

# **Wasted: A Memoir of Anorexia and Bulimia Study Guide**

**Wasted: A Memoir of Anorexia and Bulimia by Marya Hornbacher**

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## Plot Summary

*Wasted: A Memoir of Anorexia and Bulimia* recalls Marya Hornbacher's personal nine-year battle with anorexia and bulimia. In the story, Marya details childhood and personality factors that may have had a role in the development of her disorder. She also writes about the progression of her bulimia and her transition to anorexia. Marya describes her plummet to her lowest point in her struggle with anorexia, a time when she is eating almost nothing and weighs only 52 pounds. Finally, Marya describes the circumstances that finally convince her to check herself into a hospital for treatment.

Even as an infant and child, Marya writes that she has strange eating habits. She has her first experience with bulimia when she is nine years old. No one has even talked to Marya about bulimia; she discovers on her own that there is a way to get rid of any food she has eaten. Throughout her high school years, Marya suffers with bulimia. It is in her tenth-grade year when Marya attends a boarding school when she decides to make the transition to anorexia. Immediately following this school year, she is hospitalized the first time for her disorder. Marya writes that instead of getting better while in treatment, she gets worse. She convinces her parents to let her go to California and live with her stepmother when she is released from treatment.

Once in California, Marya begins bingeing and purging again. During the short while she stays in California, she manages to lose weight to a point that she is lighter than when she first enters the hospital for treatment. Marya is once again hospitalized, but discharged when her vital signs stabilize and insurance stops paying for her treatment. Within one week, Marya loses twelve more pounds and is readmitted to the hospital on emergency status. This time Marya is sent to Lowe House, a residential treatment center where Marya comes closest to being healed. As a result of her fear of facing herself, however, Marya lies about being molested as a child and sabotages her own recovery.

After her release from Lowe House, Marya's anorexia begins to resurface slowly. Finally, while taking classes at American University, Marya drops to her lowest weight of 52 pounds. Marya's father takes her to the hospital emergency room. Marya at first refuses to be checked in for treatment, but after realizing how weak she really is, signs herself into the hospital for treatment.

Throughout her book, Marya analyzes her own eating disordered behavior. She contends that eating disorders are not as simple as some people would like to think. Marya reasons that there are a variety of factors, including heredity, genetics, personality, culture and upbringing that work in unison to cause the disorder. Marya intends her book to be a warning to other girls not to follow the path that she took.

# Introduction

## Introduction Summary and Analysis

In her introduction Marya Hornbacher writes about an experience she has with another anorexic who has just been released from the hospital. Jane is shy as she tries to eat as a normal person. Marya is encouraging the girl when Jane suddenly tells her that her heart feels funny. Marya recognizes the signs of a possible impending heart attack and rushes Jane to the emergency room. As they drive to the emergency room, Marya knows what it is that Jane is feeling because she has felt the same pains herself. Marya worries that Jane will die before they reach the hospital. Once they arrive at the hospital Marya becomes frustrated because the doctor does not recognize the serious nature of Jane's condition. In fact, Marya yells at the doctor because he refuses to listen to her. Marya's choice of this introductory story shows not only the deadly consequences of anorexia, but also the lack of recognition even among medical personnel about the seriousness of this disorder.

Also in this section Marya gives some details and statistics about her own anorexia. Marya writes that she becomes bulimic when she is nine, and anorexic at fifteen. These disorders last until the age of twenty. She is hospitalized six times for her eating disorders. Her weight ranges from a mere 52 pounds to a healthy 135 pounds. Even though at the age of twenty, she is considered "recovered" she still struggles with the eating disorder. As she gathers information and looks through her own medical files for research for her book, Marya writes that she learns much about herself that she never realized. For instance, she learns she is expected not to survive her anorexia. However, Marya writes that she now lives a fairly normal life, regardless of her ongoing fight with anorexia.

Marya's introduction also tells her readers why she writes her story. She writes the book in order to tell the story both of the sickness, and her decision to get well. Marya also writes that she does not agree with the common beliefs about eating disorders. She believes, instead, these disorders are addictions. These significant disorders cannot be solved with pills and positive communication. Marya writes her book with the hope that it might keep others from going through the same things she did.



# 1 Childhood (1974-1982)

## 1 Childhood (1974-1982) Summary and Analysis

In this section, Marya writes about her childhood, from her birth until she is eight years old. This is the time in her life before her eating disorders surface. However, Marya writes that it is possibly circumstances during this time in her life that cause her disorder to begin.

Marya opens her chapter on her childhood by describing purging the first time as a nine year in her parents' house. She rewinds time to a picture of a five-year-old fighting with a friend over whether or not they are dieting. Even at the age of five, Marya already is feeling the need to be thin. It is important to note that Marya's mother is her idol. She writes that she sees her mother as being thin. She also watches the way in which her mother plays with her food at dinner, then eats only half of her food. Marya shows that she is learning these habits from her mother by eating only some of her food, then announcing she is finished. Marya writes that she might have learned eating habits from her mother in utero because her mother's eating habits are so bizarre. Even as an infant, Marya's eating habits are strange. Since Marya has various food allergies, she can only eat a concoction of ground lamb and goat's milk. Despite these issues, Marya describes herself as being obsessed with food. She indicates that while some who are obsessed with food become chefs, others develop eating disorders.

In addition to her unusual relationship with food, Marya also writes that she has never a healthy attitude about her body. She always sees it as foreign and unconnected to herself. She indicates that sometimes she feels as if she is watching herself in action, as if she is watching another person. Also according to her book, Marya seems to have some underlying unmet needs for affections. As a child, Marya recalls not liking to be touched because she realizes she wants to be touched so badly. This need seems to scare Marya to the point that she tries to avoid it altogether.

In addition to the fear of her own needs and the foreign nature of her body, Marya has an experience in a dance class that causes her to realize how different she is from other girls. While the other dainty girls are wearing baby blue leotards, Marya wears an electric blue leotard that makes her stand out from the others. In addition, Marya is a solid, muscular girl. As Marya looks at the image of herself reflected again and again in the mirrors of the dance studio, Marya, then only four years old, recognizes the difference between her body and the other girls' bodies. To make matters worse, when Marya tells her parents she believes she is fat, they do not take her seriously but instead dismiss her idea as being childish.

Marya writes that her conception is accidental. Neither of her parents intend or want to have children. Marya also believes she would have been best born as a fully formed adult instead of a child. Despite these factors, Marya writes that her childhood is happy and that her birth brings joy to her parents. She also writes, however, that her childhood



is dramatic. In her words, Marya describes her childhood as uneasy. She is nervous and feels she is often both living and watching her own life. When Marya's therapists write about her childhood they indicate that Marya wants to live in her own world. In addition, Marya has a low sense of self-esteem. Marya's parents admit to Marya's therapists that they tried to lower Marya's expectations about herself. Although the parents believe they are helping Marya avoid disappointment, Marya feels as if her parents doubt her ability to do anything correctly. This belief on Marya's part leads to the deterioration of her own self-esteem.

As a child Marya also participates in thought patterns referred to by therapists as "magical thinking." Marya believes if she does things in a certain way, she will be happy, or safe, or whatever is important to her at the time. Marya writes that these rituals calm her. As an anorexic and bulimic, Marya writes that the rituals associated with these disorders also make her feel safe.

In addition to the before mentioned circumstances, Marya writes that her life is full of contradictory factors. Although her family is close, Marya writes that they are often thrown off balance and separated by change. Her repressed mother is icy and tender by turns. Meanwhile, her father is severely depressed. He alternates between being adoring and unstable. For these reasons Marya prefers her bedroom, a place where things generally stay the same. Marya can never count on her parents being the same, however. She is never sure what will confront her when she leaves the safety of her bedroom.

As a result of her parents' personality differences, Marya writes there is tension between the two of them. Marya's role in their relationship is that of symptom bearer, according to therapists. She writes that all of their frustrations are put upon Marya, and she feels the responsibility to make things work for her parents. Eventually, Marya writes that she becomes tired of this role and becomes sick herself. When her sickness is discovered, her parents blame each other for what has happened to their daughter. At this point, however, Marya makes it very clear that she does not blame her parents for her disorder. Marya's parents often use her as a tool to manipulate the other. Marya is also not the kind of child her parents expect. Her father wants a loving child who would never grow up. Her mother wants Marya to be an adult even as a child.

Since Marya's parents are unable to nurture her physically and emotionally, they substitute food to do the work for them. Each has their own little treats they give Marya. For this reason Marya begins to associate food with nurture. Marya never associates the feeling of being hungry with an empty stomach but instead with a desire to be close to her parents. Food, for all people, fills two emotional needs, she writes. First, it makes the person eating feel nurtured. Second, food initiates a chemical effect in the brain that makes the eater feel calmer. Another source of comfort for Marya during these growing up years is her books. Instead of going to school, Marya begs to stay home in bed so she could read all day long.

Since Marya's mother and father are theatre actors and directors, Marya spends much of her childhood in the theatre. It is there that she learns that putting on a costume and



a wig can transform an actor into someone else. Marya remembers feeling like a new person when one of the actresses fixes Marya's hair and makeup. As a result of her early experiences in the theatre, Marya grows up believing that nothing is as it appears to be. Marya believes her body is only a costume. If she can change this costume, she can change who she is.

As Marya grows older, the relationship between her parents grows more rocky. Although there are fights and threatened breakups in the past, they always get past them. When Marya is seven, however, her father announces he is going to Minnesota and taking Marya with him. In what Marya's father terms "wisdom," Marya's mother insists in going with them.



## 2 Bulimia - Minnesota (1982-1989)

### 2 Bulimia - Minnesota (1982-1989) Summary and Analysis

In this section of Marya's book, she describes the time she spends living with her parents as an adolescent and preteen in Edina, Minnesota. It is at this point in her life that Marya becomes a bulimic. Marya writes that, after her family settles into life in Edina, her parents manage to salvage their relationship. Marya, on the other hand, becomes completely neurotic. Marya is suddenly afraid of everything. She believes prayer will calm her, so Marya begins praying constantly. She begins to talk to herself. She sketches out her days in a planner and becomes hysterical if her day does not go as planned. Marya is devastated when she cannot wear slim sized jeans like her cousin.

Marya also writes that at eight years old, she begins to enter puberty, a growth stage that has never been explained to her. She does not understand why she is growing hair in strange places or why her body is changing. At the same time Marya is experimenting with sex with other girls, she also has a deep-seated guilt concerning her curiosity about sex because it is a subject that is not talked about in her home. When Marya's breasts begin to develop, her mother takes her to the doctor for diagnosis. Marya becomes embarrassingly large before she nags her mother enough that she takes her to buy a bra.

About this same time, Marya begins to beg her parents to let her stay home alone after school. Although Marya is afraid of being alone, she wants her parents to believe she is responsible. Marya calms herself during these hours alone by eating. This eating causes her to gain weight. In response to this weight gain, Marya begins forcing herself to throw up the food she has eaten. This binging and purging becomes Marya's routine to keep her anxieties at bay while she is alone. It is during this point in her life that Marya reads the book *Best Little Girl in the World* and decides that she eventually wants to be anorexic, like the book's main character. Marya's bulimia makes her extremely moody and causes her to get into fights at school. Her grades at school also go down. In addition, she begins to have arguments with her parents. Meanwhile, she is searching out diet tips and toning exercises.

