

David de Filippi - Chiara Ciavatta

CHIARA SOLE

ANORESSIA
E BULIMIA:
UN'ESPERIENZA
DI VITA
E DI MORTE

Prefazione di
Gianna Schelotto

CHIARA SOLE

ANOREXIA AND BULIMIA: A LIFE AND DEATH EXPERIENCE
(or *ANOREXIA AND BULIMIA: THE LIGHT AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL*)

Translated by Gaia Fogel

FOREWORD

Hunger, as we all know, is revolutionary. It has always been one of the major, if not the prime mover of all social and political upheavals.

We thought we were rid of it: modernity had brought wealth and abundance which had forever banished that ancient, worn out ghost.

But no, it is still with us.

We are under siege from the outside, by those tragic rafts and dinghies bringing the dispossessed to our shores from distant countries.

And we are under siege from the inside, through the suffering of young women who choose hunger as the instrument of their obscure rebellion.

The story of Chiara is the detailed, relentless, atrocious account of such a rebellion. In a happy, close family, the young girl's love of food sets off no alarm bells: no-one suspects that through the issue of food a tragedy is creeping into their home, all the more devastating because of its subtle and mysterious nature. The book very accurately describes the so-called "pre-morbid personality" of the anorexic-bulimic patient: Chiara is a happy, sunny child basking in love. But her constant search for reassurances, her need for confirmation of that love is insatiable.

So food becomes a substitute for what she feels she's not getting, or at any rate not enough and not in the way she would like.

-5-

Eating or fasting, the young girl puts back into hunger - without being aware of it - the old revolutionary dimension, she uses it to unhinge established hierarchies of power: now she is the stronger one, the one who wields power, while the grown-ups - parents, teachers, doctors - are all at a loss, unsure, frightened, and finally hanging on her choices.

But it is in fact only apparent, not real power, and it brings untold pain to everyone.

Chiara's tragedy is in the dramatic separation between the image of herself she projects onto the outside world and the way she actually sees herself. She would like to be perfect, but she pays for this eternally elusive aspiration with a quiet horror, the silent rejection of herself.

A void grows between these two worlds – appearance and reality – that she desperately needs to fill: that's where her unruly, compulsive hunger comes from, leading her to constantly swing between filling and emptying her stomach.

As one reads the pages that follow, one realises not only the suffering Chiara and her family must have lived through, but just how difficult communication can become between the girl and the world around her. Nobody ever does what she would like them to do: her mother – despite being torn with anguish for her child – says all the wrong thing, makes all the wrong gestures, takes useless and damaging decisions. Her teachers belittle her efforts and fail to understand their importance. Her doctors take on clichéd, paternalistic attitudes that time and again frustrate the young woman's chances of recovery.

-6-

Reading about these episodes, one is taken aback: it's not easy to see to what extent the slide into tragedy is the fault of the dullness and ignorance of grown-ups and how much, on the other hand, it is the consequence of the girl's hypersensitivity, of her uncompromising and demanding personality.

Yet despite this constant playing games with death, despite the girl's overwhelmingly self-destructive behaviour life is, in the end, stronger. The healthy part of Chiara's personality, hiding somewhere in her heart and mind, weak and unheard, somehow manages to keep the flame burning, the flame of hope that will prove stronger than her boundless will to destroy herself.

The book is written with passion and is at the same time detached. By their continuous stepping in and out of the protagonist's consciousness, the authors turn it into a surprising and intriguing read. Chiara is at times the lost and hurting child, at other times the lucid suicidal woman whose glib self-awareness has built up over years of unspeakable torments.

What may seem like the naïve style of the story is in fact the mark of its freshness and authenticity; what may seem at times an excess of 'explanation' is the result of an understandable anxiety to get the message and testimony across to those people who may still be struggling in the grip of that sick hunger, that never makes you full and never lets you grow.

Gianna Schelotto

(READING GUIDE:

Book written in 2002 in Italy. I wrote my autobiography in years when the very few existing testimonies were often with their faces covered or from behind. There was a lot of shame and it was in the pre-social period, it wasn't talked about much and above all the violence of this disease wasn't talked about, obviously through my website and the book I wanted to show my face. So I decided to describe how powerful it is from a symptomatic point of view without mentioning the causes that led me to get sick (because they are

personal for everyone) and therefore not influence anyone, nor the actual final treatment path (always so as not to influence anyone because it is also personal). The intent was to try to make those who suffered and suffer from it feel less alone and, at the same time, try to explain to family, friends and people close to them that it is not a question of whims, willpower, but of dramatic pain that transforms into devastating and extremely violent symptoms. A text deliberately fictionalized in order not to make it too gloomy.)

-7-

TALKING ABOUT HER

No one would guess, looking at her now.

There she is, a mantle of blond hair draped around her shoulders, fighting woman's endless battle with the mirror as she applies a hint of make-up on her face.

I've known her for a long time.

For ever, really...

I am looking at a picture worthy of being framed.

Chiara.

Chiara wearing a black sequined pullover with a gold belt over a pair of black trousers and high-heeled shoes.

Chiara ready for the evening.

Chiara who studies herself surrounded by the beautiful objects that are part of her life, the elegant antique furniture and nineteenth century chandeliers.

There is an air of peaceful serenity all around as she skilfully outlines her lips with a pencil.

A ray of sun shines through the window overlooking the square and envelops her in a loving caress that seems to say you are perfect just the way you are, no need for frills.

And as if heeding her friend's advice, she now likes what she sees.

She puts away her make-up things and purposefully strides out of the bathroom,

-9-

with a rolling gait, innocently childish yet artfully feminine.

Chiara is twenty-seven years old.

Twenty seven very eventful years.

Twenty-seven years more meaningful than a thousand lives.

Chiara.

Looking at her now brings a smile. I'm so proud of her I often get all emotional just watching her.

Some sceptics will deny the existence of miracles simply because it's easier to

believe only in what you see.

But she is the living proof that the impossible can sometimes become feasible.

Chiara has looked Death in the eye.

Death sniggered. It had already raised its arms in victory.

But the Referee, the Supreme One, had not yet blown the final whistle.

Here is a small piece of advice from a sports lover: never leave the stadium before the end of the game. You could miss the best, most exciting part, where the one about to lose it all, including his life, suddenly reverses the match's outcome and ends up on top.

Chiara has looked Death in the eye.

And told it she wasn't playing.

Death, incredulous, kept fighting and throwing

-10-

darkness at her, in its conceit never believing that Chiara could summon out of the depth of her heart a ray of light that would obliterate the darkness, *annihilate* it. Death examined Chiara.

Chiara examined Death, and at the end of the round she defeated it.

Licked it!

Few people in the world can claim to have scored one against Death.

We are mortals, of course, and one day Death will be back to claim its due, but until the time she reaches old age, Chiara can claim to be in the lead.

ALMOST THIRTY YEARS AGO

She is getting ready for dinner with friends and it's good to see her looking so happy, today.

A Saturday evening like that of other young people.

What did the child she once dreamed of becoming at age twenty-seven?

A woman manager? An executive? A teacher? A singer?

Maybe...

Right now, as I surrender to the flow of memories pouring in, all I see is a child with brown curls and a perky face fussing over the presents of some unspecified Christmas.

-11-

There she is, Chiara, sitting under the huge colourful tree, all blue, red and gold, emerging from a forest of parcels and gifts.

Luca, her elder brother, has already taken all his new games to his room and this moment is all hers.

Her smiling parents watch her from the sofa of their big living room, almost as

excited as she is, anticipating the expression on her face as she discovers how generous Father Christmas has been.

It is a home full of warmth. Not the warmth coming from the fireplace or from the many surrounding lights, but rather human warmth, life's warmth, love's warmth.

Looking at Chiara now with those images in mind, it would be really hard to imagine the hell the family had to go through.

That Chiara had to go through.

Colourful fragments of time, as prelude and epilogue to a fourteen years long drama.

FOURTEEN YEARS

Fourteen.

Years.

It's unthinkable having to suffer for fourteen years.

Fourteen.

-12-

Years.

A migraine lasts only a few hours, it doesn't put our lives at risk, yet it still feels unbearable.

But...

Fourteen.

Years.

It's a lifetime.

Fourteen years of fighting.

Fourteen years to defeat an illness which often leads to death.

When the Black Lady decides to reap a young person's smile, she often takes on the most common names.

Accident.

Leukaemia.

Tumour.

Murder.

Death chose to introduce itself to Chiara under the name of *Bulimia*.

Bulimia? How do you do, I'm Chiara...

A JOURNEY DOWN MEMORY LANE

Recalling her life is like watching a river of muddled memories slowly flow by. It's like looking at a bunch of photographs thrown together by the storm of time and haphazardly scattered along the avenue of thoughts.

-13-

There are many childhood memories lodged in the halls of her mind. Some are happy memories, others less so, some are intense, others more vague, but they all contribute to accurately outline Chiara's profile.

It's wonderful to recall her games, her first nannies (saintly women who have earned a place in Paradise!), her first deep emotions, that is a grown up's emotions.

Among the many recollections, her first journey stands out above all others.

I can almost hear the chaotic sound of overlapping voices, of hurried steps as foreigners come and go, of a loudspeaker's gentle metallic voice inviting people to get on board.

The first journey, with all the emotions of a great occasion, the kind of emotions that won't let you fall asleep in the evening and force you to wake up before everyone else in the morning.

There is Chiara, wearing a neat khaki outfit, a proud look on her face as she holds her father's hand - what a happy family - confidently walking through the airport towards her destination: Paris.

Chiara is looking around and cannot stop smiling; she points at shops, at strange and exotic passers by, goggling as her mouth shapes into an "Oh"!

Chiara is happy.

Her father is happy.

So is her mother.

-14-

It's the portrayal of a modern day fairy tale, made more mundane by the stops at the toilet to relieve the child's over-excitement.

The sounds become weaker, they board the plane.

The engines are running and as if by magic people turn into birds and fly, better and faster than the birds themselves.

Chiara doesn't bat an eyelid, she is sitting by the window misting up the glass with each breath, her eyes fixed on the creamy sea of clouds in front of her. Grownups can say what they like, to her it *was* cream and she would have loved to jump into it.

Such a sweet, sweet child experiencing moments of intense happiness.

Let me now open a parenthesis here to explain Chiara's predisposition to the hell she would later go through.

From the very beginning, her times of true happiness were almost always tied to her love of food.

I remember when, during the first 18 months of her life, she suffered from three very severe ear infections, which she probably internalised as an unconscious trauma.

Despite the several operations she had to undergo and the terrible pain she felt, she would always find peace and quiet during her feeding times. Chiara was probably born with a very precise predisposition.

Within the field of psychology, opinions differ on whether anorexia-bulimia is a genetic illness.

-15-

I am not a doctor so I cannot comment on that, but I believe that in Chiara's case her background was critical. All the family on her father's side had a love-hate relationship with food throughout their lives. They were constantly on some diet or other, trying to fight a sadistically slow metabolism.

And then there's the fact that today we are constantly being cajoled by the media to conform to their standards of beauty, personified by glamorous models.

Yet those same models are often seen in situations where food overruns into opulence, thus sending a contradictory message to the public in general and to adolescents, who are going through a difficult time in their growth, in particular.

Perhaps in their strife to achieve this idealised body, Chiara's family gave her a distorted value about aesthetics.

These aesthetics could never be matched by the physical imperfections of a growing young girl.

These aesthetics have nothing in common with the craving for snacks, sweets and "junk food" that young people love.

Presumed happiness and food were often synonyms for Chiara; her vivid imagination lead her

-16-

to see even the clouds in the sky as never-ending expanses of cream...

A STRONG CHARACTER

There were several serene moments during this child's tempestuous life, like flashes of bright light during a stormy night.

Like those mariners who, in the thick of a storm, still manage to play with Neptune's fierceness, Chiara never lost her ability to smile in spite of it all.

...And I feel such tenderness as I recall her chubby face, plump yet not fat, taken for the first time - along with the rest of her - to see a dietician when she was eight years old.

EASTER

Children - all of us - love Easter, which is synonymous with joy. It's a less intimate holiday than Christmas, perhaps because it falls at a time when life is once again bursting with spring's colourful smells.

For children Easter is a word adorned with the coloured sugar covering chocolate eggs.

I remember lots of sweets in that home, all gifts

-17-

from the firms who did business with her father.

But Chiara could have none.

Her mother would not allow her. Nor would her father.

Concentration camp-like prohibitions to an eight year old girl whose only fault was being slightly plumper than the required standards. Standards asked for and imposed by her mother, which would turn Chiara into high society's darling instead of an awkward little bundle fit only for jeans and pullovers. Those beauty standards which forced Chiara to come to grips with her first diets, her first deprivations, her first humiliations caused by the cruel comparisons with other, slimmer girls.

Thank you mother...

This was Chiara's *cursive* and *recurrent* thought. This was how she perceived reality, her reality.

It was Easter Eve...

Her parents were out, while she amused herself leafing through a book and watching cartoons on TV.

But her mind was elsewhere.

Enraptured by the shining papers all around her, Chiara was greedily looking at the Easter eggs' multicoloured wrappings, chocolate rainbows, a taste buds' paradise.

There she is...

The TV now takes on the dim tones of a far away sound, the books have disappeared,

-18-

they no longer exist.

She is enraptured, entranced.

She is well aware of her parents' prohibition, but cannot fight the desire to taste some cocoa-flavoured paradise.

Just a tiny little sliver...

She stealthily approaches one big egg and looks at her distorted image in the silver paper's many folds. She starts to stroke the egg, as if under a spell, while throwing the occasional worried glance towards the entrance door.

The fear of being found out is great, but not enough to overcome her desire to taste some of that chocolate masterpiece.

Small plump hands fiddle with the gold ribbon untying it, her eyes glued to the entrance door.

Those small hands are dancing, unwrapping, tearing apart.

They are full of desire.

At long last they get to caress the egg's soft brown curve.

A loving caress on the forbidden fruit, and then a punch to break it into small edible pieces.

Chiara half closes her eyes while a small triangle of chocolate disappears between her lips followed by a square and a rectangle until her senses are saturated with geometric perfection.

Chiara is not thinking right now, she just abandons herself completely to that momentary pleasure.

-19-

The only thing she hears is the music of taste.

Nothing else.

She no longer worries about being found out.

She does not think about her father.

She eats.

She does not think about her mother.

She eats.

She does not hear their car entering the courtyard.

She eats.

She does not hear footsteps outside the entrance door.

She eats.

Only the sound of keys being inserted in the lock brings her painfully back to reality, and panic grips her guts.

Eyes shut into slits of fear, Chiara clumsily tries to rewrap the package, but the rustle of the aluminium paper gives her away.

Her parents enter the room.

They hear her.

Chiara hurries into the bathroom without uttering a word; she cannot speak, her mouth is full.

She spits out everything, but her father is already outside the door forcefully knocking as he calls (*shouts*) her name.

He has seen her childish attempt to reconstruct the egg's shape with the tinfoil and cannot accept the fact that the child wanted to deceive him.
Chiara bursts into tears. She rinses her mouth while the sound of her name being called out in anger drills her brain.

-20-

She presses her hands against her ears, trying to drive away the nightmare, the frenzy, the hate in that voice which once belonged to a father who is now a stranger.

Terror.

A burning feeling of guilt for having been caught in the act.

She has rinsed her mouth, but the taste of transgression still delights her breath and the man-father could notice.

What to do?

What to do when fear makes you cry even before you have been hit, and you can invoke neither your father nor your mother, because they are the ones terrorizing you?

I can still see her childish panic stricken face as she grabs the soap and bites into it, chewing the white nauseating dribble in an effort to drive away the heavenly taste of chocolate.

"Chiara, open the door!"

She cannot take it any longer.

She wants to put an end to the torture, her hand turns the key in the lock as she keeps on crying with the despair of someone who knows what's coming.

She throws a pleading look towards her mother who does not respond, worse, she seem to look at her with contempt.

That creature is not her own.

They scold her and punish her harshly, but the deepest

-21-

wounds are born out of her feeling of guilt at the thought of having let her parents down.

I would love to run to her and hug her to bring her comfort, but I just watch her come out through the door.

She is still sobbing, as she walks in front of her parents, full of guilt and despair. They do not deign to look at her, or at least that is what she perceives as she heads towards her room, her small earthly refuge of seeming calm.

She throws herself on the bed, or better said she alights on it like a wounded bird.

She is still crying as she wonders about the reasons for all this.

She is seized by unwarranted feelings of guilt and would like to go back to her parents and apologize for *having been a bad girl*.

But she is afraid now, afraid she has somehow betrayed her parents' trust.

Good morning, Chiara. This is your life, the life your mind is deviously fabricating for you.
You either like it or lump it.
So be it!

THE BASIS OF THE ILLNESS

"I curse the day you were born!"
Words that cut like a blade.
Chiara's childish face is dithering between laughter

-22-

and tears, she doesn't know whether to laugh or cry. Such words are too big for anyone when they are being uttered by your own mother.
An oversensitive child like Chiara did not have the means to understand that these were just words spoken in anger, but not really felt.
She does not know that.
She can feel them roaring inside her, so much so that she will remember them every single day of her life.
A trivial fight between her parents had made her mother very touchy that day, to the point of letting thoughtlessly slip such sharp words.
Overbearing, one-way words which do not leave room to any interpretation.
Words that lacerate like an icy knife plunged into the depth of soul, tearing apart Chiara's most cherished possession: *the confidence in her parent's love*.
Poor child, able to perceive the supposed negativity, yet blind to the real love she received every day. Her mind housed a growing confusion: she could sense her beloved parents' love, they showed it in more ways than one, yet at the same time she was baffled by certain conflicting attitudes, unable to understand that they treated her *harshly* because they cared so much.

-23-

As I said before, they were acting in good faith, but good intentions don't always go hand in hand with the '*right*' way of dealing with a particularly sensitive personality.

A TASTE OF A DIFFICULT CHARACTER

Chiara spent her days in the company of her nanny. Her parents were very busy, her mother kept a couple of shops and her father ran a firm. Therefore the young

child spent most of her time in the company of unfortunate paid help who had the impossible task of trying to make her behave.

On one occasion, Chiara's father told her he would take her to the funfair.

Going out with her parents was always a joyous event, especially so when it meant going to the multicoloured merry-go-rounds with all that music (not to mention all those sweets with their seductive aroma).

Oh those lovely doughnuts, so wonderfully greasy and full of sugar. And the chips, the hot dogs and all kinds of heavenly junk food!

Chiara's eyes shone like stars when she saw those 'legal' drugs.

Her father approached the nanny and told her

-24-

about the evening's programme and that the child should have a nap before going out.

Chiara made a disapproving grimace, which she did whenever she was forced to interrupt her games in fairy tale land for her afternoon nap. She hated having to submit to the rules and so, rebellious character that she is, she once more engaged in an arm wrestling match with her nanny to avoid the afternoon nap.

But the orders had been quite clear, her father had warned Chiara that unless she obeyed her nanny there would be no merry-go-rounds.

There was nothing for it: the child decided she wasn't tired. She would think about the funfair problem in due time, after all her nanny had to leave before her parents' return and who was to say she hadn't slept?!

Therefore the outing was in the bag, she would think about the consequences later.

The day came and went, her parents would soon be home.

Chiara was waiting impatiently to hug her dad and hopefully a little play with him (a game they called 'Big Bone').

Her nanny had already left, but her father had decided to find out whether his daughter

-25-

deserved the promised outing and had called her before leaving for home... The nanny told him Chiara had not slept a wink.

"The child chose to play all day, she wouldn't budge" said the *sneak*.

On his return, her father asked Chiara about her afternoon nap and the little one, without the slightest qualm, replied she had slept for hours.

Her father, half-jokingly proposed to call nanny for a confirmation. Chiara's sense of improvisation, in reaction to these words, was quite uncanny.

She took a chair and headed towards the shelf on which the phone stood.

She laboriously dragged the giants' chair all the way to the phone, then climbed onto the improvised stage.

The audience fell silent and the great actress breathed in, ready to give her best performance.

The stakes are high, ladies and gentlemen, take your places and enjoy the performance!

She put on a serious look and began to fiddle with the dial although she didn't really know how to, but sometimes fiction surpasses reality.

-26-

At the end of the *first act*, with a tone of voice worthy of the best of dramatic actresses, she simulated a conversation with her nanny, confirming - with rhetorical questions - what her speechless parents wanted to hear.

"Isn't it true that I did sleep today?!"

After a while, still frowning, she put down the receiver satisfied with her performance, which she rounded up with the advice to her parents not to call nanny again because 'she had told her' she didn't want to be disturbed!

"Didn't I tell you I had slept?" she warbled. She cheekily added: "Don't call her, she's too busy right now, but she said not to worry, because I did sleep today. See? I told you so!"

Her parents could hardly keep from laughing.

During her phone call they had to turn away so they could laugh without being seen.

The child's resourcefulness was extraordinary... a little woman looking like a true stage doll.

They had to maintain their self-control they could not show they were charmed by the little wily rascal's behaviour!

This was not prize worthy behaviour; she had told an elaborate lie.

The small theatrical performance did not achieve the hoped for result.

Chiara got a hiding and had to forfeit the funfair and all the rest.

-27-

Regardless of the performance's quality, lies were not allowed.

Such was Chiara's character.

Headstrong, stubborn.

When punished, she would curl up in her micro-world and cry and for a few minutes; she would *feel guilty* for having 'forced' her parents to take action against her.

But those were automatic feelings of guilt. After a while, having spent her tears, she would come out of her room her straight nose up in the air.

What a cheeky little bird!

Her boldness and her conceit were disarming.

A young yet well defined personality, a character inherited from her beloved father whom she looked up to.

He could do anything, and in her young mind she aspired to the same kind of omnipotence.

Sweet little Chiara... You will end up falling flat on your face again and again, convinced you'll never make it.

But this is your climb.

And you must reach the top.

-28-

APPEARANCES

Chiara in now a little older.

I really hope my constant jumping back and forth in time not exactly in a sequence is not too confusing. But as I flow along the river of memories which tie me to Chiara, the meandering, unbridled mind forcefully brings to the surface all kinds of scattered emotions.

Like, for example, the lace edged dresses so loved by her mother, but hated by Chiara. Wrapped in that imposed outfit she felt out of place, but she was not allowed to be her own person then.

She had to be what her parents' beauty standards, which she loathed, wanted her to be; this was the message she was getting. And the message grew as she grew, getting bigger and bigger within the deepest recesses of her ego.

Regardless of it all, she appeared to be quite serene, able to ignore all the unnatural and less than spontaneous things that surrounded her. She looked happy, but it was all thanks to her escape into the magical realm of her imagination.

Little by little she was being drawn into a world far removed from every day reality. An alien world. She wanted a reality full of dreams, but all she got were nightmares.

