

MY WORD



AT THIS TIME OF THE YEAR, MANY PEOPLE REMEMBER THEIR LAST DAYS AT SCHOOL AS BEING A TIME OF RELEASE AND MUCK-UP MAYHEM. BUT WHEN SHE RECALLS HER OWN EXPERIENCE OF FINISHING HIGH SCHOOL, RUTH McIVER DISTURBS A SHELVED, DARKER SELF.

I never did wind up collecting my Year 12 history award in person. At 17, my last few years of somewhat unlikely academic accomplishments were simply filed away, alongside my unevenly hemmed school tunic. While my peers were getting trashed at 'schoolies' celebrations, I sat in a psychiatric ward, chain-smoking cigarettes and colouring in with a human pincushion who was teaching me the finer points of self-harming. A middle-aged man next to us heaved with delirium tremens.

My first consultation with the formidable Dr Templeton came at the tail end of Year 12. The success I'd had in concealing my anorexia from all around me, including a slew of doctors, was well and truly over. I finally met my match in this marble-cool man. His matter-of-fact explanation for my anaemic appearance was issued to me, like a curse, in a broad South African accent: my body was dying.

The possibility of impending death *had* occurred to me during my steady and desolate descent into starvation territory, but it seemed remote and was rendered sanitised by my pained teenage romanticism. When Dr Templeton explained the unglamorous physiological process of starvation, I scoffed. But somewhere I was very scared, or simply too weary for fight or flight: a thousand barley sugars wouldn't help propel me from the fatteners, the feeders. I feared them, but feared failure more.

I managed to negotiate permission to sit my exams. I was grimly chaffered to and from exam venues, tired and medicated. I spent the night of my school

awards ceremony filling out self-harm risk assessment forms with a nurse.

Submissively, I surrendered myself to the clinic, checking in razors and permitting myself to be subjected to the ultimate horror: the weigh-in. The pointer on the scales struggled to hit 36 kilos, and I scarcely suppressed my shamed distress at scraping through the dangerously underweight hospitalisation category. What kind of piss-weak lightweight was I? You call that dying?

This newfound docility worried my mother, I think. I never did anything without a fight – and that included eating. She did have greater concerns, however: the freshly chemical smell of my hair, which, she later told me, reeked of malnutrition. Furthermore, my brother elaborated, I was attracting the attention of neighbours and passers-by. I was becoming scary; a brush with death for passing people, something confronting to behold. A family friend bumped into me in a shopping centre and we embraced: afterwards, she confided in my mother that she wept all the way home. She said it was like a gathering a dry bundle of sticks in her arms.

The penny dropped slowly rather than clattered. A few weeks into treatment, I still had not gained weight and was accused of a series of food-related felonies: throwing food away, abusing laxatives, vomiting. The injustice deeply offended me; I was physically complying, as those paralysed by fright are wont to do. My own diabolical experiment was turning on me. Like a Salem witch, I was proving my innocence by drowning. Despite the physical ban on movement,

the constant surveillance and incessant force-feeding, my organs were siphoning away any sustenance I was ingesting, which made getting fatter pretty much physically impossible.

Despite the physical discomfort of the process, my paranoia and panic began to dissipate and my brain began to formulate warmer thoughts towards the prison of pained flesh my world had become. Slow gains saw the re-energising of brain cells and strange bursts of serotonin. I began to contemplate radical concepts like human relationships, nurturing interests outside my fixation and, yes, regular meals. I went on to university and into real life in a state of a remission that would take several years to realise.

I often recall Dr Templeton's first and final warning to me: "You have a choice. You can have a life. You can have a real career. You can have a partner and children. Or you can have anorexia." I made a pact with myself: to commit to the former option. I have continued to honour this every day since I stopped actively attempting to disappear.

Occasionally, while munching away carelessly on the devil's larder bread or undressing in a public change room, I am conscious of my blissful unawareness of my body in that very moment, and of the fact I that I am still around to make the choice. It's more an afterthought rather than an affirmation. It's a nod to a dark alter ego, filed away and forgotten like so many school days.

Ruth McIver is a Melbourne based music and arts writer and emerging novelist. The doctor's name has been changed.