As Marya grows older, she becomes more and more obsessed with the way her body looks. While she hates her hips and thighs, she especially hates her butt. She checks out these body parts each day in the mirror and berates herself because she is so fat. Marya reads a newspaper story about an anorectic girl in her town who has committed suicide and realizes that she understands how the girl felt. Marya is angry at herself because she does not pity the girl, but instead understands her and wishes she could do the same.

In the next section of this chapter Marya writes about the way that wealth is represented by thinness. Those who are wealthy can afford personal trainers and gym memberships





in order to achieve thin bodies. Those who are not wealthy stay fat. Other cultural issues, including advertisements and teen magazines, place extreme emphasis on being thin. While others at her school are like small adults, Marya writes that she feels she is too quirky and loud-mouthed to be cool. She is also from the wrong side of town. She feels as if she is living in a land filled with only dainty Barbie-doll girls. Marya is not dainty. Her attempts to be so only make her feel fatter and more out of place. Marya sums up her feelings at this time as believing that she is just too much; too much body, too many emotions, too intense, too loud.

When Marya begins to menstruate, she buys her supplies with her own money. For a year, Marya keeps the fact that she has started her period a secret from her mother. She only tells her mother when she has no more money with which to buy supplies. Marya's mother is unwilling to discuss Marya's period with her, only showing irritation when Marya asks if one pad is enough for a whole day at school. As a result, Marya bleeds through her pants. Since Marya is still in middle school, the nurse does not keep pads. Marya has to call her father to come pick her up from school that day.

By the time she is eleven she not only meets full diagnostic criteria for bulimia, she is also fully developed as a woman. To Marya, becoming a woman indicates becoming a person who does not like her body. Marya also cites research that indicates those who develop early puberty appear to be predisposed to eating disorders. In addition, the loss of self-control seems to be an important cultural taboo. Marya believes her eating disorder stems from a desire to be able to control herself. Although Marya is physically an adult, she has not matured emotionally. She writes of a time when she is telling her parents her big dreams for her future. As is common, they warn her to be more realistic. At this point she throws an "age-appropriate temper tantrum."

At this point Marya begins to have a true interest in planning her career and future. She plots endlessly on how she will achieve her goals in the short amount of time she has to achieve them. Marya begins to ask her parents to let her go to boarding school. This is both an attempt to get out of her home, and an effort to launch herself into greatness. However, she does not have the tools needed to help her deal with both her maturity in some issues and immaturity in others. Marya is unable to handle the conflict so she seeks solace from the mental distress in the form of a diet. When Marya is in the sixth grade, she begins to have anorexic tendencies. She goes an entire day without eating, or eating only carrot sticks. At this point, she begins to draw into herself. During this time her group of friends keep Marya relatively sane.

Marya's transition from middle school to junior high is one that is difficult for her parents. Marya looks older than she is, a fact that causes her parents much worry. Marya, however, is pleased with the way her body is changing. In an effort to believe Marya's rebellious behavior is normal, her parents continually stretch the boundaries of what they believe normal to be. As Marya becomes less afraid of her bulimia, her eating disorder begins to take over her life.

In the seventh grade Marya begins to feel as if she is wearing a sign stating how messed up she is. Even with the variety of rumors that are spread about Marya, none of



them are true. No one guesses her real problem. As a result of her bulimia, Marya unconsciously begins to transform her emotional pain into physical pain. Although her parents take her to doctors for her headaches and backaches, none of the doctors she sees diagnose her real problem. Marya feels she is almost caught the day she comes to dinner with her eyes blood-red because the veins in them busted when she threw up. Marya feels her life would have been different had she confessed to her parents then what was wrong. Instead, she continues down the road of bulimia.

Marya's fighting with her parents becomes more severe. Her family has discussions about the problems caused by Marya. It seems to Marya that everyone agrees she is a problem, but no one recognizes that she has a problem. In her book, Marya wonders how her parents could go without recognizing that she had an eating disorder. However, she does indicate that she would throw up only when her parents were not home or under the cover of running water. Also, Marya credits herself with being a good liar. Marya holds the belief that her eating disorder develops as a way to keep others, her parents also, from having complete control over her and her life.

In the eighth grade, Marya decides not to fight the rumors circulating about her any longer. She begins sleeping with skanky boys. She also begins doing drugs. Her parents and teachers are concerned that Marya is not living up to her potential. Notice in certain instances that Marya will capitalize certain words. The word "potential" is one of these words she sometimes chooses to capitalize. This capitalization seems to put an extra emphasis, or importance, on the ideal this word represents in Marya's life.



## 2 Bulimia

### 2 Bulimia Summary and Analysis

In the same way Marya uses bulimia to fill her emotional void, she begins to use sex to try to fill this same void. Since Marya learns about sex on her own, she does not know about birth control or even how babies are actually made. At fourteen, Marya becomes pregnant. She fishes for answers from her friends and mother concerning what she should do if she were to ever get pregnant. One night at dinner, Marya feels a snap and is sick to her stomach. Her body spontaneously aborts her baby that night in the bathroom of her parents' house. Even as she stands up from the toilet after the miscarriage is finished, Marya is distracted by how fat she thinks her thighs are.

Note that this chapter includes many references to the book *Alice in Wonderland*. Marya refers to Alice's many physical changes while she is in Wonderland to illustrate her own time as a bulimic. In fact, at one point, when Marya writes about the way her body begins to change when she enters puberty, she refers to herself as being like Alice on mushrooms. In the book, Alice magically gets taller or shorter when she eats magical mushrooms.

In an attempt to stop Marya's wayward behavior, Marya's parents send her to a psychiatrist. Marya indicates that this therapist hates her and gives her little insight into her problems. Although she tells the man, whom she calls Dokter Freud, that she is bulimic, he does not address this issue. Marya even shows him the scars on her fingers and raw patch on the back of her throat with no sign of recognition or concern from the doctor.

Marya remembers feeling proud when a friend tells her school counselor about Marya's bulimia. Marya believes this fuss shows that she is a worthwhile human being. The counselor suggests to Marya that someone needs to tell her parents what she has been doing. Marya agrees to tell them. To her surprise when Marya tells her parents, her mother confesses that she also used to make herself throw up. Her father replies that he had suspected this behavior. Marya cries and promises she will not do it anymore. The conversation is dropped. Marya, however, does not stop. In fact, her bulimia becomes worse than ever after this conversation.

At the same time, Marya becomes more sexually active. She is obsessed with the way she can control men with her body. Looking back at this time in her life, she wonders why women who are sexually attractive cannot be intellectual as well. She writes that life seems to define one of two roles for women. They can either be smart or they can be sexy, but not both.

During her ninth grade year, Marya's bulimia and drug use combine to cause insomnia. She teeters on the brink of insanity caused by sleep deprivation. Marya becomes afraid of the dark again, afraid to be alone. These fears stop when Marya begins applying to

art boarding schools. She visits and applies to Interlochen Arts Academy. She falls in love with the school and wants to be accepted. In the close of this chapter, as she hoped, she is accepted to Interlochen.



## 3 The Actor's Part - Michigan (1989 - 1990)

### 3 The Actor's Part - Michigan (1989 - 1990) Summary and Analysis

This chapter of Marya's book covers the summer after her ninth grade in high school and her year at Interlochen, a boarding school for the arts. Marya spends the summer bragging to her friends that she is finally breaking free. She imagines the new person she will become when she earns success at her school. Her new vision of herself also includes a much slimmer Marya, one whom everyone will congratulate for losing weight. In conjunction with this vision, Marya decides to stop eating once she enters the state of Michigan. Already she has begun to lose weight noticeably. Marya eats, but then throws up. She is also still doing drugs and sleeping around.

Marya writes at this point that she believes her problem stems from the fact that she has fallen for the female version of the American Dream. She writes that this dream prompts women to lose weight, promising that once they diddoso, everything will be great. The simple losing of weight will transform these women into different people. Marya truly believes the loss of weight will make her tall, rich, and calm and collected, even though these characteristics are physically and emotionally out of her reach.

Also in this section Marya writes about the reasons why she decides to transform from bulimia to anorexia. To Marya, bulimia represents times of passion. It represents need, the act of giving into the body's desires, and a giving in to hopelessness. Marya writes that as eating disorders go, however, bulimia is actually more realistic than anorexia. Bulimics give in to the needs of their bodies, realizing that they are inescapable. Anorexics, however, truly believe they can live without their bodies. Therefore they attempt to entirely deny their nutritional needs. Marya desires to live in a world with no emotions or passions. She decides the way to do this is to make her body smaller.

Marya remembers being involuntarily sick when she learns of the massacre of students in Beijing. It is interesting that seeing others kill their own makes Marya sick, however, her own ploy to destroy herself through starvation does not bother her at all. Of course, one has to keep in mind that Marya does not consider starvation the end result of her refusal to eat; she thinks instead she will become the person she wants to be. In some twisted way, the Chinese people also think their actions are morally acceptable.

Before her move to Interlochen, Marya goes on tour with her choir to the Far East. In her mind, Marya sees herself as fat compared to the other girls. Marya remembers from the trip the second degree sunburn she gets on the beach in Hawaii as well as the agony she feels when she considers having to either offend her hosts by not eating or eating and then having no safe place to throw up. Marya finds solace in a friend who is also a bulimic. However, Marya discovers bisexual feelings in herself and falls in love



with the girl. As a result she tells the friend she is perfect and begs her not to throw up anymore. Marya suspects that although the friend agrees, she continues to throw up in secret.

Marya returns from her tour to a visit with her grandmother and grandfather in Seattle. Marya describes this visit as a competition between the ladies to prove which could eat the least. To make matters worse, the grandmother buys Marya an outfit that is too small. Marya believes this is a statement from her grandmother saying Marya is too fat. Later Marya wears the outfit while in Methodist Hospital as a way to prove to her grandmother she is no longer fat. Marya then describes the strange beliefs that her mother's family holds about food. She wonders how her mother happened to give birth to a normal sized child like herself. Marya believes her mother thinks Marya is fat, and too much like her father. Marya learned years later that her mother has difficulty with her daughter because she is so much like herself.

Marya's roommate at Interlochen is the daughter of an eating disorders therapist, a coincidence on which she had not counted. Even so, Marya writes that eating disorders are rampant and obvious at Interlochen. She finds friends willing to support her in her weight loss. As Marya begins her "diet" she begins to realize that she and her friends are suddenly obsessed with food. At this point, Marya asserts that eating disorders are addictions. People become addicted to the adrenaline that fuels their body when there is no food to do so. Marya also contends that there is an increased intensity in sensual feelings. Marya writes that she also has such a dislike for her body at this point that she is willing to do anything in order to make it go away. She does not have or does not sense the self-saving mechanism that keeps most people from actually harming themselves through their diet.

Throughout her year at Interlochen, Marya finds herself becoming more and more manic. She is eating less and less, and feels more pressure to get more and more done. Marya and Lora also begin arguing more and more frequently. When Lora sees Marya while Marya is changing her shirt, Lora is shocked at the bones that jut from her roommate's back. Marya refuses to talk to her. At this point Marya is drinking coffee with only a bit of cream, carrot sticks, celery sticks and mustard. As a result of dehydration, Marya craves salt. She shakes salt on almost everything that she eats. On Sundays Marya and her dieting friends allow themselves to binge. They spend the rest of the day, however, exercising trying to work off the food they have eaten. By December, Marya is living on only 100 calories each day.

