

For my grandparents Anna and Raniero.

# Preface

by Giuseppe Magistrale

For a person suffering from eating disorders, there is nothing more powerful than the experience of someone who has gone through similar pain. Even for a mental health professional there is nothing more valuable than an inside experience to an eating disorder. Giorgia Bellini's gift to her audience is exactly this. The author chooses to be completely vulnerable to the reader and shares her most intimate experience, from the origin of her suffering to the healing, never omitting anything from her story. This should be enough to make her work precious, but there is more to it: there are some factors that emerge through the narrative, factors that are key for every professional who works with diet-related psychological pathologies and for all those who suffer from them. Giorgia creates a connection to what we commonly refer to as symptoms, which are actually nothing more than a person's attempts to rise from an abyss of suffering, when we look at them removed from a diagnostic or a psychiatric standpoint. Let us examine some.

## 1. The human meaning of perfection

People who suffer from eating disorders are often beset by perfectionism. "Not enough" is a painful mantra that drives most of their behaviors. Where does this "not enough" come from? How does it arise? When we, professionals, talk about perfectionism we tend to do so in technical terms or deal with

it as a minor aspect of a more complex psychopathology. Something which is there and not much more. Through the relationship with school, quarrels at table as well as hidden ones, the story vividly shows how an unhappy emotional climate has contributed to create an enormous relational distance. Children owe their ability to survive to how they are able to cover this distance and when this is great, it gets very difficult for them. One of the tactics they employ to cover this distance is perfectionism: they need to be impeccable to keep the people they depend on, their parents, close to them.

## 2. The human meaning of an eating disorder

The first point leads us to another one. Eating disorders, just like perfectionism, have a humane meaning and arise from specific contexts too. This is very well described when we begin to understand how an eating disorder actually becomes a useful tool in the author's hands. Many forms of neglect create a space where an idea of self-worthlessness proliferates. Why should I deserve recognition, affection and sympathy when I have not had any up to now? A child (later adult) is not able to give a meaning to family-related pain, even when every family has valid reasons to suffer and is not able to give the needed emotional fuel. A child reads this as "maybe there is something wrong with me" and what they learn to do is to fill that something. In this regard, an eating disorder becomes useful, at the beginning at least. Just think how being skinny, and good looks in general, are awarded with great doses of attention and respect in our society. This is how the so-called "honeymoon", the initial stage that kicks off the terrible vicious cycles of eating disorders, begins. The risks are completely neglected (especially death risk) to give way to a

dimension of social recognition and appreciation. There is more, deprivations give a sense of power where powerlessness is rife and in fact your body becomes the only thing you feel you have under control.

Eating disorders crush a series of spaces in the mind which were previously occupied by pain. They become a companion, a best friend, a stable presence where before there was none. They become a lifeline in a relational world where nothing seems certain. The problem is that, regardless of all these functions the pathology performs, the pain does not seem to end. The feelings of dissatisfaction, of not being enough and of not deserving anything cannot cease, since while at a surface level the body is changing, deep inside the pain continues. It has nothing to do with weight, it has nothing to do with good looks. A few compliments or some weight fluctuation is just a scrap to a soul craving for affection. More is needed. The honeymoon ends sooner or later. The death risk becomes more obvious. The eating disorder performs a new function, yet not less important or less necessary than the previous one. Finally there is something shouting at the world, “Can you see that just to have some scraps of your attention I am risking my life?”. A request for care emerges with all its strength. Everyone around that person is forced to question themselves, when they can. The more difficult this process is and the less the parents (and other important people) are involved in it, the harder the healing process is. The less the request for care is listened to, the louder it is shouted by the disorder. Pain deserves all the recognition that is needed. Only at this point things can change. The healing passes through a deep understanding of all the human meanings of an eating disorder. In the absence of such understanding, recognition and listening,

there is no cure. Giorgia Bellini's story probably wants to be exactly this. A tool of recognition for the suffering ones, for those who need to make a step towards healing, for those who have already healed and want to identify themselves in someone else's words, as well as for the professionals who need to get as close as possible to the human meaning of eating disorders.

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# Introduction

Dear reader,

I do not know what has pushed you to read my story. Maybe you are fighting against an eating disorder too, maybe you are a relative, a friend or a partner who needs to understand, or maybe you are simply interested in knowing more about my story and about everything that comes with an eating disorder.

I wish to highlight how this book is only for people with a rich soul. In my life I have come across people with only a few emotions and feelings, people who feel alive only when judging others, when they can relish for others' failures. I have learned to move past the useless judgment of those who have nothing to offer besides trivialities and meanness. It is easy to judge others, on the contrary it is much harder to put yourself in other people's shoes. If you are not one of those people... enjoy your read!

