

Migration Theory

1.

Once there was a girl who made a castle out of her own body. Inside the castle, she lived as a prisoner on the top floor, high up in the sky. She did a lot of thinking. Every day, she thought about only one thing: food. She thought about warm apple fritters, chocolate cake, and her grandma's whole-wheat bread. She thought about honey, drizzling off a spoon, into a dish of vanilla ice cream. She thought about pizza with fresh basil and mozzarella. Bagels with cream cheese and strawberry jam. Spaghetti.

In the castle, there was also a witch who guarded the entrance and hovered between the girl's thoughts. The witch told the girl, You can't have that. And for years, the girl believed her.

The girl's bones became bricks and her torso very long, like a column. Her hair thinned and she was cold. Always so cold. The witch liked nothing better than to stand before the girl, holding out forkfuls of food towards the girl's open mouth. You can't have that, the witch taunted. You can't have that.

The girl grew skinnier and skinnier, and some people in the real world started to notice. They cooked all of her favorite foods: blueberry muffins, hamburgers, French fries with ketchup. But by this time, the girl was so terrified of the witch that she would not eat one bite, lest the witch punish her. Instead, she ran. She ran up and down the spiralled staircase, up and down the hallways. Her parents and friends begged her: Please, stop running. You're disappearing before our eyes. Won't you leave this castle and the witch behind? They aren't even real.

But the girl could not stop.

2.

Two ancient parts of the brain, Cortex and Limbic, stand in front of a fridge full of food.

They look at containers of leftovers while they talk, occasionally closing the fridge door, opening it again.

Cortex: You can't have that.

Limbic: Maybe I could just smell it?

Cortex: You can smell it for five seconds, but no more. Because then you'll want to eat it.

Limbic: Okay. (Opens a container of leftover baked chicken with rosemary, inhaling deeply.) Oh, that's so good. Maybe just a nibble off the end?

Cortex: No. You won't be able to stop. You know that. Control yourself!

Limbic: Okay. (Closes the container. Sighs.)

Cortex: Remember your goals. No food until dinner.



Limbic: I remember the best dinner I ever had. I was eight years old. It was my birthday. My mom cooked hot dogs and I ate three! Packed with relish, mayonnaise, mustard. Chips on the side, and then a homemade strawberry shortcake. It was sweet and thick with icing, and I ate—

Cortex: Stop! Control yourself! Stop this immediately.

Limbic: I'm sorry. I'm such a fuck up. (Starts to cry.)

Cortex: You are so emotional.

Limbic: Maybe something from the back of the fridge? (Forages the containers.)

Cortex: If you eat something now, imagine how bad you'll feel later. You're too impulsive!

Limbic: God, my pulse is starting to race again. I can't breathe. Help me, I can't breathe and my skin is itchy. Oh god, oh god! I can't breathe! (Slams the fridge door.)

Cortex: You're just anxious. You wind yourself up too much. We should go for a walk.

Limbic: Yes! A walk. How about a run? Can we run?

Cortex: Even better. Get going.

Limbic: Then can I eat?

Cortex: Maybe a little. If you run more than you did yesterday.

Limbic: (Pulls on running shoes, races out the door.)

3.

You know the stereotypes: high achieving, controlling, vanity-stricken white girl. Also: anxious, people pleaser, obsessive compulsive. There have been many, many psycho-analytical theories. The wicked witch is nothing but your own psyche, nervosa, which causes you to will your appetite away. You're just a nervous, nail biting girl, locked up in your own bones, banging on the walls. Freud figured it out, long ago: you're melancholic with an underdeveloped sexuality, and this makes you so upset, you decide not to eat. In the seventies, theorists said no, it's a battle for autonomy and control. Or, for some unknown reason, you have a "morbid fear of fatness," and a longing to revert to prepubescence. Or maybe you developed it when you were a tiny baby. A theory in the late eighties proposed that your pre-Oedipal failure to separate and individuate from your mother is actually to blame. Let's not stop there. If you didn't cause it, then your family must have. Family theorists posited that you've been used in your family to maintain "pathological homeostasis." (Bad girl!) Or, you came from parents who were controlling, competitive, and likely going through a divorce. If not your family, then society: you're performing a hunger strike against your oppressive, sexually exploited culture. Or it's the pressures of the fashion industry. A striving to be thinner than the next girl, a compulsion towards socially acceptable narcissism that could claim your life.

None of this sounds quite right to you, at least not all of it, but what do you know? What do you know?

4.

We might look up our conditions on the internet, because we're self aware. We might find ourselves sitting in a doctor's office, a slip of paper sliding across the desk. We might read the words before

we crumple the paper in our fists: anorexic, bulimic, orthorexic, OCD, control freak, broken. And after that, a referral to the psychiatrist. They'll explain it to us, simple. (See above.) We are outliers, like troublesome weeds, but even more noxious, tangled up in our chaotic worlds. Seeking structure. Seeking the light.

