth. You grab your Muppets toothbrush from the medicine cabinet, load it full of the toothpaste your mom always buys because she thinks you actually like it and you don't want to tell her otherwise, and start scrubbing away. With your free hand, you gently rub at the darkened circles under your eyes; maybe you aren't getting enough sleep — maybe *that's* you're always tired. When you spit, you notice:

- 1) the foam is tinted pink,
- 2) so you widen your lips like you've seen horse trainers do to their charges, and

3) notice small, hair-thin trailings of blood that trickle down in the crevasses between your teeth. The crimson fluid stains your canines; you look like the leech your granddaddy pulled off your leg after the two of you went traipsing through a southern swamp when you were little and you squealed bloody murder. Shuddering, you fill a cup with water, swish it around in your mouth, and almost — but not quite — enjoy the salty taste which your blood lends the liquid. You turn off the lights, leave the humid solitude of the bathroom and return to the spooky muteness of your house.

So your mom makes an appointment with a therapist who deals with “these kinds of things” — only you’re so pissed off you can’t even ask her what “these kinds of things” are. There’s nothing wrong with you. Only freaks go to therapy. What if the kids at school found out? They’d have a field day with that information. But your mom makes your sister swear on the well-being of her stuffed animal collection that she will not breathe a word to anyone. So she hauls you off in the mini-van, to this tall, skinny man with melon-colored hair that fringes his scalp. And he’s really nice, doesn’t make you talk about anything in particular or drill you on those inkblot pictures that they show in movies. Instead, you play UNO with him, usually give him a royal thrashing — sometimes beating him by hundreds of points. And he nonchalantly asks you questions in between hands, as he shuffles the black and rainbow cards with his long, slender fingers. You try to think of him as just some guy your mom pays tons of money to play cards with you every week, and after each appointment, when you are seat-belted into the passenger’s side, she asks “So what did you talk about?” — to which you always respond, without fail, “Nothing.”

And on the days when you don’t have your appointments, you’ve developed this routine after school which suits you to a tee, and consists of the following:

1) While your sister and her friends either walk home or accept rides without discrimination from anyone heading in the general direction of your home, you strap your book bag on tighter and run home from school, in whatever you happened to wear to school that day: jeans, boots, a leather jacket. And you must look pretty strange, but you don’t really care; are just grateful for being able to squeeze in some more exercise.

2) After arriving home, you hop on the exercise bike (you know, the one you used to inhale potato chips while riding? can you believe that?) and pedal away as you read one of the many books you checked out from the library for the week, the ones you’d read during lunch time so you didn’t have to eat or talk to anyone.

3) Then you shower, throw on some shorts and a T-shirt from third grade (because they are the only ones that fit anymore) and start on your homework. The more you did, the less time you had to think about how hungry you were....

In time, you found a new hobby to replace eating: cooking. You beg your mother to allow you to fix meals for the family, pack your sister's lunch everyday, filling it with wonderful foods, carefully chosen, that you would love to eat, but they aren't on your diet, and so you want her to enjoy them in your stead. Cupcakes, meat and cheese sandwiches, chips, a juice box — and she seems grateful enough, doesn't tell you to stop and is the envy of the lunch table, with her friends crowing "Gee, I wish *my* sister would fix lunch for me...." But when she has friends over, that's the best, because they are always hungry and you insist on authoring all of their meal and snack preparations. You make these fabulous (and strange) combinations of foods, accept their honest critiques, lovingly watch as they devoured every morsel of the potato-chips-and-cheese that you just pulled out of the microwave for them. But soon, too soon, your sister started to complain that you are trying to make her fat — when you honestly aren't, you just want her to enjoy the labors of your hands — love that you can make food but not have to eat it. Your parents don't complain so much, are usually good eggs about eating the countless cookies you produce on a daily basis, but you refuse to watch them eat, because they look at you with sad, puppy eyes and bully you into trying some. Your mom has started watching you like a hawk, demanding a detailed list of what you had for breakfast, lunch, etc. So you start lying to her — this is the first time you've ever lied to her, so you try to make it less of a lie by packing large lunches, only to give them away to your classmates. You hate being dishonest with her, feel terribly guilty, but you can't tell her the truth; then she'd only ruin your diet. So you have a few saltines for breakfast, drizzled with sugar-free syrup, and maybe some raisins and a mini-yogurt for lunch. Dinner is harder, but you've developed a knack for chewing the food and, when no one's looking (which is happening less and less), depositing the masticated mess into an ample napkin.

