

HUNGER

It feels later than it is when Rachel returns home from work. An oversized gray cloud has pushed against the sky, clear all day, asserting its dominance. Sharon had texted that she is inside, but the house is dark and quiet as if sleeping. Early evening was once known popularly as the arsenic hour for harried mothers of young children. But Rachel misses the incessant chatter and frenetic movements of her toddlers as she sweated onions and garlic for dinner.

From the fridge, she extracts a tray of skinless chicken breasts, icy and pale, and places it on the kitchen counter. She then rinses out the breakfast dishes, including two dirty coffee mugs from breakfast, before heading upstairs.

Sharon's door still displays the old ceramic nameplate she made in elementary school. Rachel knocks gently, trying not to sound as panicked as she feels when there's a locked door between her and her daughter.

"I'm here," Sharon yells out.

"I just wanted to say hi."

"I'm busy now."

"Let me come in, just for a minute."

There is rustling, or it might be her imagination, before Sharon finally unlocks the door. Her daughter is wearing what passes for her usual outfit these days: oversized sweatshirt and sweatpants. Her once shiny long hair is uncombed and greasy. But her very presence feels like a miracle.

"Ta da," Sharon says with visible annoyance.

Sharon then goes to sit at her desk where she's fixated on her laptop. Rachel chooses the only other seat in the room, the single bed. It was under here she found Sharon's other world

contained in an oversized shoebox filled with Doritos, potato chips, Cheetos, Kit Kats, Snickers and Mars bars. Most painful of all were the multiple strands of candy necklaces which Rachel called cavity makers and always refused to buy for her children.

“How was your day?” Rachel asks.

Sharon shrugs, “I had to remake some woman’s coffee four times.”

“Really, they make you do that?”

“The customer is always right. You wouldn’t believe the stuff that happens at Starbucks.”

“You should write an article about it.”

Sharon was editor of her high school newspaper and at age 15 had an op-ed piece published in the *Washington Post* on the perils of climate change. Rachel had then believed that Sharon would become what she herself never could: a reporter. There was still time for Sharon to do it.

Sharon says nothing, just taps on the computer, raising Rachel’s hopes that maybe she’s decided to write something after all, perhaps a freelance article or a paper for some freshman class she can still pass. She scoots to the edge of the bed to get a better look. The computer is filled with photos of rooms with whitewashed walls, tiled floors, colorful woven rugs, and hammocks.

“What are you looking at there?” she asks.

“I’m checking out Airbnbs.”

“Airbnbs? Where?”

“Mexico. Samantha and I are thinking of going.”

“Mexico? You’re in a treatment program and who’s Samantha?”

“Someone in the program. She’s been to Mexico several times and says it’s amazing. She invited me to go with her.”

“You two can’t just leave.”

“Samantha’s almost finished, and Duncan said I could take a break, that people do that.”

Rachel takes off her glasses and rubs her eyes. They’ve been hurting her for weeks and she keeps forgetting to buy eyedrops. Or maybe she needs new lenses. Without her glasses, her daughter’s room is a blur, but she knows the furnishings well: a plaque Sharon won for coming in second in an international physics competition, a guitar propped up in the corner that almost certainly hasn’t been played for months, the bean bag chair Sharon had begged for in seventh grade. The floor and surfaces look clean, proof that Sharon’s been keeping her promise to tidy up herself since she doesn’t want the monthly housekeeper to come inside. Rachel reattaches the glasses.

“It’s not a good idea to flit in and out of that program,” she insists. “Not this early anyway.”

“I’m going to need a break soon.”

“The plan was to get strong enough so you could get back to school next fall.”

Sharon stops tapping. On the computer screen is a photo of a beach with 20-something girls clad in bikinis, their exposed flesh smooth and bronze, devoid of any lumps or fat. Sharon quickly clicks off the page.

“I’m not sure I’ll be ready to go back to school by then,” Sharon says.