When Marya goes home for winter break she is complimented on her weight loss, just as she has wanted. Upon returning to school, Marya eats only once weekly to make up for the food she has eaten while on break. Marya stays with this plan until her body begins making her eat even against her will. After this uncontrollable eating, though, Marya has the safety of being able to throw up all of the food that she had eaten. Even as Marya writes her story, she says she still misses the ability to rid her body of the food that she has eaten. Marya does not do so because she does not want her husband to find her dead as a result of gastric rupture or a heart attack, both two possible consequences of purging.



One day in February Marya has taken too much speed and swallowed all of the pills in her medicine cabinet. She passes out. She goes to the infirmary but they refuse to excuse her from class. In addition to not eating, Marya is hoarding food in her room, a classic practice of anorexics. Marya writes that this school year she becomes completely obsessed with food.

After spring break, Marya passes out for the first time. Marya is taken to the infirmary. She throws up the orange juice someone tries to pour down her throat. Marya then sleeps on and off throughout the day, claiming that she has the flu. Marya remembers being happy with herself because she is disappearing, just as she had planned. However, Marya agrees to start going to AA meeting after this incident. Marya enjoys her AA meetings. She especially enjoys the idea that AA teaches, that she is powerless over her disease.

At Interlochen, prom is replaced by a celebration called morp. Marya is threatened that if anything goes wrong at morp, she will be expelled from school. During the dance, Marya breaks into a cold sweat and stumbles while trying to dance. She escapes to the bathroom where she composes herself. Although she tries to go back to the dance floor, Marya soon has to return to the bathroom, stumbling with her friends following her. Once in the bathroom, Marya begins to cough up blood. One friend goes to get a chaperone. The chaperone forces Marya to leave. She passes out on the way to the school infirmary. Despite her health, Marya is allowed to finish the school year at Interlochen.

The last few weeks of school Marya's friends begin to become more seriously concerned about her. They beg school administrators to do something to help Marya. Marya, however, does not believe there is anything to be worried about. She is not that thin, she is not throwing up anymore and she is trying to eat. At the end of the school year, Marya leaves Interlochen, telling one teacher she is going into treatment. In reality, however, Marya believes she wants to die. To her, life seems too difficult, too long to have to stay on Earth. Marya believes she is suffering from a strange sort of burnout. She has been trying to be an adult all of her life, and now she is tired of being an adult.

When Marya sees her parents again after the end of school, they are shocked at how thin she has gotten. Marya's mother tells her she looks like a ghost. Marya's mother drives the family to Chicago after Interlochen graduation ceremonies. They stay at a fancy hotel where Marya remembers eating quail. Marya decides the meal is too expensive to throw up, so she sleeps that night with a full stomach. Once she is at home, Marya's father hugs her often. She realizes, however, that these hugs are just a way to determine how thin Marya is. They tell Marya she has a doctor's appointment. To her surprise, Marya is taken to an eating disorders clinic. The nurse there checks her into the eating disorders treatment center at Methodist Hospital.

# Interlude

## Interlude Summary and Analysis

This interlude is written in September of 1996 when Marya is doing research for her book. She writes of speaking with the doctor who oversees her case while she is in Methodist Hospital. It is strange to look back through the files pertaining to her illness. She sees them as being about someone else, someone for whom she feels sorry. The girl shows no sorrow for the way she is treating her body. Marya writes that she knows now the end results of her eating disorder. She lives with the damage she did to her body every day. As she reads her files, Marya sees how obvious her lies to her doctors and parents were. She also remembers how many times she would fall as a result of her eating disorder.





## 4 Methodist Hospital, Take 1 (Summer 1990)

### 4 Methodist Hospital, Take 1 (Summer 1990) Summary and Analysis

In this section of her book, Marya writes about the first time she is hospitalized at the Methodist Hospital. This hospitalization occurs the summer after her year at Interlochen. Notice that in the title, Marya refers to this first stay as "Take 1." This reference probably comes from her background in acting. She realizes that she is not really serious about getting well while at the hospital, only playing the part that others want her to play. She welcomes the routine, the anonymity of being just another patient that comes with being in the hospital. She also makes an interesting point by indicating that these treatment centers are actually conducive to eating disorders.

One of the first aspects of life in a treatment center that Marya describes is the difficulty the patients have in using the bathroom. Since many patients are bulimics who will throw up if left alone in a bathroom, all patients have to be watched while using the toilet. Also, the patients become very constipated when they begin eating again. Their systems at first will not digest the food properly. They cannot be given laxatives because many have used laxatives so often to empty their systems and thus lose weight that they are addicted to this medicine. After girls have gone six-ten days without having a bowel movement, they are given a barium enema, an experience Marya refers to as a "nightmare."

Another aspect of the treatment center that causes anxiety for Marya is the inability to know what she weighs. The scales at the treatment center weigh the patients in kilograms and Marya has no idea how to convert this to pounds. She indicates that all patients are uneasy because they could no longer keep a strict watch on their weight and have no idea how much weight they are gaining from day to day.

Besides these small setbacks, Marya indicate that to her the treatment center is like heaven. She enjoys the way her life revolves around food. She explains that although anorexics will not eat, they think about food all the time. When hunger sets in and the individual still does not eat, these thoughts about food become an obsession. Marya is comfortable in a place where food is the center of her day. She describes her time in the treatment center as being like camp. She now uses her obsessive-compulsive nature to plan her meals. Although she, and all the other residents, pretend like the thought of food sickens them, underneath they are all happy to finally be eating.

Marya indicates that the fact she is classified as a bulimic rather than an anorexic has some good and some bad consequences for her at the treatment center. One of the good consequences is that she is not required to gain as much weight as the others. However, Marya is also looked down upon by the other girls because she is not



anorexic and is not emaciated like they are. Although she is not anorexic or emaciated, Marya writes that she is just as sick as the others. Since her blood pressure often drops quickly, she is always on watch for a sudden heart attack. As a result of her constant throwing up, her esophagus is perforated and causes her to spit blood when she coughs.

However, in outside culture, as well as the culture in the hospital, anorexia is seen as more admirable. Among those with eating disorders anorexia is considered admirable because it represents the girl's ability to deny herself her needs. Bulimics do not deny themselves, they only throw up what they eat. The skinny, fat-free anorexic body is also praised by modern culture. Since bulimics will generally not lose a great deal of weight, they do not attain this skinny body for which anorexics and the world alike strive.

Marya next introduces Dr. J., the former army doctor who now serves as the doctor for the Eating Disorders Institute. This doctor seems to be perpetually annoyed by the girls and has no compassion or empathy for them. Dr. J. and Marya do not get along because Marya does not cooperate well with the treatment plan and tends to talk back to the doctors and nurses. Although physical and occupational therapy as well as other self help activities are offered by the hospital, Marya does not participate in any of these groups.

One issue that does surface through her treatment in Methodist Hospital are the troubles in Marya's relationship with her mother. In fact, after a therapist suggests to Marya she has gotten some of her ideas about food from her mother, Marya decides to try to talk to her mother about this topic. Marya's mother immediately believes Marya is trying to blame her for the eating disorder. As a result she tells Marya that Marya is born with her problems already ingrained. Family therapy with both parents do not work out much better for Marya. Her parents still see Marya as a little girl and not a young woman with complex problems and issues. Marya is also required to see her parents as imperfect humans. Marya's parents first blame each other, then Marya for her disorder. The sessions are mostly spent fighting over years of issues that no one has ever discussed. Marya writes that it is during this time that her family falls apart.

In August, notes on Marya's charts indicate that she has gotten better. As the true actor, Marya does what is asked of her, eats what and when she is told, and has said the right things. However, Marya knows that she has not gotten better while in the hospital, but instead has gotten worse. Her fears of the world have increased. She starts sleeping around. She persuades her parents to let her move to California. Marya will be under the constant watch of a group of doctors and nurses who will monitor her weight and ensure that she continues to be healthy while in California. Marya, however, now considers herself to be the "Artful Dodger." In California she plans to play a new game.



## 8. 5 Persephone Herself Is but a Voice - California (1990-1991)

### 8. 5 Persephone Herself Is but a Voice - California (1990-1991) Summary and Analysis

In this chapter of her book, Marya writes about the time she spends in California with her stepmother after she is released from Methodist Hospital for the first time. As Marya describes her stepmother's kitchen, her reference to the way that the cereal in the cupboards scratches her throat on the way back shows the reader that Marya will return to her eating disorder and her habits of bingeing and purging.

Shortly after Marya arrives in California, she realizes she is pregnant again. She waits, apparently hoping she will have a miscarriage again. When this does not happen, she throws herself down the stairs, causing a spontaneous miscarriage. She cries, not because she has killed her baby, but because she thinks she is fat. Marya starts her time in California trying to follow her eating program as laid out for her in the Methodist Hospital. On her first day of school, however, Marya eats only half a banana in the obsessive way of the anorexic.

At school Marya meets and begins to get to know the boy whom she will later marry. Even though she is spending her days with this small-town, well-grounded boy, she is spending her nights doing drugs and sleeping around with a variety of men. Marya admits that even though she tells her parents she is getting healthier, she is actually sliding back into her own personal dream world. She either does not eat, or eats and throws what she has eaten back up.

Despite that fact that Kathi has sent specific directions to the doctors in California about how to treat Marya, her instructions are ignored. When Marya is weighed, she is weighed in her street clothes. She also does not see her therapist as instructed. As a result, Marya begins to binge in the evening when she arrives home from school. Afterward, she throws up in the bathroom. By November, she wishes she was dead.

One day after eating something her stepmother offers her, Marya remembers going to the drugstore and looking for ipecac. Marya drinks the whole bottle of ipecac before reading the instructions. Marya begins to feel ill and stagger. She walks into a café and orders soup, believing it will make her feel better. As soon as she tries the soup, Marya runs for the bathroom. She vomits violently, then sits on the floor for an hour trying to stop shaking.

At this point, Marya believes that she goes crazy. She writes strange stories and poems deep into the night. Sometimes she goes out walking. Once she remembers picking up left over food off the ground and putting it in her pockets. Marya is afraid if she sleeps,



she will die, or lose her soul. Although Marya has always had an acute sense of time, she writes that during this point in her life, she loses this inborn sense.

At Christmas Marya meets with her parents in Portland. After her parents realize how thin Marya has allowed herself to get, they call TAMS. It has been easy to lose the weight and yet fool the doctors in California into thinking she is healthy. If the scale is a regular bathroom scale, she moves the dial to add pounds before the doctor come into the room. Medical scales are harder to trick but since Marya is weighed in her street clothes, she tucks things like rocks, cans of soda and jewelry into her pockets to add weight. She also drinks large quantities of water to add weight. Marya adds at this point a portion of a letter from TAMS to the doctors in California. This letter contains information warning them to weigh Marya in a gown and to always have her pee before weighing. Since these instructions are ignored, Marya is easily able to fool the system.

