Chapter One: The Hunger Artists

Hunger is a country we enter every day, like a commuter across a friendly border. We wake up hungry. We endure that for a matter of minutes before we break our fast. Later we may skip lunch and miss dinner. We may not eat for religious reasons. We may not eat before surgery. We may go on a three-day fast to cleanse ourselves of toxins and boredom. We may go on a longer fast to imitate Christ in the desert—or to lose weight. We may go on a hunger strike. If we are lost at sea, if we have lost our job, if we are at war, we may not be hungry by choice.

Our body is a circle of messages: communication, feedback, updates. Hunger and satiety are the most basic of these. Every day, we learn more about how this system works. We know what hormones run through the blood screaming, “Eat!” We know which ones follow murmuring, “Enough.” We know that it is relatively easy to repress the signal for enough. A gene malfunctions, and a three-year-old girl weighs one hundred pounds: her body does not tell her when to stop eating. That signal is complexly influenced by genetics, chemistry, and culture. For many of us, it has become blurred. Our body doesn’t give us the news or doesn’t give it with enough emphasis.

The signal for hunger is much harder to turn off. We are omnivores with an over-sized brain that requires a lot of energy. We are not specialized in how we get our food. Instead, we are always willing, always alert, always ready with a rock or digging stick. We are happy to snack all day long. We are particularly drawn to the high-caloric bit of fat around the deer's kidney and the sweet taste of berries. Our love of fat and sugar has been associated with the same chemical responses that underlie our addictions to alcohol and drugs; this cycle of addiction may have developed as a way to encourage eating behavior. We hunger easily, we find food, we get a chemical reward. Then we’re hungry again. That’s good because the next time we look for food, we may not find it. Better keep eating while you can.

Human beings evolved for a bad day of hunting, a bad week of hunting, a bad crop, a bad year of crops. We were hungry even in that first Garden of Eden, what some anthropologists call the "Paleoterrific," a world full of large animals and relatively few people. Paleolithic bones and teeth occasionally show an unnatural pause in growth, a sign of food shortage. Our diet didn’t get better as our population grew and the big-game species died out. In the Mesolithic, we foraged more intensively for plants and hunted smaller game with new tools like nets and snares. In the Neolithic, we invented agriculture, which sparked the rise of cities. There is no evidence that any of these changes reduced the odds of starvation or malnutrition. A more common trend seems to be that small-game hunters were shorter and less nourished than their Paleolithic ancestors, farmers less healthy than hunters-and-gatherers, and city-dwellers less robust than farmers. We just kept getting hungrier.

It's no wonder we are programmed to pound the table and demand dinner. The exceptions to this are usually extreme: infection, disease, a terminal illness. For most of us, at regular times, the body shouts, “Feed me, damn it!” Deprived, the body sulks. The body exacts its petty revenge. Finally, with extraordinary cunning, and with something that approaches grace, the body turns to the business of the day, beginning what scientists call “the metabolic gymnastics” by which it can survive without food.

If you are a healthy, well-nourished man or woman, you can live this way for sixty days. You can live much longer if you have more fat to break down. The rhythms of your life will change: your heartbeat, your hormones, your thoughts. Your brain will switch to a new energy source, something rare and wonderful, something only humans do and a few lactating ungulates. You will start consuming yourself, but precisely, carefully, with such orchestration.

You are built to be hungry and you are built to withstand hunger. You know exactly what to do.

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In his short story “The Hunger Artist,” written in 1922, Franz Kafka describes a professional faster in the late nineteenth century who lived publicly in a small cage, eating nothing for days and then weeks, his performance ending with a grand finale on the fortieth day when “the flower-bedecked cage was opened” and an adoring audience waited as a military band played and doctors examined the emaciated patient. The results of their study were announced through a megaphone. Finally, two blissful and giddy young ladies appeared to escort the hunger artist to a carefully chosen meal.