“That’s still several months away.”

“I know, but I don’t know whether I’ll be ready.”

“But you’ll be ready to go to Mexico?”

“It’s a little different, don’t you think?”

“Sharon, can you please face me, so I don’t have to talk to your back?”

Her daughter turns around. Her face has all sorts of new angles and contours since she’s become thinner and every day, she seems to look different.

“In Mexico I can improve my Spanish which you always say is so useful,” said Sharon.

“It will be the gap year I should have done after high school.”

Alan, who had just moved out then, had agreed a gap year could be a good experience for a student like Sharon who had worked tirelessly throughout high school. But Rachel convinced Sharon that it was better to get her degree started.

“Isn’t this break from school a gap year?”

“This?” Sharon snorts. “This is anything but a gap year. This defeats the entire purpose of a gap year.”

“Where would you get the money for this trip?” Not from me, she wants to add but thinks better of it.

“I’ve been saving up. Besides, Samantha says Mexico is so cheap that you can live there on practically nothing, especially off-season.”

“Do you have exact dates in mind?”

“In about two weeks.”

“Two weeks! No way, you’ve only been in the program six weeks.”

“But Duncan said —”

“What’s the big rush?”

Sharon turns her back and taps hard on the computer.

“Let’s discuss this over dinner,” Rachel says. “I’m going to make chicken with vegetables, it should be ready in less than an hour.”

“I ate already.”

“What did you eat?”

“A salad.”

“A salad isn’t enough—”

"It was a chicken salad with lots of mayonnaise, real mayonnaise not that diet crap you buy."

"Then just keep me company while I eat. We're supposed to eat together."

"I can't, I'm going out tonight."

"On a Tuesday?"

"It's not a school night for me or my friends."

"What friends?"

"You don't know them."

"Where are you going?"

"To someone's house."

Rachels knows she should be happy that Sharon wants to socialize. But she thinks about that oversized gray cloud stalking her daughter like an angry Greek god. If Sharon leaves, she won't get to sleep until she returns. She doesn't even want to consider all the nights of insomnia she'll endure if Sharon takes this trip to Mexico.

"How about inviting these friends here? I'll be happy to stay in my room and give you the living room."

"I have to get out of this house and have some fun. I'm dying here."

No, you were almost dying out there, Rachel wants to say.

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Rachel watches television and picks at a half-finished plate of chicken and vegetables that tastes metallic, like most food these days. For the first time in her entire life, she has trouble eating. She no longer enjoys any of the food she makes or buys and views her own hunger pangs with annoyance. She has gotten rid of her scale along with Sharon's, but her clothes feel loose suggesting an unintended weight loss. She wishes she could enjoy it more.

Jessica calls when she's half-watching a comedy special and drinking wine which also tastes metallic but at least dulls the senses. Her older sister's been good about calling during the week, even though she lives in California where the time difference means that it's still her workday. Sometimes their conversation is punctuated by Jessica's yelling at someone in the background, using the same tone she once used with her younger sister.

"Sharon just informed me that she wants to go to Mexico," Rachel says.

"Mexico? But she's in a treatment program."

"Yeah, I know."

"Mexico is about the last place a young woman should go alone."

"She wants to go with a friend."

"Do you know the friend?"

"Someone she met in her program."

"Two young girls with eating disorders travelling together, what could possibly go wrong there? I suggest scaring her with stories about how dangerous Mexico can be. Tell her everyone I know who went there got sick from something they ate and was throwing up constantly."

Like a lot of brilliant people, Jessica is not immune to overlooking the obvious. Sharon of all people isn't going to be scared by the prospect of throwing up.

"How is she doing otherwise?" Jessica asks. "Do you see any progress?"

"I don't know. I guess. It's hard, she covers herself up."

"But you're monitoring her, right?"

