

# FOOD STORY

*rewrite the way you  
eat, think & live*

ELISE MUSELES

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## CHAPTER 1

# What Is a Food Story?

**W**hen it comes to food, everyone has a story. The way you feel about food, the way you think about food, the way you deprive yourself or overindulge, the specific things you crave . . . there's always a story behind it.

Your food story might involve your mom, who congratulated you for getting straight A's by treating you to a hot fudge sundae.

Your food story might involve your dad, who quietly struggled with his weight for decades and who sometimes hid a stash of candy ("Our little secret, don't tell Mom, okay?") in the glove compartment of his car.

Your food story might involve your college roommate, the one who first introduced you to diet soda or laxative pills. Or maybe your favorite aunt, whose apartment always smelled like fragrant tomato sauce and whose hugs made you feel unconditionally loved.

Your food story is a big swirl of many things: the way you were raised, the messages about food you've received from your family and other influential people in your life, the advertisements you've absorbed from the media, your positive memories about food, your painful memories about food—all of it comes together to create a particular story.

Your food story = your beliefs about food and the words you say to yourself about food, either out loud or privately, inside your mind.

With food, you might be telling yourself a story about control and perfectionism (“I have to carefully track what I eat, otherwise everything will fall apart”) or a story about confusion (“I’m just not good with food. I never know what to eat or how much”) or a story about rewards (“I work hard all day long, so I deserve this margarita and nachos”). You might be telling yourself a story that makes you feel strong and empowered or a story that makes you feel miserable, anxious, and inadequate.

You might be thinking, “Oh, I don’t have a ‘story’ around food. Not me.” But that’s not true. We *all* have a food story, including you!

Let me tell you mine.

## MY FOOD STORY

When I was just a little ponytailed girl running through the heat and sunshine of Southern California, I had an easy, breezy relationship with food. I’d pluck oranges off the trees in our backyard when I felt hungry (or leave them shining on the branch when I wasn’t). If I munched on a handful of bright jellybeans, my only thought was “Wow! Those were good jellybeans.” I ate when I was hungry, stopped when I was full, and felt zero guilt about food. Then, early in my pre-pubescent years, things began to change.

It started when I was nine years old: I stood on a cold scale at the doctor’s office while hushed conversation filled the space above me. I was there for my annual physical, but I was secretly hoping my mom and Dr. Gordon were discussing whether or not I could get my ears pierced, since I had been begging my parents for months. After I politely interrupted and asked if he could pierce my ears, Dr. Gordon turned to me and told me that if I worked very hard and lost just five pounds, I could come back to see him and get my ears pierced. I wanted nothing more in the world, and I nodded my head vigorously in agreement.

I don’t remember much else about that appointment, but how I felt afterward is still fresh in my mind. I was eager to follow the doctor’s order, please all the adults in my life, and earn my present. That very afternoon I started eating less, exercising more, and weighing myself

religiously to the point of silent exhaustion. The numbers on the scale crept downward, and we finally scheduled the appointment.

When it came time to have my ears pierced, I cried: the pain shot through me like a knife. But I'd proven to myself that if I set my mind to something, I could achieve anything I wanted—including the number on the scale.

Around that same time, my father battled *his* own diet demons and good-naturedly padlocked the refrigerator in an attempt to curb his late-night snacking habit.

“Want anything before I lock up?” he'd call up the stairs to my siblings and me before wrapping a massive chain around the fridge, clicked in place with a ridiculously large padlock. The key went to my mom for safekeeping, while my sister and I discovered that there was just enough slack in the chain for us to squeeze our small hands through and remove string cheese or carrot sticks, our new favorite game.

The fun began to wear off when friends would visit and find the chained refrigerator, effectively blocking us from partaking in a pastime of historic importance: the late-night snack. I'd offer a sheepish explanation and usher them into another part of the house, silently fuming that my family couldn't be normal; later I'd arrange my social time to take place as much as possible at my friends' homes. Though the lock supposedly had nothing to do with us kids, it became a part of our food stories, which for each of us manifested in different ways: disordered eating patterns, shame, deprivation, embarrassment.