In Kafka’s story, the faster does not want to stop fasting. He is in fine form. There are no limits to his capacity! His manager insists, and the hunger artist has no choice but to eat, recover, and begin the show again in a new town with a new audience. The model for this character may have been the flamboyant Giovanni Succi who fasted professionally over thirty times in all the major capitals of Europe. Succi believed himself possessed by a benign spirit which enabled him to live without food; between shows, he was quietly and regularly admitted to the insane asylum. On December 21, 1890, in New York, the *Daily Tribune* described how he broke a forty-five day fast:

Scores of men and women stood in the room waiting to say or do something or see something done at the moment when the fast should end. Expectations were on tip toe…At 8-o-clock sharp, Succi arose from his couch and then it seemed as if the persons looking at him were welcoming back from the grave a long-lost brother. Cheer followed cheer and hands vied with feet in making noise. Succi, his hands deep in his pockets, his back bent nearly double and his head hung low on his chest lifted up the right corner of his mouth and smiled a greeting to all.

In history, as well as in Kafka’s story, the public loses interest in fasting. There is not much to see, after all, and other entertainments take its place. Kafka’s hunger artist becomes a minor attraction in a large circus. In the story’s conclusion, the faster in his self-imposed cage is finally allowed to go without food for as long as he wants. In truth, he has been forgotten, hidden in a nest of straw, until a few moments before his death. At this time, he asks for forgiveness and confesses, “I always wanted you to admire my fasting.” The amiable circus manager assures him that they *do* admire him. The hunger artist protests that they should not, since fasting came so easily and his reasons for fasting were not profound. “I couldn’t find the food I liked,” the dying man whispers. “If I had found it, believe me, I should have made no fuss and stuffed myself like you or anyone else.”

The circus manager replaces the hunger artist with a young panther. Everyone loves the healthy, vibrant animal, who eats whatever is given him, and who “seemed not even to miss his freedom; his noble body, furnished almost to the bursting point with all it needed, carried freedom around with it too.” Now the audience crowds around the panther’s cage and “the joy of life streamed with such ardent passion from his throat that for the onlookers it was not easy to stand the shock of it.”

Most of us identify with the panther, not the hunger artist. Eating is something we think about when we wake up, before we go to bed, and many times in-between. Food is life. Life is freedom. Even the constraints of life are freedom.

Yet the opposite is also true. Perhaps a billion people in the world are overweight

(as many can be described as hungry) and obesity often leads to a constrained life: diabetes, high blood pressure, heart attacks. Food is our enemy, and so we walk the aisles of supermarkets searching for ice cream that is not really ice cream, for pockets of flavored air, taste without calories.

Food fascinates us. Yet the opposite is also true. Hunger fascinates us.

A few years after Franz Kafka wrote “The Hunger Artist,” there was a brief resurgence of the form. In 1926, in Berlin, six hunger artists exhibited at the same time. One performance took place in a popular restaurant where in the middle of the hall, under a glass bell, a man in a dinner jacket smoked cigarettes and sipped water. A nearby blackboard announced that he had not eaten for twenty-eight days. As one newspaper reported, “Around him corpulent gentlemen and fashionably dressed ladies are consuming Wiener Schnitzel with fried potatoes. They are discussing whether the hunger record will be broken this time.”

Recently, in 2003, an American magician lived without food for forty-four days while sitting in a Plexiglas box, six by six by three feet, strung up in the air near Tower Bridge in London. The entertainer, David Blaine, had done endurance tricks before--encasing himself in a block of ice and being buried alive in a glass coffin. Now he was the century’s first hunger artist. The response was mixed. An estimated quarter million people visited the site to see a man sit and do nothing. Some women held banners declaring their love and support. Others ran naked under the box. Some men said David Blaine was a hero. Some called him an idiot. On the street below, members of the crowd pelted the Plexiglas box with rotten eggs, taunted Blaine with the smell of sizzling hamburgers, and organized a movement to keep him awake at night with drums and foghorns. They showed a surprising degree of anger and distaste. A hundred years had passed since the heyday of the hunger artist. In that time, television had brought famine into our living rooms, and the bodies of starving women and children--especially children--had become familiar to us. In that time, too, we came to revere the hunger striker, cultural icons like Mahatma Gandhi who used his hunger to further peace and religious tolerance. Even as David Blaine fasted for entertainment, other people were fasting for social justice—in Turkey, in Chile, in China, in the United States.

Ten thousand people gathered to witness the end of Blaine's forty-four-day fast and many more watched on television. The newspapers described a carnival atmosphere with food vendors and souvenirs, cries and gasps from the girls, songs and flags. The door to the Plexiglas box opened, and soon Blaine was explaining to the crowd how he had learned to appreciate the simple things in life: a sunset, a smile. He had learned how strong we are as human beings. He had learned how important it is to have a sense of humor, to laugh at everything because nothing makes sense.