My name is Giorgia, I am 24 and I suffered from eating disorders for 8 years, namely Bulimia Nervosa.

I was born in April 1997. An Aries with Leo ascendant. Not that I know what it all means, as I understand nothing about the horoscope and I have no clue as to how the zodiac is able to know people. However, from what I have read they say I am empathic, direct, sincere, passionate, a good person and I have many dreams in the closet. And a friend of mine once told me the horoscope always gets it right. I trust him!

Do you know “Kintsukuroi”?

Kintsukuroi is the old Japanese art of fixing what is broken: when a piece of pottery breaks, Japanese masters fix it with gold, leaving the mending visible since a repaired artifact is a symbol of fragility, strength and beauty to them. My life was a bit “broken”, but I was then able to fix it.

I have decided to share my story with you since I have often felt alone, not understood and lost. It is not easy to help a person suffering from an eating disorder, especially if you have never been underweight or overweight. It has not been easy to make others understand that, although I did not weigh 30kg, I still was sick. And I do not want other people to “reach the limit” or attempt suicide to show they too exist. Most importantly, I have decided to tell my story to make those who are suffering understand that there is nothing to be ashamed of, that it can happen to anyone and that falling sick is not a choice.

Aristotle said that when someone in a society believes they do not need the others they are either a beast or God. And in case they are God, he adds, that God may not be happy since he is lonely. If I am here it is because I have had the courage to ask for help.

I have written this book very slowly, erasing and rewriting, often in front of sunset, away from everything. I didn’t know if I was doing the right thing by exposing how vulnerable that seemingly strong girl actually was. But then I decided to do it as a new and completely different Giorgia was born out of that eating disorder.

Remember that pottery or life can break into a thousand pieces, but this does not mean we have to give up living.

You can totally build a happy life starting from scratch or starting all over again. I am sure about it, I am the living proof.

## Always weigh your words

“Giorgia, your sandwich is so big today!”

There you go, for a person like me, those words made my world collapse. “An insignificant comment from a teacher”, you may think. However, those words became mine. I did not know I would repeat them to myself for years to come, everytime I used to eat something, even just an ice cream, maybe a fruit one since a chocolate ice cream would be too much. Because when that little voice gets into your head, it is impossible to make it stop telling you what to do or not to do, what to eat or what to say. Even if you try with all your willpower. Yes, willpower, “You just need some willpower to heal” others used to tell me. But I really did try with all my willpower and I was still never healing, making me feel there was something really wrong with me.

“Why do my classmates eat pizza?” “How do they manage? Will they be able to have lunch after that?” “Why are her legs thinner than mine and mine are huge?”

I was only 7 and I took that sandwich, wrapped it up and tossed it into the bin. I never took a snack to school again after that.

Grandma would come to pick me up everyday from school. I remember I used to peep out of the window to see if she was there when the bell was about to ring, even if I was sure she would be there waiting for me. Yes, because grandma would have never left me alone. Then, together, we would go pick up my sister Giulia. She would get out a few minutes later as she was older than me and was attending middle school.

Meanwhile, at home, grandpa had already prepared lunch for everyone. My grandparents enjoyed eating all together, they were always telling me how lunch and dinner were important moments to be shared, they would tell me about “conviviality”, about “family”. When my mom and dad quarreled they always tried to protect me and my sister. “Come on, we are only arguing. Everyone has arguments”, they would tell us to calm us down. But I could see and hear everything. I was checking everything. I checked, observed, weighed. I would hide behind the door to hear what my parents were telling each other and then I would run to grandma and tell her all.

<<Grandma, will they break up?>>

<<Of course not, Giorgia! They’re just having an argument>>

<<Ok, can I sleep with you, though?>>

I loved sleeping with her. Her bedside drawer was always full of chocolates. I used to eat them when I was little, then I do not remember what happened but I started eating fewer and fewer of them otherwise how could I have thin legs like my classmate? I really could not afford to eat chocolate!

I had to be the best at school. I was convinced that if I didn’t get all straight As I would not be the perfect daughter. And I could not let dad down.

<<Dad, what does it mean “to be slipping”?>>

<<It means someone is not as good as they used to be. Why? Who told you that?>>

<<No one, I've just heard it!>>

I was in third grade and that day the teacher told me I was slipping since I had not colored a worksheet properly. She was not expecting that from me. I had to always be the best and it was better not to tell dad, otherwise he would have stopped loving me, I thought.

<<Show me, who do you look like?>>

<<I look like my dad, we look the same">>

<<It is true. You do look the same!>>

I was happy when people told me I looked like my dad. He always wanted to be the best one, too. And he used to eat a couple of chocolates only, just like me.