-29-

MY FRIEND THE TV

Her favourite way of letting her imagination fly, fuelling it with a certain input which she would then modify at will, was to watch a movie. She would watch them over and over again, tasting them, absorbing them, her lips moving in synchrony with the words being spoken on the screen. As a result she had developed the ability to enter the scene so completely as to become an active component of that wonderful fiction. Thanks to the video recorder, she could faithfully recreate those imaginary worlds whenever she wanted.

Thus, there was a constant rotation of comedies, especially those from the Fifties and Sixties; stories with the right kind of plot and the right ending, a true panacea (or is it drug?) for someone with the right (and need) to dream.

It's nice to recall the carefree expression her face took when she watched a movie by her beloved Elvis Presley, and it's easy to recall the emotional rapture on her face whilst watching a classic like 'Gone with the Wind'. A young girl so passionate about these kind of movies is rather uncommon, but when this was pointed out to her the child would self-importantly shake her head.

She was looking for a meaningful space in which to live her childhood and those movies afforded her that space.

It would do.

-30-

Movies weren't the only thing to capture her soul. Those were the years of 'Bim Bum Bam' and of cartoons like 'Candy Candy' and 'Bia', little afternoon treasures that brought peace and a longing for some magic.

Often, during class, she would stare into space or towards a window and recall her favourite characters' exploits, wondering what they would be up to in today's episode.

It happened more often than not with her dearest 'friends': the characters from 'Fame'. With them she was able to create a reality parallel to her own, giving shape to those aspects of her life she couldn't grasp, the painful ones, and replacing them with song and dance. And suddenly, as if by magic, everything would turn into a game, into another movie with an exceptional leading actress: herself.

The afternoon ritual would begin at 16.00 hours.

As I have explained, her parents both went to work and she wasn't allowed out very often. So each afternoon she would settle down in front of the TV, ready to journey into the dreams that would soon materialize.

In spite of the severe prohibitions, the ritual would not be complete without a few biscuits. They reinforced the feeling of a complete escape from reality.

The feeling of the sugary embrace melting in her mouth coupled with the dreamlike dimension of the images on the telly were sheer pleasure, both mental and physical.

In time, the daily

-31-

solitude of hedonistic pleasure became a refuge she could not do without.

CHIARA'S CONDITION

Let's go back for a moment to Chiara's lace edged dresses.

The effort to achieve beauty and perfection was a way of life in Chiara's home. Chiara watched her parents become an integral part of that phoney world (the fashion world) made of appearance, and at times she perceived them to be shallow to the point of losing sight of life's real values. She came to believe that for her to be admired was more important to them than seeing to the needs of her growth. A simple girl's needs. A girl who wasn't interested in wearing minute expensive frills if it meant giving up her precious sweets and snacks. Her life consisted of salads without any dressing, as advised by the dietician; deprivations of all kinds were the order of the day. All her relatives and friends had been advised of what Chiara could and could not eat. But she wasn't having it. She just couldn't accept those wrongs, which made no sense to her, and they would inevitably lead to violent domestic fights.

-32-

In spite of the frequent quarrels, she was mulish enough not to give in. But what she saw as unfairness was only love. It was the desire to bring up a blossoming woman in the best possible way. True love. A love so deep it would often turn violent, yet still the love of someone with the best intentions. Chiara, unfortunately, couldn't *feel* this. She allowed in like some disease only the negative things, which would then sprout and grow inside her thoughts, ruthlessly corrupting her sensitivity to the love she received. She developed a feeling of defiance, a kind of unconscious pleasure in breaking the food rules, as a way of punishing her parents for not allowing her to grow as nature intended. Here's an example. One of her friends was the daughter of a well known baker and when the two of them spent time at her friend's they would stuff themselves with all kinds of 'goodies'. When she was outside her parents' control she would take advantage of any available occasion to satisfy her cravings for both food and the desire to be free like all the other girls. She spent her afternoons doing homework on exercise books covered in breadcrumbs and grease stains. The two young girls would laugh with their mouth full and feel happy,

-33-

an habitual feeling to the one, an unusual one to the other. In spite of all her dieting she obviously didn't loose any weight and this would cause great tension

and a constant clash between herself and her mother. She was rather sturdy and she felt that her parents saw it as an unforgivable fault!

But she wouldn't give in, and kept asking herself how her mother could hold her in such contempt. For goodness sake, she was after all her own daughter! Yet deep inside she only felt hatred and resentment.

Why?

A child with such a sunny character was a godsend. Any mother would have been proud of a daughter so full of joy and life. True, she was obstinate, rebellious, even a bit spoilt, but she was after all a child!

These thoughts became her constant companions, to the point of obsession. They were there as she woke up in the morning and would remain there for the rest of the day, becoming more and more oppressive.

THE DIETICIAN

At age eleven she went back to the dietician of her own accord, not because

-34-

her mother wanted, or *expected* it; one early summer day they entered the doctor's whitewashed surgery.

There were four of them: young Chiara, her mother, an aunt and her cousin. Chiara was very jealous of her cousin, because she *believed* her extended family admired her cousin more than her. She *felt* she was taking second place to her *rival* and not only was it painful, it also brought on a need to compete.

She felt ugly and awkward in comparison with the other girl and she experienced her baby fat as something burning into her skin.

All of a sudden the fat covering her stomach was heavy and painful, it sizzled like a blanket of boiling tar. A memory going back a long time, yet still so vivid and sharp...

It was one of the many reasons which prompted her to seek a dietician's help. She had decided she had to lose weight whatever the price, this was now her mission.

The surgery looked cold and unfriendly in the glare of the deceptively inviting light.

Chiara immediately sensed something unusual in the air, but she brushed it aside and took a seat.

The doctor - a man in his forties, slightly bald

-35-

and with a vague expression - was wearing a forced jolly smile.
We often assess the people we meet according to our gut feeling.

Some people we like straight away, others we don't particularly care for; being a very sensitive child, Chiara immediately perceived something unpleasant about him.

And the session did in fact begin with a burning humiliation.

The doctor asked Chiara, in a smart aleck tone, which was her favourite sporting activity and Chiara replied she loved horse riding. A sarcastic laugh filled the surgery and the doctor, rather indelicately, said he pitied the poor horse unless the girl did something to loose weight!

Chiara felt she was dying inside.

She could hear the doctor's and her cousin's laughter and it was like fire in her ears.

She felt unbearably ashamed; that man had insulted her in front of her relatives!
Why was everyone being so ruthless with those excess pounds? Wasn't it right to allow one's body to slowly grow into its appropriate shape? Wasn't every adolescent girl constantly fighting with her imperfections until she spontaneously reached her true femininity?

After all she was in the throes of growth, she was a young girl

-36-

waiting for time's magic wand to turn her into a woman.

Why did she have to feel ashamed of the way she was growing and coming to know herself?

Chiara suffered the humiliation in silence, perhaps she was too young and sensitive to be able to answer back; she lowered her shame-red face and escaped into her dreamer's thoughts.

She impassively accepted the situation, she had no way of fighting back. She too didn't like that body of hers, which was the cause of so many family fights, and little by little she began to believe that the things they were accusing her of might be true: she didn't feel at all attractive so maybe she wasn't worthy of respect either.

She didn't like her body and soon she began to loathe it.

The mind of a growing adolescent is full of such distorted thoughts and of seemingly trivial problems, especially if she is very sensitive. If these thoughts – to make things worse - are being validated by the very people who nature put there to build your character, they become facts and a simple problem can turn into a tragedy, into sheer hell.

Little by little she began to wonder whether the humiliations

-37-

weren't in fact the rightful punishment for her ungainly appearance.

These fixations began to devour her one bit at a time, like a ruthless cancer on a blind rampage. A cannibalistic disease.

THE FOLLOWING SESSION

It was one of those hot mid-summer days when just drawing a breath is a laborious task.

Her mother was trying to find some relief with the aid of a fan, but Chiara wasn't feeling the heat.

She was concentrating on the doctor and on the way he made her feel.

She didn't like him.

His behaviour was far from professional and rather ambiguous.

In view of what followed, I later discovered that he had harmed other young girls by means of unspeakable psychological violence. He turned out to be, both professionally and as a person, one of the slimiest and most unscrupulous figures to undermine Chiara's life. He was the first person outside her own family to forcefully open, with his despicable behaviour, the doors to her illness.

-38-

THE BEGINNING

The eleven year old Chiara had no other choice but to entrust her desire for the perfect body into the hands of that man.

He had promised to bring down her weight and she desperately wanted to feel pretty and adequate, worthy of her parents' love.

She began toying with the possibility of leaving behind her troubles and worries. She wanted it so badly she chose to trust that 'scales magician' more than she did her own mother.

She had lived with her absurd feeling of guilt caused by her excess weight for so long now. That doctor meant renewed hope and trust and therefore his words were of the utmost importance.

She began to drastically cut down on food, obsessively weighing everything. Nothing should weigh even one ounce more than what the *guru-doctor* had prescribed.

It all took place within the space of one summer.

Let me now take a moment for a little friendly chat...

The desire to be in good shape is quite normal as is the choice to go on a *balanced* diet, especially so when it's a health matter.

-39-

These diets, though, should always be done under a qualified practitioner's supervision. I strongly discourage any do-it-yourself methods.

I'm not going to go into further details about our doctor's underhand behaviour, but my advice is to choose the professional who will look after you with great care.

The best known doctors are not necessarily the most qualified ones.

A famous name is not always synonymous with wisdom and skill, but more about this later.

Therefore always use discernment when making your choice!

During the course of her illness, our friend met several people of dubious character, who instead of helping her solve her problems only contributed to prolong her ordeal, creating conflict between her and her mother.

I won't bore you with the details of each single episode, but I wanted to make these preliminary remarks, especially for those people who are now going through the same experience as Chiara did.

-40-

LOSING WEIGHT

While other girls were living a colourful summer full of fun and games, Chiara was battling with her fat in an effort to become beautiful.

Her heart almost burst with joy the day the scales showed she was losing considerable weight.

What a wonderful sensation!

She felt almost omnipotent, she could finally mould her body as much as she liked. She was able to curb her cravings for food, and temptations seemed to dissolve to give way to the satisfaction with her new image. She kept on losing weight, feeling over the moon each time the scales confirmed that her efforts had been successful.

At long last she felt strong and in charge of her life, but she was actually consuming herself like a candle burning with vanity's flame

I can still recall her first day at school after the summer vacations.

Chiara looked much slimmer and wore clothing she wouldn't even look at only a few months earlier.

She received lots of compliments and for the first time she felt admired and flattered, but this was mostly due to the fact that she now accepted herself.

- 41-

Young boys had been interested in her before too, but she hadn't felt worthy and had therefore ignored those intrusive looks believing they were just making fun of her.

Her belief that she was now beautiful came from her head, not from an objective assessment of herself.

She saw herself being wooed, as she exuded all the charm of an unripe young woman who knows she is beautiful.

Her greatest joy, though, was *feeling* that *now* her family really loved her. Paradoxically, that's what actually happened; Chiara's new look coincided with a greater domestic harmony and unmistakable signs of love and admiration.

She was *sure* she was getting more love and more attention from her family, but in truth she was beginning to live inside a reality of her own making, entering through the main door the dark tunnel that is this dreadful illness.

Chiara convinced herself she was happy and began to feel great pleasure from the sacrifices she made with regards to nourishment.

Soon the physical pleasure of taste was substituted by the satisfaction of having to give it up.

Giving it up.

Depriving herself.

-42-

The more food she deprived herself of the more her ego grew.

She obviously began to grow weaker, but at first she didn't feel it, being so totally focused on the competition with herself to become slimmer and slimmer...

Her life was made of diets, they became her only thought and little by little (yet at an incredible speed) her constant feeling of hunger began to wane, until it disappeared.

ANOREXIA

Not long into her treatment the dark colours depicting the situation began to take on ominous hues.

Chiara could no longer eat light-heartedly; the food wasn't simply 'pasta' or 'potatoes', it had turned into the sum of its calories.

And then came the strenuous exercise, in an exhausting effort to get rid of any remaining traces of fat.

As anyone practicing sports knows, any such activity requires adequate nourishment.

Chiara gave herself permission to eat only sad, tasteless protein bars and never more than one a day.

-43-

For a period of time she became visibly thinner by the day, but she was too happy to realise what was going on, and her parents were *too obtusely involved* in their own activities to notice that *anorexia had entered the family*.

Besides, at the time information about it was not easily available and a quick diagnosis would have been problematic.

Meanwhile the young girl kept starving herself, ever more pleased with her constant sacrifices. She would go without eating for several days at a time. The longer she managed not to eat, the more her ego told her she was on the right path.

She had become anorexic.

A FAINTING SPELL

I got quite a fright the first time she fainted in front of me.

She was in the sauna with her father after two hours spent together in the gym.

I wonder when she had last sat down for a meal...

I watched her, she seemed distracted. She was watching the sauna's mist, but it was as if the mist had penetrated her thoughts.

She seemed attenuated, far away. It wasn't really her.

-44-

After the session she followed her father to the elevator. She wasn't feeling well, but didn't want her father to worry about her and had only told him she needed a glass of water.

Robot-like she entered the metal enclosure.

She looked at her reflection in the shiny walls, then her outline lost its sharpness and dissolved.

She fainted.

As she was falling she instinctively held on to her father, then there was only darkness.

The next time she looked into a mirror, she saw someone who was not herself.

The eyes were crying out in despair. Those eyes *were* despair.

Up to that moment Chiara had seen her face's sharp edges and pallor as signs of beauty.

That day she saw them as synonyms of death.

In the beginning she had taken pleasure in her lower weight, but the pleasure soon turned into a distorted caricature of life. She saw herself as the misshapen image reflected back by a funfair's deforming mirror.

There is a medical explanation for this. The prolonged food restrictions can damage the hypothalamus and the hypophysis. These are watery glands and in a situation of excessive physical strain they get drained, giving rise to a distorted perception of oneself and of one's reality.

-45-

This distorted perception leads one to give in to one's evil determination to disappear.

PLAYING THINGS DOWN

Despite her evident weakness, Chiara soon recovered, to the relief of her parents who made the big mistake of playing things down.

The recovery did take some time, though, because Chiara - weak as she was - would only eat the occasional marble-white fat-free yoghurt.

Eating her yoghurt had become a kind of ritual. She kept it in the freezer, because when it was solid it seemed more substantial. Her meal would often consist of that one cold tasteless, colourless yoghurt. Something quite insignificant, considering what it should have meant!

And this is what Chiara's life had become: something cold, tasteless, colourless.

And meaningless.

Chiara's mother had some doubts about the causes of the fainting spell, but her daughter was quick to dispel them.

And besides, she did look *so perfectly beautiful*.

Exactly.

-46-

She looked right.

But deep inside, death's poisonous ivy had taken root, a disgusting plant which claws the stomach making it its own.

You blood becomes its blood. It drinks it in order to grow inside you, to become bigger than you, than your thoughts, than your will to react.

It grows and throws out buds, nourished by people's compliments and praise. It falls in love with the mirror amplifying each detail. With that poison inside, what a more accommodating mirror would reveal as just a bit of fat, becomes an unacceptable blemish, something one must fight, an evil to wipe out.

But the evil is inside, not outside.

You are possessed by it, little Chiara, and even if you don't eat, it none the less survives, because it's eating you.

GAMES, SMILES AND MEMORIES

The childish games with her brother Luca seem so far away now.

Their moments of rightfully carefree games would stir up such tender feelings.

Games, smiles, pranks... in between diets.

Let's put aside for a moment the distressing thought of what Chiara - the scapegoat of her family's uneasiness - would go through later and watch the two youngsters at play.

-47-

There were two games the young children would play quite often and they had been given the kind of fantasy names that only children can come up with. The first involved a forbidden amusement and was simply called: 'Watching'.

Chiara's home had a spiral staircase, the background to many a childish chase. So Chiara and Luca would pretend they were going upstairs to bed, but - like seasoned veterans - they would actually crouch behind the stairs' spirals, keeping very quiet.

It was not much, but for the fact they were breaking the rules; spying on their parents would often give rise to bouts of hysterical laughter which they tried to repress by pushing and shoving or even slapping each other. This brought on even more laughter.

Oh, the mad runs the moment their parents approached the stairs, fearing they would walk up, but the taste of transgression was too alluring.

Peaceful moments, the calm, still air almost sweet before the storm's arrival.

The second game was called 'Little Hut', a place tasting of intimacy, of secrets, of safety.

It was a game made up of few things and plenty of fantasy, and as such it gave the children moments of genuine amusement.

-49-

They were constantly in search of a world of their own in which to create those conditions lacking in their every day life. Small things, small joys, yet difficult ones to get.

They waited until the house fell silent and, once they were sure the god of dreams, Morpheus, was visiting their parent's room, they would float downstairs, silent as ghosts, to stage their game.

And so a heap of pillows would turn into a real wonderful hut deep in the forest, a theatre in which to play out their dreams and hopes, a hide-out from their fears and from the grown ups' anger.

Had their parents found them out, they would have been severely punished; not so much because of the mess they made while building the hut, but because of what they did after the game was over, which was even more of an infringement.

In the quiet of night they would leave the house and go to the nearby funfair.

There, amongst colours and lights, they would be enraptured by the show of food and sweets and their many aromas.

They would have their fill of ketchup flavoured crisps, their favourite food.

-50-

Woe to them, had they been found out!

But those crisps tasted of freedom, of rebellion, or more simply they gave them a taste of what it felt like to be like all the other children.

They would eat greedily, then they would go back home, back to their hut where they would fall asleep, sated.

...that was one of the reasons, which Chiara's mother never knew about, why Chiara didn't lose any weight in spite of her diets.

YOUNG LOVE

The lack of understanding between Chiara and her mother was not confined to food alone.

I would like to tell you about one episode that took place during the first phase of the illness.

I believe Chiara was in her eighth school year.

Lorenzo was one year older. He was tall, well dressed, with an engaging smile. There were many girls pining after him, and Chiara was one of them.

In short, the two took a liking to each other and decided to go out together. It happened like this: one of Lorenzo's friends, as a result of constant dogging and threats of a beating, had gone to see Chiara to ask for her hand in his friend's name. After careful consideration, she had accepted and this was all they needed to become a couple. A kind of modern day 'wedding by proxy'.

-51-

Anyway, the two 'lovers' did everything in their power to avoid meeting along the corridors, because they felt so embarrassed by the fact they didn't know how to behave towards each other.

This hide and seek game was none the less a string of sweets moments made up of sighs, red cheeks, adolescents' fantasies lived out before falling asleep (each in his/her own bed!).

One day Lorenzo told Chiara they must talk. After an initial hesitation, with eyes lowered and sweaty palms, the two young faces drew close and exchanged what amounted to a shy brushing of the lips.

That was it.

Nothing more. The first real kiss would have to wait for another time.

But it was enough for the class' 'nice' swot to make a full report to her mother, oozing with details worthy of the best gossip magazine, who in turn reported it to Chiara's mother adding a few details of her own.

From that moment Chiara became, for several weeks, the family's 'black sheep'.

All Chiara's explanations and efforts to prove her innocence were to no avail. The blossoming relationship ended, of course, in tears and regrets.

-51-

Today she can think back and smile, but at the time Chiara experienced it as a small drama. In addition to the pain of having to give up the boy who meant so much to her, there was the humiliation of being reproached by the very person who was there to protect and defend her from everything and everyone. And so, the thought of having once more let her parents down wormed its way into her brain like an irritating parasite.

THE CONFIRMATION

Life went on as usual, as the various events which are part of one's growing up process followed one another.

The day Chiara received her Confirmation was a telling example of the family's way of life.

Just before the event, she and her father had been staying at a famous health clinic where you follow a supervised health regimen. They had both had excellent results while also learning about the body's reaction to each food.

They organised the festivities for the ceremony with those teachings in mind. The dramatic result had some very funny overtones. The festive lunch served

-52-

after a Communion or a Confirmation is usually characterised by an abundance of succulent, fatty, satisfying food. Chiara's lunch gave rise to the first 'low calorie' Confirmation.

It took them a whole week to put together a menu based on wholemeal bread, fish, light dressings and the like.

It was like forcing all their relatives and friends to diet against their will.

The one traditional item to give total satisfaction was the cake, which disappeared in no time. All the preceding courses had been well presented, but lacking in substance.

The cake, in its bursting, round perfection was a proper cake!

A beautiful, wonderful, creamy temptation.

Chiara looked at it, then she turned toward her mother as if to get permission for a forbidden taste. But the permission she was really looking for was from herself as she was already prey to the anorexia demon.

Another look at the confectioner's fairytale and a request for help from her parents.

It was a silent request not to reproach her for her impulsive desire to taste a small slice.

After all, it was her Confirmation party.

Please, don't hate me for it...

-53-

All right!

They consented.

So did Chiara. After all, during the meal she had just pecked at her food to keep the guests company.

She shyly approached one of the small dishes containing a tiny piece of cake. Her spoon sank into that culinary masterpiece, raising a morsel of paradise to her mouth. She allowed the taste to linger, but the far from abundant portion didn't last very long.

As soon as she had swallowed the last morsel, something broke inside.

The craving for the sweet had been satiated and could therefore be replaced by a flow of boiling lava, which is what her feelings of guilt felt like.

The others were laughing, talking, joking like characters from a distant, almost unreal dimension. They could neither understand nor hear, they could not perceive the mixture of panic and *sin* struggling inside Chiara's stomach like a black, malign vortex.

Her cheeks became red hot, she thought she was going crazy.

She couldn't reconcile herself to her presumed weakness in partaking of the forbidden fruit from her own, personal Eden-cum-Hell.

-54-

Her head started throbbing.

She could not stop thinking, thinking, thinking, sin, weakness, fat, flab, filth. What if tomorrow that insignificant slice of cake turned into an unbearable blemish?!

She felt choked by her anxieties, fears and shames.

They are quite right, I'm disgusting, worthless...

She approached her father, the other guests still totally unaware of anything going on, and asked for his help.

Luckily her father immediately understood her anxieties, and thanks to the intellectual understanding (in spite of it all) between them, he was able to push all the right buttons and calm her down.

He told her not to worry and, stroking her hair, he promised her that the cake would be burned off the next day with some heavy exercise.

And so amid runs on the treadmill and several other exercises, the slice of cake turned into a more bearable past memory. But Chiara kept fretting until the moment of her gymnastic expiation.

-55-

A SNOWY DEATH

That same year the school organised an outing on the snow that Chiara was very much looking forward to.

Everything had been prepared with the greatest care and on the days prior to the departure, excitement had reached its peak; but perhaps this was due to the presence of a boy Chiara was mad about!

The times of her first love, Lorenzo, were long past and Chiara didn't want to miss the chance of a dream journey with her newly found prince charming. The thought of spending one whole week away from home, in his company, gave Chiara the most intense emotion.