Jessica makes it her business to monitor all aspects of her life. She had used that skill to propel herself toward a better university, a more prestigious and higher-paying job, and smaller pants size than her younger sister. Rachel thought that she would end up the better mother. But

Jessica's older daughter, Ariella, is a reporter at a prestigious magazine and her son, Liam, is a neurosurgeon. And they are both attractive and nice kids devoted to their parents.

"I can't suffocate her, that's what the therapist says."

"But you have to make sure that she's not purging by checking her room. Tell me that at least you do that."

"She keeps it locked."

The first time she found the door to Sharon's room locked Rachel was sure it had been accidental, like the time it had happened while she was as a child. Sharon had cried hysterically and couldn't follow Rachel's instructions to turn the lock on the doorknob. Finally, Alan returned home and calmly talked her out. But now Sharon locks her door whenever she is inside or leaves the room and, after consulting with the therapist, they decided to continue to let her do this to build trust.

"Are you kidding?" Jessica explodes. "You must check her room. You were the one who told me that there's a high degree of failure in this illness."

The emergency room doctor said they had a long road ahead of them. Patients like Sharon who landed in the hospital with severe dehydration and an erratic heartbeat could recover and then relapse. She also added that the suicide rate was higher than average with this illness.

"But I have to give her space."

"But isn't that precisely how you missed it last time?"

How she missed it -- the bingeing and purging that had been going on for years under her nose. Rachel had found missing commas in draft press releases, misplaced keys, the pill bottles indicating that her father was sick, the signs that Alan was no longer in love with her. But she had

missed that her daughter was not finishing her dinners, exercising obsessively and that she kept that box under her bed.

When she and Alan rushed to the university hospital where Sharon was in the emergency room, they both thought she had just overexercised or not drunk enough water. They had been shocked when the doctor told them that Sharon confessed that she had been bingeing and purging for four years.

Over the next months, little details came back to her. She had to keep buying air freshener for the kids' upstairs bathroom and replace Sharon's toothbrush which had spots of blood. And so often after eating Sharon disappeared into the bathroom for a long time.

Rachel knows what's going through her sister's mind. That Rachel is too lax. That had she just been vigilant like Jessica would have been, Sharon would have ended up like her superstar cousins.

"Is Alan any help?" Jessica asks.

Her sister had never liked Alan who she considered too passive and unambitious because, among other things, he was content to teach history at a community college. She had called Alan earlier to talk about the Mexico trip and been annoyed when he didn't think the trip was a terrible idea. He also hadn't opposed Koby's plan to move to Los Angeles to try to become a musician. Still, it's one thing for her to criticize Alan, it's another thing for Jessica to do so. And who is Jessica to talk, with her own eating regiment being so strict that nothing fattening ever passes her lips. Jessica who will only stay in hotels with gyms, who considers overweight people to have a moral failing.

"Alan's doing the best he can," Rachel says. "We both are."

She robotically repeats the lines the therapist had told them. They feel as useless now as when she heard them. But then she also feels useless. When she hangs up, she pours herself

another glass of wine and flips to a police drama. The graphic violence doesn't faze her, just how thin all the actors and actresses appear, the lack of flesh on their bones. The front door shuts. Sharon has gone out, probably without even a raincoat or umbrella. Rachel goes upstairs and checks the bathroom. It doesn't smell of vomit. Sharon's toothbrush looks clean. The towel hanging over the shower door smells soiled but that's expected in a bathroom. She tries the handle on Sharon's door. Locked. If it wasn't, she'd go inside and go through her room.

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Welcome to hell. Rachel thinks this every week, as the doors automatically swing open, and she noisily rolls the steel cart inside. She wants to get in and out of here quickly. The aisles are filled with rows of boxed, canned, and packaged food each designed to attract her attention. She could buy online, but she forces herself to come here. She must remind herself that none of this food has moral value but is strictly to nourish, sustain and delight. Yet all the choices, the fluorescent lights and the artificial cool air makes her feel dizzy.