# **In the end I always blamed only myself**

<<You must address your teacher properly!>>

Once primary school was over, middle-school began. A new class, new teachers, new classmates, new responsibilities. I had to be the best one at middle-school, too. However, I did not know that older girls would make fun of me.

<<You cannot kiss that boy, you loser!>>

One of them liked a boy who liked me, though.

<<Hurry hurry, let's go, let's hide at the back, they are here!>>

I was at a pizzeria with my best friend, Asia. We had eaten together and we were happy since our parents had allowed us to go out for dinner without them and at that age it feels like you have just scored a massive win. However, that night things did not go according to plan...

<<Please hurry! If she sees me I'll be in trouble>>

All of a sudden I was surrounded. I did not know what to do. I felt scared. Had I gone out with my parents none of that would have happened, but how could it be my fault if that boy liked me? Why did they hate me?

<<You must not get close to him. You're a loser. Who do you think you are?>>>

<<But I...>>

I remained silent, I was not able to utter a single word. “But I...” meanwhile dad came to pick me up. That evening, I could not wait for him to come. I was silent in the car. I kept rubbing my hands on my legs. They were too big that evening. I wanted to punch them, one hit after the other. Cut them, if possible. But I could not.

I was looking out of the window, thinking about what had happened, while dad was driving. It was not fair that they had ruined my evening. I had only gone out with my friend. I did not want anything else. *“Why did they hate me so much?”*

At only 12 years old, I could not understand that it was better to just let go. That they were bad and I would never be like them. I could not understand that I should let them judge me and go my way. I could not understand that it was no use crying, feeling sad and wrong because a boy liked me. Sometimes it is not easy to let someone’s opinion roll off your back. And this gets even more difficult if you are sensitive and fragile. Back then, I just could not understand, but now I am always able to pull myself out of such situations and people.

However, at that age I always blamed only myself and I suffered in silence while putting up an invincible mask which would soon have shattered.

## In their eyes “you are not normal”

<<No, thanks grandpa. I’ve already eaten at school>>

<<I really don’t fancy anything, I’ve got a bad stomachache.>>

<<No, I really don’t fancy pasta today!>>

<<I’ll cook something later, you can eat now.>>

<<I’m not hungry at the moment. I’ll eat later.>>

All of a sudden I stopped eating almost all carbs. I had read in a summer magazine that they were responsible for weight gain and that if I stopped eating them I would have gotten thinner quickly. The same went for desserts. I had to eat a lot of fruits and vegetables only, as well as a few proteins.

<<Why do you always order salad? Why do you always have to be the different one? can’t you have a pizza like every normal person?>>

“*Normal*”, they were telling me I was not normal... but after that nothing else, they did not ask themselves why I would not eat pizza or pasta. Everyone just stopped at what I did without ever questioning the reasons behind my actions. It was maybe easier. The fact remains that I was the only one who ordered something different, or I’d better say, something with as few calories as possible. I would carefully go through all the dishes on the menu. I enjoyed looking at the pastas and desserts sections, browsing all the options, even if I would have never ordered a dessert.

*“People with skinny legs don’t eat it! And I must not eat it!”* Even I would have loved to. “You are not normal”. I never knew what to answer, so I would give a shy smile and pretend, while deep inside I kept saying to myself *“I am not normal...I am not normal”*. But I could not understand why. Or maybe I could. I wanted to eat pizza like them, but at that moment I could not. I was sure that once I had reached my dream weight and those thin legs, I would have started eating pizza again. But then things turned out differently.

## The black wind is a friend of mine

At first, an eating disorder is a friend of yours. “Honeymoon”, doctors call it. During the honeymoon my disorder was very kind to me and made me feel invincible! If I had to give it a name I would call it “black wind”. At first the wind caressed me. I would close my eyes and feel it next to me. It was a good wind.

*“Hi black wind, thank you for being my friend. Thanks to you I have control over what I eat. I am now able to eat less. Thanks to you I’ll have thin legs, like my classmate. I love you black wind, you are always with me, you don’t judge me, you don’t abandon me. Black wind, you help me when I am sad. Even when mum and dad argue you’re there with me. You are a real friend. And I hope you will never leave me because I need you”.*

<<I’m busy tonight, I am not coming for dinner, maybe next time!>>

The black wind loved me so much it preferred to keep me there instead of letting me go out with my friends. The others wanted me to eat pizza, but for my own sake, it wanted me to choose salad. So I stopped going out with my friends.

I do not know how it could happen. It all played out so quickly. I do not remember too well. But every night I would find myself alone in my room with the black wind. And in the end my friends started forgetting about me. They did not invite me out anymore. The wind was always with me instead. I loved the wind. We spent our evenings browsing through Giallo Zafferano’s Blog, food recipes and top model videos. It told