After Marya leaves, the pipes burst, proving to Marya's parents that she is purging again. Kathi orders Marya's parents to bring her back to the treatment center immediately. Marya has gone on with her regular life in California. However, all this ends when Marya's stepbrothers return home from college and inform Marya she is in trouble. Marya is picked up by the cops running down Highway 101 and returned home. The night before she is to leave, she stuffs herself with food at her boyfriend's house, hoping she can gain enough weight to stay out of the hospital. The next day Marya says goodbye to Rebecca and Julian. Marya writes that later Julian tells her this is the first time he realized how thin she really was.

Marya returns home on an airplane. When the plane takes off, Marya's blood pressure drops, making Marya believe she is having a heart attack. Kathi is angry when Marya enters her office and asks Kathi how she looks. Although the doctors and nurses at TAMS are obviously concerned about Marya's health, Marya appears proud that she has lost so much weight.

# **Interlude - November 5, 1996**

## **Interlude - November 5, 1996 Summary and Analysis**

In this interlude Marya describes the daily routine of a person living in the aftermath of an eating disorder. She still worries that she has gained weight, still checks herself out in the mirror, still worries her clothes are getting tighter. Marya writes that she hates that she has to eat, yet as a now healthy human realizes she cannot go back to her eating disorder. Still, however, she feels the need to harangue her husband about whether or not she has gained weight. She imagines this scene repeating in homes across the world.



## 6 Lockup - Minneapolis (1991)

### 6 Lockup - Minneapolis (1991) Summary and Analysis

This section of Marya's book deals with the time she spends in Lowe House, the Children's Residential Treatment Center in Minneapolis. The initial pages of this section draw a picture of a Marya who is miserable, who wants to die. Even while at the Methodist Hospital, Marya is throwing up meals into her suitcase. At the point that Marya's vitals stabilize, her insurance company refuses to pay for any more treatment. In addition, Marya is noncompliant so she is discharged from the hospital. At home Marya becomes sicker than she is when she first goes to the hospital. At home, her father holds a thread over Marya's nose to determine if she is still breathing as she sleeps. Within a week after her discharge, Marya loses 12 pounds and is readmitted to the hospital.

Marya writes that she remembers little of that hospital stay until she is in a meeting with her parents, doctor, nurse and Kathi. They are planning to send her to Willmar, a state institution. Since Marya has such a bad reaction to this suggestion, Kathi manages to get her into Lowe House. In this facility Marya will be required to stay in the building, on her floor. As a result of the seriousness of her condition, she is put on twenty-four hour watch. Marya soon realizes she is actually in a locked, soundproof institution. The nurse searches Marya's things, taking away anything Marya might use to hurt herself. Marya is most upset when the nurse takes Julian's picture. The only items on Marya that the nurse does not search are her shoes, an oversight that makes Marya pleased because she has laxatives hidden in her shoes. Despite this moment of pleasure, Marya tries to run from the nurse out the "Exit" door. She finds out that it too is locked.

Marya explains the daily routine at Lowe House. Although others fight with the nurses about the routine, Marya is instead in trouble for being too neat. Marya is shocked by the cafeteria because the staff members allow the patients to fill their own plates with food. Marya does not take any of the food. Another anorexic in her unit warns Marya the staff members will make her eat eventually. After breakfast the other anorexics' words become true when Marya is given the option to either choose to eat, or be sent to a hospital to be force fed, then sent back to Lowe House. For a few days Marya is allowed not to eat. Then, she is met with a plate full of food when she goes to her meal. If she does not eat the food, she will be forced to drink a whole can of Ensure.

At this point Marya breaks into her discussion of Lowe House to tell her reader that she has since learned that in order to recover from her eating disorder, she has to give it completely up. She cannot keep any bit of it and ever hope to get better. During her stay at Lowe House, the laxatives hidden in Marya's closet represent the bit of the eating disorder that she still holds onto. Marya also writes that at Lowe House, they treat Marya not as an illness, but as a person who has feelings and experiences that cause her eating problem. Marya has trouble with this approach because she does not see herself as a victim of anyone but herself.



At first, Marya spends her days reading, studying and writing down quotes that she likes. Marya turns over a table in the cafeteria when she suspects the nurse has given her too much milk. When her parents come to visit, Marya talks only about her books. She throws a fit when the staff take away her books. With no books to distract her, Marya cries for three weeks. Then she met Duane.

Duane tries to befriend Marya even before her books are gone. He lures Marya away from her books with a game of rummy. When the game is finished and the two clean up the cards, Duane asks Marya how to properly pronounce her name. He then asks her to be his sister while they are at Lowe House. Marya accepts the proposition. Each night there is a routine of staff members reading stories, then staff and residents giving hugs to one another. Marya has always run from the hugging. One night, however, Duane runs Marya down in the hall and offers to give her a hug. Marya holds tightly to the young boy and begins to cry. Marya cries because of the significance that hugging has come to have for her. It has been something she has decided to avoid completely; hugs seem like a threat instead of a comfort. They make Marya realize that she has a body, that she is important and that other people care about her in a nonsexual way.

It is with Duane that Marya first feels an emotional connection. Marya tries to convince Duane he is a wonderful person while Duane tries to convince Marya that she needs to eat. This emotional intimacy is important since one of Marya's primary problems is her lack of emotion. Staff members try to get Marya to play, to take advantage of the time she is given to relive her childhood. Finally, Duane is assigned to Marya to help her learn to play.

Through her journal and her one-on-one sessions with the staff members, Marya begins to realize how all of her loudness and rudeness was just an act and a lie. For the first time, Marya begins to feel as if the staff members realize who she really is. In response to her bad feelings about herself, Marya begins cutting her hair. She finally shaves all of her hair off. Finally one of the staff members tells Marya that no matter how much weight she loses, or how short she cuts her hair, or changes herself in any other physical sense, she will still be the same person underneath.

It is at this point in her treatment that Marya begins to realize how much she hates herself. She realizes that her desire to lose weight is her form of self-torture, of self-murder. Marya's desire to hurt herself is so deep that she understands the pain of the girl on her floor who cuts herself whenever given the opportunity.

When Marya talks about the causes of her eating disorder, she does not lay the whole blame on her parents. She recognizes that her own personality is partially at fault for bringing on the disorder. Marya does not talk to her counselors about the way her childhood years and her personality foster the eating disorder. She does not want to think that this disorder comes about as a result of something in her own personality. While at Lowe House, however, Marya does come to learn more about her own childhood and fill in the blank spaces in her memory. However, Marya realizes how much she hates the person she is as a child. Marya realizes that in order to be healthy, she must get to know and reconcile herself with this child she dislikes so much.





Since she is not sure if she can live without her eating disorder, Marya admits that she did not put complete effort into getting better. In fact, she notes that she "chickened out" instead of taking full advantage of her opportunity to get well. At this point Marya begins sneaking to her sink at night and drinking massive amounts of water to increase her weight. A staff member catches on to Marya's scheme and puts an end to it. Staff members search Marya's room after she returns from a pass having lost six pounds. They find her hidden laxatives and put Marya back on twenty-four hour watch.

Marya begins eating again only because she wants to go on the trips the staff are planning for the residents. Marya again begins to show some promise of recovery. She discovers she both wants to stay in the institution because of the safety it provides as well as leave because she misses her freedom. Marya finally comes to the realization that once she is dismissed from Lowe House, she will have to give up the eating disorder in its entirety. She will not be able to diet or count calories or anything.

At this point in her treatment, Marya lies and tells a staff member that she has been sexually abused as child. She realizes as an adult that this is an act by her unconscious brain to allow her some way to hang onto her eating disorder after she leaves Lowe House. This lie takes the emphasis off Marya and her eating disorder and puts it on something that does not exist. Although Marya's parents suspect she is lying, they do not mention this to Marya's counselors. Marya realizes that this lie is a ploy to get out of Lowe House. The ploy works. She is soon allowed to take classes at the University of Minnesota. Marya is released from Lowe House on November 5, 1991 nearly eight months after she is first admitted.





# 7 Waiting for Godot

## 7 Waiting for Godot Summary and Analysis

This section of Marya's book details the year between 1991 and 1992 that she spends in Minneapolis after she is discharged from Lowe House. At this time Marya is relatively happy. She is living with her parents, taking classes and working at the university newspaper. Marya writes that during this time, she slowly eases back into her anorexic rituals of working too much and not eating enough so slowly that even she does not recognize what is happening. Marya writes about her evening ritual of eating a bowl of granola and yogurt, a process that is so complex it sometimes takes her as long as three hours to eat the entire bowl of food. Marya's parents notice her strange eating habits and are concerned. However, they see that Marya is eating and believe she is better.

At this point, Marya takes the opportunity to write about the ways she, as an anorexic, uses to avoid food. Often she turns around the things that her counselors tell her in an effort to make her feel as if she is making progress to excuse her not eating. In addition to using these constructive things as an excuse to self destruct, Marya writes about the way that the eating habits of nearly all women, even the seemingly "normal" ones, do not provide a good example to those suffering with eating disorders.

After spending an evening reading in an all night café and not eating, Marya wrecks her father's car on the way home. Marya's father tells her later he correctly thinks the wreck is a result of Marya passing out because she is not eating. Marya remembers this incident as the point in time at which her life falls apart again. One weekend soon after the wreck, her parents go out of town and leave her alone. Marya remembers bingeing and purging until she has eaten everything in the house. Marya goes to the store and attempts to buy supplies to restock her parents' refrigerator, but in her weakened state cannot remember what she ate or what was even kept in the fridge regularly. When Marya returns home, she eats all of the food that she has just bought. She finally stops eating when she sees how bloated and terrible her face looks reflected in the glass of the kitchen window. At this point Marya tries to go to bed, but instead passes out and falls down the stairs. Marya repeats the behavior the next three days. When her parents return home and find the toilet stopped up with vomit, Marya lies and tells them she had the flu over the weekend.

In retrospect, Marya reasons this behavior of bingeing recurs because she is in her parents' house. It was only in this kitchen that she looks around her and consider all of the things that she can eat. This does not happen in other kitchens. Marya believes since the habit of bingeing and purging starts in her parents' kitchen, it just seems natural to her that she should carry on with habit once she is left alone. Marya also admits that bingeing and purging are activities that scare her. The binge eating proves that she has lost control of herself. The throwing up indicates there really is something wrong at a deep level. Anorexia does not conjure these fears because it is during the times that she



can control her eating, therefore controlling her needs, that Marya feels in control of herself.

The next weekend that Marya's parents leave her alone, she meets a man named Dave while she is studying and trying not to eat in a café. By morning Marya has taken Dave home with her. They spend the weekend having sex and lying to each other. At the end of the weekend Marya drops Dave off at the same café where she found him. She tells him never to contact her again. As she writes about her experience Marya indicates that she feels as if she is outside her body watching what is happening between herself and Dave. She considers it a game to seduce a man, but then the actual act of sex with a stranger is just another way to abuse her body.

Marya's father is livid when he finds condoms in his daughter's dresser. Through their fights concerning her sexuality Marya comes to realize her anorexia may have been some sort of apology to her father for growing up. Marya is afraid of being pulled back into her childhood, afraid of the needs she has as a child, and still has as an adult. For this reason, she turns her father into her personal arch enemy. Marya believes her parents are not the cause of her eating disorder, or its worsening. Anorexia and bulimia are part of her life so long, that these behaviors have become a habit for her. Marya indicates that she regresses to her eating disorder because she has never learned how to deal with situations and circumstances in life that she does not like.