Makes sense, right? No one was tending the garden at home, so we built our own bodies into nice, tidy flower beds. (Or castles.) We brought order to the chaos. We came to admire rock walls, trellises to train the wandering vines, and row planting. Yes, we'll say, that might be true. We do like perfect corners. We count our steps. We run on the same treadmill, everyday. We walk straight like soldiers, automatic and stiff, tracked by our Fitbits. We wake up at six in the morning, park our cars one-hundred steps away from the gym entrance. We ascend the stairclimber for thirty-seven minutes, going nowhere, sweat running down the sides of our face. We lift weights and watch our bones in the mirror. They are too big and not in the right places. We will workout more. We shower, lingering under the hottest water. We feel genetically modified, and our tears taste like petroleum. Something about this is artificial, we know that. We didn't mean to become this rigid, this ordained, but people seem to like it. They tell us, Beautiful! Strong! Inspirational! We spray a little pesticide onto anyone who reaches over to touch our frail, pale limbs. DON'T touch us. We are controlled-environment agriculture, now. Best left alone in order to function optimally. We are mostly left alone.

5.

There is a species of frog that lives in the Columbian rainforest. It has shiny yellow skin, showcasing its toxicity, warning predators: don't mess with me. Though only the size of a paper clip, the poisonous secretions of one golden frog can kill fifteen grown men. Such lethal power inside one little amphibian. Interestingly, when in captivity, the golden frog loses its toxicity, likely due to a change in diet. Like nature can turn a deadly switch on or off, depending on circumstance.

Could this happen to us, too? Do we also have a switch? And what triggers it? From the humid exhalations of those rainforests, does anyone else hear a murmur? Not the frogs, but words whispered from the buried mouths of our ancestors. If anyone else can hear it, maybe this is what they're trying to say: There is another theory. And it's best told in the form of a story, a fairy tale of sorts. You—you'll play the girl part.

Once upon a time, before princesses and princes, before castles and banquets, the earth was in a period called the Pleistocene epoch. North America was covered by extensive ice sheets and glaciers. The sea was lower; the air was dryer. Beasts roamed the barren landscape— mammoths, saber-toothed tigers, giant ground sloths. The primitive peoples sketched line drawings on cave walls, hunted with bone-tipped spears, and lived a nomadic lifestyle. They survived the harsh climate and recurring food scarcities by migrating.

Migrating?

Yes, dear. Moving from place to place.

What did I do?

You, my girl, were a great huntress.

Huntress?



You could run faster and further than anyone in your clan. You were known as “She Who Can Go Without.” When your family was hungry, their stomachs convulsing from the stabs of starvation, you felt nothing. When their legs were exhausted, and couldn’t take another step, you kept walking.

Where did I go? Did I leave them?

Yes, dear. You kept walking, and then you kept running, and you didn’t stop to eat the low hanging fruit. Those useless berries and withered grasses. You had a power that propelled you onwards, into the ice-rain that beat across your thin, determined face.

What was I looking for?

Food, of course. Real food. Food that you could bring back to feed your family. Wild rabbits, buffalo, deer.

Did I find it?

You did. And because of your great power, your ability to feel no hunger, to walk for miles without tiring, you were able to bring it back to your tribe, and you were celebrated as a great hero. Because of your adaptation to famine, they could feast.

Did I feast then, too?

Of course, dear. You filled your belly with the flesh of animal, with the seeds and tubers of the earth. And then you slept, and dreamt of warm fires, of a future that your own daughters might one day know—far, far away—little twin beds, flannel sheets, a fridge full of food and an oven to cook it all.

Would my daughters grow up to be powerful, too?

Well....

What’s wrong?

No one will ever tell them this story.

6.

She lunges across her living room, lunges into the bathroom, where she lies on her back.

The floor is freezing; her spine and sacrum dig into the hard tile. She counts. Fifty, one-hundred, one-hundred-fifty sit-ups. She checks her watch. It’s been twenty hours since she last ate—one apple, cut into sixteen pieces. Today, she will eat only eight pieces. She is your daughter, or maybe your mother. She’s your best friend, strapping three pound weights onto her wrists and ankles, layered in sweaters in the middle of summer. She’s on her fifth walk of the day. She’s your sister, or your cousin. She’s weighing her baked chicken, cutting her sweet potatoes into daily allotments. She’s smiling from her Instagram photos. Bikinis in Bali. Photo shoot! Another half marathon, for charity of course. You joke with her, Wish my addiction was exercise and green smoothies! You eat potato chips from the couch and watch her run out the door. She’s so healthy.