In my teens, I was constantly reminded to obsessively watch my weight at the all-girls' school I attended, where calorie counting and diet soda were as much a part of the culture as our matching uniforms and ambitious plans to eventually take over the world. During those years, I became more attuned to my mother's conversation with her friends, who maintained their enviable slender figures by pushing food around on their plates, bringing their own fat-free salad dressing to restaurants, and declaring certain food groups off-limits. I adopted their mantras as my own and then went on to dabble in more extreme forms of dieting. By the time I was a senior in high school, my friends and I followed a starvation diet to get ready for prom. Not even pickles allowed because “too much sodium,” I vividly remember telling my best friend as I slapped one out of her hand—all that water retention and bloating! I also experimented with diet pills and what was certainly not normal eating.

These habits stuck with me throughout college and eventually made their way with me to the East Coast and law school, where I met Steven, the man who is now my husband. We hit it off almost immediately, eventually moved in together, and began to map out the rest of our lives postgraduation.

All of those dreams came to a grinding halt during what was supposed to be a special evening.

We're sitting at a fancy restaurant about an hour outside of Washington, DC. It's famous, world-renowned. The write-ups, the three-month-long wait for reservations, the artistic presentation of food . . . all of it creates excitement and anticipation that bubbles inside of me. I can't believe the day has arrived as we dine at our corner table with champagne glasses and two plates that look more like masterpieces than something to eat.

Except I'm not smiling. Or eating.

There's a lump in my throat and a pit in my stomach.

How ironic. All dressed up in the midst of a five-course meal with the love of my life, celebrating my graduation from law school, and I am unable to force myself to take even a single bite. He's discussing breaking up with me. Right then. Right there.

The reason? Food. Yes. Over food. We're in love, but he wants a woman who eats freely. A woman who can share his pleasure for chocolate and wine and wholesome, long, drawn-out meals, just like the one we are meant to be eating right now. More importantly, a woman who is present and fully engaged in the moment, not distracted or consumed by self-imposed rigid restrictions, like I am. Someone who isn't always on edge and anxious. We have all the other ingredients for a lasting relationship. We share a love for big dogs, hiking up steep mountains, dancing at loud concerts, reading spiritual books, and traveling to exotic places.

But there is the issue of the food. The damn food.

I've needed to control it for as long as I can remember, so fearful of what it will do to me. ("Will I gain weight? Feel bloated? Give in to my cravings?") Never in a million years do I even think that all of those anxious thoughts constantly buzzing through my head will cost me my relationship with the person I am possibly going to marry.

That night in the middle of dinner, Steven watches as I push cream sauce to the edge of my plate. He looks me in the eyes and says, "I



enjoy eating and going to dinner, and it's important to me to be able to share one of life's essential pleasures. I don't get to do that with you. Never, ever, ever. You're just too worried about what you eat—or don't eat. You're rigid with all your food rules. I worry that you're going to make yourself sick. It's hard to watch."

The chef interrupts us. Not the waiter, but the chef in his white coat with his French name inscribed in the upper right corner. It's pretentious here, but that's the least of my worries. He asks, "Is everything okay? I noticed you aren't eating. Nobody comes here and doesn't eat."

Salt in an open wound. I want to scream, "Leave me alone! What I eat isn't any of your business." But nothing comes out except for the noise I make as I hold back my tears.

This scene isn't pretty, and this isn't some silly fight. This is deep.

Steven's words sting. Controlling food to maintain my weight had been my life for as long as I could remember. But I never thought it was a problem. I look good. I make healthy choices. I am fine with it. It isn't an issue *for me*.

I feel a chill when Steven finally stops me midsentence and tells me what he has been trying to say all evening: "Elise, I'm sorry, but I just can't do this anymore."

Food, he says, is a part of his life—and his *family's* life. He and I had discussed eventually starting one of our own, he reminds me, and he isn't willing to drag my dysfunctional relationship with food into it. He wants to enjoy our time together, not feel stressed out watching me obsess over carbohydrates, fat grams, and sodium counts. My stress is pouring onto him, making him feel anxious and on edge.

