

Marianne Dissard - NOT ME

On her farm in the Béarn region of the Pyrénées, my grandmother raised — and force fed — ducks for foie gras. I loved foie gras as a kid. And brains, blood pancakes, sweet fritters of acacia flowers in spring. How on earth would I end up with a severe eating disorder at age 17?

Cramming into my parents' Peugeot for weekend trips to the Auvergne, we'd pack wheels of St Nectaire cheese and the blue-streaked Roquefort revered by my father. How, then, did I figure at age 22 that sticking two fingers down my throat was just the thing to do after a meal?

1985. I was a teenager when we moved to America. On my first day at school in Phoenix, Arizona, I learnt that a quart of Diet Pepsi is a perfectly acceptable breakfast, and iceberg salad — 'dressing on the side, thanks' — the only acceptable lunch item for popular girls. Shy and bookish, I observed but spoke little, an awkward foreign body longing to integrate.

At 17, I craved independence, most of all from my anxious parents. And so, like every cool kid, I skipped family dinners for joyrides to McDonalds. What nailed it, though? What particular incident caused me to become anorexic? I had never even heard the word. Could it have started when a boy asked me on a 'date' to a football game, where a girl I knew only a little pulled me aside and asked excitedly if I was dating him? There was no stopping her and her friends. They would keep talking about me, judge my looks, assess my moves... It must have been obvious to them that I didn't have a clue how to behave. Exposed as a novice, I wanted to disappear, or to become impenetrable.

The next day I turned down breakfast, had a salad for lunch, said no to steak at dinner. I had embarked on a diet. Except it wasn't just a diet...

We anorexics are like an army of deep undercover agents, highly self-disciplined albeit ineffectual at anything but killing ourselves. In a catch-22 about my rapid-weight-loss scheme, I valued the control it gave me over my own body but resented the attention — and also, sadly, the lack of attention — I got from my parents. To get everyone off my back, I started eating again. *A lot*. I raided the pantry for breakfast and doubled-down on pizza at lunch. Whataburger, Taco Bell, KFC, Wendy's and Bosa Donuts... Ditching school cafeteria for the fast-food joints that circled campus like vultures, I gained back 20 pounds in a month.

For the following three decades, I was never far from a 24/7 neon-lit drive-thru to feed my bottomless hunger. In Los Angeles I worked in the film industry, where the pressure to be and stay thin, and young, and beautiful, was overwhelming. As I ate, vomited and exercised, I used to wonder if being bulimic wasn't my biggest accomplishment. After my short-lived teenage anorexic phase, I dedicated two decades to bingeing and purging. Were these 10,000 hours I spent bent over toilet bowls my one true, practiced expertise?

I fled Hollywood for Tucson, Arizona, and found yoga. Why yoga? Maybe for the fellowship. Or to learn to breathe. I was intent on a new career as a singer but didn't know the first thing about singing. Simple, I thought, breathing well equals singing well.

My music career took off. I began touring, months at a time, my yoga mat a home away from home. My yoga practice kept me fit, with shapely muscles bulging through my fat-free skin, and helped me relax. My bandmates — little did they know about my sickness — would drink themselves silly every night, but I acted as if I was vice-free. And all the while I was suffocating, having to keep my dark secret, slowly dying from a complete lack of perspective on myself.

Bulimia's vicious circle of isolation and shame was in full swing as I travelled and sang through four continents. In 2013, aged 44, I took a sabbatical and turned my attention to yoga. After training in Paris, I began teaching at a studio in the 11th Arrondissement. I felt at home there with my students. Maybe even a bit at peace.

In August I managed to go 14 days without puking. Fingers crossed that that nasty habit was on the way out. What if this was the beginning of...? What if I was...?

October 17 is a date I shan't forget. On rue de Rennes, with every boulangerie displaying a resounding 'yes' sign, I had my hands in my face, stuffing myself with self-love and self-loathing — and then I stopped.

I mean *'this'* stopped. I didn't stop the moving, the walking, I didn't stop stuffing my face. Not this day nor the next, not for the next weeks and months. I didn't stop walking into boulangerie after boulangerie. Nor did I stop buying the next bag of brownies ten times over.

But in my head, or wherever these things are decided, I'd stopped fretting. I stopped thinking 'stuffing needs puking'. Something clicked. 'So what if you've eaten a mountain? Just deal with it. I won't puke any more.'

Slowly, agonisingly, over the next couple of months, I kept to my resolve not to puke ever again. What a miracle those two months were! Or nine weeks, two days and 16 hours, precisely. Dutifully, unrelenting in my commitment to the experiment, I blew up by a pound or two each week. But I was enjoying a new lightness. 'I can eat whatever I want, whenever I want, and I do not fret. Time for myself and for whatever I want to do with myself, in exchange for dresses that won't zip up.'

Did yoga help me recover? Yes and no. A wise person once said that nothing is in itself inherently good or bad. It's what you do with it that determines its quality. I had overused yoga, abused its power by making it an escapist routine, a treadmill of the mind. Teaching, I learned the gift of transmission — that it is better to give than to receive.

Yoga is no magic bullet — there is no such thing in recovery. What there is a painstakingly slow, unique route through your own particular set of conditions — relationships, upbringing, social context, biological markers and whether your health insurance covers diagnosis and treatment

Still, on rare occasions, I throw up. But when the bingeing and puking happens I don't beat myself up over it. I pick myself up, make a cup of ginger tea and think calmly about why I did what I did, and what other wonderful things I could have done instead of acid-bathing my front teeth with green goo. The next morning I put on my big glasses, and, hidden behind pink-shaded lenses, go face the works, one task at a time.

And if there is one thing I got from yoga, it is that nothing happens if you don't show up on the mat. Take that first step. Don't overthink the next. Not every day will make sense. Keep showing up. Just like with life, right? That, is logical.