The irony, and there are so many now in her life, is that she had once loved grocery shopping. She had grown up in a household with two busy parents who jointly ran a real estate company but showed little interest in their own home. Early photos of her mother show a glamorous woman wearing immaculate white linen pants cinched at the waist and a crisp white button-down shirt. Her mother was highly disciplined about everything, including her own eating regiment and often skipped meals and popped diet pills. She modeled herself after Jackie Onassis who was said to watch her weight "with the rigor of a diamond merchant counting his carats." She hated cooking and relied heavily on packaged and frozen products. Often, she left her two daughters with TV dinners while she and her husband went off to a social event. No one then thought there was anything so wrong with that.

As a teenager, Rachel tried to create the warm home she craved by baking. She loved the smell of butter and sugar in the kitchen and the way people responded to her food. Even her distant father delighted in her peanut butter cookies, until he had a heart attack and was no longer allowed to eat them. But around 11th grade, Rachel stopped cooking when her mother told her that the world was cruel and unfair. Women would always be judged by their looks, she said, and Rachel needed to lose some weight. She lost 20 pounds before she graduated high school but regained them all freshman year and her first boyfriend didn't seem to care about her extra weight. After she moved off-campus, she was known among her friends for her homemade baked goods and dinner parties. Some friends even suggested she attend culinary school and she seriously considered it before finally settling on journalism.

As a mother, she relearned the vital connection between food and love. She juggled a demanding job in public relations with feeding her family. She shopped several times a week, stopping at several different stores to buy the specific items beloved by each family member. She shopped with detailed lists of items needed for dinners planned a week in advance and made sure to have good quality cocoa powder and peanut chips in the cabinet for her baking. She had thought she lived with acceptance of the extra weight she carried, that permanent bulge around the stomach because she didn't want to constantly monitor herself. But when all the problems with Sharon started, she remembered how she had hated herself whenever she ate too many cookies, how it was a family joke that she so often asked Alan whether she looked fat and more recently how she compared her weight to others in the online dating sites.

She comes to the bread aisle with its packages promising health, nostalgia, exoticism: Wonder bread, English muffins, bagels, multigrain and sourdough loaves. The package of Kaiser rolls induces a stab of pain, the reverse of Proust's *madeleine*. When the kids were young, she'd used these oversized rolls to make them sandwiches for school. Koby had roast beef and

mayonnaise, while Sharon preferred peanut butter and jelly. She'd loaded on the peanut butter, intentionally spilling some on her hands, which she licked and then heaped on a cracker, eating it quickly the way she did all fattening foods. When Sharon turned ten, Rachel saw, with dismay, that her daughter's stomach protruded whenever she put on a bathing suit and her legs looked chunky in jeans. Rachel told herself to just ignore it, but it increasingly bothered her to see Sharon alongside her skinnier cousin Ariella. And it especially annoyed her to see Sharon watching television while eating a bag of potato chips and refusing to do any sports.

She slowly began diverting Sharon away from fattening food, limiting her scoop of ice cream, or adding only the smallest drizzle of chocolate syrup. Then Rachel decided the Kaiser roll sandwich had to go. She instead made Sharon a sandwich with two pieces of whole grain bread and swapped out the peanut butter and jelly for turkey and mustard.

"I don't want that," Sharon had wailed.

"Just try it. Turkey sandwiches are delicious."

"How come I have to eat turkey and Koby gets to eat what he wants?"

She'd had to explain that because Koby played baseball and basketball he needed "extra fuel," all the while feeling that she had set back feminism several decades because the world needed to change not women.

"Are you putting me on a diet?" Sharon asked.

"Not at all," she insisted. "This is just a healthier sandwich."

She hated the ridiculous lie. But she hadn't known what else to say. She asked Sharon's pediatrician for advice, sure that she would find an ally in this nation of obesity. But the pediatrician told her sternly that Sharon was not even close to being medically overweight, and most girls begin dieting themselves when they become teenagers.