And so we break up.

After graduating, I moved back to California, where I threw myself into work as an immigration attorney—and began the process of healing my food story.

That dinner with Steven was a turning point in my life. I realized I wasn't healthy on the inside, and my complicated and messy food story was unknowingly bleeding into other areas of my life. This was a huge wake-up call for me. It was the first time I became aware that my consuming thoughts about food were not only disconnecting me from my body, they were disconnecting me from others, preventing me from being present and experiencing a life filled with joy.

I wanted eating to feel simple, not stressful and complicated. I wanted food to be a source of pleasure, nourishment, and connection. Just like it's meant to be.

Who knew a celebratory dinner gone bad could create such a revelation? But it did.

Looking back, I now see how my food story had been causing me unnecessary pain for years. The more I strove for control, determined to follow my strict narrative, the more it derailed my life. It was something I carried with me wherever I went, and it had a negative impact on everything—my career, my confidence, my relationships . . . and almost my marriage!

But here's the thing that I say to myself daily: "I'm never stuck. Whatever my food story is right now, it can be rewritten. I'm living proof!"

I have a new food story, one that I created, page by page. It's the way I comfortably embrace food and my body. It's how I connect with my family in the kitchen (my two sons love to cook). It's how I enjoy a date night with my husband at our favorite restaurant. It's inspiring thousands of women to peel back the layers and work on their food stories, too. Stress no longer plays a starring role. Now, my food story is filled with acceptance, gratitude, love, and FUN!

Most of us don't realize how deeply our food stories are impacting our lives until we take the time to identify and untangle them.

## **CHANGING YOUR FOOD STORY**

When Vivian reached out to me to inquire about cooking classes for her family, she had her two daughters in mind. She wanted to make sure they had a healthy self-image and knew that this would be rooted in their relationship with food and their bodies. What she didn't realize was how her food issues made her a less-than-ideal role model for her kids—because her kids were watching how she ate, how she talked about food, and how she behaved around food and following her lead. "I hadn't even considered that my years of yo-yo dieting and current habits might affect my girls until you asked me about my food story," she told me.

Because when you have a negative food story, it can downgrade your entire life and filter into the lives of those you love most. Meals become a source of anxiety. You might feel preoccupied with intrusive thoughts

about food. You can't seem to stop overeating. You feel out of control. You might feel ashamed about your eating habits. Or you might feel bored and profoundly uninspired about cooking for your family. Food becomes a source of pain and exhaustion, sapping your energy rather than nourishing you. The negativity seeps into your relationships, your career, and the way you parent your kids.

On the flip side, when you have a positive food story, it makes everything in your life so much easier. Grocery shopping feels inspiring. Cooking feels relaxing. Figuring out what to eat feels simple. Eating a meal feels nourishing and pleasurable. Frustrating habits (such as overeating to soothe yourself after a long workday) melt away. Food no longer has a controlling grip on your life. You are comfortable in your body. You just feel . . . good. When your relationship with food is joyful, your whole life feels different, not only to you but to those around you, too.

Now that you know you have a food story and are becoming aware of its presence in your own life, you can take the next step forward on the path to changing it: identifying your current story, the one that's looping inside your mind every day, possibly without you even realizing it's there.

Are you ready? Something tells me the answer is a big, resounding YES!

## CHAPTER 2

# Identify Your Food Story

**W**hen you look at your life, do you notice a frustrating pattern that keeps repeating? Is there a discouraging negative story you keep telling yourself over and over, day in and day out?

Maybe you keep repeating the same old story about *money*: “I’m terrible when it comes to financial matters. I always have been.”

A story about *time*: “I’m always late for everything. It’s just who I am!”

A story about *work*: “I can’t afford to take a vacation. Everything at the office will fall apart if I’m not around.”

A story about *relationships*: “There aren’t any decent men in my town. All the good ones are taken!”