When Marya stops eating, she indicates that she suddenly begins to enjoy life again. She loves her job, and is getting acceptance letters to the colleges and universities to which she has applied. It is at this point that Marya begins a relationship with Mark, a photographer from the university newspaper. At this point, Marya moves out of her parents' house and stops going to therapy almost completely. Although she planned to attend Reed College with Julian, Marya changes her mind when she visits Washington. Marya has been offered a huge scholarship to this school. In addition, Marya feels in Washington as if that unnamed thing that she has longed for is just out of reach. Although Marya is happy with the city, she reflects that her writing at that point is about the sadness associated with the city.

At her eighteenth birthday, when her parents no longer have the power to force her to continue treatment for her eating disorder, Marya ends her treatment sessions with TAMS. Marya also rents an apartment that she shares with a friend from work. This friend, Sibyl, is honest with Marya and tells her that her constant worries about the size of her rear and eating are crazy.

Marya remembers a visit to her grandmother during which her grandmother warns a young girl she will get fat if she eats a cracker with cheese. The comment embarrasses the girl and she starts to cry. Marya leaves the room and sobs in the bathroom as she realizes her whole family has issues with food. She later remembers talking to the young girls in the family about the dangers of anorexia. Marya calls herself a hypocrite for talking to the girls in this way when she is so obviously suffering with the very disorder she is warning them to stay away from. However, it is often those who have suffered with a disease who are best able to warn others of the dangers of that disorder.



Marya writes that before she leaves Minneapolis she visits Kathi once more simply because she does not have the power to put her back into the hospital. Kathi notes that Marya is very thin but Marya insists that she is doing all right. Marya writes that it is when she goes to Washington to begin her college studies that she completely loses her mind.

# Interlude - Present Day

## Interlude - Present Day Summary and Analysis

Marya writes about a trip to have her wisdom teeth removed, a procedure that her former eating disorder complicates. Although Marya suggests to the nurses and doctor that they do not need to give her a general anesthetic, they do anyway. The anesthetic causes Marya's heart murmur to become worse. Meanwhile, the antibiotic the doctors give her upsets her stomach so that she throws up and cannot eat. During this time, Marya loses fifteen pounds. She sees her anorexic body returning and can feel bones again. Although Marya wants her husband to notice her weight loss, to mention it so that she can feel proud of herself, he does what is perhaps the smartest thing, he does not mention that he notices.



## 8

### 8 Summary and Analysis

This section of Marya's book covers her time spent in Washington at American University. Although Marya admits that she is quite thin, she continues to lose weight. She has stopped eating almost entirely. Marya cuts back her system of caloric intake to the point she is living on only 320 calories each day. In addition, Marya writes that she does not sleep during her time in Washington. She refers to her lifestyle as suicidal.

While taking classes at American University, Marya also works as the managing editor for a wire service. During the chaos of the Clinton election, it is a wonderful time for her to break back into the journalism field. Soon Marya is working more than 40 hours at her job, as well as carrying a 4.0 grade point average.

Marya remembers going out with friends to drink. She meets a guy named Jeff who has sex with her in a corner of the bar. She was so drunk two men had to carry her to bed, leaving a trash can by the bed. Marya remembers throwing up the alcohol, then being fresh the next morning while others are still recovering. At this point, people begin to ask Marya if she is anorexic. Marya denies their questions, but also stops eating in the cafeteria.

Although Marya is distancing herself from others at her school, her letters to her parents are revealing. They indicate that Marya is lonely. However, Marya also tries to convince her parents she is eating in a healthy manner while at school. Each letter references food in some way. When Marya's roommate moves out, she loses her last connection to others.

Marya goes to the doctor for a checkup in order to pacify her parents. The campus doctor does not recognize Marya's eating disorder. Although she weighs only 82 pounds, his only suggestion is that she try to gain some weight. This illustration demonstrates how uneducated those in the medical field, even those who care for a group of young people especially vulnerable to eating disorders, are about these disorders. Although Marya weighs less than 90 pounds, her doctor is not concerned about her weight, even when Marya tells him she was once anorexic.

In this section Marya also realizes how unattractive her eating disorder has caused her to become. She cannot understand why men are still attracted to her. Marya writes that her face has turned a sallow, yellow, color. She has bruises where her bones jut out with no fat to cushion them. Her face is sunken and her cheek bones stick out. Marya also writes about the way she eats during this point in her life. She drinks usually three to six pots of coffee daily. She eats low-fat frozen yogurt for lunch and a fat-free muffin at night. Each of these foods is eaten slowly in order to make them last as long as possible.



When Marya's mother visits her in Washington, Marya does not want her to leave. Marya's mother realizes Marya is not doing well, but will not say that her daughter has relapsed. Marya's mother tells her she leaves Marya at that point because she feels Marya has decisions to make, such as whether to live or die, that Marya alone can make.

Shortly after her mother leaves Washington, Marya begins to have what she terms a nervous breakdown. In reality, her anorexia has probably become so severe that her body begins breaking down brain matter for energy. This process leaves Marya unable to think or concentrate as she was able to in the past. As a result, Marya tells her boss she needs a vacation, and goes to Boston to visit Lora, her roommate from Interlochen.

Lora tries to get Marya to eat during their time together. Since her mother is an eating disorder counselor, Lora realizes how close to death Marya is at this point. Marya remembers eating muffins from a bag on the floor of Lora's room, then crying and apologizing to Lora about eating her food. When she leaves Lora, Marya remembers wanting to tell Lora how scared she is, but she is unable to do so.

Once back at school, Marya realizes she no longer feels proud of her condition. She no longer wants people to see her. When Marya overhears a former friend make a comment about her eating, it angers her instead of pleases her. Although she wants to be left alone, people begin coming to Marya and expressing their concern about her weight. During her Christmas break, Marya and her parents fight about food. Marya estimates at this point she weighs about 75 pounds. Marya admits to her stepbrother, Paul, that she is sicker than ever. The family goes for a walk in the snow. As a result of the cold, Marya is forced to cut their walk short. She feels her family is angry with her. When Marya returns to school, she discovers she has a roommate. Although Marya worries what will become of her routine, she soon comes to love her roommate dearly.

At one point, Marya finds a scale and learns she weighs only 67 pounds. She goes on a binge. Marya indicates she feels as if she is possessed as she ate. She throws up what she eats and begins coughing up blood again. At 61 pounds, Marya purchases and begins taking laxatives. As she writes about her bingeing and purging, Marya begins to write in the third person. This switch from first person indicates how removed Marya has become from herself. Marya soon discovers that she no longer has the strength to get out of bed.

Marya's roommate convinces her to see a therapist. The therapist encourages her to see a doctor. Marya drinks water all day before seeing the doctor. Therefore her weight registers as 69 pounds. The doctor declares her to be healthy. In reality, Marya's true weight is closer to 55 pounds. One night Marya realizes she was no longer able to read. She falls down the escalator at Dupont Circle and believes she is dead. At this point, Marya weighs 52 pounds. Marya's roommate calls Marya's parents. Marya's parents, however, refuse to let her come home. It is not until Marya drops out of school that her parents allow her to come home. Marya's mother tells her she is very sick. Her parents convince her to go to a doctor.



The night before Marya's doctor's appointment, she goes out driving. Marya writes that she bounces \$200 in checks that night as she binges and purges. When she returns home, she even dreams she is eating and eating and throwing up what she has eaten. Her father takes her to her appointment the next morning, at the hospital emergency room. Marya is put in a room and given juice to drink. She pours the juice down the sink. Although Marya is told by a doctor she is going to admit her, Marya tries to avoid getting put in the hospital. The doctor allows Marya to go outside to smoke a cigarette. While outside, Marya gets dizzy when she turns too quickly. Battling her dizziness, Marya makes her way back inside the emergency room and checks herself into the hospital.



# Afterword

## Afterword Summary and Analysis

In her Afterword, Marya describes the difficulty of writing her story. She feels it is difficult to write her story since some words, such as hunger and cold, have different connotations for her than other people. She writes that she feels there should be an ending to the story; however, she still deals with the loose ends of her eating disorder on a daily basis. These loose ends, she writes, are the effects the disease had on her body. Her immune system does not work right, her reproductive system shut down, and her hair is prematurely grey. Marya writes she still has tendencies to "forget" to eat, or eat in a minimalist fashion. She also sometimes wakes from nightmares of being hungry.

Although at one point, Marya is given only one week to live, she has surpassed that expectation by four years. Marya lists the reasons why she is able to recover from her illness. Listed among her reasons is the idea that it is cowardly to kill herself just because life does not agree with her. Although at the time the book is written Marya was still underweight, she has grown three more inches. She envisions herself as a plant, growing toward the light. She refers to scars on her arms indicating she cut herself in an attempt to relieve depression as she begins to recover from her disorder. Her recent marriage, she writes, gives her a reason to stay and not turn back to her eating disorder. Marya summarizes that over the years she just learns to deal with life. She learns that running away, or becoming a different, thinner, person, does not change life. Marya writes that she has learned that what she is has to be enough.

Marya adds that she begins to realize that since she is still alive, she needs to do something with her life. Her fight, she writes, is worth the results. She explains that eating disorders are a way to avoid the pain and reality of life. By creating her own drama, she manages to ignore the more trifling matters of life, the matters she is afraid will destroy her. In her effort to deal with the things that go wrong in life, Marya turns on herself. In her mind, she writes there is no middle ground, only success or failure. However, Marya writes, it is hard to find women who can demonstrate good eating habits since so many women are obsessive about their eating to some extent or the other. In the end, Marya determines that her eating disorder is something that she has to fix by herself. Although Marya realizes this determination to work through her eating disorder is something that makes her strong, she still acknowledges there is grief and difficulty in letting go of that crutch.





# Present Day

## Present Day Summary and Analysis

In this final section, Marya writes about her life with the aftermath of her eating disorder. She suffers with a low pulse rate which often makes it difficult for her to wake up. She often gets dizzy and falls. When Marya goes to the gym, she realizes she has lost weight. She is scared because the idea of weight loss still makes her proud. Despite her weight loss, she runs on the treadmill for one and one half hours. After the exercise Marya passes out in the shower. Marya also indicates she often wakes at night with her heart beating an uneven rhythm, believing she is having a heart attack. As her pulse drops into the thirties, Marya falls into sleep.

This section seems to depict the true aftermath of Marya's anorexia. Although she is "recovered" Marya still has anorexic tendencies as are demonstrated by her pleasure when she discovers she has lost weight. Through her writing, Marya demonstrates the fear she feels in her everyday life as she deals with a low pulse and erratic heart rate. Although she wills her heart to beat normally, it is unable to because of the damage caused by long term starvation.



# Characters

## Marya Justine Hornbacher

Marya Hornbacher is the central character and writer of this memoir. In the book she shares the story of her 11 year battle with bulimia and anorexia. Marya is the daughter of Judy and Jay Hornbacher. Marya writes that even as an infant her eating habits are strange. She has a variety of allergies and can eat only a mixture of ground lamb and goat's milk. As a child, Marya spends much of her time in the theater where her parents work. It is in the theater that Marya learns that changing one's appearance can change who you are. When Marya and her family moves from their home in California to Minnesota, Marya develops a variety of strange neuroses, including bulimia. She is only nine years old the first time she forces herself to throw up. Marya's bulimia continues throughout her grade school years.