"Don't create a problem where this isn't one," the pediatrician had snapped.

Rachel have felt chastened but couldn't stop herself from pushing those turkey sandwiches. Sharon liked them anyway, she reasoned. And just as the pediatrician had predicted, when Sharon became a teenager, she went jogging, no matter what time she came home from afterschool activities and ate only one portion of dinner. She not only didn't want Kaiser rolls; she also didn't want any bread for lunch. She started to slim down.

When Sharon went to college, Rachel had thought she looked a little too thin but actually pretty good. Rachel also knew that many girls gained weight during their freshman year.

Rachel leaves the bread aisle without putting anything in her cart. She's been in the store for almost a half hour and all she's committed to buying is toilet paper, deodorant, and bottled water. But she must make dinner tonight, so she forces herself to browse the meats -- the beautiful, marbled steak she used to joke was her death row meal, chicken breasts robed in fat, and ground beef she once used to make sweet and sour meatballs beloved by Sharon.

She tosses some salmon into the cart, then glides past the cereal aisle where a mother, holding onto the hand of a chubby toddler, reaches for one of those brightly colored boxes that everyone knows is filled with more sugar recommended in a month. Then it's onto the produce section with its piles of apples, oranges, bags of carrots and red, green, and yellow peppers. Here, she sees the skinny middle-aged women clad in yoga gear plucking kale stalks and bags of fresh beets they pretend to love eating, and which they sometimes hide in cookies and shakes they make for their family. One or two look overly thin, almost like the girls at the hospital who resemble concentration camp victims.

She waits behind a long line, a place where she used to tear into a box of cookies or crackers, but nothing in her cart is tempting which is a strange feeling. There's a row of chocolate bars on sale. She picks up one of her favorites which she hasn't eaten in years. She puts it in her cart. She'll set an example that it's possible to safely indulge. Her eyes drift to the magazines with

covers of women in bathing suits or workout clothes and then there's a photo of an overweight woman with Bill Clinton. She looks closer, it's Hillary Clinton. The former secretary of state who almost became president is wearing a shirt and jeans revealing layers of fat as a headline proclaims her supposed fifty-pound weight gain. Rachel feels sickened by how much the image disturbs her. She puts back the candy bar.

Eating her meals in silence, as if in a Buddhist monastery, is excruciating for Rachel. She would much rather watch something on television, read a book or even mindlessly flip through a dating site, although she hasn't been on a date in months. But she's supposed to try to normalize eating with Sharon. So, over a Friday night dinner of roasted salmon, quinoa, and broccoli she engages in a one-sided discussion reminiscent of the final weeks of her marriage.

Sharon presses her quinoa into one of the many hills she must climb. A piece of the salmon fat lays exposed and glistening on her plate. Rachel pointedly cuts a part of her own salmon fat and swallows it. A phone buzzes and Sharon reaches for her cell phone, but it's Rachel's phone. She glances at it quickly and sees it's from a man interested in dating her. She puts down the phone without responding, knowing she will later delete it.

After trying and failing to get Sharon to talk about work or her new friends, Rachel drones on about a new client, a makeup company, the public relations company where she works has acquired.

"I have a coupon to buy their products," she says. "I thought I'd go pick out some this weekend, why don't you come with me?"

"I can't. I'm meeting with Samantha so we can plan the Mexico trip."

Mexico again. The mention of it infuriates Rachel. She'd love to go off on a trip somewhere herself, just as she had when she was Sharon's age and travelled through Europe on an

Eurail pass. Recently, her friend, Deidre, tried to get her to join her on a wine tasting tour in Argentina and she was seriously considering it. But now she couldn't go away even if she wanted to. She used up all her vacation time when Sharon became sick.

“Explain to me, what is the big attraction about Mexico?”