Or perhaps an old, discouraging story about *food*, which might sound something like: “I don’t have any self-control when it comes to food.” Or: “I’ve always struggled with food, and I probably always will.” Or: “I know what I should eat, but I never do it.” Or: “Healthy food is boring and doesn’t taste good! I don’t want to have to eat rabbit food like raw celery and kale for the rest of my life!”

We all have stories moving through our minds every single day. Some of these stories are empowering and help us to thrive. But others are not, and these can leave us feeling utterly stuck. Often, we repeat

stories to ourselves without even realizing we're doing it. The story becomes deeply ingrained. Automatic. Like background music in your head, playing 24/7, guiding your daily decision-making.

Once you're aware of the fact that you're telling yourself a story, you can identify what your current story is—and change it if it's making you feel stressed about food, unhappy about your body, and frustrated, hopeless, and powerless to change your life.

The stories you tell yourself and the words you say to yourself directly influence your well-being and your quality of life. They have the power to change your mood—and change the course of your day. This isn't my personal hypothesis. It's backed by scientific evidence.

## THE SCIENCE OF WORDS AND STORIES

Numerous studies confirm that words have a direct influence on almost every aspect of your physical and emotional health. Words impact your physiology (what's happening inside your body, including your metabolism and digestion), your cognitive function (your ability to focus and think clearly), your mood (how you feel about what's happening in your life and how you cope with stressful situations), and, of course, your performance (how well you're able to complete certain tasks, such as answering emails or planning dinners for the week).

The conversation between your own two ears can have a big impact on your success. Studies on the language-mindset connection confirm that athletes who talk to themselves in a positive, empowering way (“You’ve trained hard and you deserve to be here,” “You’re strong and powerful,” “You’re ready for this”) perform significantly better in competitions than athletes who don’t engage in such self-talk. Encouraging words lead to faster race times and more slam dunks, trophies, medals, and victories all around.<sup>1</sup>

Of course, it's all about the words you choose. Researchers found that simply saying the words “I’m excited” right before a performance helped people to sing better, hitting notes more accurately.<sup>2</sup> Singers who said, “I’m nervous” performed significantly worse—further proof that the words you say to yourself directly influence how your day goes!

The words we absorb matter too. MRI scans have shown that certain regions of your brain light up with delight when you hear your favorite uplifting song or when you read an inspiring quote or a poem

that you love.<sup>3</sup> Positive words are like pharmaceutical drugs—without the side effects.

We know, without a doubt, that positive words and phrases have the power to improve your life. Tell yourself an empowering story, and with those magic words, you're setting yourself up for a healthy, happy, successful day.

Of course, the opposite is equally true.

Much in the same way that positive words can help you, negative words can harm you. Research confirms that verbal abuse during childhood can change the structure of your brain, creating a lasting imprint on the corpus callosum region.<sup>4</sup> That old saying “Sticks and stones may break your bones, but words will never harm you” is, unfortunately, not true. Words can, and do, hurt you. Negative words can literally leave a mark on your brain, like a verbal bruise. This damage can be undone, but it takes effort and patience.

This is why it's so important to be careful, intentional, and deliberate about the words you say to yourself. Every word you say out loud (and every word you say privately inside your mind) leaves a mark, for better or worse.

Your brain hears everything you say. Your body hears, too. It's always listening. No sentence goes unheard. If you say to yourself, “I'm terrible with food,” your body hears that story of defeat and reacts accordingly. If you say, “I love taking good care of myself,” your body hears that story of self-love.

What types of words do you say to yourself on a daily basis? When it comes to food, your health, your weight, your body, what's the predominant story that you repeat to yourself? Is it an empowering story? Or one that's disempowering? Is it a story that's helping you lead the life of your dreams? Or holding you back?

Many of my clients have never really stopped to consider, “What's my current story about food? What does it sound like? What are the specific phrases that I say to myself, over and over?” If you've never looked closely at this, now it's time.

## **EIGHT DISEMPOWERING FOOD STORIES**

Through my work with thousands of clients and workshop participants, the women in my online community, and my family and friends,