This new love was still an adolescent's crush, made of stolen glances and fast beating hearts, but to her it was nevertheless very special.

She very much wanted to go and could not stop thinking about it, but because of her physical condition, she never enjoyed the trip to the full. Suddenly, during the last minute preparations, everything went dark as she fell victim to another nasty black-out.

My memories of the episode are somewhat vague, but I can still recall the rings of *natural eye shadow* round her eyes, cadaverous eyes, and the pallor of someone who's about to surrender to death.

-56-

And I remember well her mother's fear on seeing her collapse as if her frail life were about to fly away.

The excursion seemed jeopardized, but Chiara couldn't bear the thought of such an important event being snatched from her.

She wanted to, she had to go.

She was so weak she could barely stand, but the mulish child kept repeating the word 'trip'.

Her class mates left.

She did not.

But she nagged until she was allowed to catch up with them a couple of days later. Her mulishness had paid off. She was taking part in the outing!

It was wonderful, the special atmosphere typical of school outings was made even more special by the sentimental background beat of Chiara's heart. Every time she caught a fleeting glance from her platonic 'him' her chest would swell with a joyous feeling so intense it was almost painful.

Further down, though, the feeling was one of nagging discomfort. Her stomach was in a constant upheaval and while the others would defiantly wolf down any food, Chiara felt ashamed of being seen eating.

-57-

In spite of her enviable silhouette the words her mother would say whenever she saw an overweight person eat something fatty like an ice cream, for example, still rang in her ears.

"Go on, eat...just look at the state you're in!"

These words summed up a philosophy based on appearance and deprivation of everything which stood in the way of that appearance, and Chiara had made them her own.

Chiara hated it when other people saw her take in nourishment. She believed she had no right to nourish herself. *She must not eat!*

I can still recall her forced smile when being presented with the one course she would most often have.

That vinegar drenched salad was a dull torture, because it would not satiate neither hunger nor the eye.

...Because satiety is not only physical, but mental as well, it's a need of the mind for aesthetics, quality and quantity.

In Chiara's case, everything was exaggerated to the point of obsession.

It's our head that causes us to rejoice at the sight of a richly laid out table.

It's our head that causes us to feel pleasure at the sight of dishes generous to the point of wastefulness.

-58-

We often realise it would be physically impossible to eat all that food, yet our mind has already been satisfied by the sights and the aromas.

Senses chasing each other, marrying each other, loving each other and living their passion.

Chiara lacked that passion

She would not allow herself to have it, it had no place in her boring and tasteless nourishing regimen.

A regimen with neither tasty colours, nor colourful tastes.

Her holiday had begun later than that of her companions and it unfortunately ended sooner.

Chiara received the unexpected news that her grandmother had fallen ill and she had to go back. On entering her home she had the feeling that a terrible truth was awaiting her.

What were all those friends and relatives doing there?

Her father welcomed her and took her to his study where he told her that her grandmother was dead.

It was a great blow.
Father and daughter embraced.
A shared pain.
A man.
A child.
United by the same deep anguish.
It was the first time Chiara saw her father cry.
And she suddenly came to realise that the one whom she had always seen as a superior being, was after all simply, merely, wonderfully *just* a man.

EXPULSION

It's difficult to pinpoint the exact moment when it all began
Anorexia isn't like a cold where, at the first signs of a congested nose, you know you'll soon be dealing with lots of tissues and hot drinks.
Anorexia starts from within and the illness' fruit has its roots in today's unease.
Anorexia attacks you in a cowardly way, always choosing defenceless victims, weakened by their insecurity; its favourite prey are girls who have gone, or are still going through a lot of suffering and it won't let go of its hold until it has worn them out completely.
To this day, those closest to Chiara often call her 'The Survivor'.
If I had to be more specific about the moment the illness took on its more blatant form,

-61-

this, if my memory serves me right, is how it happened.
Chiara put up with the constant pressure for several years. She lived her traumas and her troubles with the carefree attitude of a child living life as if it were a game. But there came a time when she could no longer fight and she had to give in to the belief that appearance was all. It was the answer to all her problems, to that inner void which could never be filled.
She began to skip meals, thus opening the door to *anorexia's* first stage, and then went on to the equally destructive *bulimia*.
I have already described the wonderful feeling Chiara experienced whenever she stepped on the scales. The loss of weight meant she was now able not only to shape her body, but also to get the much longed for approval.
Now that she liked herself more she felt the others, especially her parents, liked her better too.
In the end this weird dieting lead to an explosion of destructive, devastating, lethal energy within her mind.

This evil feeds on feelings of guilt and the thought of that cursed food inside her body became such an unbearable torture it completely changed the way she satisfied her palate's needs.

-61-

She began to spend whole afternoons by the water closet.
She was happy with simply tasting the food and drinking in its aroma.
She would capture its appearance then let it go as she rid herself of it.
Her life revolved around her love/hate relationship with food.
She would look at it. Then she would close her eyes and smell the pleasure giving aromas.
Finally she would chew it and spit it all out into the toilet.
She enjoyed the ritual. Her mind saw it as an acceptable compromise, affording her the certainty she wasn't ingesting any harmful calories.
She had the satisfaction of being able to have a small taste of the love in her life whose name was Food and whose zodiacal sign was Forbidden.
It was like meeting a secret lover, and the bathroom was their boudoir. Food would cradle her, giving her all the things life could not.
Food meant excitement, transgression, security.
Food was an 'Entity', it was *her* food.
She knew it would never betray her.
Food was faithful. Always there when she needed it.
It gave her satisfaction.
But all the while...
It was destroying her, both emotionally and physically.
She loved it.
She hated it.

-62-

It was her one certainty, the champion of good and the demon of evil.
The line between love and hate is often so thin...
There was such greed and such passion in that *ritual*.
She would open the box with the devotion of a bridegroom caressing his bride on their first night together. She would then grab a biscuit and welcome it inside her.
She would start chewing it slowly, caressing it with her tongue, grateful for that small round mixture of dough standing for both hell and paradise.
She would chew the biscuit until it was ready to be swallowed. And then she would lean forward and gift it to the water closet. A comforting gush of water would flush everything away.
The 'game' would then begin again
Biscuits, pleasure, guilt, flusher.

Not a single crumb entered her stomach, which made her feel happy, if not totally fulfilled.

The desire to feel what one has just tasted go down into one's stomach is thrilling and Chiara missed that.

And how.

The sense of protection that Chiara was desperately looking for stemmed from an uncontrollable mental hunger. It was no longer a physical hunger, she had annihilated that ages ago.

-63-

Her hunger was an unconscious need for peace and serenity, for an unrequited fulfilment. It had to fill the black hole inside her stomach.

When one is in the throes of the illness, one isn't aware of even the simplest and most elementary things.

Restrictions inevitably lead to a pig-out.

To limit one's food intake with absurd diets, will sooner or later result in a loss of control, making hunger unmanageable.

Chiara and her loved/hated food had to be one and this could only happen if she swallowed it. Her desire for food was by now an obsession, an unstoppable magnet. She felt drawn to it without knowing why. She couldn't stop herself and so...

One day after eating her 'so called' meal, Chiara was overcome by an uncontrollable impulse. She automatically got up and headed towards the bathroom.

-64-

She almost ran the last few steps.

She hadn't meant to, but she started to vomit even before reaching the toilet. She had often tried to induce vomiting in the past, but she had only succeeded in hurting herself. She had tried inserting her fingers in her throat, but believing them to be too short, she had soon turned to pencils, combs and anything else that could go in deeper.

Chiara was convinced that in order to be able to eat without putting on weight she had to get rid of all the food she swallowed. On an unconscious level, her body began to obey the demon she harboured inside. If Chiara couldn't induce vomiting her body would see to it. Getting rid of her food became an automatic, almost 'spontaneous' thing.

I recall one painful event, which I still find hard to believe.

In spite of all these going on, Chiara had began to put on some weight.

Once, while being scolded by her mother who had caught her nibbling some biscuits, Chiara had addressed her mother in angel-like tones, telling her not to

worry because she would soon throw up the lot. Chiara was now relying on this sick mechanical appointment after each meal.

- 65-

Her mother's reply was: "Well, maybe you are not throwing up enough", as if that would explain the ungainly weight she had recently put on again.

Her mother didn't realise what a slippery road her daughter was now walking down. She wasn't being mean; it was just ignorance of an illness still unheard of at the time.

She did not understand how harmful her behaviour, her sharp words, her blame were. After all (and this is a great truth), we all have different sensibilities; what is seen as of little import to some can seem devastating to others.

Following several such episodes, Chiara discussed the problem more thoroughly with her mother and they both discussed it with the doctor who was seeing Chiara at the time, who unfortunately underestimated the gravity of the situation.

He came up with a series of wrong reasons for the self-damaging behaviour and told them they could find a solution later on, should the problem persist..

The tunnel had been entered.

Chiara was thinking about food 24 hours a day. Food was her refuge, her desire, her friend, her one true protection. She collected newspaper cuttings of models with perfect bodies and of recipes. The food pictures transported her into a reality far removed from her own. Her own reality was a prison she couldn't escape.

-66-

It was a golden cage made of fashion, catwalks and seeming perfection, but a prison none the less.

As I have explained, Chiara had to be one with her food. Her 'lover' had to become a part of her. Pretending to eat wasn't enough, she had to physically eat. And so the vomiting began, and it did not stop for many seemingly never-ending years of hell on earth.

These years saw good and evil melt into one, so that Chiara could no longer tell them apart.

These years saw the destruction of Chiara's ability to make her own choices, the poor girl was forced to do what the demon of the moment wanted her to.

She decided to use that 'spontaneous' behaviour as a weapon to get what she wanted from her body. To run it. To steer it.

-67-

The guilt she felt after eating would often make her feel sick. And it wasn't just food.

Little by little the feeling of being wrong and therefore guilty became the norm and soon it became so intense she felt guilty just for being alive. Perhaps this is why her body decided to expel that which the mind was so forcefully refusing. Her head hated food. Her body threw it up. It was driving out life, because food is life. The self-destruction had begun. Chiara was now able to throw up the moment she leaned forward, expelling anything her mind had ingested, even a sugar-free sweet. For a while the method seemed to work, but as the voluntary torture became more and more harmful, it began to lose its efficacy. It now took Chiara two to three hours to be able to throw up. She would keep on trying until, sweaty and tearful, she was able to produce a small foul smelling spurt, a gruesome mixture of sick gastric juices and blood. She would have vomited her soul had she been able to, and this was her real intention; she was courting death in her desperate desire for life.

-69-

It was a painful cry to assert her own nature; she longed to be simply 'Chiara', not the projection of what others deemed 'beautiful'!

THE PIGOUT - a page from my diary -

*Noooo dear diary what have I done?
What' happening to me oh my God I want to die
it's all over all over
each single sacrifice has gone down the drain
I don't know what happened I can find no explanation for it
I did the worst possible thing
I'm disgusting
let me take my breath back and I'll tell you
everything
today I woke up at 5 am and spent sometime on the treadmill downstairs then I went to school
and on my way back I went to the gym as usual to rid myself of this bloated feeling you know
how I'm always feeling as bloated as a hot-air balloon
when I went to the kitchen to eat my yoghurt which I always keep in the freezer I thought I
would also have a couple of father's wholemeal soy flour biscuits
I was feeling a bit weak today and there was a lot of studying to do*

-70-

for my French test tomorrow

*as soon as I opened the biscuit tin I was completely enveloped by their aroma everything went dark I was no longer myself and within minutes I had polished off the whole tin
all of it do you realise what a tragedy?
all those hours of exercise gone up in smoke
I want to die I can't cope with the disappointment I've always been able to resist temptation I've always been in control of my body
but this time someone else took my place
an abominable Chiara decided to wipe out all my daily sacrifices
all that junk will turn into fat
now it is all inside me
my legs will become enormous and all because
I couldn't say no
I hate myself damn my lack of character
but the truth is I didn't consciously choose to eat those biscuits
I didn't even feel their taste damn it
no taste reached my mouth
what on earth happened?
a wide eyed nightmare
one minute I was opening the tin and the next minute it was empty
where was I when it all happened?
if only you could give me the answer dear diary*

-71-

*as soon as it was over I called my father sobbing like crazy
he was at work and I disturbed him with my paranoias
he calmed me down saying that tomorrow we'll go to the gym together and he'll help me burn off the lot but I've still forfeited days of sacrifice my eating life has been so sad this past year completely lacking in taste and colour but at least I was in control
no control today though
and now I'm supposed to study
but how can I?
I'll never forgive this Chiara who wants me to put on weight
please help me I simply cannot cope with such huge disappointment my full stomach feels taugth to bursting point I'm desperate because of all the calories I swallowed
they are burning inside and I'm in great pain
please stand by me dear diary help me put up with myself
I'll say goodbye now I need to have a good cry to get a load off my chest
I need to free myself
yes free myself
I hate myself*

GROWING UP

She only wanted to be herself

-72-

To be a child when it was time to be a child

To be a young girl when it was the time to be a young girl.

Nothing more.

She wanted to sprout and grow like any of the other girls her age, whose normal life she envied.

She would watch them at school and on the streets and she felt different somehow, so far removed from them because of her *abnormal normality*.

She envied ordinary little things, the normality of all those fundamental stages marking an ordinary girl's growth.

One morning she noticed a couple of drops of blood on the bathroom floor, but she quickly dismissed them and proceeded to get ready for school.

The steam rising from the wash basin dissolved the recollection of what her half asleep mind had barely noticed and Chiara started washing her face, combing herself, getting undressed, and...

As she took off her panties a dreadful fright grabbed her by the throat.

What was the meaning of all that blood? What was happening to her?

Overwhelmed by fear, she cried out to her mother who came in running.

Chiara's chin was trembling with the dismay of someone who doesn't understand what's going on, and seeing her mother cover her mouth with her hands only made things worse.

-73-

"What's happening to me, mum?"

Instead of answering her mother started to sob.

Chiara kept calling out to her mother for an explanation and some comfort, but the mother was hardly aware of her child's despair.

Then, as if hit by a sudden intuition, she resignedly wiped away her tears and without looking at her daughter she said only: "You won't lose any more weight now..."

What?

What did she mean?

A few minutes later Chiara learned she was now a 'young woman' and the blood was that of her first menstrual cycle.

This was how her family greeted her development and once again she had to find comfort outside her home in the smiles of her teachers and the hugs of her friends who had already gone through the same experience (celebrated rather than cursed).

This was how Chiara experienced her first step towards womanhood. I wonder how her mother remembers the day in which the small girl brought her femininity into the house.

Living means growing and with each passing day Chiara discovered

-74-

that becoming an adult was a source of great suffering.

This illness' sly aim is to arrest growth, to cancel it, it craves for total destruction. It cajoles its victim into refusing maturity, so Chiara began to push away her developing womanhood.

She was frightened by it.

Her femininity bothered her.

What were all those strange shapes, those bulges emerging out of her still unripe body?

She wished she were a boy.

Deep inside, she thought everything was much easier for boys.

She grew up surrounded by boys and saw they always seemed much happier, unconcerned by the constrictions that *having to look beautiful* imposed.

Confusion, constrictions, and contradictions were Chiara's daily compulsory fare.

That's how the little girl felt on her way to becoming a woman.

She didn't want to be a woman.

But if she was neither girl nor woman nor man, what was she? She didn't know, she couldn't find her identity.

Maybe she just wasn't.

-75-

GASTRITIS

One rainy day, Chiara was steaming up the window panes overlooking the street with her breath.

Her sombre pale face was the reflection of a soul who has nothing to do with the naturally blooming spirit of a growing adolescent.

A thread of dew like tears ran down her face, looking much too old for one so young.

Outside, a crying sky: the angels were shedding anguished rainy tears at the sight of a young life bent on self-destruction through barbaric torture.

Chiara didn't even hear her mother's (apparently) worried voice asking how her stomach was.

For the past ten days Chiara had suffered from terrible stomach pains.

She still wasn't feeling at all well, but with the aid of some food and lots of television she had managed to have a passable day.

The doctor's advice had been quite clear: the moment she had another crisis she would go into hospital.

-76-

That night a piece of advice turned into a curse.

The silence enveloping the sleepy town was broken by the desperate cries of a child in great pain.

Sleep had marched in with great strides that night, enveloping the exhausted young girl into its enchanted spires.

Suddenly, when silence had become so deep you could hear the world breathe, a choking moan tore the dark while a small hand switched on the bedside lamp.

The cold yellow light illuminated Chiara's body curled in a foetal position, a grimace of pain on her face.

The pain was such she could hardly breathe, let alone ask for help. She was staring at the few steps separating her from the door. Her stomach was aflame with flowing lava.

Eyes open wide with pain, she gathered all her strength and slipped out of bed then started to crawl towards the door.

-77-

A thin whisper was coming out of her lips contracted with pain: the barely comprehensible, tear soaked word 'help'.

Her parents, though, were sleeping too soundly to hear anything.

Another searing stab of pain lacerated her stomach.

Her eyes filled with tears once more and I find it difficult to imagine how she found the strength to move on.

A few more uncertain steps and then...

She managed to lay one hand on her father's arm, tears pouring down her face, unable to get up.

The journey to the hospital is just an incoherent memory, due in part to the calming injections she received.

The one clear memory is that of her father's strong hand lovingly holding hers.

The night spent in hospital, although an ordeal, was nothing compared to all the tests and examinations she had to undergo the following morning.

-78-

The doctors invaded her with scientific determination, leaving no part of her body unexplored. They were looking for a physical cause for what had happened, it never crossed their minds that the triggering factors could be psychological.

The tests showed an acute gastritis, so advanced it could soon become an ulcer. This was just one of the symptoms spawned by Chiara's aimless wandering in her mind's labyrinth.

There was no way out.

AMENORRHOEA

There are a couple of points one should keep in mind at this juncture.

As is the case with a violent hurricane, Chiara's illness didn't bring with it only wind and rain, but a whole series of unforeseen consequences.

Her body had forgotten its natural biorhythms and was now following the dictates of her unnatural behaviour.

-79-

One of these consequences turned out to be amenorrhoea, which means the absence of a menstrual cycle.

Initially no one paid too much attention, but when the problem persisted for several months Chiara asked for medical help.

Having received the advice of several professionals, she began a treatment more memorable for its painful injections than for its efficacy.

Unfortunately, the mix of hormone injections and contraceptive pills was much too strong a cocktail for Chiara's weakened system.

Things only got worse when, after a lengthy period of useless treatments, an ovarian cysts was diagnosed.

Her womanhood and her chance of becoming a mother seemed irremediably compromised.

You can imagine the family's dejection when confronted with the news.

Chiara now had to cope not only with her illness, but with attacks on all fronts from what were probably the offspring of the illness.

But it is often when everything seems lost that life takes an unhopd-for turn.

-80-

Never knowing how, the weak, fragile, exhausted Chiara found the strength to rebel against the game's unreasonable rules.

What was the use in following a treatment that gave only limited results if any at all?

By asking herself this question Chiara had perhaps found the key that would let in her first ray of SUN.

She said 'no' to a useless treatment.

She said 'no' to something in which she no longer believed.

She began to believe in herself.

She began to shine with her own light, a very dim one, but a light nonetheless. Several doctors tried to talk her out of her decision, enlisting her parent's support as well.

There was no appealing their scientific verdict: stopping the treatment would inevitably lead to atrophy of the ovaries and sterility.

Those consultations, impregnated with unscientific cruelty, stimulated the girl's defiance. She was not going to let someone else choose for her and for her body.

-81-

Everyone was obviously quite worried by her choice to stop the treatment. In addition to the doctors' dissuasive tactics there was also her parents' discouragement.

Her father talked to her lovingly, trying to make her see reason. Her mother alternated between crying spells and worried reproaches.

But to no avail.

She stopped all the conventional treatments and began drinking clay instead. She would prepare a glass full of water with green sun-dried clay in the evening and drink it the next morning on an empty stomach.

This had to be done for three consecutive weeks followed by a pause of one week. It was important to follow the treatment correctly,

-82-

because taking too much clay could cause a clogging of the arteries.

Chiara bought several booklets explaining the benefits of taking clay and managed to convince her mother to take it too.

The two of them drank a glass full of earth each morning for almost two years. Chiara had decided that her menstrual cycle would return, if ever, only if she could successfully will herself back to good health.

And so it was.

After a very long wait, marked by everyone's distrust, the red womanly flow inexplicably reappeared.

She had several more tests, amidst general disbelief, which showed that everything was getting back to normal, including her cysts.

Thinking about it rationally, I couldn't really say whether ingesting all that clay made any difference, but from the psychological point of view the drink was a kind of moral support. It meant leaving behind the certainties of traditional medicine to embark on a very personal mission.

-83-

The clay represented hope, it justified the belief that one's goal was within reach
And sure enough the goal was reached.

There is one comment, though, I feel I have to make.

It is chiefly addressed to those girls who are suffering from the illness right now. This story is about Chiara's experience. She was the one who took responsibility for stopping her treatments and luckily everything turned out all right. But she took a great risk. Her act of reckless courage could easily have harmed her for life. When in the depth of the illness one seldom has the clarity of mind necessary to make such choices, it is therefore advisable to rely on the knowledge of a true expert.

SIDE EFFECTS

You can't even begin to imagine how unbelievably well our defence mechanism works.

Take for example a suntan. The healthy looking complexion we get from lying in the sun is actually the body's defence mechanism against harmful UV rays.

-84-

The anorexic person is doing everything in her power to steer her body into a self-destructive course.

But in spite of the daily lack of nourishment (whether because food is being refused or expelled) her body keeps on going, the last bastion of a soul who won't give up.

The anorexic girl's body hair, for example, will slowly grow thicker. It's strange yet perfectly logical.

The body is responding to the excessive loss of heat caused by under-nourishment by creating a 'natural blanket'.

The drastic refusal of food on one hand, the body's refusal to give up on the other.

The desire to keep on going, the desire to end it all.

This spectacle of life and death chasing each other is awe-inspiring.