“This has been the most important experience of my life,” he said, weeping. “I love you all.”

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In the annuals of fasting, forty-four days is unimpressive. In June of 1965, a twenty-seven-year-old man, known as Mr. A.B., presented himself to physicians at the University Department of Medicine in Dundee, Scotland. He weighed 456 pounds. “Initially,” reads the resulting paper in the *Postgraduate Medical Journal*, “there was no intention of making his fast a protracted one.” But the young man adapted so well and was so “eager to reach his ideal weight,” and the days passed, and his medical signs were normal, and more days passed, and still he persisted--drinking only as much water as he wanted, along with a daily vitamin pill--and more days passed, and then somehow a year had gone by, and then more than a year.

At first Mr. A.B. stayed in the university hospital. Rather soon, he was allowed to go home and return every day to have his urine collected and vital signs checked. The researchers took blood samples every two weeks and gave other tests every six weeks. From Day 93 to Day 162, Mr. A. B. received potassium supplements. From Day 345 to Day 355, he was given sodium. His blood sugar or glucose level dropped quite low, yet Mr. A.B. “felt well and walked about normally” without any symptoms of hypoglycemia. His weight loss averaged .72 pounds a day. That sustained loss, the low level of blood glucose, and the results of other tests convinced the scientists that their patient was not secretly eating. Eventually, during the course of 382 days without food, he lost 276 pounds. Five years after the fast, he had only gained back sixteen.

He must, at times, have felt like a god. He lived like a tree, a rowan or oak, on air and sunshine. He lived more like spirit than matter. Did he try and walk through walls? Did he think of himself as a ghost?

We do not know, of course, what Mr. A. B. felt or thought during those thirteen months. The *Postgraduate Medical Journal* says only, at the end, “We wish to express our gratitude to Mr. A.B for his cheerful cooperation and steadfast application to the task of achieving a normal physique.” The citation in the 1971 *Guinness Book of Records* briefly gives his name and poundage. Soon afterward, Guinness stopped recording long fasts because of the dangers involved.

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When I was nineteen, I wanted to be a writer. My friend Stephanie also wanted to be a writer. We wanted to know the truth. That’s what we thought writing was about. Stephanie and I sat at my kitchen table, perhaps drinking tea, perhaps making sandwiches, and I remember her declaring with emphasis, “I always write better when I’m hungry.” I disagreed, although I didn’t say so. Hunger only made me want to eat. Still, I knew what she meant in the larger sense: artists shouldn’t be too comfortable. Artists need hunger as a verb. They need to desire. Moreover, in my time and place, in 1973 in Berkeley, California, the role of art was to stand outside established powers and successes, outside the state, outside capitalism--outside satiety.

It is not new, this portrait of the artist as a hungry young man. In 1890, Knut Hamsun published his autobiographical novel *Hunger***.** What we know about the physiology of hunger matches up surprisingly well with his description. The unnamed narrator survives for weeks and months on insufficient food, moving from lodging to lodging, sometimes sleeping in the street, often walking the street in a kaleidoscope of moods, talking to himself and scribbling out the articles that bring him a few kroners so he can repeat the cycle of a hurried meal and semi-starvation. In this story, hunger is all about emotion. The narrator is under siege to his own attacks of rage or fancy. We are introduced to him in the middle of his hunger and so we can never say that we know the whole man, for we only catch glimpses of someone in a storm, his attributes exaggerated, overly-conscientious, overly-sensitive, now frantic, now furious, always self-absorbed.

Often enough, he is euphoric, a condition many fasters describe, "I had arrived at the joyful insanity hunger was; I was empty and free of pain." Or “I was drunk with starvation, my hunger had made me intoxicated...I lay in a state of utter absence from myself and felt deliciously out of it.”

Sometimes, his senses are unnaturally acute. He is aware of every sight, every sound, every smell, and they all seem meaningful: the brown dog and its silver collar, the maid with her sleeves rolled up, the way she polishes the window pane. Details overwhelm him, and the world “poured into me with a staggering distinctness as if a strong light had fallen on everything." Without warning, this clarity can tip into mysticism, the state of no-mind, “as though my brains simply ran quietly out of my head and left me empty.”