When Marya is fifteen she goes to live at Interlochen, a boarding school for art students. When Marya leaves for Interlochen, her goal is to completely transform from a bulimic to an anorexic. Throughout the school year, Marya pushes her body as far as she can both physically and mentally. With the support of other eating disordered friends, Marya is surviving on a minimal amount of food and exercising constantly. By the end of the school year, at a celebration similar to prom, called morp, Marya passes out and then spits up blood. This incident brings the attention of both Marya's teachers and her parents to her eating disorder. At the end of the school year, Marya is hospitalized at Methodist Hospital for treatment.

Instead of getting well during this first stay at Methodist Hospital, Marya only gains weight so she can get out and lose more weight. After she is dismissed from Methodist, Marya goes to live with her stepmother in California. During this time, Marya continues with both her bulimic and anorexic habits. Only a few short months after she is dismissed from Methodist, Marya is readmitted to the hospital. This time she weighs less than she did the first time she was admitted to the hospital. After being treated long enough to stabilize her vitals, Marya is dismissed from the hospital because her insurance will no longer pay and she is not cooperative. Within a week of being dismissed, Marya loses 12 more pounds. At this point, Marya is admitted to Lowe House, a residential treatment center. Marya comes closest to emotional healing in this center; however, when she lies about childhood abuse, the attention is taken from her true issues. After Marya leaves Lowe House, she goes to live with her parents. Even with their supervision, the eating disorder returns.

During this time, Marya enrolls in classes at American University in Washington, D.C. Although she makes good grades and works full time at a newspaper service at the college, Marya continues to lose weight. She writes in her book that it is this time in her life that she loses her mind. She has a nervous breakdown and leaves her job and classes. Finally, Marya's roommate calls Marya's parents and tells them how thin she has become. At this point, Marya weighs only 52 pounds. Marya finally agrees to her



parents' suggestion that she see a doctor. Marya's father takes her to the hospital emergency room. Marya balks when the doctor tries to admit her. Marya leaves the emergency room to smoke a cigarette. When she realizes how weak she really is, Marya goes back into the emergency room and checks herself into the facility. Although she is only given a week to live at the time, Marya beats the doctor's prediction.

## Judy Hornbacher

Judy Hornbacher is Marya's mother. She locks herself in her room and cries for three weeks when she learns she is pregnant. Marya describes her mother as being repressed and distant. Judy works first as a theatre actress then later as an assistant principal. Although she and her mother are not close, Marya's mother is her ideal. One of Marya's goals in life is to be thinner than her mother. Marya wants her mother to be proud of her. However, Marya's mother is always shooting down Marya's big dreams and big ideas about what she will do with her life. Although Judy believes this is a way to keep Marya from being disappointed, Marya sees these comments as being belittling. When Marya is a preteen, her mother tries to ignore the fact her daughter is growing up. Marya has to scream at her mother in order to get her to buy Marya a bra. As Marya gets older, her mother tends to "float off" when Marya and her father have arguments. She wants her husband to back off and let Marya grow up. When Marya admits to her family she is throwing up, her mother indicates that she used to do that also. Marya's mother tells her therapist once she feels like she is living with two crazy people. She also feels as if she is not a part of the family. As a parent, she believes Marya's problems are her fault.

## Jay Hornbacher

Jay Hornbacher is Marya's father. While she is a young child, Jay is near paranoid in his over protectiveness of Marya. He desires a child who will never grow up. For this reason, he and Marya begin to have serious disagreements as she gets older and begins asserting her own personality. Jay seems to suspect that his daughter has an eating disorder. For instance, when Marya tells her family she has been throwing up, Jay responds that he had suspected this was the case. He also suspected that his daughter's car wreck the day before she is to go see the doctor, is caused by her anorexia. Although Jay does not seem to actively try to intervene in his daughter's disorder, his care for her shows how much he loves her. In the time between when Marya is dismissed from the hospital because insurance will no longer pay and before Marya is readmitted to the hospital on emergency status, Marya's father sits by her bed at night. Since he can detect no movement from breathing or a pulse, he holds a thread over Marya's nose to determine if the girl is still breathing.



## Duane

Duane is one of the most important people in Marya's recovery because it is with him that she makes a true emotional connection. Duane tempts Marya to first spend time with him by offering to play rummy with her. After this game, Duane asks Marya if she will be his sister while they are at Lowe House together. Marya agrees. Duane chases Marya to the door of her room one night when hugs are being given. He asks permission to give her a hug. Duane is also assigned to Marya to help her learn how to play.

## Kathi

On their first visit, Kathi, a nurse with the eating disorders clinic pronounces Marya's name correctly. This correct pronunciation clues Marya in that someone has been talking to Kathi about her. Kathi administers tests to Marya during her first visit to the eating disorders institute. From the results of these tests and Marya's vital signs, Kathi decides to admit Marya to Methodist Hospital. After Marya is dismissed from the hospital and allowed to move to California, Kathi tries her best to give the California doctors proper information to enable them to watch Marya closely. Kathi is included in the group that discusses where Marya should go since she is not cooperative at the eating disorders institute. Although others believe Marya should be sent to the state institution, Kathi manages to get Marya a place in Lowe House, a Residential Treatment Center.

## Lora

Lora is Marya's roommate during her year at Interlochen. Lora's mother is a well-known eating disorders therapist. Although they are friends, Lora and Marya do not spend much time together outside their dorm room. Lora is a worse insomniac than Marya and the two often spend time talking until early morning. Lora calls Marya by the nickname of Max. Lora is a sugar addict. Lora and Marya begins fighting when Lora begins to notice how thin Marya is. When Marya stops going to meals at the cafeteria, Lora brings her food. Finally, Lora becomes truly angry with Marya because she realizes what is happening to her friend but is not able to do anything to help her. When other girls praise Marya for her weight loss, Lora begs them not to encourage Marya's self destruction. Since Lora does not treat Marya as she wants her to, and instead speaks truthfully about Marya's disorder, Marya is frightened by Lora. As a result, Marya moves out of their shared room.

When Lora learns Marya is hospitalized as a result of her anorexia, Lora visits Marya in the hospital. They also begin corresponding by letters on a regular basis. For this reason, Marya decides to visit Lora at the point when she has her "breakdown" at American University. During her visit, Marya does not eat. Since her mother is an eating disorders therapist, Lora recognizes what is happening with her friend. Lora begs Marya to talk to her. Later, in a letter to Marya about her visit, Lora tells Marya she was



surprised Marya was able to hold her head up and not collapse under the weight of her bags as skinny as she was.

## **Dr. J.**

Dr. J. is Marya's doctor at Methodist Hospital. Before his work at Methodist Hospital, Dr. J was an army doctor. Dr. J. appears annoyed by the anorexic girls that he treats. Dr. J. does not like Marya nor does she like him. It is this doctor who is in charge of allowing day passes and outside walks as well as distributing medicine and overseeing caloric intake. At the point when the Methodist Hospital cannot handle Marya any longer, Dr. J. is one of the specialists who discuss the options with Marya's parents.

## **Julian Daniel Beard**

On first impression, Marya believes Julian is an odd person. Julian sits in front of Marya in class in California. As she looks at him, Marya has the odd feeling that she will one day marry this man. Julian is the opposite of Marya. He is an innocent boy from a small town who still believes in people and love. When they are later married, Julian will cry because he did not recognize what Marya was doing to herself the whole time they were dating. Marya and Julian later marry.

## **Rebecca**

Rebecca is one of the girls that befriends Marya at her new school in California. Rebecca tells Marya she found it hard to believe Marya was formerly anorexic as they ate Oreos in Rebecca's kitchen. When Marya returns home from Rebecca's house, she purges for the first time since she spent time in the eating disorders hospital. Later, when Marya's pants appear too big for her, Rebecca begins to openly show her concern about her friend's weight.

## **Paul**

Paul is one of the boys that Marya's father and his first wife adopt. Marya considers Paul to be her brother. Paul makes apple butter sandwiches for her when she is a small girl. During a walk outside Marya admits to Paul that she realizes she has not recovered from her eating disorder.

## **Sibyl**

For a short while Marya shares an apartment in Minnesota with Sibyl, a friend from the university newspaper. Sibyl tells Marya her habit of checking out her rear end each day in the apartment's full length mirror is ridiculous. Later at her parents' Christmas party,



Sibyl shows concern about how thin Marya has become. Although Sibyl insists that Marya is sick, Marya tells her friend she is fine.

## **Mark**

Mark is a man who works at the university newspaper with Marya in Minnesota. Although Marya falls in love with Mark, Marya's father does not like Mark. Mark is too old for Marya at the age of twenty-five. He also rides a motorcycle. Mark never says anything about Marya's thinness during their relationship together. When Mark picks Marya up after her trip to Washington, Marya knows he has been sleeping with someone else. Although Mark denies the accusation, they decide to end their relationship. However, while Marya is at her lowest point while at American University, it is Mark she calls for support and comfort.

## **Dave**

Dave is a man with whom Marya has a fling. Dave approaches Marya while she tries to read one night in a café. After only a few hours, Dave decides he is in love with Marya. As a result, Marya takes him home to her parents' house. They spend the weekend having sex and enjoying each other. At the end of their weekend, Marya drops Dave off at the café with instructions not to call her.

## **Psychiatrist Marya Called Dokter Freud**

Dokter Freud is the name Marya calls the first psychiatrist she sees. This man is her mother's psychiatrist. Marya dislikes this man because he cannot pronounce her name correctly. Although Marya tells Dokter Freud she believes she has an eating disorder, the psychiatrist does not seem to be concerned with Marya's confession. At their last session, Dokter Freud tells Marya she is very angry. At this statement, Marya storms out of the room and does not return.

## **Gina Lucarelli**

Gina Lucarelli is a young friend with whom Marya argues about food and dieting. Gina is disappointed that there is nothing but low fat and healthy food in Marya's house. Marya tells Gina she is on a diet. She purposefully tells Gina that Gina's mother is fat in an attempt to hurt Gina's feelings.

## **Jane**

Jane is the recovering anorexic about whom Marya writes in the introduction to her story. Jane is rushed to the emergency room by Marya when Jane complains that she is having heart palpitations. Later in the book, Marya mentions the first time she meets



Jane. Jane is eating an apple in what Marya describes as an erotic fashion. Even Jane tells Marya that she is "making love" to the apple.

## **Kelly**

Kelly is one of Marya's babysitters. One evening Marya brags to Kelly that she can eat an entire loaf of bread. Marya does so, but does not let Kelly know she threw up the bread in the bathroom under the cover of taking a shower.

## **Grandma Donna**

Grandma Donna is Marya's mother's mother. Although she is blind, Marya writes this woman will repeatedly tell Marya she is fat. Grandma Donna blames Marya's fatness on the fact that Marya's father feeds her too much.

## **Grandma Ellen**

Grandma Ellen is Marya's father's mother. Marya writes that whenever Ellen visits, she feeds Marya constantly. Marya also writes that Grandma Ellen is openly hateful about how thin Marya's mother is.