-85-

THE ILLNESS - a page from my diary -

I just don't get it everyday I keep filling my head and heart with good intentions

FROM TOMORROW NO MORE PIGOUTS

how long have I been saying it to myself?

how long have I deluded myself I can overcome this illness that is like a cancer in my brain?

the bad Chiara whom I've named Francesca wants to see me dead and I can't fight her

I keep trying to resist that damned urge to pig out, but I always end up failing

and going back to the usual rigmarole
I CAN'T GO ON LIKE THIS I WANT TO DIE
I'm utterly disgusted with myself
how can my head have such power over me?
why on earth can't I choose to follow the path of good instead of the one of evil?
and worst of all it's all up to me
this isn't an illness that can be treated with medicines it's an illness of the mind
my head chooses whether I live or die and there's nothing I can do
to fight this destructive spirit inside me
curse it and curse me and my inability to react
when they tell me it's all up to me I get so pissed

-86-

I could break everything in sight
IT IS ALL BECOMING TOO MUCH
why can't they understand that I'm not eating all that junk because I want to?
my mother gets angry when she discovers the fridge is empty and in a sense she is right to
but it's not just greed like she says
how can I make her see that the one pushing me to do these things is a me I cannot control?
food has a kind of magnetic attraction for me
I'm so frustrated by this feeling of impotence
I look at myself in the mirror and feel disgusted
I hate myself because when the craving hits I put number one first
and walk over anyone who's in my way
I did it last night as well
I'm ashamed of myself
I was with my beloved what tough luck to be saddled with someone like me
for the umpteenth time I made love to him only as something to go through to reach my goal
I longed for a food orgy my body was throbbing all over
I was in pain and felt sick
I HAD TO EAT
we were together but my mind was elsewhere
I wanted him to feel good but only so that I could reach my sick goal

-87-

I was lying on the bed imagining huge tables full of food
I saw sandwiches everywhere
sauces
lasagne
food oozing fat
how can I treat someone who loves me this way?
he never noticed but once it was over I ran to the kitchen the moment he fell asleep

*what kind of evil is it that forces me to stoop so low?
I'm no longer myself
this person isn't Chiara
at times I feel I'm possessed
I don't recognize this crazy thing inside me it isn't me
I also drank a lot yesterday to ease thing a bit
I loathed the idea of having sex so I anaesthetized myself and fell into the usual trap
I ought to know by now that drinking only increases my need for food
it's been barely a week since my mother found me lying on the bathroom floor
I had fainted from too much alcohol food and vomiting*

-88-

*I pity my poor parents I'm making their life hell
why live such a life?
why live in this prison of my own making?
a prison that is turning me into someone I loath
I will stop at nothing to reach my goal
I feel exhausted and very weak right now I've been throwing up non-stop for almost two hours
I've no idea how much junk I managed to stuff inside my stomach
before running to the toilet and throwing it all up
I feel such shame I have no dignity left my body is all aches and pains
I feel this emptiness inside it's like a bottomless pit an abyss I must fill with life with food
with my loved/hated food
the one thing that can give me some relief
but what happens then?
I have to get rid of it because all those calories would destroy the false security I get from being
slim
I get so angry because on a rational level I'm perfectly aware of what's going on but then the bad
Chiara takes charge she shoves me aside and proceeds to hurt me with a vengeance like she's
doing right now*

-89-

*and no one understands all I want is to die
I've been living this way for years now
years filled with subterfuges
I can be very cunning when I want to eat
I'm so ashamed of all the nasty things I've done
of how irresponsible I've been
as I said before I've just been throwing up
this act forces me to confront my ravaged reality
if after I've thrown up I manage to stop eating again I fall into a state of despair
if I ever commit suicide it will be during one of these states*

*but you and I dear diary know very well I haven't got the balls to end it all
and so I'll keep on dying while I go on living
because I'm already dead inside
nothing gives me satisfaction the only thing I'm interested in is food
I dream about it I see it everywhere I long for it
curse the bloody thing
I know that each time I throw up I'm putting my life at risk so what do I do?
I go on doing it hoping to get the longed for internal haemorrhage that will bring me some peace
an haemorrhage and it's all over in twenty minutes
but it's no good I keep spitting out blood*

-90-

*but alas it's only from broken capillaries
my life is all blood and tears
I don't know what to do
but I do know I want to die it's my one desire
because I just know I'll never get well.*

BOLOGNA

It was the year of Eric Clapton's concert in Bologna and all the streets in Romagna (northern Italy) were full of placards advertising the arrival of 'Slow hand' to the city.

Chiara's bulimia was marching on along its path of destruction, literally disfiguring the poor girl.

Her eyes had turned into black skull-like sockets and her deathly pallor was a perfect match to her skinny, unhealthy appearance.

But what is even more painful to recall is the total absence of light in her eyes. There was no trace of the shining desire for happiness, for laughter, for self-discovery, for love in the face I now recall in my mind's eye.

That miserable assembly of skin and bones was about to enter a well know hospital in Bologna.

She would have preferred to travel to that city to see the concert,

-91-

but her illness chose otherwise and she agreed to be hospitalized out of a moral obligation to her distraught parents who were desperately trying to save her.

She was in the eye of the storm at the time and therefore wasn't aware that her life was in danger. She was mentally blind and the illness held her in its grip with relentless tenacity...

At the hospital she was taken to the room which would become her home for the following days.

In view of her situation she didn't even look too dejected.

She looked... she was...the quintessence of passivity.

She was there for some tests and to receive artificial nourishment, but she behaved as though it was no concern of hers.

She came back to reality only when she began to be fed through a drip.

Chiara was lying on the bed staring at the pale ceiling, lit by a sad neon eye, when the doctor came in followed by a nurse.

Chiara was expecting the usual type of drip, but she was wrong. With the regular drip there was always the risk that the girl would take it off out of fear of ingesting fattening calories.

The nurse was bringing in a plastic tube, a thick catheter, soon to be inserted into the patient's arm.

-92-

After a couple of trials they were finally able to insert the tube and they left her to spend the night, absent to her thoughts yet very present to her pain.

That thing tortured Chiara's arm for a whole week, during which she underwent several tests including a dreadful gastroscopy.

The gastroscopy consisted of more than just a tube inserted into the stomach through the mouth; once the tube was removed there was an additional painful and humiliating surgery to remove a piece of rectal tissue.

Chiara was taken back to her room feeling even worse than when she had entered the hospital.

Wounded in her pride, Chiara lay back in her bed and her tear-filled eyes took on their usual vacant look as she stared at the uncaring ceiling, bored by human suffering.

Life went on even in that Earthly Purgatory, some days were almost normal.

Normal, that is, by Chiara's standards.

In spite of her devastated physical condition, Chiara walked along the hospital corridors, dragging along one of those moving drip stands.

She was on her way to the bathroom.

Not to relieve a physiological need, but to throw up.

-93-

She would look around to make sure no one was watching, then she would drag herself - drip in tow - to the bathroom, where she would throw up all the liquids, adding the strain of holding up the metal structure to that of her abdominal muscles.

She would vomit even if she hadn't ingested any solids. Her refusal of the liquids she was forced to take in through her arm was so strong that her body would immediately get rid of them.

This went on for quite a while until one day, during one of her bathroom visits, Chiara felt a sudden tingling in her legs and then she could no longer feel them. Her sight misted up, her legs gave way and she ended up on the floor lying in her vomit, unable to understand what was going on.

Terrified by the fact she could neither feel her legs nor see, Chiara began to shout in desperation attracting the attention of the staff on duty.

Her mother, who was the first to reach her, found her in a state of absolute panic rubbing her eyes in an effort to get her sight back.

Then came the doctors and nurses, who picked her up and took her back to her bed, but she wouldn't calm down.

Wrapped in hopeless darkness, she could hear several agitated voices around her all whispering the same word: 'collapse'.

-94-

The worried voices were mixed with her mother's sobs.

Chiara could feel the warmth of the light being shined in her eyes and then there were voices, voices and more voices of people touching her, pricking her, observing her.

The chain of terrifying events took place within forty five never-ending minutes. Panic-filled minutes in which she felt sure she would never make it. Minutes in which, in spite of an extremely low blood pressure, Chiara was nonetheless able to perceive what was happening both around her and inside her.

The dark waking nightmare was dissolved by the doctor's prompt intervention, but for Chiara it had been a brush with death.

Her sight came back and so did the feeling in her legs. Never had the feeling of being *almost* alive given her such pleasure.

Death caught up with Chiara in Bologna that day, but didn't succeed in taking her away.

-95-

KASSEL

Running parallel to her drama was Chiara's apparently normal everyday life, one made of family fun, parties with friends and school adventures.

Her high school would often organize trips abroad to study languages in depth, but because of her psychophysical conditions, Chiara had to forgo several of these.

On one occasion Chiara was able to get her parents' worried consent for a trip to Kassel, in Germany.

Chiara's interest in the trip was mostly due to her belief that a change of scenery might result in a change inside her mind and therefore inside her illness.

Doing something normal that other normal youngsters were doing too gave her the hope of defeating the demon living inside the labyrinth of her psyche.

This hope was shared by her family and by the doctors who were looking after her.

Who knows, maybe during the trip she might find within her the *click* that would trigger the healing process. It was a risk that had to be taken.

And so her parents saw her off, bursting with the desire to be well again. Chiara and her malady were leaving. Hopefully only Chiara would be coming back.

-96-

As luck would have it, when the youngsters reached their destination and were allocated their living quarters, Chiara received a room with her own private kitchen!

Chiara's conditions on her arrival in Germany were barely acceptable, following the period of forced feeding through a drip.

'Give us our daily drip...' this is how a smiling Chiara would play things down today.

But at the time that kitchen felt like a blow below the belt.

The first day went by quietly, with no sign of the tempting elf and for a moment Chiara felt she could cope with her food crisis, at least for the duration of the trip.

"If this works, I'll come to live here!" she thought, amused.

Unfortunately on the second day all hopes of not having packed the illness together with her other things were lost.

To her sick ego's pleasure, she soon discovered that food prices were very low and so, while her companions spent their time visiting museums and historical sights, Chiara spent her afternoons inside supermarkets hoarding food.

-97-

Her back would ache from carrying bags as big as suitcases, full of junk food: tinned pasta, sauces, sweets and gallons of soft drinks that would help her to get rid of everything once the pig out was over.

She would greedily fill her trolley in a state of restless excitement, she would then hurriedly pay and be on her way with her 'lover'.

The moment she got back, her insane behaviour took over as if her actions were being guided but some outside entity.

She would cook all kind of things, from frozen foods to huge amounts of pasta and then ingest the lot with animal-like voracity using her hands and getting all dirty like a small child.

Often the need for a food fix was such she wouldn't even wait for the food to be cooked: she would eat it half-frozen, or even half-raw.

Her eyes would widen like those of a wild animal ready to jump on its prey. Her prey was food and Chiara couldn't wait to get it inside her to satisfy her mental hunger, mother to her physical one. Food was both prey and predator.

-98-

She ate.

She ate.

She ate anything edible.

She didn't care about the taste, she wouldn't even chew the food, no time for that, the need to ingest was too pressing.

She would push the food into her mouth with her hands to help it go down.

She ate.

And then she ran to the bathroom and got rid of it.

After a few minutes of dizziness, a foul taste in her mouth her eyes full of tears, the frenzy would begin all over again.

Her emptying ritual lasted only as long as it took her to make some room inside her stomach for more food.

The real tragedy was the final bout of vomiting.

Once she had eaten everything she had bought it would take her hours to get rid of it, because she had to make sure there wasn't even a crumb left inside.

She would gulp down a whole bottle of liquids to ease the process and then it was head down on the water closet.

Eyes closed, her hands forcefully pressing her stomach, she would push and push until she got rid of what she hoped would be the last drop of food.

-99-

She would watch herself eating in the mirror and see only the void left by a creature who had no right to exist.

She would pray to be rid of all the food and each time she would promise (and hope) that if successful she would put an end to it all.

What an ironic play of words, Chiara would end it all whether she stopped torturing herself or whether she carried on.

But she never stopped trying to convince herself and each time she would almost believe her promises.

There were cries of pain too. Her stomach and oesophagus were being corroded by the excessive acidity.

Seeing her drug transformed into a mush floating inside the water closet gave her great pleasure. She would gaze at it with satisfaction: she had once more succeeded in getting rid of the lot. 'Well done' for putting up with all that unbearable pain.

This distorted reality had been the norm for several years now and it would remain so for many more...

"Push Chiara, push again there must be no calories left inside!"

SHE HAD to recover the emptiness she was so desperately trying to fill.

Pain and strain were her daily companions, always, be it in Kassel or anywhere else.

-100-

This was her life, always.

She would travel hoping to escape her reality, but reality kept chasing her all round the world.

Her companions, unaware of what was going on, were always inviting her to join them, but Chiara was no longer able to give up her drug.

She needed it to survive.

She lived for her food.

She lived to eat, to kill herself with food and on those occasions when she had to postpone her suicidal ritual she would suffer from withdrawal symptoms: feeling cold, trembling, headache and all kinds of aches and pains in her body.

After each binge she had to get rid of all the empty tins and other wrappings before her roommates' return. Therefore - exhausted and with her throat in flames - Chiara would hide everything inside the wardrobe and would then get up in the middle of the night to secretly dispose of the rubbish.

For the first few days she repeated the ritual with meticulous regularity, until things got worse.

During one such ritual, Chiara noticed that the red spurt she had just thrown up wasn't tomato sauce, but blood.

-101 -

At the same time she began to feel such piercing pains in the neck, under the chin and in the ears she found it impossible to bend her neck.

She got up from the water closet and looked in the mirror. It reflected back a deformed swollen face.

Her throat glands, the salivary ones in particular, were throbbing with pain. A pain that, mixed with the shame she felt because of the way she looked, went straight to the brain.

Her embarrassment at being seen in this state by her companions was just one of the side problems of this hellish trip.

She ate.

She ate some more.

She ate until she emptied the fridge and there would be nothing left for her to eat at night. This meant she had to risk going out then and there to procure the drug.

Poor irresponsible girl, forced to wander the dark streets of a foreign city, who would cry tears of misplaced joy on finding an open pizza place. Each day was the same as the previous one, filled with food and feelings of being unclean. She felt unclean both inside and out and even when she didn't throw up she felt she could still smell the vomit permeating her body.

- 102 -

She felt like a corpse and the mirror, or seeing her friends, could not alleviate the feeling. How could they, in view of her deathly pallor, her sunken eyes, her smile that revealed gums as white as her teeth.

Chiara had hoped the trip would mark a turning point in her illness, unfortunately things only turned from bad to worse.

She began to long for death as a way out, but just the thought would bring tears to her eyes. She knew she didn't have the strength to end it all and this knowledge depressed her because it meant being condemned to a lifetime of suffering.

And so, each time she smeared the toilet bowl red, she prayed God to call her to His side. She was now vomiting herself as well as her blood.

Each day was a Calvary, but it brought her nearer to her return home to the people who could answer her silent, almost unconscious, cries for help.

A week before the trip's end Chiara found out she had no more money, but what really hurt was the thought of having squandered most of it on her addiction.

A few days before her return journey Chiara started to worry about the way she looked.

- 103 -

She didn't want her parents to see how ugly and bloated she looked and she therefore opted for the only solution she could think of: fasting.

Chiara's perception of reality was so distorted she really believed she was bloated and fat.

In spite of all her vomiting the one thing she could think of was the amount of food she had ingested. All the rest had never happened. Her mind was consumed by that thought, regardless of the fact that the scales showed a frightening loss of weight. She *saw herself* as fat and therefore this corpse bearing her name had to fast.

She drank only liquids for five days, alternating between abstinence crisis and panic attacks. She drank only liquids, which she promptly expelled for practice's sake.

She drank lots of water to make up for the violent strain to which she was subjecting her glands.

She drank gallons of mineral water and this she allowed her body to keep.

The day of her homecoming had finally arrived.

I can still recall what she wore: a pair of black leggings and a long yellow pullover to hide her imagined fat.

The coach entered the road leading to the school, parting a crowd of excited parents waiting to embrace their children after a three week separation.

-104 -

Among them, just as excited, was Chiara's mother, impatient to hear her child's (no longer a child) stories.

But her mother's smile died the moment she gazed into her daughter's dim eyes and her welcoming hug turned into an anguished embrace.

THE RITUAL

People often think of anorexia as a refusal to eat and of bulimia as stuffing oneself to bursting point.

I'm sure by now you've realised these are only symptoms of a problem whose roots are devastatingly deep.

Some psychological conflicts let off steam through disorderly eating behaviours that put the patient's life at risk.

The destructive trigger that set off Chiara's life-endangering food binges could be switched on at any moment for no apparent reason. Any emotion, be it negative or positive, could be that trigger.

The *bad* Chiara would use everything and anything as an excuse for a binge.

A binge could often be triggered by a piece of good news. Quite a contradiction, wouldn't you say?

- 106 -

The fact is that anything altering Chiara's emotional state would bring up new sensations that she was unable to handle. Any emotion presented a risk. And the bad Chiara hiding inside her would immediately turn to food to anaesthetize the feelings she couldn't handle.

What did Chiara's unconsciously associate with the very fact of *feeling*?

Feeling good.

Feeling bad.

It made no difference. It was the feeling part that caused the damage.

Here's an example: an evening out with her boyfriend...

She was in love with this sweet boy, who was as yet unaware of how painful his relationship with a problematic girl like Chiara would turn out to be.

They spent their first evening together in a state of total bliss, they were young and in love and a simple walk was all it took to transport them on cloud nine.

They decided to go somewhere for a drink.

Once seated, Chiara's expression suddenly changed. Her habitually sweet features turned edgy, her dull eyes staring into nothing while her mind was somewhere else. She told her boyfriend she had to go home, without giving any further explanations.

-106 -

He was bewildered, they hadn't even ordered yet, so the bad Chiara told him that she was seeing someone else. Chiara did love her boyfriend, but her need to eat was so impelling it forced her to blurt out those nasty words.

Soon after she went on one of her wild binges, stuffing herself with enough food to cater for five wedding receptions!

Her illness was so devious it would force her to hurt someone she really cared for. She wasn't aware of what was taking place, but she knew for sure that bad person was not the Chiara she knew. It was a separate Chiara, an unscrupulous Chiara, a Chiara who was prepared to walk over anyone standing between her and her loved/hated food.

On other occasions her need to binge was the result of a specific behaviour. Chiara had decided how much food (a laughable amount) she could ingest without having to throw it up. Whenever she happened to take just one bite more, the doors to hell would open up in her mind. That one additional bite meant all her carefully laid plans had been broken leaving her with one option: BINGING. The damage had been done she might as well go all the way and then rid herself of the lot.

- 107 -

That was how her mind worked.

I would like to talk about the bingeing in some more detail now.

As I have explained, the need for food could arise at any moment in any kind of situation.

When it did, Chiara would always find a way to run off in search of food. The need was so powerful because with it came the physical pain of a withdrawal crisis. Real pain.

For years she often wandered round town in search of a place where she could binge without being seen. She would walk for hours on end visiting one cafeteria after another, one deli after another.

She would stuff herself to bursting point with unbelievable speed without tasting anything. The rush during the ritual, which was by now a way of life, was quite forceful.

She felt impelled to fill herself, just fill herself.

It was a feeling of despair, of neediness. It was a need to anaesthetize all her feelings. A need to fill a very deep void.

And then came the unconditional refusal of that which could sustain life.
Her feelings of guilt would tear her apart and she would begin to fill herself with liquids to ease the expelling process.
In such cases the threshold of pain is so high it is almost non existent.

- 108 -

To induce vomiting, even without having to insert one's fingers inside one's throat, is always destructive. All those burning acids, the feeling of constriction in one's throat, the strain induced tears.

Anyone who has experienced this illness first hand knows how difficult it is to describe the pain one feels.

It's a life of repeated actions dictated by the phobias of an obsessed mind. I can't even begin to imagine how many water closets round the world received Chiara's offerings.

Emotions - bingeing - vomiting.

This is how the ritual unfolded.

These were the symptoms of her bulimia problem.

Hers was a life built on death, despair, blood and tears.

EXTREME VIOLENCE

I must now tell you about one particularly violent episode.

It happened during the umpteenth bulimic crisis.

Chiara was at home with her mother (and a maid). The hours were passing slowly on that sleepy day in early spring.

- 109 -

Suddenly, with no warning, Chiara was seized by the demon of gluttony.

As she started to tremble and sweat, she explained to her mother that she felt a crisis coming on, more out of fear of being held back than from a desire to be helped.

When the craving for food was upon her she had to eat! Nothing could stand between her and her drug.

But her mother, out of instinct or perhaps out of fear of what she knew was coming, decided to intervene and tried to stop her.

During her crises, Chiara would often spark a row which would give her a valid excuse to storm out of the house (in search of food) slamming the door behind her.

But on this occasion her mother refused to let her go, thus igniting a spark inside the powder keg Chiara had turned into.

In an effort to shake her out of it, her mother said some very offensive and hurtful things, which were her way of showing the love she had for her daughter. And suddenly Chiara lost it.

Her next memory, once back from her mental blackout, is of being held back by the maid as she tightly held her mother by the shoulders.

- 110 -

And she was shaking her, forcefully shaking her.

She stopped as if waking from a nightmare, much too painful to be just a dream. She had hit her mother.

She staggered away in a daze throwing a glance first at the maid and then at her mother.

Her mother avoided her daughter's gaze and passed her by with icy disregard.

The maid too left the room, leaving Chiara on her own.

She was now alone with her illness, alone with her feelings of guilt.

A few days later, torn by the memory of what she had done, she decided to write a letter as a means of putting an end to her mother's unbearable indifference

- 111 -

A letter to my mother

PLEASE DON'T JUST TEAR UP THIS PAPER, READ IT FIRST!

Rimini, 21.03.1996

Hi mum,

I know you want to have nothing to do with me and I can't really blame you.

There are no words to explain what I did, I cannot come to terms with it, it's like living in a nightmare.

After all you've done for me this is how I repay you.

I guess nothing I say or do will ever heal the wounds I inflicted on your heart, but on one thing at least we agree: I'm a piece of worthless shit.

What I did was really SERIOUS, I cannot find the right words to apologize or justify my behaviour. It's all so crazy, I'm crazy, because I really do love you so much. I adore you, mum, please believe me even though my behaviour yesterday seemed to show otherwise.

This is so hard to take in: only the night before when we were lying on the bed together I took your hand and told you how much I loved you. And even during these tension filled days there were still moments of laughter and tenderness,

- 112 -

moments in which I was able to show you my appreciation for all the things you do for me and for what you're going through because of me.

I don't know whether you'll ever be able to forgive me, I'm afraid this time you won't and rightly so.

Maybe I should have waited a bit before writing this letter, or maybe I should not have written it at all. It's too soon, but I would do anything to take it all back. But that's not possible and therefore I must pay for it. I deserve to be worn out by my guilt I deserve the relentless anguish I deserve the lot.

I can't look at myself in the mirror I hate myself for what I did. I probably wasted the only opportunity I had to get well and I went too far. I don't know what to say this is too much of a nightmare.

Have I no longer got a mother?

I'm an ungrateful bitch!

But I still have some courage left to make one more request I couldn't go on otherwise. I've got to give it a try! Please read my proposal, I'm sure you won't accept, but it's worth a try. So here it goes: let's wipe out this episode and try to start anew from scratch; I'll do whatever I'm told and at the first lapse you can throw me out.

-113 -

I cannot bear to think about how much I hurt you, but if you ever find it in yourself to give me another chance, I SWEAR I'll do my best, I'll do everything you tell me and I'll completely change my attitude.