“I told you already. It's close by and cheap. And it looks interesting. Besides, I speak the language which makes it more fun and there are a lot of people my age there. Also, I know someone who's going there and it's better to go someplace with someone, right?”

It is the longest stream of sentences Sharon has delivered in weeks.

“I can appreciate your passion,” Rachel says gently. “But I want you to appreciate that travelling abroad now is not the best idea.”

Sharon takes a teensy bite of salmon.

“You know that Dad thinks it's a good idea. He understands why I want to do this.” “I also understand why you want to do it, but I just don't think the timing is great. What is the big rush to get there? Mexico will still be there in a few more months.”

Sharon flattens the quinoa hill on her plate.

“But who knows where I'll be in a few months.”

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Everyday Rachel looks for the signs that her daughter is preparing to leave for Mexico. There's the oversized backpack that she took on an overpriced teen trip to volunteer in an orphanage in Thailand that remains stored in the basement. The stack of summer clothes is still piled in Koby's old room. Most telling of all she finds Sharon's passport nestled next to her own in the console in the family room. She doesn't dare ask about the trip and even Alan doesn't seem to know Sharon's plans. It seems possible that the dream of Mexico is gone. Thank God for that.

One night, Sharon comes into the kitchen. She's finally shed her baggy clothes and is wearing white pants which look great on her lean physique. Sharon has also brushed, and blow dried her hair and applied some make-up. She looks beautiful and even just a little happy or at least less miserable. Maybe there's even a young man in the picture which might explain why she's perhaps given up on travel. She has her own private Mexico.

"Going out with friends?" Rachel asks.

"Don't wait up."

As she watches Sharon turn to leave, Rachel feels the almost physical pull of envy, a realization that she herself will never look so good in white pants. Then the envy changes into something else: shame. It is her. Sharon's problems are all because of her.

She sleeps fitfully and at 2 AM wakes in fear. She hasn't heard Sharon return home. She goes upstairs and gently knocks on the door. No answer. Again, she knocks, this time more frantically. Her heart is beating like a snare drum.

"Oh my God, Mom, it's 2 AM," Sharon yells with irritation.

The snare drum stops. She feels relief suffuse through her like stepping into a sauna after an icy bath.

"I just wanted to check that you came home."

"I need to get back to sleep. I'm opening tomorrow."

"Okay, I'm sorry. Go back to sleep."

That night Rachel dreams that she is once again a little girl making perfectly molded cakes in an easy bake oven and feeding them to her parents and Sharon. She awakens before her alarm and stumbles into the kitchen to make a coffee, seeing by the absence of a coffee mug in the sink that Sharon isn't awake, although she said she needed to get to work early.

Sharon also isn't in the bathroom and her door is locked. She knocks and there's no answer. When Sharon was a baby, she would sleep for long periods which could be worrisome. "Just get used to the fact that you have an easy baby," Jessica had said. "I'm jealous." But when Sharon had woken from one of her sleeps, she would cry for an extended period. And Rachel had understood and even been sympathetic. The transition from a state of sleep to full consciousness was jarring.

Sharon's likely gone to work and just decided to have her coffee there. She turns her back when she hears the tinkle of a phone in Sharon's room. No answer. She knocks again as Sharon's phone rings a second time. No answer. She knocks feverishly, pounding her hands on the door as if she's in an insane asylum. The pounding is so hard that the ceramic nameplate comes off and shatters to the floor. She cannot stop pounding. In the time it takes to find her phone and call a locksmith to break down the door, Rachel prays that Sharon is lying somewhere on a beach of white sand in Mexico watching a perfect pink sunset, a nearby plate of cheesy quesadillas and an extra-large Margarita ready to be consumed. Even as the locksmith calls the ambulance since she cannot do so in her shock, she still clings to the image of Sharon taking her time to revel in eating something gooey, sensual, and delicious. And, with the food nestled warm in her belly she hopes that Sharon will somehow forgive her mother.