## **Jeanne**

Marya spends a tense vacation in her stepgrandmother's home. Marya indicates that she, her mother and Jeanne all compete against each other to prove who is the most perfect. The three have an unspoken rivalry to see who can eat the least. Jeanne not only buys Marya an outfit that is too small for her, implying Marya is fat; she also insults the girl through an entire lunch together. Jeanne is one of Marya's relatives who sees fat people as being less important than those who are thinner.



## Objects/Places

### **Lunchroom of Concord Elementary, Edina, Minnesota**

It is in this lunchroom that nine-year-old Marya realizes the implications of her first bout with purging. Once she has started throwing up, she feels she has to either continue to do so, or not eat at all.

### **Diet Lipton Iced Tea**

In an effort to prove she is on a diet, Marya drinks this diet tea in front of a young friend. Marya claims that it tastes good even though she hates the taste.

### **Dance Studio Above Main Street**

This dance studio is a room full of mirrors in which Marya feels she sticks out from the other girls both because of the color of her leotard and her shape and size.

### **Kiddie Koral**

Marya remembers being locked in this cage at a gym while she watches her mother work out.

### **Methodist Hospital Eating Disorders Institute**

Methodist Hospital is the hospital to which Marya is admitted three times in one year for her eating disorder.

### **Russian Petrushka Dolls**

Marya uses these dolls that come apart in the middle to reveal another doll to describe the way she feels things in her childhood always come in layers, with Marya never knowing where the truth lies.

### **Marya's Plan**

At age of six Marya writes out her life plan to get thin, be great, and get out with a green calligraphy pen. She buries this plan in her backyard.





## **July 4, 1982**

July 4, 1982 is the date when Marya's parents tell her they are moving to Minnesota.

## **Prayer**

A search for divine intervention that Marya believes as a young child will help to calm her fears.

## **Mouse Stationary**

Even as a young child, Marya uses this paper to plan each day and make lists.

## **California License Plates**

Marya remembers keeping these plates even after her family moves from California so they will not be sad when thrown away.

## **Jeans**

Marya develops a fear of this article of clothing because she wears a regular size and not the slim size, like her cousin.

## **Edina Elementary School**

Edina Elementary School is Marya's new school in Edina where she feels shamed because she enters puberty and develops more quickly than the other girls.

## **Nancy Lane**

Nancy Lane is the street on which Marya's house in Edina is located.

## **The Best Little Girl in the World**

Marya reads this book as a child and decides she wants to be like the novel's main character, who is anorexic. Looking back at the book, however, Marya realizes the book is a romanticized account of the disorder.

## **Clancy's Drug Store**

As a pre-teen, Marya searches through magazines for diet tips in this drug store.



## **Sweet Valley High Series**

The Sweet Valley High series is a series of books written for teenage girls. The main characters are popular, blonde-haired, blue-eyed twins who wear size six clothing.

## **Interlochen Arts Academy**

Interlochen Arts Academy is a boarding high school for arts students that Marya attends during her 10th grade year of high school. It is here that Marya becomes anorexic and loses enough weight that she is hospitalized after finishing the school year.

## **Mozart-Beethoven**

Mozart-Beethoven is the name of Marya's dorm at Interlochen.

## **Girl Scout Trefoils**

Marya finds a box of these cookies while she is "sick" in the Interlochen infirmary. She eats them all and throws them up. She is surprised the nurses do not notice or seem concerned.

## **AA**

Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) is the addiction support group that Marya decides to join while at Interlochen.

## **Morp**

Morp is Interlochen's form of prom. It is during this dance that Marya begins coughing blood in the restroom.

## **Teen-Age Medical Services (TAMS) clinic**

It is this clinic to which Marya's parents take her for treatment of her eating disorder after her year at Interlochen.

## **Chocolate Ex-Lax**

Chocolate Ex-Lax is a laxative which Marya admits to eating whole boxes of three times daily in order to help her lose weight.



## **Barium Enema**

Since most of the girls at the eating disorders clinic are addicted to laxatives, they are given barium enemas if they are constipated.

## **Ensure**

Ensure is a liquid nutritional supplement that the patients at Methodist Hospital are given if they refuse to eat solid food.

## **Ipecac**

Marya drinks a full bottle of this liquid, intended to empty the stomach after accidental ingestion of poison, twice to induce vomiting.

## **Thread from a quilt**

Marya's father holds this thread over her mouth while she sleeps to be sure she is still breathing after she is released from the hospital the second time.

## **Willmar**

Willmar, also known as Minnesota State University, is the place where Marya is almost sent because of her uncooperative behavior at Methodist Hospital

## **Lowe House, The Children's Residential Treatment Center**

Lowe House is the place where Kathi arranges to have Marya sent for treatment instead of Willmar.

## **Hughes Hall**

Hughes Hall is the dorm in which Marya lives while she took classes at American University.

## **February 18,1993**

February 18, 1993 is the date on which Marya, weighing 52 pounds, checks herself into a hospital for treatment of her eating disorder. She is given one week to live.



# Themes

## Causes of Anorexia

Throughout her book, Marya searches for reasons why she and others like her turn to eating disorders to deal with their problems. Although she does agree with some of the conventional wisdom about eating disorders she also adds her own experience and insight she has gained through actually having an eating disorder. She argues that the causes of the eating disorders are not simple and generally cannot be blamed on only one incident or factor. Marya argues that often there are factors in the eating disordered person's family, culture and personality that work together to create the disorder.

Although Marya's does not point to her family as the sole cause of her disorder, she does note that there are factors in her family that help to encourage her eating disorder. For instance, Marya writes that she believes her whole family is messed up when it comes to food. Her mother is an actress who often picks at and does not completely finish her food. When Marya admits to her mother and father she is throwing up, her mother admits she used to do that also. In addition, Marya's stepgrandmother is also anorexic. She spends her time with Marya insulting the girl and competing with her to see who can eat the least. Other relatives on her mother's side of the family tell Marya regularly she is fat. Marya remembers the anger and sadness she feels when she sees her grandmother tell another young girl she should not eat so much because she will get fat.

In addition to her family influences, Marya writes that a great deal of her disorder is caused by cultural pressure. Marya grows up in a time when appearance is very important. Dieting is common place. Losing weight, her culture indicates, is the way to get what you want. Marya refers to this as the female version of the American Dream. By losing a few pounds, a person can be who they want to be. The culture of her time leads Marya to believe that if she loses weight, she will be successful, tall, beautiful and entrancing. Since Marya wants more than anything to be successful, even though she is not really sure what that term means, she accepts the role she believes culture has laid out for her.

One aspect of her eating disorder that Marya tries to avoid for years is her dislike of herself. In fact, it is because Marya does not want to accept the dislike that she has for herself that she lies about childhood abuse while living in Lowe House. For Marya, her disorder is a way to punish and do away with herself. Marya believes she is so unworthy of love and care that she deserves to slowly starve to death. It is her form of suicide. Marya also writes that she believes she is too much, too intense. It is this intensity that adds to Marya's ability to be successful at her eating disorder. Personality traits of those generally affected by eating disorders include perfectionism as well as a driven nature. Marya has a habit of throwing herself into work, school or exercise to the extent that it causes her to cut back on eating until she is not eating at all.



## Mirrors

Mirrors are objects that recur throughout Marya's story. Marya writes that when she is a child her world is defined by mirrors. She is forever searching the reflection she sees in any reflective object. Although her mother calls her vain, Marya believes her obsession with mirrors comes from a desire to be sure that she looks, at least, acceptable. While Marya is looking in a mirror one day, she feels a rift in her brain in which the person in the mirror is not the same as the person in Marya's mind. Marya writes that she eventually has this feeling of dissociation every time she looks in a mirror.

Marya remembers a dance studio in which she takes classes. She feels as if the mirrors reflecting back and forth intensify her feeling that she stands out from the other girls. These girls are waifs while Marya is solid and athletic. Later, mirrors begin to show Marya how heavy she believes she is getting. At each new place she lives or stays, Marya takes particular care to note the mirror. Good mirrors are ones where Marya can see her entire body. Bad ones require her to stand on the tub or toilet to see her rear end and thighs. Really bad ones, like the ones at her treatment center, allow her to only see her face and neck.

Mirrors are also the objects that allow Marya to look at what she is doing to herself. For instance, it is the mirror in her parents' dining room that shows Marya that by forcing herself to vomit, she causes all of the blood vessels in the lower parts of her eyes to burst, leaving her eyes bright red. It is the reflection of her bloated face in the kitchen window that causes Marya to stop her cycle of binging and purging that night.

## Long-Term Effects of Anorexia

In addition to writing the story of her active eating disorder, Marya also shares with her reader what her life is like dealing with the ill effects long term starvation has on her body. At the time she writes her story, Marya is still suffering with an erratic pulse rate and unstable blood pressure. These blood pressure issues cause Marya to pass out often. Marya also suffers with a heart murmur. Although she is aware she does not need to be given a general anesthetic, doctors who do not understand the seriousness of her condition will still insist that she take it. For weeks after she was given this medicine Marya suffers more with heart palpitations and an erratic heartbeat.

Marya's years of starvation also take a toll on her immune system. She contracts illnesses easily. When she is injured, Marya does not heal quickly or properly. One knee is bad as a result of Marya's habit of running constantly in an attempt to lose weight. Marya is also unable to have children as a result of her severe malnutrition during her teenage years. She writes that her husband lives in fear that she will have a heart attack.

Although Marya is said to have "recovered" from her eating disorders, she still has a tendency to revert to her disordered eating behaviors. Marya sometimes "forgets" to eat. Also, she often tries to eat only a minimalist diet, such as cereal only. When Marya



loses fifteen pounds after a sickness, she feels the old anorexic pride of being able to feel her bones return. In addition, Marya also sometimes has the tendency to exercise to the point of causing herself harm, another behavior of the anorexic.

## Public Perception of Anorexia

Another idea that surfaces in the book several times is the way in which the public, including medical professionals, view anorexia. For instance, in Marya's introduction to her book, she becomes angry with the doctor treating Jane because he does not recognize the implications of Jane's eating disorder. In fact, he does not even appear to know what an eating disorder is or how dangerous it could be to this recovering girl. Another example of medical ignorance occurs when Marya is seeing her mother's therapist. She tells the therapist she thinks she is bulimic. She shows him the telltale marks on her fingers caused by her teeth scraping her fingers when she gags herself. She shows him the raw patch on the back of her throat also caused by repeated gagging and throwing up. She is, in essence, begging for help. The therapist either does not recognize her disorder or does not think it is important enough to address. Again in an AA meeting, Marya suggests to the group she believes she is bulimic. Again, no one expresses concern.

Insurance companies also have a skewed opinion of eating disorders. The guidelines are that once a patient's vital signs stabilize, the insurance company will no longer pay for treatment. These companies see a patient as "healed" once they have physically gained weight. They do not understand that in order to keep a patient from relapsing not only the physical weight issues but also the emotional issues must be resolved. Similar medical ignorance allows Marya to continue to starve herself even though she has a team of medical professionals looking out for her. When Marya moves to California after her first stay at Methodist Hospital, she is sent with specific instructions to the doctors who are to be overseeing her case. Instead of following these directions, however, these medical professionals allow Marya to continue to lose weight even while under their supervision.