Maybe I've finally woken up and the wake up call has been a harsh one. It was all very sad and despicable, but perhaps I had to hit bottom before I could open my eyes.

There isn't much else I can say except that I need you, mum, I need your love, your help and please believe me when I say that I LOVE YOU VERY MUCH like never before.

I beg of you, call upon your love, your strength, just give it another try even in a year's time if you want, but please give it another try!

It's your desperate daughter asking, your daughter who doesn't know where to turn.

These are just words, give me a chance to prove them to you, even though I don't really deserve one. I SWEAR THIS IS THE LAST TIME, PLEASE!!!

I LOVE YOU VERY MUCH

Chiara

(your shitty ungrateful daughter)

It took some time, but in the end things went back to normal.

The love the mother felt for her daughter was stronger than any wrong she may have suffered.

- 114 -

ABUSE

If this were a television programme, before I could start this chapter there would be the following announcement:

"Due to the some of its contents this programme is for an adult public only"
Well, the advice stands.

Chiara was now seventeen, the age when rose petals begin to open and a promising young bud blooms into a beautiful flower.

At seventeen life is like a vast stage on which every young woman is about to play her role of enchantress of all men.

Her fight with bulimia was now taking its toll both on her and her family and on all the people who were part of her life.

Her parents' attempts to stem Chiara's self-destructive tendencies weren't limited to medical treatments, sometimes they would take personal initiatives.

- 115 -

Without giving the matter too much thought, Chiara's mother decided to take a trip with her daughter, hoping the girl would find the diversion of a holiday village relaxing.

It was a repeat of the trip to Kassel, only this time Chiara wouldn't be on her own. They were still hoping.

They hoped and prayed that this attempt would turn out to be the right one. Chiara weighed only forty kilograms at the time and her features mirrored the advanced stage of the illness. The jutting cheekbones, the sunken eyes, the skinny square hands attached to a pair of broomstick-like arms.

She would faint quite often and her constant vomiting depleted her of the necessary liquids to cope with the summer's heat. She was totally disoriented.

In an effort to get some physical and mental relief, Chiara was now drinking too. Nothing too strong, something gentle like wine but with enough alcohol to take her mind off things. Everything would take on an air of joyous unreality allowing her to escape her daily hell.

That day Chiara had tried to burn off some non-existent fat by doing a bit of sport,

-116-

she had sunbathed, she had fainted, she had cried and now there would be dinner to round off this very eventful day!

When she had finished *not* eating her dinner, yet drinking a lot of wine, Chiara decided to spend the rest of the evening in the company of other young people in

the village. She could do with a bit of amusement and so after spending a couple of minutes in front of the mirror to improve her looks, she went out.

She noticed the good-looking boy straight away: He was one of the village's entertainment organisers, but Chiara was in no mood for any kind of relationship, not even a short summer fling, and so she didn't pay any attention to the young predator's persistent admiring glances.

Once inside the disco, she was enveloped by the smoke and the loud sounds and, thanks also to all the wine she had drunk, her daily nightmare seemed to become a distant memory.

Anonymous, happily smiling faces whizzed by her like ghosts from past lives, there were shouts and laughter superimposed on the drums' pulsating beat brought to life by a bald-headed dj.

The beat reverberated inside her frail chest as she tried to dance, as she tried to be one of them... and all the while the alcohol inside her was being thoroughly shaken.

-117-

Then someone proposed a holiday classic: a midnight dip in the pool!

I'm not so sure about Chiara's reaction, because things are a bit hazy in my mind too, but I see her running to her bungalow, saying goodnight to her mother and running out again wearing a swimsuit.

And there she is, in the middle of a pool bubbling with spray and joyous shrieks, looking happy and carefree.

Hers behaviour was a strange sequel of alternating extremes, which were a perfect reflection of her character. She could be intensely happy one moment and be throwing up her life into a toilet the next.

She was very aware of the joy and the desire to have fun all around her and - superb actress that she was - she got into the role.

It was so wonderful to gaze at the tiaras in the sky, the stars shining with hope on a night as salty as the water, while the world around her echoed with the sounds of carefree fun.

And suddenly the good-looking boy she had seen before was by her side, his face covered in watery pearls and a smile that hit you right in middle of the chest.

With the air of the perfect gentleman the boy was very attentive to Chiara, making her feel protected and wooed at the same time.

-118-

She liked the way he looked at her, as if she were the most beautiful woman there, a woman light years away from her everyday problems, so when he invited her to the shower room she simply followed him.

He had very nice manners and being showered with the loving attentions of an older boy gave her great pleasure.

On reaching the showers they found them closed, but the boy took Chiara's hand and - flushing another of his ice-melting smiles - asked her to come with him to his bungalow to fetch the keys. Chiara, following alcohol's reasoning, agreed. As she entered the bungalow Chiara saw a boy asleep on the second bed in the room, her partner immediately told her to be quiet so as not to wake his quick-tempered roommate. They went into the bathroom and the well-mannered boy showed her the shower. Why share a shower with all the others when she could have one all to herself? Still in a daze from all that had happened and dazzled by the romantic movie-like adventure she thought she was living, Chiara stepped into the shower

-119-

and surrendered herself to the water's exciting embrace. Her eyes closed, she saw herself under a fresh mountain fall, far from everything, far from her thoughts... When she opened her eyes again she saw the young man entering the shower too. Still overcome by the alcohol, she didn't quite realise what was happening, but she sensed something was wrong and she instinctively recoiled, trying to get out. All she wanted was to go back to her mother, she felt too much negativity all around. He took her by the shoulder with a gentleness she had never experienced before and asked her to stay and savour the beauty of this moment. Then, abruptly: "Take off your swimsuit!"
My swimsuit?
What?
Why?
This shower is only for washing away the pool's salty water like the ones we take on the beach!
Why is he asking me to take off my swimsuit?
Chiara said no and once again tried to get out. Suddenly, as when a monster comes to disrupt what had hitherto been a wonderful dream, the previously gentle youth showed his true colours.

-121-

He lost his patience and pushed Chiara back into the shower, starting to undress her. Chiara just stood there frozen with fear then, overwhelmed by shame, she tried to cover her nudity. Her jutting bones were like sharp cruel needles, but her thinness had not protected her from all this. The young predator came closer and started to caress her, to kiss her, to breathe his eagerness for raw sex on her.

She froze in panic at the thought that a second monster, if awakened, could soon come and join them.

Chiara began to pray.

She prayed in a whisper, afraid of waking the other one, and trying to keep this one at bay with arms too weak to be of any use.

Please help me, God...

I'm scared...

Help me, help me...

But the young beast didn't stop and he took her with great violence.

Chiara started to cry, hoping for something that would never come, seeing her mother asleep in a nearby bungalow where none of this would have happened.

-121-

Angered and aroused by her tears, the young beast grabbed Chiara by the hair and slammed her face against the wall as she sobbed, begging him to let her go.

Then she lost her senses and collapsed on the floor. He beat her.

He laboriously got her back to her feet, leaning her against the wall, but he obviously didn't like her moaning, her crying, her desperate efforts to avoid him and so he beat her again and again. Chiara, her tears mingling with the pelting water, was too petrified to scream, too terrified to react.

The savagery ended in a frenzy of anger and hostility as he entered her with his cutting and humiliating blade of flesh.

Please...

No...

Stop...

I beg you...

Stop...

Enough...

The fleshy knife kept on piercing her, disembowelling her, inflicting both physical and spiritual pain on her.

That blade had penetrated her tight, inhospitable body and her unwillingness had only made her more desirable.

-122-

It didn't last long, and yet it lasted forever.

Chiara was left in a heap on the floor under the pelting water, which couldn't wash away her feelings of being soiled through and through, although her only real sin had been an excess of alcohol.

She didn't move while inside her the very essence of her femininity was throbbing with pain and humiliation.

She longed to go back to her room, but was not allowed to.

He picked her up from the floor and pushed her towards the empty bed.

She was silently crying and trembling with fear at the thought that the potential accomplice might wake up and take over where the other one had left off.

She was cuddled up like a sleeping child but she wasn't sleeping, even though what she had gone through had been a nightmare.

Time passed, but not inside her head. She was living inside a time warp in which the word rape had taken on a very solid and very real meaning.

Time flowed relentlessly on, bringing with it the first rays of daylight, which found her still huddled on the bed, held down by the arm of her sleeping jailer.

It was late in the morning when she finally managed to get up and slip out as the nice well-behaved boy slept on peacefully.

-123-

Wait...

Said the beast-boy, or maybe it was only her fear of being stopped the moment she was finally outside, free as the breeze which was now caressing her.

She felt bloated, her stomach taugth as a drum, saturated with poisonous impurity.

She managed to reach her bungalow, where she found her mother sitting on the bed in a state of distress because she couldn't find her, despite hours of searching.

Feeling ashamed and terrified, Chiara came up with the childish excuse that she had fallen asleep near a rock on the beach. Then she fell into a kind of trance.

But when she came to, her mother's anxiety-fuelled reaction was a harsh one.

She slapped her daughter.

Chiara remained silent.

It was a dark lonely, all engulfing silence.

She headed toward the bathroom, her mother's hand still searing her cheek, and turning on

-124-

this now friendly shower she began to scrub away all the filth she had been submitted to.

She scrubbed herself with maniacal care, she then lay on her safe bed and fell into a very deep, death-like sleep where only one image would still come to the surface: the panting face of the beast who was penetrating her soul.

The following days were filled with flushes of recalled horrors and sounds echoing in her mind. She was in pain, but it was a different kind of pain. It hadn't been caused by her self-destructive behaviour, but by one man's deliberate wickedness.

Why?

Why had he done this to her?

Why did he smile at her maliciously whenever he came across her in the village, as if to mock her, after wronging her in such a way?

The vacation's deleterious outcome was that Chiara became even more vulnerable and insecure. Back home she felt so soiled, worthless and guilty of a secret that would remain such for a very long time, she fell even deeper into the illness' vortex.

You might think this episode has nothing to do with the unfolding of the illness, but in truth such episodes are often rooted in it.

-125-

There are unfortunately a number of unbelievably loathsome people for whom I have so little respect I cannot use the words that come to mind to describe them (there has to be some form of moral censorship, especially with regards to the written word).

Therefore I shall not describe them, relegating them to the oblivion of indifference.

I want to address instead those who listen and perceive through their soul. Individuals capable of taking advantage of a girl's fragile equilibrium do exist. They certainly do. Look around, girls. Look out for them the way they look out for you. And be wary.

The need to escape one's anorexic or bulimic reality can often be translated into a burning desire to live a passionate love story, to experience a pseudo-normal snippet of life like all the other girls.

Well my dears, you *are* like all the other girls. Make no mistake about it.

Gather the sunshine inside you and let it illuminate your face.

You *are just as worthy and as deserving* as your contemporaries. True, you are going through a difficult, destructive time, but you'll come out of it. Believe it. Believe it as I believe it!

'The sun will rise again', to quote an Iron Maiden song.

It's a wonderful title... and it's true. The sun, *your* sun will rise again.

And when it does, you'll be able to have all the things you desire.

-126-

Love, happiness, dreams, passions, the lot.

With an intensity you cannot even begin to imagine.

So get going!

A big hug...

-127-

AGE EIGHTEEN: THE FIRST, PALE SUNBEAM

For the past four years Chiara had been toying with the idea of having something tattooed on her skin that was really meaningful to her.

An indelible something, that would stay with her forever. But it couldn't be any old symbol, it had to have great significance.

This desire had been born at age fourteen during an educational trip to England with her cousin. They would be spending a short period in an English college to study the language. What she did learn were better ways of hiding when she wanted to eat and a few words of the Florentine dialect spoken by her cousin.

I recall she managed to put on sixteen kilograms in three weeks.

She ate non-stop.

In spite of the pain she felt because she couldn't understand what was happening to her, she had some memorable times watching the bustle of Carnaby street, the colourful hats, the girls' fuchsia-dyed hair.

Life and death intermingling as usual.

One day they went to Portobello road.

The two young girls were walking among the stalls when they caught sight of a partly hidden shop sign reading: TATTOO SHOP.

-129-

They entered, curious.

Chiara was enraptured by all those designs conceived to remain forever engraved on the one's skin.

She looked at them in wonder.

She decided there and then that one day she would have her own tattoo!

Four years went by. The decision to have a tattoo needs to be carefully weighed, it needs to be pondered at length. It is something indelible that will stay with you *for life*.

The emotional reaction to a tattoo is something so intimate it makes it difficult to describe.

It's a philosophy of life. It isn't just an aesthetic whim, it goes much deeper than that, it comes from the heart. It's a different way of expressing and capturing forever a particular moment, a joy, a pain, a thought.

She waited until she was eighteen, by which time she had already decided on the design of the jewel that would always be with her.

A sun.

A special sun: her sun!

Although she had waited to be of age, she nonetheless asked her parent's permission. Luckily they agreed.

Accompanied by these two precious allies, she went to see a famous tattoo maker named Luigi.

-129-

She searched for the right image for a very long time, to no avail. Even the artist himself was by now feeling desperate.

But all of a sudden he took a CD out of a drawer. Inside it under the writing was visible a stylized sun.

It was the one.

The moment she saw it she fell in love with it.

In that instant a window opened unto the world.

I won't bore you with the 'lofty' words uttered by Luigi as he proceeded with the titanic task of tracing the chosen image.

It was the 18th of January 1993. Two days after Chiara's birthday.

From that moment on, this symbol would become her goal.

The Sun with all its positive meanings: life, light, heart, love.

The *Sun*, something so far removed from the illness that never left her.

This *Sun*, and all the good intentions attached to it, was witness to all she had gone through and was going through right now... all the Death she had absorbed during her teenage years would turn into something as beautiful and shiny as this most magnificent of stars.

This would be her first *sun*: her new obsession, a symbol of her buried passion for life.

-130-

HEADS OR TAILS

One thing all anorexia and bulimia sufferers have in common, beside the obvious refusal of any form of nourishment, is the need to torture themselves.

I can still recall the tortures Chiara would inflict on herself despite all my efforts to stop her.

Possessed as she was by a crazy destructive demon, my words sounded to her like some distant echo, far too feeble to be clearly heard.

For example, she chewed her fingernails.

But not like any other insecure and anxious adolescent would do.

She chewed her fingernails, and her toenails too, with such fierceness she would often cause herself dangerous infections.

She knew she shouldn't yet she persisted and neither the pain nor the profuse bleeding would make her stop. On the contrary the sight of all that blood seemed to excite her. She seemed to get pleasure out of that masochistic behaviour.

She would also bite the fleshy parts of her heels and fingers until the searing pain would shake her out of her unnatural torpor. Then tears of utter dejection would begin to flow, her bleeding hands and feet (which would hurt at each step she took) would curl up around her body and share her suffering.

Even today, it is still possible to detect a few scars of a different kind on her hands, right there close to the sun tattoo on her wrist. What better place to put out your cigarette when there are no ashtrays around?

There was a strong desire to harm herself by punching walls or other solid objects, for example, and on one occasion she ended up with a fractured bone. Let's now turn to the time she chose to end it all.

That day a particularly acute crisis had kept her away from school...

In order to placate a bulimic attack she began to stuff herself in the morning and she remained in the kitchen for five consecutive hours, thus missing school. When she got back from work her mother immediately realised what had happened, it wasn't too difficult considering the leftovers strewn all over the place. Her daughter's lifeless, half closed eyes only confirmed her conclusion.

-132-

Overwhelmed by feelings of despair and helplessness, feelings that often turned into anger, Chiara's mother railed against her daughter, wounding her with her cutting words.

Chiara, her throat still bloody, didn't answer or show any reaction.

Feeling both physically and emotionally devastated by the humiliation she went up to her room and there it dawned on her there was a way to put an end to all this pain.

This last episode had finally tipped the scales.

Chiara had been toying with this idea for a long time.

At times she thought about it calmly, at other with terror, at others still with clear awareness.

While pondering this insane idea she came to the conclusion that God had made a mistake when He had chosen to put her upon this earth and she would therefore entrust to Him the coin of her existence.

She would be the one to throw the coin, but God would be the One to choose whether it would be... *head or tails*.

She went to the bathroom and emptied the contents of the medicine cabinet swallowing

all kinds of tablets: pain killers, tranquillizers, digestive aids. Everything went into the fiendish cocktail that would help her put an end to her suffering and, she believed, to that of her parents.

-133-

She was watching herself in the mirror opening the various metallic blisters and she didn't recognize the young girl with lifeless eyes who was chewing one tablet after another, swallowing the word 'end'.

Having swallowed the lot, she lay on her bed and waited for the effects of that lethal mixture.

She called her boyfriend and told him, her voice by now drowsy, what she had done. Then everything turned dark.

She wanted to put her salvation into the hands of her young love. She could have told her mother who was downstairs, but calling on someone far away meant she was asking God: "If you want me to live, then allow that boy to save me!"

Chiara woke up on a hospital bed, a plastic tube coming out of her nose.

The boy had made it on time.

God had chosen *heads*.

On reaching her home the boy had found her unconscious. He and her mother rushed her to hospital where she underwent the gastric lavage that saved her just in the nick of time.

When she opened her eyes Chiara saw her brother's face. I can still recall her brother's streaming tears as he kept repeating: "Don't ever do that again, Chiara".

-134-

Several days went by and her case was taken up by experts who suggested to Chiara's parents a treatment in a suitable medical facility.

This would soon lead to the first real change in Chiara's life, the first decisive step towards salvation.

BETWEEN DREAM AND REALITY -a page from my diary-

Dear diary I've got lots to tell you today so please bear with me

I'm only joking I know you love me

first of all let me tell you I've finally come up with a name for you I know I took my time

I've always called you diary or travel journal but no longer you've got a real name now it's SUN do you like it?

after all the psychological treatments I've had and all I read on the subject

I've finally understood what you mean to me

you are the Chiara that is more real the one who is suffering

when I write to you I'm talking to the part of me no one knows

to the part no one seems to understand any longer

you are not just a bunch of pages stuck together

you are a separate entity a secret one that belongs only to me

I'm so sorry I had to burn all your 'diary-brothers'.

-135-

*it was like burning a piece of myself but I had to
I suspect my mother has read them
she denies it but I thought better safe than sorry
it was very painful to see them burn but I had no choice
no one must come between me and you who are the more real Chiara
my diary my friend my SUN
thank you for always being here for me I know it's not an easy thing to do
I'm always telling you about sad things and it is through you I always ask God
to take me away from this daily hell of mine
but no tragic stories today dear SUN
today we'll talk about wonderful things
ok get ready here goes
the moment I got up this morning I felt there was something different in the air
I still felt the usual emptiness inside yet the air seemed to have a different hue
all of a sudden there were colours
as you know I've been living surrounded by black all these past years but today
as soon as I opened my eyes I saw lots of pink green red pale blue and especially yellow*

-136-

*sun yellow
right now I'm rather plump no I'm actually rather fat
my weight goes up and down everyday this isn't something new to you
I've weighed as little as 36 kg and as much as 90
I'm in the middle right now but with or without jutting bones I always see myself as fat
I went down to the kitchen where I found both my mother and my father
they were having breakfast
my mother gave me a big hug
which came as a surprise seeing that yesterday we had the most dreadful row
she hugged me so tight she almost took my breath away
and then she gave me this really strange talk
or should I say unexpected
she has often told me I'm beautiful
but hearing her say so now that I'm so plump was quite a surprise
she said I'm beautiful just the way I am
that she loves me regardless of how much I weigh
she said my true beauty is in my eyes because they reflect my generous heart
I looked at her dumbfounded I couldn't believe this was the same person who has often made me
feel so disgusted with myself because I am overweight who led me to believe that my brother Luca
was ashamed of me*

-137-

she has always been the beautiful slim perfect one while I was the gloomy ugly fat one

today I was being accepted and I deserved to exist for what I am regardless of aesthetics she even told me I need not exercise and that she would prepare an aubergine casserole with chips for lunch how about that my dear sun?

chips are a definite no-no in this house because they are unhealthy and very fattening she was embracing me and caressing me but not as she usually does in order to check whether I've put on some weight today it was just out of love

you can't begin to imagine how happy I felt they were both so attentive as they suggested several culinary dreams how wonderful

I left for school where usually everyone looks at me as if I was someone from Mars those who cannot understand my peculiarities see me as weird all those who know me have seen me change shape at unbelievable speed they just don't know what to make of me but today I heard new words spoken by both my classmates and my teachers

-138-

the messages were loud and clear regardless of what my ears heard I could feel the people's kindness right in my stomach where I've always had this unfillable void I didn't hear the usual disapproving judgements there was none of the prejudice that has always been part and parcel of my every day

I was wonderful simply by being Chiara

I was accepted in spite of my paranoia

as you know I always wear black and my pullovers cover my knees

I'm trying to hide my oversize shape and I've often been ridiculed because of this outfit but funnily enough today two people complimented me on my new pullover

it's black and very long of course with a big heart on the front

one of them told me these are his exact words

"what a nice pullover a heart as big as yours"

I felt myself shiver he didn't see it but I was really moved

no one understands me

my illness is difficult to understand too many contradictions but today they all seemed so kind

-139-

in spite of my crazy behaviour

as you know I've often been caught secretly eating in the school's bathrooms

at times when I can't control myself I'll sit in the last row with all my food bags at my feet and eat hiding behind the shoulder of the tallest boy in our class

some teachers don't say anything but my history teacher has often ridiculed me in front of all my classmate

it is such a humiliating experience

but today everything seemed brand new

*the air felt crisp in spite of all my inner tragedies
no one said anything about my weight
as I said before I know they don't understand but today no one was paying any attention to the
cancer in my brain (that's how I define my bulimia)
the despair I feel inside cannot be wiped away by other people but the fact that I no longer sense
them as hostile makes my everyday battle a lot easier
it isn't coming up all roses of course
I did have an argument with the class swot today but it was all very civilised almost pleasant
I'm having some difficulty explaining what I mean
but the gist of it is that I was no longer the class' BULIMIC*

-141-

*I was as 'normal' as the rest of them
they made me feel their equal
they treated me as if I was one of them
they quarrelled with me as they do with each other
the cherry on the cake was that I wasn't even tested in chemistry
yesterday I didn't study at all because I was too busy eating like crazy (am I crazy?)
and I couldn't throw it all up like I always used to
my body no longer obeys my orders
that's why I'm putting on weight
never mind the missed test was one more building block of the joy I'm feeling
as I write to you now
I added it to describe how perfect the outside world looked to me today
I was simply a person
that's all
not too bad wouldn't you say my dear SUN?
when I got back I found my beloved chips waiting for me complete with dipping sauces
my mouth is watering even as I talk about it
I often eat them on my binges but today they were particularly tasty because my mother cooked
them for me and she even insisted I have more eat a few more*