Of all people, you'd think that *she'd* understand — what, with all the diets she's been on — but she doesn't. She keeps asking if you are angry with her, with your father, and each time you shake your head from side to side with ever-increasing vigor, until you feel that your brain must be bouncing around the interior of your skull. They are still fighting just as much as they did before, only now they're fighting about you, with your mother begging your father to come to family therapy, only he quietly refuses — there's nothing wrong with



him, thank you very much. And though he's never been a very verbose kind of guy, he

1) talks to you even less nowadays,

2) doesn't have much to say, but

3) when he does look at you, it's with the eyes of an anthropologist (though you're sure he's never taken an anthropology course, since he's worked on airplanes since he was eighteen), like he's trying figure out what's wrong with you, but can't even begin to wrap his mind around it. He just gets really pissed off when you refuse to eat, threatens to sit on you and shove hamburgers down your throat, but you won't budge, learned your bull-headedness from the best. And eventually, he gives up, walks away with a defeated demeanor bending his broad shoulders and solid neck. And you feel guilty, but strangely triumphant. *This* is your choice. It's something they can't take away from you. For once, you are in control, and you marvel with horrified curiosity that what you do (or, more specifically, *don't*) eat can make adults bend and sway like worried willows.

But the worst, the absolute worst, comes on a day just like any other. It's a Friday, and you arrive home from school bursting with energy because

1) you don't have to go back for two days,

2) you checked out several books by this new author you really liked and have all weekend to read them, and

3) your sister is having a friend sleep over, so you have a brand-new source of hunger to satisfy.

When you walk in from your run — barely sweating because it's such a cold day out — you notice that your mom has just been to the grocery store. You help her as she unloads the groceries, inspect the new ingredients she's purchased dutifully because she hopes that you will actually *eat* some of them (but you know better). And when you think that you're all done, she takes a small, plastic sack from her purse, and hands it to you as a sort of offering. She smiles shyly as you unfold the sack, remove its contents, find yourself holding a package of cupcakes. Your eyes rise to meet her; she looks at you hopefully while you flash her a quizzical glance. "They're brand new," she quips, and she points to the writing on the outside of the package. "See, low-fat." So you mumble thanks and leave them on the table as you head for the shower.

And the evening starts out great:

- 1) your recipes are enthusiastically received by your sister's guest,
- 2) you tear through one of the library books, which is much to your liking, and
- 3) you manage to not eat *one bite* of dinner.

But later, after your parents have gone to bed and your sister and her friend are camped out in the family room, watching some movie that you find to be incredibly boring, you happen to walk through the kitchen, and you see the package of cupcakes, still where you left them on the table. You pick it up disdainfully, scrutinize the nutrition label, scoff at the enormous number of calories these puppies contain. Then your stomach sends out an audible rumble. You try to remember the last time you ate. The picture on the package looms tantalizingly before you. *Maybe one, just one. What can it hurt?* So you start to remove the packaging, are horrified to observe how greedily you tear at the plastic. *What are you doing?!!!* your brain screams, and you look down at your fingers, thrust into the chocolate and goo of this sugary snare — how close you came to ravenously ravaging this embodiment of weakness. And your face is wet — you realize that you've been crying, and you slump to the floor, holding the package in one hand and the mutilated cupcake in the other. Leaning against the wall, you cry like the day you were born. And somewhere, in the recesses of your starved, crippled cerebellum, you can stand back and realize how ridiculous this all seems — that you can be reduced to a wretched mass of sobbing hysterics by a commercially marketed product of Hostess....

After several thousand hysterical episodes like the aforementioned cupcake-catastrophe recorded in your repertoire, you begin to wonder if this is all worth it — this *diet*, this period of self-abnegation, this dark year of the soul. For all that you've given up for this obsession, what has it done for you? You have

- 1) no friends,
- 2) no energy,
- 3) no glimpse of joy in your life.

You've alienated your parents, your sister, and for all you know — God Himself has washed His hands of you. You wouldn't blame Him. So now, when you go to therapy, you kick butt at UNO a little less, talk a little more. After all, this guy does have a degree, he just might know what he's talking about. And when you're hungry, for the nine times out of ten that you just ignore the electrical pains that traverse the length of your stomach, there is that

one in ten instance when you actually eat something. Sure, it may be just cut-up vegetables, or a small apple, but it's a start. And you won't be cured overnight — in fact, you might never get better, may have started on a life-long struggle. But you discover that the whole time you thought you were in control of this — this disease — it was controlling you. And if nothing else, that alone should send you into fits of rage. No one and especially, no thing, is going to dictate how you live your life. So you try to take a bit of it back. You're not better, but you're getting there.