Or—she’s a he. He’s the twenty-nine year old guy at the gym, sticking earbuds in, looking at the floor, glancing backwards into the mirror. He’s lifting heavier and heavier weights. He’s cutting. He’s competing in a bodybuilding contest tomorrow. He’s fasting. He’s conditioning. You’re getting ripped, bro, the other guys tell him. He eats three pizzas alone at midnight, outside in the alley. Adrenaline crashes through his body like a storm swell; he shakes with guilt and fear. He shakes his bottle of

laxatives, shakes his head. Shakes his keys into the front door. At least he lives alone. No one needs to see this. Tomorrow, he will stand on stage, fake tanned under the yellow lights, contracting his biceps and the abdominals that chisel up his torso like mountain peaks. He will not win. The other guy, more ripped, eyes shining with conquest, will take home the glory. A golden trophy man, flexing.

7.

BREAKING NEWS. Recently, scientists pricked the fingertips of “She Who Can Go Without” — thousands of them. They put her blood beneath microscopes and focused in on the chromosomes of those great human hunters who roamed the earth nearly one-hundred-thousand years ago. They didn’t see an anxious teenager, hiding her lunch, or a judgemental mother, pinching her son’s stomach. They didn’t see a controlling father, demanding a straight spine and straight As. They didn’t see blue-eyed models smiling from glossy magazines, or emaciated young women walking on treadmills. They didn’t see notepads filled with handwritten graphs of calories in, calories out. They didn’t even see the starving saints from the Middle Ages, those devout mystics who prayed to be unshackled from the carnal appetites, who found satisfaction in feeling their hunger for God, and nothing else.

In the genome, they saw footprints leading into the forest, then across the tundra and the grasslands. They saw frozen terrain, an arid landscape, and a great famine. No food for miles. They saw adaptation. Our ancestors, battling for survival. They saw those who conserved their energy and waited, huddling in hides and growing colder, likely starving to death. And then there were those who could walk, and walk, and walk. Not even stopping to nibble on tree bark, lest the metabolism needed to digest it burn too much energy. She Who Can Go Without. She can walk, and walk, and walk, and forgo eating for days, and days, and days. She can keep going when everyone else needs to stop.

It looked like a fatal flaw, didn’t it? It can be, if not switched off. But when we trace footprints back in time, we find our ancestors behind us, walking for miles. Bare feet pounding the earth. Surviving. We are always surviving.

Can you feel it? That savage, unstoppable force called instinct. There She is, going without. There She is, walking to save your life.

8.

One day, a woman arrived on horseback to the courtyard of the girl’s castle. She had hair the color of fertile soil, warm freckled skin, and flushed cheeks. On her shoulder perched an enormous eagle with thick talons and bronze feathers. The woman looked up to the girl’s window, barred over with steel and cobwebs.

Girl! the woman called, I’m here to deliver you a hand-written letter from your oldest, greatest grandmother.

The woman lifted her arms up and the eagle pushed off from her shoulder, holding the letter in its beak. Girl! Come to your window! the woman commanded.

The eagle circled up, up, up, into the sky, into the thin air where the girl stood, her cold hands outstretched through the bars.



Quick, the girl whispered to the eagle. There's a witch and she will be back soon. She will be very angry to see you.

The girl took the letter from the eagle. She sat on her bed. Way up on the top floor of the castle that she made with her own body. The hooves of the woman's horse stomped on the ground, down below. The girl opened the letter.

A map.

A map stretching across all the oceans. Oceans that have washed in and out for five billion years. A map plotting genetic codes like individual footprints in the sand. A map connecting this girl's life to her oldest, greatest grandmother as she walked for days, migrating to find food. The girl traced her fingers across the paper; she started to shake.

You Are Here, the map said, stamped in red ink. She Who Can Go Without. The girl leapt from the floor and looked out the window. The woman on horseback was calling up to her. There's no witch! the woman cried. She's just your prefrontal cortex, putting a spell on you. She will tell you all kinds of things. She's just trying to make sense of everything, too.

The castle dissolved like a sugar cube on her tongue and the girl floated back down to earth, landing with bare feet on the ground. Her castle was gone, and she was just a girl again, made of blood and bones and connective tissue. Limbic and cortex, impulse and thought. Her stomach growled.

Come, the woman said, lifting the girl to sit beside her on the horse. The eagle flew in front of them, leading the way into the forest, along a well-worn path.

It's time to go home, the woman said. There's a feast prepared for you. Everyone is waiting.

Acknowledgements: Many thanks to Dr. Shan Guisinger, PhD, for her work and research in "Adapted to Famine Theory", and to Tabitha Farrar, from whom the author first heard the term "Migration Theory" — an evolutionary explanation for restrictive eating disorders.