-141-

*dear eat
I'm glad you like them
you deserve them
and she watched me eating them a wonderful smile in her eyes
for once she wasn't studying me
I couldn't eat much though
the anorexia-bulimia is a constant companion I carry inside me
and as I find it difficult to throw up these days I have to limit my food intake otherwise I'll put
on weight but I also can't force myself to fast like I used to*

*and a fast is what I need right now considering the shape I'm in
and there is also something else I find hard to believe
my mother has finally got it
she has finally understood all my complaints
all the things I accused her of
all of them
the lot
she said she was sorry
as you know I've been trying for years to explain to her that I find some of her attitudes towards
me very hurtful*

-143-

*and today as if by magic she seems to have got it
and so has my father
actually all three of them finally understood me today
in short dear SUN today should be framed as one of my most cherished memories
that is if we don't count the labyrinth in my head inside which I still keep getting lost in
unable to discern the good from the bad
my mother my father and my beloved brother were no longer angry with me
all right all right don't fret I know they are not really angry with me but with this
incomprehensible bulimia
poor parents of mine
they feel desperate because they love me I know that
they tried to help me by enlisting the help of so many doctors
it must have cost them a fortune and I feel so guilty about it
all that money scattered in all the water closets on the planet
I'm causing them so much pain it's such a waste of energy
I'm hurting them
I've stooped so low as to steal money from their wallets to buy my drug
dear SUN are you pleased with today's story?
very different from my usual ones wouldn't you say?*

-143-

*but
dear SUN
I'm afraid I'll have to disappoint you
at this point alas I woke up and the dream ended
I was lying in my worm bed blissfully dreaming of the world as I would like it to be
my mind often plays these tricks on me
it imagines a non-existent reality
my life is made up of these realities to which I alone have access
my parents often ask me how they can be of help*

*they want to know how they should behave
but I haven't got an answer
I don't know what bulimia requires from the outside world
I really don't damn it
unfortunately there isn't a right way of behaving towards me
the one thing I can say is that I would like them to be less hostile
I would like them to understand that my actions aren't planned ahead of time
I seem to have no say in it all
it feels as if some despicable being takes over my soul and makes me do whatever it likes
it forces me to wear myself out with all those acids that burn my throat and to be nasty to the
people who really love me*

-144-

*I don't really know what I would like the people around me to say to me
but maybe being accepted by them for what I am would be enough
I live in constant fear of being caught as I ransack the larder
I know perfectly well they will be angry but I can't stop myself
even though my mother hides the food all round the house I still manage to find it
it's as if I can hear IT calling me
it isn't I who stuff myself with all that junk
no one in their right mind would gulp down a whole bottle of oil in one go would they?
I have gone as far as swallowing a frozen fish just out of the freezer
I'm not trying to provoke anyone
I'm not being mean believe me dear SUN
the other day I went to retrieve the supper's leftovers from the dustbin
I'm so ashamed
I'm disgusted by myself
I have no dignity left no self-respect
I'm at the mercy of these incomprehensible destructive urges that live inside me
my mother discovered that some spirits were missing from the cocktail cabinet
and immediately thought of me*

-145-

*I'm running out of ideas on how to avoid thinking about this reality that I find more and more
oppressive and I really don't know what advice I should give to the people close to me all I can
say is 'please keep loving me even if you don't understand the things I do'
love
understanding
encouragement
that's all
what annoys me most is that it's often they who have a problem
they are the ones to be pitied*

*I'm the one who's sick yet I have to be careful not to be a cause for concern to my family
and so my feelings of guilt become much too weighty and they slowly wear me out
one drop at a time
a deafening noise
a noisy silence
seeing my parent's despair makes me so sad I would do anything not to hurt them
but I don't believe I should be worrying about their state of mind
I should be worrying about mine
I must fight
I must look for you inside me
because you are the sun I need
that shining smiling part of me*

-146-

*this is my work
I'm the one who has to fight the daily battles that keep throwing my bleak reality into my face
who knows I may even find this strength inside my heart one day
maybe one day I'll win my personal war and my parents will be proud of me
together we'll rejoice at my newly found strength
just bear with me for another couple of minutes
I had another thought regarding my strength
I actually have lots of it
just think of all the hurt I inflict upon myself
think of all the vile things I subject my body to every single day
think of all that power
and it's all negative
all deadly
I can shape all that is negative within me any way I like
such destructive power
just think what would happen if I could transform it into something positive
I believe I could do great things
that blessed click everyone is talking about
the one that should trigger my desire to get well
there's no sign of it
I've been waiting for years now*

-147-

*I must find a way of creating it myself
this is no life
death is a much better option
my dear SUN I must find you within my heart*

*but maybe you are not there and therefore I have to invent you myself and perhaps one day
believing in you will come naturally and my smiles will be spontaneous rather than forced
ok I can see you've had enough for one day
you know me I'm a chatterbox
a great big hug and thank you for always being here for me
I love you
see you tomorrow
your little Chiara*

THE CLINIC

After the luckily unsuccessful suicide attempt, something had to be done. The idea of a stay in a specialized clinic had often been taken into consideration, but had never been acted upon. Now, after Chiara's attention-stopping gesture, it was decided to go ahead with it. Her desperate parents had expedited all the entry procedures and what Chiara perceived

-149-

as resentment was really extreme worry. The fear of losing their child had suddenly turned into a real possibility and trying anything, come what may, was no longer a choice, it was now an obligation. The time came for Chiara to prepare herself for a forced separation from her family, from her home and from the things she loved most... The night before her departure Chiara asked her parent's to grant her the condemned's last wish: that they leave her alone so that she could indulge in one last binge before entering the clinic. The clinic had not been her choice, but she nonetheless hoped it could be the turning point in her life of pain and grief. That evening she waited to kiss her parents goodnight and then rushed to the kitchen to set in motion the devastation. She stuffed herself with anything she could lay her hands on and then threw it all up and began all over again. She kept going until the following morning. Then it was time to leave. Chiara looked at her house as if she had never seen it before, or as if she knew she would not see it for a very long time. It was just her and her father, and during the journey neither of them said much.

-149-

When they arrived to the clinic they received the warm welcome reserved to outside people and were shown to the girl's room.

As she walked along the corridors, Chiara saw many other girls and wondered why they all had such lifeless, staring eyes. They were all suffering from her same illness but unlike them, she was now very aware and wide awake, which made what she saw all the more disturbing.

She would later discover that the girls' dull eyes and gestures were due to all the tranquillizers they were given as part of their treatment.

As soon as they reached her room, a female doctor came in and asked Chiara to follow her in an authoritative tone of voice. Chiara asked if she could say goodbye to her father first, but her request was denied.

The doctor rudely asked her father to leave. All Chiara's hopes collapsed.

How could they refuse to let her say goodbye to her father?

She felt her throat tightening and when she saw her father's chin tremble as he spread out his arms to embrace her she burst out crying. She desperately wanted to speak, but the words were stuck in her throat. She would have liked to tell him all the things she

-151-

had never told him all these past years. She would have liked to tell him how much she loved him and how important he was to her. In the end her caring and protecting instinct gave her the strength to tell him not to worry, she would get well.

She was then taken somewhere else, alone in a new world. A world difficult to imagine for anyone who hasn't been there.

The long corridors with their tall windows made the place look like an old fashioned public school, but the atmosphere was far removed from that of hoards of carefree school children.

White and light blue overalls passed her by, intermingling with the withered faces of skinny girls with no soul. A pale sunbeam that could not warm any of them shone in from outside.

She came to the room where they put together a patient's history. She was asked many questions, some of them of a very intimate nature.

Then it was time to go to lunch. Chiara protested that the bulimia crisis of the previous day made it impossible for her to ingest any food, but to no avail. The staff paid no attention. They were paid to carry out instructions not to interact with patients.

A robot-like attendant took her into the dining room

-152-

and Chiara was once again overwhelmed by the same icy feeling of loss of individuality she had experienced when she saw her father leaving.

Oh, the never ending hours she spent sitting at those dining room tables.

Anorexic girls eat very slowly, as if these natural gestures were alien to them and caused them great suffering.

One slow bite after another, as if they wanted to dissolve it before swallowing it. The rule said no one could leave the table until the last girl had finished eating and supervision was quite strict. The staff would check that no food got wasted, it had to be regularly eaten. Professional dieticians would march round the tables at 'goosestep'.

This whole strict military procedure was then nullified as soon as lunch was over, because the girls were allowed to go where they pleased.

Strange, but true.

The girls were forced to eat everything that was put in front of them and then, as if to say: "Hey, we were only joking..." they would be let free... to run to the bathroom and throw it all up.

Sure enough, after each meal there was a constant flow of people heading to the bathrooms which ended up looking like post office windows on a particularly busy day.

The queues would unwind all along the bathrooms amidst coughs, exertions and tearful eyes as each girl waited her turn to get rid of everything that could cure her.

But not Chiara.

Chiara was fighting as hard as she could to keep her promise to herself and to her parents. She had to be stronger than the demon inside her. She cried, she became desperate, she fought with her unbearable feelings of guilt, but she tenaciously tried to keep all four daily meals inside her body.

The belief she had entered a kind of concentration camp took shape after she witnessed certain unimaginable incidents (which unfortunately many girls are still experiencing RIGHT NOW).

You are reading a book and in books reality is often embellished to make the story more shocking and the book more sellable. This is not the case with this particular book. What I'm about to recount is the simple unadulterated truth.

One of the clinic's patients was a girl I'll call Vania.

Vania was anorexic and eating was for her an act of violence against her body and her mind (as it is for all anorexics).

-153-

She would sit at the table with lots of well-hidden tissues, primly eating her food like a shy young girl who is really enjoying it..

But after slowly chewing each morsel, she would spit it into one of her tissues and close her fist around it.

Thanks to her childish trick, she managed to fool the staff for quite a while.

Vania was bent on taking the authorities for a ride, never realising it was herself she was taking for a ride.

One day though, the staff decided to watch Vania more closely and they discovered her trick.

She was reprimanded with such gratuitous violence it borders on the unbelievable. Moments of tension during a meal were an everyday occurrence, but what the dietician did that day was despicable and quite unjustified.

She forced the poor girl to eat all the food she had spat out down to the last bit

A tearful Vania tried to resist the imposition, but to no avail.

What stuck in my mind is the malice I could detect in the dietician's reaction

-155-

as she carried out the allegedly, and I underline allegedly, therapeutic procedures. Such violence should never have taken place. It's obvious the woman couldn't care less about the patient's fragile state of mind nor about that of all the other girls who witnessed the scene!

I cannot recall whether Vania went to the bathroom to throw everything up, but in this case who could blame her?

Another girl whom I'll call Lucia had the belief that everything could put calories inside her body, even a simple touch, and she was therefore terrified when she had to touch any object that had been handled by someone else.

She lived her days in a state of fearful wariness. A simple caress or slap on the shoulder would send her darting to the bathroom to frantically wash herself with obsessive fervour. I can't begin to tell you the number of times she was scolded for leaving the dining table (where she picked things up using a paper napkin) ahead of time, in search of a bathroom!

Each of Chiara's companions lived in a hideously distorted reality of her own.

-155-

Everyone's favourite game was taking the dieticians for a ride and no method was too disgusting. One of the favourites was to smear all kinds of sauces and dressings all over their faces: the more sauce on your face the less calories inside your body.

The war between the two factions (doctors against patients) included an over-abused chemical warfare: the girls were given massive doses of tranquillizers and other similar medications to keep them in a state of constant lethargy.

One monotonous day followed another with the same meals, the same lifeless looks, the same guttural struggles, the same obsessive behaviours.

Girls weighing 30 kg dragged themselves along iron railings, because they had consumed themselves to the bone, and nonetheless kept smearing their bodies with slimming creams.

Exhausted girls pinching the loose skin on their bony bottoms and seeing it as fat. Girls getting up at 4.00 in the morning to start their 'rituals'.

-156-

Girls fed artificially because of a self-inflicted lack of anything life sustaining. Girls closer to madness than to normality. These were the clinic's patients, and the staff behaved as if their aim was not to help them get better, but to keep them there as long as possible. But these conclusions could be distorted too...

Things were about to change for Chiara.

The clinic's policy was that once they had got over the initial phase, the girls would be allowed to live a more normal life. This meant they could live outside the clinic and come in only for treatments. Chiara immediately began looking for a flat near the clinic.

Her first day in the new flat went according to the rules. Chiara found the idea of an autonomous life rather exciting. Receiving permission to try out her wings in her diseased sky had given her considerable self-confidence.

Proud of her new home, Chiara went out to do some shopping and everything was fine until breakfast on the following day.

The radio-alarm had cheerfully sung in the rising morning mist. While the milk was coming to the boil on the stove, Chiara was cutting open the bag of cereals

-157-

that would soon be floating in a pool of white liquid.

Chiara felt light as she went through the motions of preparing breakfast like any other normal girl, she was almost humming to herself.

She covered the table with a colourful tea cloth, filled her bowl with milk and threw in a handful of corn flakes, yellow leaves on a sea of white.

It happened in an instant.

Her first mouthful freed the demon.

Chiara shook her head as if to say no, but before she even realised what was happening she had turned the bowl into a manger from which emerged slurping, breathless sounds.

Her head kept bobbing up and down as splashes of milk drenched her face: it was the usual frenzied orgy.

As soon as she finished the contents of her bowl she grabbed the box, tore it to pieces and swallowed an unbelievable amount of flakes in no time at all with no conscious awareness of what she was doing.

The breakfast marked the beginning of a new bout of devastation and the loss the unsteady balance she had somehow managed to hold on to until that moment. She was once again doing all the things she had tried so hard to eliminate. Her shopping trips were moments of sheer pleasure as she filled her trolley out of all proportion, looking forward to her intercourse with food.

-158-

Then she would go home and swallow everything in a near ecstatic a state. She would often end up eating some of the food before she even got home either in the car or while queuing at the supermarket till.

And then the house would echo with the strained sounds of her unrestrainable and unrestrained urge to throw everything up.

A few minutes to recover and she would be off again in search of another deli, another pizza place, another refreshment-room, which were the obligatory stopgaps when the urge was so pressing she just couldn't make it to the supermarket.

At the end of each bingeing session Chiara felt like a non-entity who's unable to control her drives; she would set down a series of good intentions which lasted for as long as it took her to tidy up a bit, then it was back to her self-destructive mode.

Chiara was now pretty close to the end of her tether.

She had asked for help at the clinic, but with no appreciable results. She was given advice, suggestions were made, but none of it seemed to work. She was left to her own devices in that house that was the anteroom to hell.

She spent days on end torturing herself in that flat and no one from the hospital ever came looking for her, no one ever noticed her absence.

She had been abandoned.

The six weeks she spent in the flat consisted of a self-perpetuating cycle of crises, crying, shouting, bingeing, blood and self-destruction which came to an end when she was once more admitted to the clinic in a state of mental, spiritual and physical dejection.

This experience came and went like many others before it, leaving behind no discernible results, as if it had never taken place. But it did throw Chiara back into her abyss, more hopeless than before and with less chances of coming out of it.

In agreement with her parents, who were feeling even more dejected and desperate than their daughter, Chiara left the clinic, promising to come back for the occasional check up, and went back to her home, to her town, to her land where pain had at least a more familiar appearance.

In the umpteenth attempt to change her lifestyle and her habits, Chiara chose to go and stay with an aunt and for a while she was able to keep her eating problems under control.

But her illusions were short lived and deceiving her aunt proved quite easy.

When she had to expel her food she resorted to all kind of tricks, like going outside with small plastic bags, or letting the water run in the bathtub to cover the harsh noises she made.

She was still losing weight as she desperately spiralled into a deadly inertia. The regular check ups at the clinic were superficial and careless, which made it easy to put forth the possibility that Chiara was on her way to recovery. Her undernourished thinness, against all logic and common sense, was labelled 'a normal body reaction'.

Chiara knew she was nearing journey's end, yet she still persisted in her heroic race towards the final collision.

She found some relief in writing. She wrote about her deep hatred for food and about her desire to put an end to it all the moment she could no longer get rid of it through vomiting.

Twisted words born of a twisted mind, too tried to be able to face its inner demons.

But now, following a desperate comment overheard by her aunt, Chiara could no longer indulge in her destructive behaviour, her aunt never let her out of her sight. Her body, used to the negligible amounts of food barely sufficient for its survival,

-161-

reacted by swelling up out of all proportion, as if it were trying to hoard as much nourishment as possible while the going was good.

On her following check up Chiara's tests were so outside the norm she had to be admitted to the clinic again.

In spite of being fed up with an existence which could no longer be called 'life', she passively accepted this new turn of events, ending up in a hospital bed, this time in a different ward. She was told her stay would last ten days at the most and with a few sacrifices on her part she could soon be on her way out.

Days went by with no tests of any kind. During those unending dead periods in which gazing out of the window was the only way of relieving the boredom of lying in bed, Chiara was allowed to go out several times a day to a near by bar. There she would buy food which she greedily ate, then she would return to the hospital to throw it all up.

One evening she surreptitiously slipped into the bathroom and, having made sure no one saw her, she leaned over the water closet to start her indecent self-inflicted torture.

When she resurfaced from her attempt to spit out her existence, she heard steps behind her

-162-

she got up terrified and silently stood in front of the metal bathroom door.

The nurse who was now rinsing something in the wash basin must surely have seen her.

So why was there no reaction? Why wasn't the woman running off to report what she had seen? Why wasn't she shouting at her, shaking her, pointing at her as someone to be kept under constant watch? These questions held all Chiara's fear of being found out, yet her greatest fear was that of not being found out, of being left to her own devices.

And this is exactly what happened.

Chiara left the bathroom wiping her mouth with the back of her hand her eyes still full of tears.

She gave the woman in the light blue uniform a lifeless look and received in exchange a look of indifference tinged with disgust.

No words were spoken.

The woman left too.

Chiara stood in the corridor for a while, feeling utterly empty: no food, no hope, no life.

Days passed and Chiara did not receive any treatment for her unnatural swelling: she was examined, observed, studied, but never treated.

Chiara's suspicion that she was being treated as a case study rather than as a patient was confirmed when her doctor told her she had to remain in the clinic for ten more days.

-163-

No.

She would not agree to it.

She wanted out. She might as well kill herself on her own terms, there was absolutely no need to prolong this preposterous hospitalization which hadn't in any way prevented her from carrying out her usual rash actions.

She told them of her intention to leave the clinic and the sharp reply was that if she really wanted to she would have to sign the discharge form herself because no doctor was willing to discharge her.

Chiara firmly requested that the forms should be made ready for her to sign and went to her room to pack her things.

She threw one last look at her roommates and at the dull outside view.

She then went to her doctor's study where she was shown the form she must sign. Chiara leaned over the desk, her hand trembling, but before her pen had reached the paper, the doctor came closer and whispered that if she signed she would be signing her death sentence. Without mincing his words and in a tone of conceited satisfaction the doctor told Chiara that if she left the clinic she would never get well.

-165-

A glint of her hidden inner sun illuminated Chiara's eyes as she defiantly held the doctor's gaze. She forcefully lowered her pen and wrote her signature.

Those challenging words had struck a hidden note within her mind spurring her into action.

She picked up her rucksack, looked at the doctor again, then turned around, leaving behind that place suspended in a dimension of its own.

SCHOOL DAYS

Chiara was admitted to the clinic during her thirteenth year at school, a few months before her school leaving examination.

Before deciding whether Chiara should interrupt her studies for a while, her parents went to see the school's principal to find out whether it was at all possible to combine their daughter's treatment with her studies so that she could still take her exams.

It has to be said that Chiara and the principal weren't on the best of terms; the principal, who also happened to be Chiara's philosophy teacher, had never really understood the girl's illness and would often make fun of her during his lessons. He found Chiara's behaviour, which was always food related, unacceptable.

-165-

Chiara was of course driven by her usual need that never left her: to eat! And so there she was, sitting at the back of the class furtively grabbing a biscuit, a snack, a piece of bread and stuffing it into her mouth in the middle of the lesson.

"You can do nothing but eat!" was her teacher's recurrent remark, always followed by her classmates' laughter, a forced tribute to the wit of the one in charge.

Her teacher saw Chiara's behaviour as the childish whims of a spoiled girl.

When Chiara complained to her parents about the way she was treated there followed an exchange of heated points of view which only made things worse.

But in spite of it all, it was agreed that Chiara could take off all the time she needed for her treatment as long as she came back to school a month or so before her exams. And so Chiara left with no undue worry.

But a surprise awaited her on her return.

When she went back to school following her exhausting non-treatment, she was told she could not take her exams because she had missed too many lessons.

-166-

Having the burden of school behind her would have been a godsend to Chiara, she longed to be able to focus all her energy and attention on the task of fighting her illness.

But it was not to be.

In spite of furious rows and threats of formal complaints, Chiara had to repeat her last school year, one more problem in an existence marred by ill-blowing winds.

The description of this school misadventure could lead the reader to pity Chiara as someone who's had the worst luck in the world.

But my reason for writing of it is to make the reader think.

Think about all those who make light of young people's problems, illnesses and traumas, even when they are less serious ones than those experienced by Chiara. Why should a principal, a headmaster or a teacher have the right to ridicule a pupil?

I'm not going to preach, because it would take me into a field that isn't the one I've chosen to cultivate and besides the frock and the pulpit are not suited to me...

But if this book were ever read by a teacher (be it a school teacher, a university teacher or even a dance teacher!)

-167-

I hope it will give him/her something to think about.

Dear teachers, please always try to be aware of what kind of education you are giving your pupils. It isn't just about a strict adherence to the school syllabus. Yours is a role that can have great personal and human impact.

Often the young person sitting in front of your desk is experiencing circumstances you cannot begin to imagine, and if you do it's probably a much softer version of what's really going on.

What I'm trying to say is that a bit more compassion (even if not contemplated by your union agreement) could do wonders to answer the silent call for help of tomorrow's budding adults.

Just a small aside.

Enough said.

MIAMI

And now to make sure we lack for nothing let's talk about the exportation of the illness abroad.

I'll recount what Chiara did in Miami, the city visited by every Italian tourist who wants to enjoy the sun's warmth and the ocean's embrace.

Miami, the city of sun-tanned skin, shorts, hunks wearing Bermudas and breathtakingly beautiful Barbies!

This is the sweet fragrance of an American holiday.

-168-

Chiara went to live in the States in an umpteenth attempt to find a solution to her problem. It was her brother who suggested the move when the family had considered the possibility of sending Chiara to a commune.

"Come with me for a while, and if things don't work out you can enter a commune."

In spite of all the recent disappointments Chiara still believed that a change of scenery would do her good. Even after several failed attempts one often keeps on trying, hoping against hope to be finally dealt the winning hand.

And so Chiara found herself sitting on a plane to Florida, never realising that the passenger sitting next to her was her illness.