# Style

## Perspective

This novel was written from the perspective of Marya Hornbacher, who struggles with both anorexia and bulimia for a total of eleven years. At the age of twenty-three, Marya writes this story that tells of her experiences with eating disorders. Since Marya is telling her own story, the majority of the work is written in the first person point of view. There are times, however, when Marya slips into the plural first person point of view. For instance, toward the end of the chapter entitled, "Dying is an Art, Like Everything Else," Marya begins writing in the plural point of view. Marya uses this point of view because although she is writing about her own experiences, she is writing about things, such as binge eating, that happen to all bulimics and anorexics.

Marya is very qualified to write this story as she lives through the circumstances she describes. In her introduction, Marya writes that she decides to tell her story in hopes that others will not suffer with the same disorder with which she suffers. For this reason, Marya presents her experiences with no holds barred. She tells of bingeing in restaurants in order to fulfill her body's need for food, then drinking ipecac to make herself throw up the food she has just eaten. Marya writes about her fear of bulimia, as well as the fears of life itself that drive her to be anorexic. Marya is also honest about her present state of health. She allows the reader to see that although she has "recovered" from anorexia and bulimia, she still suffers with the heart damage and other lasting physical effects of her disorder.

## Tone

The tone of Marya's book is painfully honest. She writes at one point that she finds it very difficult to write her story. Her struggle with her eating disorder, as well as the emotions and circumstances that initiate the disorder, is very personal and very private. Writing out these feelings in a medium so that others can read about them is both painful and tough. Even through the separation of time, Marya manages to capture the essence of her feelings during the time of which she is writing. She shows her feelings of distaste for and fear of her habit of bulimia. She also portrays the fear she feels as a child and the rebellion she feels as a young teen.

Although this book is a personal story of an eating disorder, Marya's story is well researched. She tries, to the best of her ability, not only to describe what is happening during her disorder, but also to offer scientific and psychological explanations of why she is doing what she is doing. Marya intends this book to try to determine why she, and others, suffer with eating disorders. Sometimes Marya agrees with scientific explanations of eating disorders and sometimes she does not. Marya argues her differing viewpoints in a way that is both intelligent and informed.

## Structure

Marya divides her book into eight different chapters. These chapters each cover a different time period during her life. For instance, the chapter "Childhood" deals with the first eight years of Marya's life. These are the years before her eating disorder becomes active. In the next section, "Bulimia" Marya writes about the years she suffers with bulimia before she becomes anorexic. Each section is given a title that indicates what that section is about. A subtitle is also given to each section that indicates the years of Marya's life covered by that chapter as well as the town where Marya is living at the time. Marya begins her book with an introduction, and ends with an afterward. She ends with a section entitled, "Present Day," that describes how Marya is dealing with the aftermath of her eating disorders.

Marya presents her story in a linear timeline, tracing her eating disorder from its roots in her childhood to the point where she checks herself into a hospital emergency room to be treated for her anorexia. The majority of Marya's story is written in exposition, with only scattered patches of dialogue. This expository form is the ideal form for the novel since it allows Marya to tell her story in her own words. It forces the reader to focus on Marya and her story, while not putting a great deal of emphasis on the reaction that others have to her disorder.





## Quotes

"Eating disorders linger so long undetected, eroding the body in silence, and then they strike. The secret is out. You're dying." Introduction, p. 2.

"A strange equation and an altogether too-common belief: One's worth is exponentially increased with one's incremental disappearance." Introduction, p. 2.

"This book is neither a tabloid tale of mysterious disease nor a testimony to a miracle cure. It's simply the story of one woman's travels to a darker side of reality, and decision to make her way back. On her own terms." Introduction, p. 2.

"I was never normal about food, even as a baby." 1 Childhood, p. 12.

"On the contrary, my vigilance was something else—both a need to see that I appeared, on the surface at least, acceptable, and a need for reassurance that I was still there." 1 Childhood, p. 14.

"An eating disorder is just such as system. And it indicated, in me at least, an inability to believe I was secure in myself or in my world." 1 Childhood, p. 21.

"If you are bulimic, it is assumed that you come from a chaotic family. If you are an anorectic, it is assumed you come from a rigid and controlling family. As it happens, mine was both." 1 Childhood, p. 22.

"I do not remember a time when I was ever certain what the word hungry signified, or a time when I recall eating because I was physically hungry." 1 Childhood, p. 26.

"The body is no more than a costume, and can be changed at will. That the changing of bodies, like costumes, would make me into a different character, a character who might, finally, be all right." 1 Childhood, p. 31.

"Eventually, after the turmoil of moving settled down, the two of them pulled it together and began to like each other again. I, on the other hand, became completely neurotic." 2 Bulimia, p. 37.

"I had a spatial relations crisis, becoming increasingly disoriented in my skin and annoyed at my own height and width and elbows and knees." 2 Bulimia, p. 39.

"At puberty, what had been a nagging, underlying discomfort with my body became a full-blown, constant obsession." 2 Bulimia, p. 41.

"No one gave me the idea. It just seemed obvious that if you put it in, you could take it out." 2 Bulimia, p. 41.



"But, as is always the case with bulimia, it is at once tempting, seductive, and terrifying. It divides the brain in half: you take in, you reject; you need, you do not need. It is not a comfortable split, even early on." 2 Bulimia, p. 42.

"In our culture, thinness is associated with wealth, upward mobility, success." 2 Bulimia, p. 46.

"By the time I was eleven, I met the full diagnostic criteria for bulimia nervosa (severe and uncontrolled); and by the time I was eleven, my body was fully developed." 2 Bulimia, p. 51.

"It is a visual temper tantrum. You are making an ineffective statement about this and that, a grotesque, self-defeating mockery of cultural standards of beauty, societal misogyny." 2 Bulimia, p. 64.

"The convenience in having an eating disorder is that you believe, by definition, that your eating disorder cannot get out of control, because it is control." 2 Bulimia, p. 66.

"My eating disorder was for me, as it is for many of us, one of the only things that I could call my own, something that I could keep private." 2 Bulimia, p. 67.

"It's fine for a woman to be smart, so long as she is mousy, bespectacled, shy, because she is then no longer the obvious object of desire. It's okay for a woman to be sexual, tits bouncing and ass-presenting, because she is no longer obvious competition. What if she is both?" 2 Bulimia, p. 84.

"As I recall, I thought I was a fuck-up with good tits, useful for sex and laughs." 2 Bulimia, p. 87.

"I was fifteen, sad, in search of balance, and trying very hard to become someone other than me." 3 The Actor's Part, p. 88.

"Bulimia, now that I was too good for it, was being phased out." 3 The Actor's Part, p. 93.

"Bulimia is linked, in my life, to periods of intense passion, passion of all kinds, but most specifically emotional passion." 3 The Actor's Part, p. 93.

"This is a dangerous statement, but the bulimic impulse is more realistic than the anorexic because, for all its horrible nihilism, it understands that the body is inescapable." 3 The Actor's Part, p. 93.

"I found out later that boarding schools, in general, are hotbeds for eating disorders." 3 The Actor's Part, p. 101.

"I think it more accurate to say that, hidden from the periscope of the childhood home, people—myself included—go for broke and don't bother to hide it anymore." 3 The Actor's Part, p. 101.



"When you have no sense of physical integrity—a sense that your own health is important, that your body, regardless of shape, is something that requires care and feeding and a basic respect for the biological organism that it is—a very simple, all-too-common, truly frightening thing happens: you cross over from a vague wish to be thinner into a no-holds-barred attack on your flesh." 3 The Actor's Part, p. 108.

"The etiquette of our culture says that a good woman should take sex and food with a sigh of submission, a stare at the ceiling, a nibble at the crust." The Actor's Part, p. 112.

"Perhaps one of the fallacies endemic to both eating-disorders specialists and our culture in general is that there is either a biological cause or an emotional cause for eating disorders. But the two become entangled." The Actor's Part, p. 122.

"We think of bulimia and anorexia as either a bizarre psychosis, or as a quirky little habit, a phase, or as a thing that women just do. We forget that it is a violent act, that it bespeaks a profound level of anger toward and fear of the self." The Actor's Part, p. 123.

"I think this assumption of powerlessness is the most dangerous thing an anorectic can hear. It grants license, exonerates." The Actor's Part, p. 131.

"I had just come like this, with a peculiar tendency to self-destruct." Methodist Hospital Take 1, p. 156.

"But the hospital became a haven for me, as it does for many of us. It became the Eden I longed for when I was out. It was as close to death—that still, silent, very safe place—as I thought I could come. Life stops. Time stops. You become a case, a study, a curiosity, a problem, a sickness, a child." Methodist Hospital Take 1, p. 159.

"What I was doing was purely internal. I was trying to starve. I was exploring the extent of hunger." Methodist Hospital Take 1, p. 167.

"What I know is this: I went in with no emotions, no will to live, no particular interest in anything other than starving to death. I came out eating. Almost normally." Lockup, p. 199.

"This is, I believe, different from the suicidal wish of those who are in so much pain that death feels like relief, different from the suicide I would later attempt, trying to escape that pain. This is a wish to murder yourself; the connotation of kill is too mild." Lockup, p. 205.

"Maybe, if we stretch it, we can say that in the year before I was to leave home (again), my eating disorder reappeared because I subconsciously wanted to stay at home with my father (who drove me bats) and mother (who barely spoke), in the warm and comfortable womb of childhood (which was shitty), avoiding sexual maturation (which I didn't much like but wasn't afraid of) and responsibility (which I craved). But that's really stretching it." Lockup, p. 229.



"'Success' meant a perfect career, perfect relationships, perfect control over my life and myself—all of which depended on a perfect me, which depended in turn on me living inside a perfect body." *Waiting for Godbot*, p. 231.

"Three days before my eighteenth birthday, I walked—head up, confident, extremely thin—into TAMS and terminated treatment." *Waiting for Godbot*, p. 237.

"In her presence, I was reminded again of why I was an anorectic: fear. Of my needs, for food, for sleep, for touch, for simple conversation, for human contact, for love. I was an anorectic because I was afraid of being human." *Dying*, p. 266.



## Topics for Discussion

Based on her story, what do you believe were the causes of Marya's anorexia? Be specific in your answer. Include cultural, relational and familial causes.

Do you believe Marya's parents were as pro-active as they could have been in her treatment? In what ways could they have been more co-operative with her treatment? Could they have been a better source of support for her to get well?

While in Lowe House, Marya realizes that much of the reason that she is the way she is is because of her own personality. However, instead of accepting herself, Marya chooses to lie about the cause of her eating disorder. Give your opinion of why she does this. Do you believe she would have gotten better had she learned to accept herself?

After reading the section of Marya's book entitled "Present Day" do you believe she has completely healed from her eating disorder? Does she still have a chance of relapsing?

Anorexia is often portrayed as a disorder where a girl stops eating, loses a lot of weight, gets treatment, then gets all better. Marya's story depicts the true horrors of anorexia and the health consequences that stay with the anorexic for the rest of their life. Describe some of the major health consequences that haunt Marya even after she has been "healed" from her eating disorder.

Consider Marya's statement in the chapter "Methodist Hospital, Take 1" that treatment was actually conducive to eating disorders. What do you think she meant by this statement? Explain your answer.

Compare and contrast the eating habits of those with bulimia and those with anorexia. Why was the disorder of anorexia considered more honorable than bulimia among those with eating disorders?