But hunger is hardly a friend. In scene after scene, the narrator writhes or weeps or vomits or curses God. He falls into depression. He betrays his ideals. He bullies an old cake seller. The hunger in his stomach gnaws “without mercy…like a couple of dozen tiny creatures who put their heads over to one side…then put their heads over to the other side.”

At the end of the novel, feverish and ill, the narrator is taken on as a worker aboard a ship. Just like that, he sails away from the city, away from hunger. This was a ten-year pattern in Knut Hamson's own life, periods of physical labor mixed with the poverty of the struggling writer. The book *Hunger* was his entrance into success and the end of that struggle. Critics would later describe Hamson’s willingness to be hungry as a drive toward creativity. In his discussion of the novel, poet Robert Bly believes that hunger leads the narrator to psychic health: “Somehow his unconscious has chosen this suffering as a way for some part of him to get well. The hero of *Hunger* obeys the unconscious and remains in hunger, despite suffering, until he has lived through what he must or learned what he had to.”

In the 1933 novel *Down and Out in Paris and London*, George Orwell tried and failed to shake up the mythology of the starving artist. The story is clearly autobiographical, the adventures of a poor student in Paris who discovers “the boredom which is inseparable from poverty; the times when you have nothing to do and, being underfed, can interest yourself in nothing.” Later, Orwell’s character spends a day in bed reading *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes.* “It was all that I felt equal to, without food. Hunger reduces one to an utterly spineless, brainless condition…It is as though one has been turned into a jellyfish, or as though one’s blood has been pumped out and luke-warm water substituted.”

The effect of all this complaining, however, with its literary allusions, is only to strengthen the central glamour: hunger as a rite-of-passage. Hunger has always been seen as a unique form of suffering, one that can lead to insight, both in art and religion. Asceticism brings us closer to our version of God. The monks in their monasteries, the artists in their garrets—they grow lean and leaner and more spiritual and more artistic. That may have been Kafka's joke at the end: all his faster wanted was better food, not the truth, not a deeper understanding of life, but a desire for more than what life can offer.

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Hunger is finally about death. We are fascinated by hunger because after 50 days or 90 days or 382 days, hunger ends in a body forced to cannibalize itself. Death is a major theme in our own life, too, the conclusion we are sliding toward. Death is the real story.

For a time in my life, I became something of a hunger artist, collecting news clippings about starvation and famine, labeling folders Somalia and Ethiopia. A billion people in the world were hungry. Even children in America were hungry. My impetus did not seem to be about death, but birth. I was thirty years old and pregnant. A gate opened inside me with a neat and nearly audible hormonal click. It was the gate to grief, not sentimentalism exactly, but something that might have veered close. Certainly that gate swung open at any sentimental cue--a country western song, a photograph, a sad movie. I couldn’t understand why children were dying because they had no food. I gave birth to my daughter, and she brought down my milk, and I fed her my body. In a few years, I had a son and he, too, drank from me. I was feeding the world. This was not aggrandizement so much as myth. At the center of our life, we are Eve or Prometheus or Odysseus. At the center of my life, I fed the world, and yet children were dying.

This lasted for a few years. I would sit in a fast food restaurant with my five-year-old son. He was here for the toy they had set like bait in a circle of French fries, orange soda, and meat. As I read the newspaper, I saw the picture of a hungry child in our most recent famine. The gate swung open. I knew because I had made it my business to know what was happening in her body. The fat in her tissues had been used up long ago, so that her skin looked loose and her eyes sunk into bone. Her brain needed glucose of which the only source now was her own protein. Already the digestive enzymes in her stomach and pancreas had been sacrificed. Soon she would eat the muscles in her arms, in her legs, in her heart.

Where I sat at the table, I could see the restaurant’s playground. Small children bounced up and down on brightly-colored plastic. I wanted to snatch this little girl from the page. I wanted to hold her, raise her, send her to college. My sight blurred and instinctively, immediately, I pushed hard against the gate. This grief, whose was it? *This was not my baby*. I did not burst out crying. I did not frighten my son in the middle of a fast food restaurant. Instead I assembled his cardboard prize and turned to another page of the newspaper. I felt tired but only deep down, so far down it was hardly noticeable.

Most of us know this exhaustion. We are afraid the pain of other people will subtract the joy from our life, that our joy will be impossible next to their pain. A child dying of hunger cannot be juxtaposed. A child dying because she has no food does not make sense. She shatters the view from the kitchen window. She shatters your son’s first day at school. Eventually I stopped collecting famine stories. I shut the gate. But I never turned the lock.