Miami and America are all about wide, open spaces and all things big. Very tall buildings of metal and glass were now stretching their shining embrace towards the incoming plane. Entering this new reality was wonderfully exciting.

Her brother Luca, as handsome as a Hollywood star in his white linen shirt and khaki trousers, was waiting for her at the airport.

With her blond hair and sun-tanned skin Chiara was a perfect match of the local model, she could easily be mistaken for one of them.

Brother and sister embraced and headed towards their flat while catching up on each other's latest news.

-169-

As they walked Chiara took in all her surroundings, which perfectly matched her idealised expectations. Gaudy shops framed very busy roads on which skilful roller skaters and cyclists whizzed by.

And what of the sun? Ah, her beloved sun seemed to be more full of energy than anywhere else. It was a festive yellow, rebirth yellow, vitality yellow.

But unfortunately these were just her usual illusions.

Illusions that made her feel euphoric; illusions representing her desperate need to think positively, illusions that would melt the moment she entered her first American bathroom.

Vomiting in the States isn't that exciting after all...

The acid and the blood taste the same as they do at home; despair on the other hand tastes a lot worse because of the added disappointment of having failed yet again.

Her dear brother Luca would often accompany her to the bathroom, always hoping this would be the last time. He would hold her tight while his trembling jaw revealed how worried he was about that bundle of bones he called sister.

-170-

Chiara spent her days following a methodical routine. She always got up at four in the morning when a sleepy Miami was still enveloped in dawn's dim light.

In the States there are supermarkets that stay open twenty-four hours a day so anyone can satisfy a sudden nocturnal craving without even having to queue at

the till. It was the ideal situation for someone like Chiara who got up so early to buy her drug undisturbed.

She would stealthily go down the stairs, heading towards the shelves laden with all kind of goodies; she would fill several shopping bags and return via the emergency stairs. She would then sit on the landing, take out all the food she had bought and start the slaughter.

She would devour everything with her usual greed.

When she had finished she would first check there was no one around, then she would gather all the empty plastic bags and proceed to fill them up again!

She would throw up until there was nothing left to throw up, pressing her stomach with harsh fingers.

Exhausted, sweaty, her eyes watering, she would hold on to the bags for the time it took her to recover, then she would throw them down the rubbish shoot one can find in any American block of flats.

-171-

I can still see her - poor child - her head inside the plastic bags as she utters horrible groans, her eyes stinging from her tears and...

the strain is so forceful that the mouth is no longer sufficient and stuff comes pouring out of her nose...

She would silently go back to her flat where her brother was still asleep and lie down on the bed pretending she had just woken up from a terrible nightmare. Late in the morning when the city was already bright under a healthy sun, Chiara would put on her roller skates and would whiz along the coastal roads blending perfectly with the local beauties; afterwards she would lie in the sun for hour after exhausting hour.

She was once again pray to her obsessive drive to burn as many calories as possible while ingesting as little food as possible and she was soon looking as skeletal and deathly pale as she had many times before.

Her stay in Miami turned out to be but a repeat of her illness-driven behaviour in different geographical locations.

America is America is America with all its daily facets; tears and laughter chasing after each other, giving birth to an overseas mythological world full of hopes, dreams and expectations.

Even someone walking in the shadow of Death can scoop up a few colourful notes from life's vast pentagram.

-173-

But one doesn't necessarily have to live in the States to hear the music. The melody is part of everyone's life, as it was of Chiara's life too.

During those drama-filled days the two siblings received the visit of a dear family friend, Simone, who had just arrived from Italy.

After a very warm welcome - seeing a friendly face in a foreign land is always cause for rejoicing - the three youngsters went for a tour around town. While out they suddenly decided to comply with the newcomer's longstanding wish to see the Universal movie studios in Orlando.

What a joyous adventure it turned out to be! It was a world filled with wonders where everything else took second place. Chiara and the two boys were enraptured by this fairytale come true, the trip still remains one of their fondest memories.

The moment she entered the gates Chiara caught sight of a building looking very much like 'Arnold's' in Happy Days. You still remember Chiara's passions for the fifties and sixties, don't you? Well, entering that building filled with 'ghosts' from those years gave her the feeling she would come face to face with Elvis Presley any minute now! A vintage juke-box blared out the rock-and-roll notes of base guitars while waitresses wearing check skirts enlivened the atmosphere dancing with their leather-clad, greasy-haired partners.

Outside a show was about to begin and the three of them hurried to get some seats, squeezing between their contemporaries wearing the same clothes their parents wore when they were young.

Chiara wore a grey T-shirt with a stylized Mickey Mouse over black jeans and a rucksack: the perfect modern girl outfit. Her skin had the sun-tanned look imposed by the Florida sun and she looked quite out of place among that homogeneous rendering of times past.

She immediately realised that the concert she was about to hear would be a medley of all the tunes that had accompanied her difficult growing up years, the much-loved songs that had often given her comfort and strength.

The seats were rapidly filling up as the notes that had given birth to modern rock music had the lion share.

Suddenly the band's leader stopped playing. He looked around smiling and told the audience he needed a girl for the show to go on.

Everyone reacted as pupils do when the teacher announces one of them is going to be tested, they all looked elsewhere sporting an air of nonchalance they didn't really feel!

-175-

The young man came down from the stage with the typical gait of many a movie Teddy boy, smoothing down his hair at the temples he stopped in front of Chiara and gently stretched out his hand.

Trembling, she accepted the invitation and was led to where everyone could see her... the stage.

Meanwhile Simone and Luca were elbowing each other's ribs, sniggering at the victim.

Reaching for the microphone, the Elvis look-alike asked Chiara her name she hesitated, as if she had been asked a question about quantum physics, than whispered her answer.

The moment the word left her lips the music's deafening melodious beat filled the air once more. They were playing the well-known 'Oh, Carol', which on this occasion had become 'Oh Chiara, to a very romantic choreography.

Among all the girls he could choose from, some of whom were stunning beauties, he had chosen her.

The magic lasted the space of one song, ending with a round of smiles and applause, yet it painted Chiara's day with the colours of life, of sunshine, of long forgotten feelings.

-175-

PERUGIA (a page from my diary)

*Dear SUN diary another year of my life has gone down the drain or should I say down the toilet
I'm so angry*

today saw the end of my Perugia experience

*I would like to run it by you because I can find no redeeming quality in it all
it all began exactly 365 days ago*

Anna

*a dear friend of ours had told us she knew some smart psychologists over there
considering how desperate we were we decided to go and meet them
off we went to Perugia*

we had an interview with the two of them a husband and wife team

*they told us I should find myself a flat nearby then I could start an almost daily treatment
the aim was for me to spend time away from my family and its habitual patterns
what were we to do?*

like many before them they too promised a full recovery

I'm so fed up of always feeling sick and the other three members of my family would do

-176-

anything to see me get well

therefore we immediately found a flat close to the train station

mum helped me make it more welcoming

but from the very start she had her doubts about the outcome

it turned out she was right

the apartment was such a poor choice

there was a supermarket only yards away and a fast food practically on my door step

*you can't begin to imagine the smells wafting up to me even though I was on the seventh floor
come to think of it I had moved to chocolate city (because of the annual Chocolate Fair)*

*not a bad partnership
chocolate and bulimia.
I started my treatment every day at 8.00
I tried more than once to get a later appointment that wouldn't leave me free to eat my way
through the rest of the day
but the therapists said it had to be done this way
tough luck
and so I ate like crazy
non-stop
really non-stop
the more you binge the more you want to binge
it's a well known fact*

-177-

*the stomach dilates and immediately asks to be filled up again
I had reached such levels of craving I found even the hourly therapy too much to bear
I lost count of the times I skipped it
and they knew perfectly well I was all on my own in a flat close by
yet they never came looking for me
they were undoubtedly very professional
but not at all humane
in the carrying out of a job in which humanity and sympathy are everything
I was despair made woman submerged under piles of once full food containers I had emptied
in my need to fill myself
those therapist didn't teach me anything of value
I only learned how to feel even worse
because I was at the mercy of circumstances
of my sudden impulses
with no guiding rules
no one's affection to support me
I lost count of the times I called my mother in a fit of despair
often when I had finished eating I couldn't throw up
and my stomach felt so taugh I could hardly breathe
so I would call mum hoping she would say the right word that could make me feel better*

-178-

*I had no respect for anything
I would mix all kinds of foods together
everything in one bowl
sauces
pasta
bread*

*bottles of oil
butter
all together
there are burn marks all over the cooking corner
and there are burn marks on my hands too
as you know
when I'm under the effect of my food anaesthetic
I can't feel a thing
no emotions
no pain
on one occasion I saw my hand lying on the stove but never felt a thing
how much lower can one stoop
and the more I ate the more I needed to eat
the more blood I threw up the more I needed to throw up
curse me for being so crazy*

in the meantime I made friends with a girl who owns a jewellery shop in the town centre

-180-

*I worked in the shop for a while but it was just a momentary sham
that lead me to hope I could give up my drug
but I didn't
I failed yet again and squandered my parent's money
I can't bear to think about my little flat and the state I turned it into
papers
crumbs
grease stains everywhere
how disgusting
it took me hours to clean up everything
I was under the delusion that cleaning everything up could in some way stop the next impulse
it was like cleaning the filth inside me
I was projecting my inner darkness onto the outside world
a darkness that has been with me for far too long
you dear diary know all the stages
you know it all
you know about all the treatments I subjected myself to
about the long days spent in this or that clinic
you know about the family therapies with the four of us all together
do you remember the one in Milan?
the one where we were being filmed by a camera
whilst our conversations were being recorded*

-180-

*on tape?
there were several therapists
some were behind a mirror with their camera
and one of them was in the room with us to get the conversation going
we tried so many things
all sorts
things based on religion
things based on traditional medicine
and on alternative medicine
and prayers too
maybe we should give up
maybe those doctors
of so long ago
were right
maybe I'll never see the light at the end of this dark tunnel
no sunshine for me
just me and my food and my vomit
only a foul smell and regret for the what I am
I hate everything about me
I hate my utter lack of character
I'm strong only when it comes to evil of which I am a master
why do I hate myself so much I'm willing to do anything to wipe out my life?
I've been dead for several years now
true I had some traumatic experiences*

-181-

*but let's face it
I still had it good compared with other people
people who have had real misfortunes
you know
the ones you read about in the papers
well they don't all end up anorexic or bulimic as a result
I did though
I have to drag along this deadly burden that has no intention of letting me die
and what about those people born with a handicap
or those youngster who prematurely loose their parents
most of them are able to react to their pain
they suffer
but they react
I didn't
I couldn't cope
I fell into the abyss*

*which just confirms what I read once in a psychology book
we each have a different degree of sensibility and we react to outside events accordingly
I broke my back carrying all those heavy shopping bags
and looking back all I see is a desperate girl
who has become the major shareholder of many a supermarket
I can understand the truth of the above statement on an intellectual level
but it doesn't*

-182-

*make me feel any better
in spite of it all I could have had a really good life
and instead here I am praying to Heaven to take back its gift
I pray to God even more fervently now
I beg Him to take my life
my cursed life
I know it's a mortal sin to curse one's own existence
but I can bear it no longer
I leave behind me a trail of failure and destruction
I'm alone in a hell on earth
I read something the other day that left me speechless
do you know what happens when you binge?
it's unbelievable
you actually have a physical orgasm
do you realise what the head is capable of?
it's a well know thing
that food and sex are closely linked and share a common meaning
I find in food the fulfilment I can't get in life
it's become a substitute for everything
do you know what I do when I haven't got any money?
I walk around the supermarket for hours on end
eating without anyone noticing
you know how canny I can be when I need*

-183-

*my fix
I push my trolley along
and all the while I eat as much as I can
bulimia and I are but one inseparable thing
maybe it's all I have
maybe I have nothing else
bulimia and manic depression go hand in hand now
and proceed to do all they can to make my life miserable*

*the glands under my ears are about to burst the pain is unbearable
when I look at myself in the mirror I see some monstrous special effect
I have a double chin
it's so painful and I'm so ugly
but I no longer care about my looks
it doesn't really matter I only want some peace
at first it was all so nice and easy
everything was under control
I kept telling myself I could stop whenever I chose to
but in the end I couldn't
this destructive game has prevailed over me and is now the boss
maybe I have a screw loose
maybe I really am crazy
so many maybes
so many ifs
I'm so tired*

-185-

*I really am
I feel my life force is abandoning me
why keep on fighting?
why delude myself and my family that we can wipe out this evil?
I'm sorry dear diary
I needed to tell you all of this
because Perugia has left so many scars
I bet you didn't understand half of my scattered ramblings
never mind
what's important is that I got it all out of my system
the way I do with all the food I eat
you have no idea the amount of food I ate during this blood-filled year
more eating
vomiting
laxatives
diuretics
and very long walks
the scales say I'm very slim now
about forty kilograms
and I have to believe it
it's undoubtedly more objective than me
I stopped being objective ages ago
I'm still hoping I'll soon find the strength to fight
because right now I'm giving in to death
I hope and I want to*

-185-

*so maybe I can still find the good little Chiara within
dear diary
hope with me
pray with me*

THE COMMUNE

The last stay away from home was another failure and once again it took Chiara to the extreme limit.

She had spent some time living on her own because of her constant rows with the family, and one can easily imagine how the illness must have deteriorated during that time.

Blinded by her need for food Chiara had incurred huge debts and had gone as far as stealing money from her family whenever she visited them.

It was during this period that a psychiatrist materialised in Chiara's life. Doctor Angelo Vallesi's name had been put forth by an aunt and the interview Chiara had with him was in no way different than the dozen she had already had.

I couldn't really say why she chose to meet him, considering she was already being treated by an esteemed female doctor, but she did.

It was probably despair that drove her to keep on searching, to keep on fighting for the wraith-like souls still surviving inside her.

-187-

That same despair had led Chiara to avoid daylight.

She would shut herself in her home, closing all the blinds and sinking into the shadows, her only window to the outside world her computer screen connected to the net.

She would write one suicide note after another. Although filled with despair these words gave her some relief, because writing them down strengthened her conviction it would soon be all over.

Illusions. Nothing but illusions. She knew perfectly well she would never be able to take her own life and she often cursed her lack of guts.

The meeting with doctor Vallesi brought her face to face with a likeable, gentle looking man with kind eyes who immediately got down to the facts about his therapy.

After a careful analysis they all agreed that Chiara should enter a commune targeting people with addictions even though the test showed that her abnormal weight gain was due in part to a thyroid disorder.

The first stage of the doctor's treatment involved a therapeutic procedure called M14, a complete 'cleansing' of the body by way of a three day cycle of drip injected drugs which would bring back to normal many of Chiara's blood values before she entered the commune.

-188-

Chiara travelled north to the nursing home, hospital, commune, call it what you will.

She chose such a far away place out of reserve and out of love for her family, she wanted to avoid any kind of rumours or gossip. She left with a hormonal disorder at its peak (which gifted her with a thirty kilograms gain in about forty days!) and a feeling of foreboding about what she was letting herself into.

Unfortunately the only way of finding out what went on behind those walls was to live inside them.

Upon entering the imposing grey building Chiara was taken to a room where a board of several people was waiting to draw the newcomer's profile.

She was submerged under a deluge of questions aimed at verifying, amongst other things, how motivated she was to get well. After an exhausting hour-long interview she was introduced to her tutor.

The tutor is a common figure in many of these communes. He or she is actually one of the patients, close to recovery, who has to look after the newcomer's needs.

After a close examination of her profile and of the tests showing her hormonal

-188-

disorder, Chiara was put on a special diet which only worsened her already fragile emotional equilibrium.

Try to imagine how this poor ill girl - riddled with all kinds of destabilizing psychological problems, away from home, alone, and now deprived of her greatest love: food - must have felt. Try to imagine her loneliness. Put yourself in her shoes and listen. Listen with your heart, not with your mind. Listen to her true story and whenever you are faced with one of life's irritating annoyances instead of complaining remember that somewhere out there another Chiara is fighting a lonely battle to survive.

Chiara's uneasiness emerged during the first few days, as soon as she was confronted with the commune's strict disciplinary rules, which consisted mostly of humiliating punishments for anyone caught in the act.

The method I find the most asinine, and I'm not making this up, was called 'CALL TO ORDER', a sort of military report that required the *transgressor* to present himself to a staff committee. Here, after a plethora of gratuitous insults aimed - so they said - at shaking him out of it, he was *advised* not to repeat his mistake.

At the end of this pleasant and constructive exchange the 'criminal' was sentenced to a series of exemplary punishments, like washing the dishes and cleaning the kitchen, or the toilets. These had to be done under the supervision of a staff sergeant-nurse whose noble task was to remind the offender that he was the dregs of society.

Admittedly the word *lager* describes a place where death means something quite different, but this place comes pretty close to the description. Many of the commune's inmates lived in an atmosphere of terror which was further amplified by their psychological problems.

Another of the commune's strict rules was that the patients were not allowed to receive any mail that could upset, positively or negatively, their equilibrium.

One day Chiara was caught crying as she read a beautiful letter written to her by a very dear friend.

Her friend's moving words together with her incessant longing for home brought tears to her eyes, which unfortunately cost her the right to receive any more letters.

Caught in the spirals of a cruel nightmare, Chiara felt more and more lonely, her only moments of friendly contact the twice weekly visits from doctor Vallesi.

The doctor soon realised that the commune wasn't suited to Chiara's needs, she would never get well there.

The commune's methodology had thrown Chiara into a well of fear mixed with indifference.

-191-

It's hard to describe her state of constant alienation from herself: she went from excessive emotionality to utter indifference.

...DRAWING TO AN END

There is Chiara now, sitting at her home computer surrounded by tributes to the sun and colourful collages, answering several e-mails as she does everyday of her now wonderful normal girl's life.

She is already dressed for her night out, but there are still some letters she must answer. One more letter and then...

Gone are those moments when everything felt like a prison in the dark ages of her existence.

She smiles a bitter yet satisfied smile as she recalls her past now, a source of hope for many girls.

Remember, Chiara.

Out of her past come images of the final battles that saw her victorious over her illness.

Remember, Chiara...

Another fainting spell, but this time her parents' anguished words spark her anger and her will to react, to put an end to the suffering both hers and that of her loved ones.

-192-

Remember, Chiara...

...the psychological exercises that helped her overcome her problem, like setting just one small goal at a time, or eating just a little bit more everyday, trying as hard as she could to keep it inside her without going crazy at the thought of having allowed food into her body, or beginning to identify food by its taste rather than by its calorie content.

Remember, Chiara...

...and she feels she finally has the strength to trigger that longed for *click* which has eluded her for so many years: that sudden strength born from within that lets you know you are going to make it. That strength that gives you the certainty that all you need to get out of the dark tunnel is already within you, not in the outside things you desperately search for as a way of distracting yourself.

Remember, Chiara...

... an unforgettable journey with her beloved father, who decides to take a long period of time off work just to be with her, thus making her feel that she really is important to him. That month in which her father dedicated himself completely to his daughter's well-being gave her a new impetus to reach her goal. A goal called Life, after years spent walking arm in arm with Death.

Chiara is now fighting a different battle as she digs into her past, because the girl

-193-

she is now writing to is about to face the same terrible experience of life in a commune.

Chiara is writing.

She'll go out later...

She remembers the excitement of packing her things, ready to leave her commune. She remembers perfectly well how the commune's director objected to her leaving because having a bulimic in an institution which only took in drug addicts was something to boast about.

Chiara is writing...

She remembers all the pain contained by those cold walls, inside which youngsters who were there to avoid prison would exchange place with other youngsters who preferred prison to staying there.

She remembers the faces of girls who were not allowed to grow their hair, or make themselves more attractive.

Chiara is writing... and as she does she is giving of herself...

She remember the therapy's last stage and doctor Vallesi's face as he told her the time had come for her to live in her new home, not far from her home town; the home that would witness her last steps towards her goal.

Many thank, dear doctor, together we made it!

Chiara is writing... she is giving of her self... she is gifting sun beams...

She remembers how she earned her living during this period by selling insurance policies,

-194-

she smiles as she sees herself offering her policies, a world miles apart from her present reality.

She remembers all the past fourteen years, fourteen years of her life spent fighting against Death. She remembers her new state of mind, the felt sense that she was nearing her goal; this is when you raise yourself on your pedals, the crowd is cheering you on and you want to push down hard on those pedals to go faster, to get the trophy: a wonderfully normal Life

Chiara is writing...her testimony is one of hope, the same hope that shines through her web pages.

She also remembers the last relapses before the complete recovery, the last flicks of the tail of a wounded animal close to death, a *beast* with a cursed name.

Flicks of the tail reminding her of her illness' legacy.

Part of her teeth corroded by the excess acid.

Digestive problems, especially during the few months following her recovery.

A slow metabolism.

Weakened saliva glands.

Lots of scars.

Feeling inferior to her contemporaries for a while, because she spent fourteen years fighting instead of growing.

This is the price she had to pay to become the Chiara she is today:

-195-

not someone with fourteen years less than her real age, but rather someone with fourteen years of added experience

Chiara is writing... and the love she feels for those she's helping is proof that this is her mission.

Chiara has declared war against Anorexia and Bulimia.

This is her purpose now. To snatch as many girls as she possibly can out of the claws of that heinous Demon called Death.

Her words have brought hope. And she will go on doing it.

The ticking of the keys has stopped now, Chiara fiddles with the mouse and sends her e-mail.

She gets up, twirls round and switches off the stereo, inseparable companion of past and future battles.

She blows out the incense sticks which are diffusing spirals of oriental smoke in the air and heads towards the bathroom for a final touch before going out.

She comes in...

And looks at *me*.

Straight in the eyes.

She likes what she sees.

She smiles, I smile back.

She gets closer, she wants to kiss *me*.

Her face gets closer to mine.

We half close our eyes.

I can feel her touch as cold as a glass blade

-196-

then as I open my eyes I can see right in the middle of the mirror the red outline of her lips, wings of passion soaring towards the sky.

EPILOGUE

On a lethargic afternoon.

One of those afternoons when there's nothing on TV and a cold late winter wind makes the outside world uninviting.

There was a fair a couple of days ago and while strolling among the stalls, the amusements and the candy floss stands I suddenly recalled my ladybird.

It happened at another fair, a long time ago.

The noise from the street vendors glided along the streets like the swarming of joyous ants, attracting children, adults and a few stray dogs wanting to be stroked.

There were wares aplenty and just as many vendors ready to sell their soul in an effort to convince you of their product's indispensability.

Those were carefree days.

A serene, almost happy time.

Having sated my eyes with all kinds of wonders along the way I was asked what I wanted.

I looked around and noticed - it was love at first sight - a red helium balloon looking like a ladybird with a likeable expression.

-197-

Its curved back was strewn with a multitude of black dots.

"I want that one" I said without hesitation, eyes shining.

Feeling proud of my gift, I stopped looking around eager to show my new friend her (to me it was a her) new home.

I marched home, between streams of people, like a colonel reviewing his troops with the airborne little creature tied to my wrist.

I finally got home and without even taking my coat off I took the balloon to see my room and meet the other roommates: the teddy bear, the dolls, an antique porcelain carillon and all the other nick-nacks which made up my world.

Having gone through the introduction ceremony I showed the rest of the house to the ladybird before anchoring her to a chair in the dining room from which she could watch us eat.

I loved my flying ladybird.

We spent the whole evening chatting together.

I told her about my school ups and downs and about my friends, she told me about her countless flights around the world in search of new places to explore.

We fell asleep together that night.

The following morning Ladybird woke me up ahead of time

-198-

she almost made me jump, hovering tall and proud at the top of the string tied to my bed!

We had breakfast together, she watched me get dressed and then I said goodbye and left for school.

When I came back in the afternoon she was there waiting for me.

I gave her a close look. She looked a bit listless.

But we nonetheless played together for the rest of the day, she flying about with her floating body carrying with it my flights of fancy.

We said goodnight at bedtime and I embraced her again the next morning, but she felt tired and deflated in my arms. I asked her what was going on, whether she felt sick, but she didn't answer. She just wished me a nice day and told me to pay attention to the lessons. I remember I felt a bit worried, but as soon as I reached school my worries dissolved.

Back home, though, I discovered she had grown old, a wrinkled Ladybird still full of colour, but with no sparkle in her eyes.

She didn't greet me at first, only after I had called her name several times.

I stretched out my hand to caress her and she felt cold and yielding like the skin of a dead person.

I blew some air in her direction and she began to fly, forcing a smile.

She pretended to be happy in order to amuse me and make me happy for one more day.

When evening came I saw that Lady bird was exhausted from all that flying

-199-

so we went to bed early. I pulled her by the string and drawing her close I kissed her on the tip of her nose.

I couldn't understand what the problem was, but I had the anguished feeling she wasn't well, she wasn't her usual self.

With these thoughts heavy on my mind I fell into a restless sleep and in the morning I still found her looking down at me, but she was even more wrinkled than the night before.

I would have liked to take her to school with me so we could spend more time together, but I was not allowed to and all I could do was think about her the whole morning.

As soon as the school bell rang that afternoon I sprinted home.

I found Ladybird looking peaceful, like someone who has nothing to loose. We looked at each other.

She smiled.

I started to cry, feeling sure no one would understand, convinced I understood the ways of the world.

Ladybird was much worse, a deflated coloured cover wrapped around a dying gaseous soul.

My heart heavy with grief, I realised she was nearing her end. She had given me some unique, magical moments in which my fantasy was allowed to soar, the most precious moments one can have...

The time had come to do something for her.

I untied her from the bed and took her for one last tour of the house.

-200-

Ladybird said goodbye to my dolls made of immortal plastic, to the long-lived felt animals, to the carillon to whose notes she had danced floating in my room's sky. Then she winked at me and fell asleep.

I ran to the entrance hall and put on my coat, it was very cold outside.

I grabbed Ladybird by her string and dragged her along up the stairs to the top floor.

One flight.

Then another.

Until we reached the roof terrace.

I opened the door wide and we were slapped by the icy north wind blowing towards the shimmering golden sea.

I looked at Ladybird again.

She was still asleep, floating in mid-air as if unwilling to give up.

A tear flowed down my cheek leaving an icy trail.

"Have a safe journey, dear friend..."

I opened the hand holding the string and let her free.

Ladybird swivelled round once, then once more, at the mercy of the wind that was now her dancing partner.

Suddenly, as if regaining the strength she had the day we became friends, she zoomed angrily upwards and began to ascend.

She opened her eyes, looked at me with unbelieving enthusiasm, and smiled. "Farewell!" I shouted.

She answered with the most hopeful greeting there is: "See you soon..."

And she began ascending again, dancing with the wind, a small dot rushing towards the sea, bursting with that same passion for life she once had.

That greeting was a promise, an invitation to keep on flying by her side, to keep on looking for her in my happier dreams, an invitation not to give up. Because you can always chance upon a gust of wind that will sweep you up, sparking your desire to keep on going.

Chiara and Ladybird have much in common.

Her life was deflating like a balloon and the doctors who were treating her had already said their 'goodbyes'.

But she had always answered 'See you soon'.

And she kept on flying...

CHIARA'S WORDS

Writing this book has been quite an adventure.

The people close to me, those who have always known me, ask me how come I decided to relive all those painful years.

"You are finally feeling well, why go through all that pain again?"

There is but one answer.

I won my battle against the illness, but there are many people who are presently living what is now my past. It is my heartfelt hope that my testimony will help those who are ill to feel understood.

Quite often one's line of reasoning during the illness is 'crazy-making' and one feels like some kind of alien. This is a devious, paradoxical illness with its very own 'rationality', incomprehensible to an outsider.

My aim is to give the people who read the book some comfort, make them feel that someone knows what they are going through and at the same time strengthen their hope and their resolve to keep on fighting.

I chose to write about some very personal and intimate episodes in my life, because I believe it wouldn't otherwise be possible for me to claim one can recover from this illness.

I'm sure you realise this wasn't easy. Knowing that these episodes would soon be in the

-203-

public domain was painful, it brought up the usual worry: "What will people say?" But it no longer matters. It's all right!

Now, as David says, mine is no longer a lone private battle, through my experience I'm trying (in my own small way) to win the war: doing my best to bring some comfort to those who are suffering.

I recovered, but I haven't forgotten those years.

This experience is now a part of me, it will stay with me forever and I want to benefit from it.

I can now talk about it with the clarity of mind of someone who's no longer emotionally involved in the bulimia problem. I can vividly recall the crazy dynamics of the situation and I hope that by describing them I can give all the people who are close to those suffering from this illness some understanding of the kind of hell it actually is.

I have seen and felt my parents' and my brother's suffering for many years. I have felt their despair. I saw in their eyes the devastating helplessness. And I suffered for them, because I could not give them the assurance that I would still be alive the following day.

I would like to tell those families who are now fighting against this illness to never lose hope, never relinquish their will to fight.

I had several fights with my parents and I felt very hostile towards them at times.

-204-

They never stopped loving me, but my perception of life was totally different. I wasn't able to acknowledge their signals. I probably misunderstood them, but following a careful self-analysis many things became much clearer.

I understood my mother.

I understood my father.

And so, in time, I was able to make peace with them.

And now with your permission I would like to tell you about something that happened to my family in 1989, the year my paternal grandmother died. I thought this would be the best time to talk about it.

It was an experience that left its mark on us all.

As they say, "These things happen!" but they leave behind a feeling of hurt and bitterness.

My family owned a company, our own little empire in the fashion business.

My father, with my mother's constant support, was a self-made man.

It took him many years of hard work and sacrifices.

And then one day because of a mixture of envy, malice and injustice we became the target of *someone's* deliberate plan to destroy us in order to take possession of my father's company.

Today that *someone* has an identity, made up of personal names and a trademark too.

Within the space of a few days we had lost everything. Years of hard work gone down the drain.

-205-

It was a tragedy within a tragedy. I saw my parents cry in despair as did my brother and myself.

I won't bore you with all the details, this isn't a suitable place, the purpose of this confidence is only to underline how the problems experienced by the adults can often have a devastating impact on their children.

I was fourteen years old at the time and was already ill, but that experience hurled me into the abyss. Witnessing and living through my parents' suffering was a torture both for myself and for my brother.

In the midst of adversity though, my father set an example for me: the day after the crash he grabbed his briefcase and invented a new job for himself. He began travelling around, always preserving that clarity of mind that the three of us, at the mercy of the negative events, had lost.

The two of us were very close and this forced separation made me feel very lonely. I wanted him to stay close to me and at the time I couldn't understand why this wasn't possible.

We made it through this painful experience and found ourselves sharing the greatest love there is, based on respect and esteem for each other, not without some difficulty though. We grew through our suffering.

But as you all know, pain can often turn to joy. Ours was to grow in forgiveness and in

-206-

love bringing us even closer.

I had the same experience with my illness. I am well now, but for a very long time I blamed myself believing I had thrown away fourteen years of my life.

Not so!

Those years are my riches.

They are my strength.

I'm a different person now, a person who has suffered and can now reap the benefits of that suffering.

I won't disown those fourteen years. I don't want to wipe them away, on the contrary I want to remember them in the hope they may be of help to those who are going through the same experience.

My heartfelt thanks go to my aunt Laura (my father's sister), a wonderful woman, bound to a wheelchair since the age of two. Such a kind-hearted person, I stayed at her place during some of the worst periods I ever experienced.

She was the one who suggested what has now become my motto:
EVERYTHING COMES AND EVERYTHING GOES.

Thank you dear auntie for all you have done for me, thank you for the countless chats, for the time you spent trying to make me see how wonderful life is, thank you for your constant support. I haven't forgotten, I'm holding those memories in my heart. I give thanks to Heaven for sending me an aunt like you.

But that's not all...

-207-

Thank you also to my wonderful brother Andrea for all his patience, especially during the first years of the illness. I'll never forget his loving care when he came with me to the bathroom and held my head as I threw up, or the long nights he spent trying to explain to me on which side goodness stood.

I adore you, Andrea, my love for you is boundless!

Please forgive me for spoiling those years that should have been carefree ones, years in which my illness robbed the whole household of its serenity.

And now to my strong point:, my parents Aldo and Carla.

First of all I want to thank them for what is their greatest gift to me... my very life. A life I cursed for years, but which is now very precious to me: thank you for that 16th of January 1975!

Dear parents, I'm saying this to you and to myself as well, no more guilty feelings, no more trying to ascertain who's responsible for things gone and done with.

-208-

I love you with all my heart and more and I thank you for all you gave to me and are still giving me today. I talk about guilty feelings because I still have them for all I made you go through, especially you dear mum. You were always there for me, in spite of it all.

Well, lets put an end to those feelings both you and I. We have all grown and matured through the love that binds us. I thank God every day for giving me parents like you.

This book marks the end of that painful chapter in my life. Thank you for giving me permission to write it and make our private affairs public. You really understood my reason for writing this book, thank you not only for not thwarting me, but most of all for being so supportive.

Oh, I'd better put the breaks on otherwise I could go on talking of my family forever, the love I feel for them could fill another book.

One last thing: I would like to assure my family that IT'S ALL OVER NOW, they know what I mean.

I would also like to thank David for his tenacity in trying to get into the illness' incomprehensible dynamics. He was very patient and showed a great sensibility

with regards to bulimia's problematic behaviour. I must confess we had some lively

-209-

discussions which occasionally turned into real rows. But it all turned out well in the end and this is the result of our work together.

Thank you, David De Filippi!

And now, dear boys and girls who are carrying on your back this rucksack full of pain, of helplessness, of guilt, this illness so heavy to carry, please don't despair: if you fall down you can always get up again.

I recall a phrase I once read in a Jim Morrison book when I was thirteen:

"No night is so dark it can prevent the sun from rising".

I leave you with a smile, hoping my story has been of some help and comfort.

This isn't a goodbye, but rather a see you soon and...

KEEP ON GOING, COME ON, HOLD YOUR HEAD HIGH!

with all 'my' SUN,

ChiaraSole Ciavatta

www.chiarasole.com

DAVID'S WORDS

Few readers ever bother to read the author's notes. That's why in this part of the book I'm using a more colloquial tone as though I were talking to a few remaining intimates.

I hope you won't mind.

Which would you say will be the question I'll be asked more frequently - after the book's publication - by friends, newspapers, relatives, readers (and by my next door neighbour who's such a busybody she simply couldn't miss a chance to investigate!)?

They'll all ask me what compelled me to write about subjects as painful and dramatic as anorexia and bulimia.

Let me explain...

Those familiar with my writing know I began as an ironic author, my first two books were conceived with a smile on my face. Then came a fictionalised biography, which my friend Walter and I had great fun writing, and lastly a love story full of passion and melancholy.

I had never tackled a context in which the word *Death* took on such painfully concrete meaning.

I met Chiara during the presentation of my last book, 'Villa Marazzo'

-211-

the meeting signalled the beginning of my next journey into the meanders of the mind (writing a book is this too).

She told me about her harrowing experience with anorexia first and then with bulimia, and together we decided to put these experiences on paper as a testimony of the illness' devastating effects.

We chose to describe these illnesses without using too many scientific terms so that everyone could understand.

We wanted to reach not only the people who are going through 'that tunnel' themselves, but also those who have a relative, a friend, an acquaintance who is suffering from the illness. And also anyone wanting to know more about a problem that is now becoming very widespread in our society.

I don't agree with those who label anorexia and bulimia as problems of a select group. During my journey I came across several people in the throes of the illness and I can assure you that their social rank had no bearing on what had befallen them.

This is why I decided to embark on such a difficult journey: I wanted to give voice to someone who, like Chiara, was able to draw from her experience and help others who

-212-

are now in the same situation. To someone who won her battle against the illness. I wish to thank her for the opportunity she gave me by accompanying me on the journey.

The many short chapters were meant to show how erratic the memory of those who have been through this hell is.

We didn't want (and it wouldn't have been easy anyway) the story to follow a chronological order, because the events make up a life thread that resembles a dream, they all took place, but one never knows in what order.

...And we inserted some real diary pages, little dreamlike flashes, thoughts extrapolated from states of delirious suffering.

I sincerely hope that this book has successfully gifted some of my readers with the thing they need most if they want to defeat the illness: the hope they can recover, the trust in their ability to make it, the conviction that they will make it!

A smile.

See you soon...

David De Filippi

www.daviddefilippi.it

INDEX

| | |
|--|-----|
| TALKING ABOUT HER | 9 |
| ALMOST THIRTY YEARS AGO | 11 |
| FOURTEEN YEARS | 12 |
| A JOURNEY DOWN MEMORY LANE | 13 |
| A STRONG CHARACTER | 17 |
| EASTER | 17 |
| THE BASIS OF THE ILLNESS | 22 |
| A TASTE OF A DIFFICULT CHARACTER | 24 |
| APPEARANCES | 29 |
| MY FRIEND THE TV | 30 |
| CHIARA'S CONDITION | 32 |
| THE DIETICIAN | 34 |
| THE FOLLOWING SESSION | 38 |
| THE BEGINNING | 39 |
| LOSING WHEIGHT | 41 |
| ANOREXIA | 43 |
| A FAINTING SPELL | 44 |
| PALYING THINGS DOWN | 46 |
| GAMES, SMILES AND MEMORIES | 47 |
| YOUNG LOVE | 50 |
| THE CONFIRMATION | 52 |
| A SNOWY DEATH | 56 |
| EXPULSION | 60 |
| BINGEING - a page from my diary - | 70 |
| GROWING UP | 72 |
| GASTRITIS | 76 |
| AMENORRHOEA | 79 |
| SIDE EFFECTS | 84 |
| THE ILLNESS - a page from my diary - | 86 |
| BOLOGNA | 91 |
| KASSEL | 95 |
| THE RITUAL | 105 |
| EXTREME VIOLENCE | 109 |
| ABUSE | 115 |
| AGE EIGHTEEN: THE FIRST PALE SUNBEAM | 128 |
| HEADS OR TAILS | 131 |
| BETWEEN DREAM AND REALITY - a page from my diary - | 135 |
| THE CLINIC | 148 |
| SCHOOL DAYS | 165 |
| MIAMI | 168 |
| PERUGIA - a page from my diary - | 176 |
| THE COMMUNE | 186 |
| ...DRAWING TO AN END | 192 |
| EPILOGUE | 197 |
| CHIARA'S WORDS | 203 |
| DAVID'S WORDS | 211 |

note: 'Ossicione' is a game in which the two participants fight wildly trying to defeat each other by putting a forceful pressure on the lower back close to the sacrum bone. A careful pressure in that area would trigger in Chiara a fit of laughter similar to those triggered by intense tickling.

-215-

(inside cover)

CHIARA SOLE

This is Chiara's true story described in harshly realistic detail.

A fourteen year long merciless battle with anorexia (first) and bulimia (later).

The powerful and sometimes violent story of a girl who spent almost half her life fighting against two illnesses which have become widespread phenomena in today's society.

But when all seems lost and hope is about to give way to despair, there suddenly appears an unexpected breakthrough, as warm and dazzling as the first sunbeam.

This is a message of hope for those who are suffering from these illnesses: recovery is possible.

(inside back cover) David De Filippi's literary career was launched in spring of 2000 with the publication of his first book 'David, 27 years old...' (Di Salvo Editore) which he took to the Turin Book Fair later that year. In 2001 he published 'Topoj' (Di Salvo Editore) and 'One of You' (Idealibri), co-authored with goalkeeper Walter Zenga and presented at Pontremoli soon after the Premio Bancarella.

At the beginning of 2002 he published 'Villa Marazzo' (Idealibri) which was presented at Gradara by the journalist-writer Romano Battaglia. This last book won the National Cultural Prize 'Torre di Castruccio' for the year 2002.

Biographical hints:

ChiaraSole Ciavatta [@chiarasolems](https://www.instagram.com/chiarasolems), Founder of MondoSole, has been sick with anorexia, bulimia, binge eating, depression and other forms of dependence for over 14 years.

Her experience led her to remain active in social fields, to make her experience available to those who suffer, having known firsthand both strengths and weaknesses of many care methods.

After her recovery she started as a volunteer worker, and through the website chiarasole.it (now her official website is www.chiarasole.com/), she welcomes requests for help from all over Italy. In 2002 she trained as a social worker. In 2003 her autobiographical book was published, written together with David De Filippi: ChiaraSole: Anorexia and Bulimia: an experience of life and death. Foreword by Gianna Schelotto, Ed. Idealibri. Gruppo Rusconi.

Free download at chiarasole.com/ebook/ . She carries out a prevention and awareness activity on eating disorders through all forms of communication and attends many university and non-university conferences on the subject (read press review [rassegna-stampa-mondosole](http:// rassegna-stampa-mondosole)).

As a volunteer she welcomes many people affected by eating disorders and their families. She founded together with Dr. Matteo Mugnani the MondoSole Center and manages it with the collaboration of a clinical staff associazione-centro-mondosole for the treatment of anorexia-bulimia-binge eating. MondoSole carries out a care, rehabilitation and social reintegration service for people with eating disorders, the center offers a day-to-day job in collaboration with the families.

ChiaraSole is always present at the Center to offer concrete and constant support. ChiaraSole has been a lecturer in post-graduate specialization courses on eating disorders, addressed to doctors, psychologists and health professionals.

On May 20, 2008 Chiara Ciavatta (ChiaraSole) received the Milanodonna 2008 award for the “social communication” category for her commitment in recent years in the field of eating disorders.

Chiara is very active in fighting pro-Ana, pro-Mia groups, body-shaming sites, blogs and any other harmful phenomenon for those who suffer.

ChiaraSole is very active on social media, on many platforms, active since 2001 everywhere for those who know the labyrinth of these tragic pathologies: to continue to be there for those who suffer and feel invisible as she herself felt many years ago!

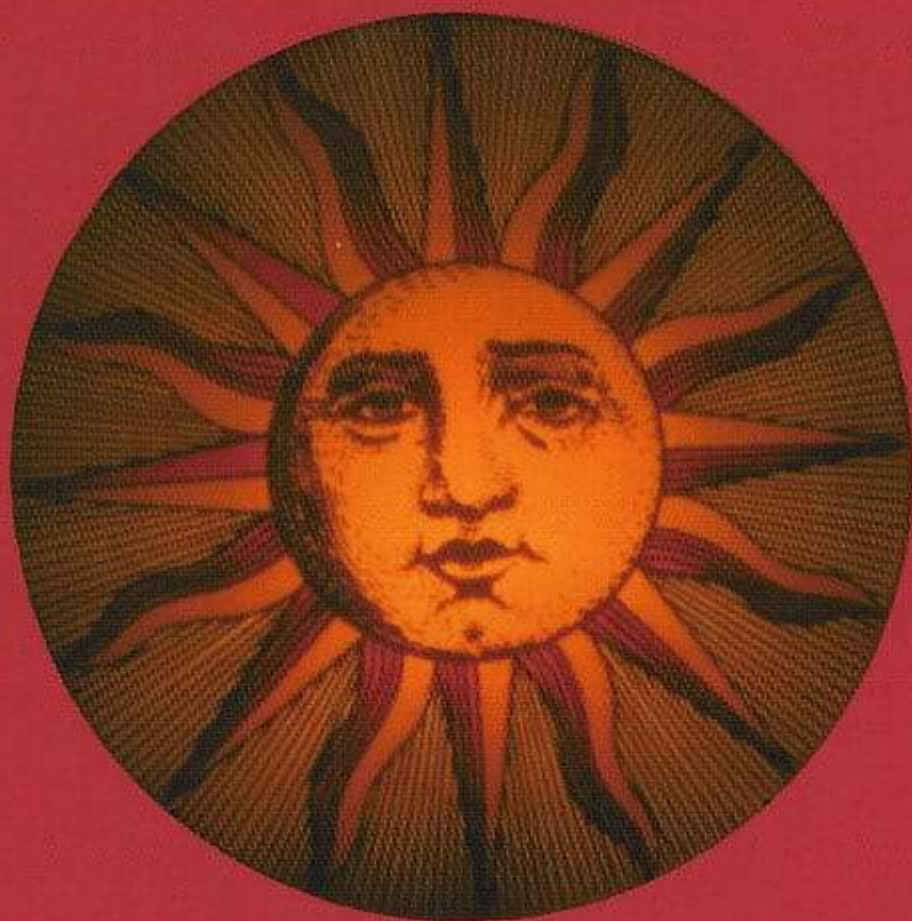
On February 2, 2018, Chiara's husband, [Matteo Mugnani](#), passed away after three long and exhausting years of a rare form of blood cancer.

On February 1, 2025, the President of the Republic, Sergio Mattarella, awarded, *motu proprio*, thirty-one honors of Merit of the Italian Republic to citizens who distinguished themselves. Chiara Ciavatta Knight of the Order of Merit of the Italian Republic (OMRI), "For the help offered to people and families who experience the very difficult problem of eating disorders".

Chiara, given the numerous requests for help received on her blog on the topic of eating disorders, has decided to dedicate herself daily, through the establishment of the MondoSole Center, to people who experience the effects of pathologies deriving from eating disorders on a daily basis.

26.02.2025 at 11:00 am at the Quirinale Palace “Ceremony of Award of the Honours of the Order of Merit of the Italian Republic conferred by the President of the Republic Sergio Mattarella, *motu proprio*, to Chiara Ciavatta”.

From the darkness of despair to the warm embrace of the rising sun...



Un inferno durato QUATTORDICI anni.
Dal buio della disperazione, al caldo abbraccio del
sorgere del sole...