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A little hunger, scientists are beginning to say, is good for us. We would live longer and be healthier if we were hungrier. In animals, and probably in humans, reducing the daily intake of calories by thirty per cent can mean lower blood pressure, lower cholesterol levels, resistance to cancer and Alzheimer’s, and a longer life span. In 2002, the National Institute of Aging gave the Pennington Biomedical Research Center a seven-year, $12.4 million grant to study calorie restriction in adult men and women.

Informal work has already begun. The Calorie Restriction Society is a group of enthusiasts who list over 150 members on their website. Many have cut their daily consumption by twenty-five percent, keeping all the protein, carbohydrates, fats, vitamins, and minerals they need for a nutritious diet. Men over six feet tall, at 175 pounds, will eat between 1500-1900 calories a day. Others eat less. A typical calorie-restrictor tends to be introverted, self-disciplined, and male. They admit that their lifestyle can lead to obsessive behavior, which they try to avoid. Their goal is to live longer, not less well. They admit that calorie restriction can mean a reduced sex drive and greater sensitivity to cold, although they also point to feelings of vitality and increased mental awareness. Most say that hunger is a constant companion. They share strategies to reduce their cravings for food as they map out their days and meals in a war against hunger. They are the newest version of the hunger artist, happy to be in a good fight.

Periodic fasting may be as good or better then reducing calories. In a 2003 study, mice were fasted every other day and then allowed to eat freely. They maintained a stable weight and had lower blood glucose and insulin levels than the control group, which meant a reduced risk of diabetes and heart disease. Outside the laboratory, people have long promoted fasting for health. Hippocrates recommended fasting, as did Plato. Mark Twain wrote, "A little starvation can really do more for the average sick man than can the best of medicines and the best doctors." Around the world, clinics supervise therapeutic fasts--that period of time in which an individual can safely abstain from food, living like an oak or rowan, calmly drinking water, resting and reading, sunbathing just a little. Some patients fast for as long as thirty days. They fast because they have rheumatoid arthritis or stomach problems or high blood pressure. They fast because they are diabetic or overweight. They believe they are accelerating the natural healing powers of the body. A number of them seem to get better. (A small percentage of people with metabolic diseases should not fast at all, for any reason. Unfortunately, you do not always know if you are one of these people.)

What happens in your body after twelve hours without food, after eighteen hours, after seventy-two hours, after seven days, after thirty days? What happens when you just eat less? What happens during months and years of malnutrition and semi-starvation? We know less than it seems we should. On the subject of hunger, so everyday, so deadly, we have surprising gaps of knowledge. We are eager to learn more. We begin the twenty-first century with renewed interest.

Hunger is as big as history. Some four thousand years ago, an inscription on the tomb of the Egyptian Ankhtifi read, “All of upper Egypt was dying of hunger to such a degree that everyone had come to eating his children.” The Bible is full of stories about hunger. Two-thirds of the population of Italy starved to death in 1347. A potato fungus triggered the Great Hunger of Ireland in 1845-1850, which killed a million people and is still commemorated by monuments, websites, and recreated voyages of the “coffin ships” that brought Irish emigrants to North America. Perhaps seven million people died in 1919-1921 from a man-made famine in the Ukraine and southwestern Russia. Four million died in the Bengal famine of 1943-1944. The largest known famine killed over thirty million Chinese from 1958-1962.

Hunger is as intimate as self. It is what I feel before lunch. It is how I think about my body, my breasts, my thighs. My mother went hungry during the Depression, and I am partly who I am because of that. I am largely who I am because I do notexperience involuntary hunger. I am who I am because of the specific way hunger affects my cells—an efficient response to insulin, decisive actions by the liver. I have been shaped by hunger, and I have adapted to hunger. Like a hibernating bear, I can live off my fat. I could live for forty days in a glass box. In the complexity of being human, I might use this ability to make money, get closer to Jesus, or convince the British to leave India. I shape hunger too.

Every morning we wake up hungry. Hunger and satiety are two poles we swing between all our life. Hunger is traveling in our blood stream now. Hunger is clanging the bell of the hypothalamus. Hunger is driving us into the kitchen. We are in the passenger’s seat. We are all hunger artists.