

Hunger Point

Narrator: Marilyn Rucker is Shelly's psychiatrist, whom she secretly calls Chubby. A month ago, before Shelly admitted herself to St. Mary's [a psychiatric hospital with an eating disorders unit], the entire family met Marilyn at her office for a family powwow. Chubby is sweet-faced and rotund, and I felt like she really wanted to help Shelly. My mother, on the other hand, says she can't understand how someone with such an obvious lack of self-control with food can possibly help Shelly deal with her own weight problem.

We waited in the reception area. Shelly was swaddled in a quilted yellow jacket that she refused to take off even though it was eighty-five degrees out. I stood in front of the door that closed off Chubby's office.

Frannie: Isn't it nice to be together? Just a normal family from Long Island visiting the big city.

Narrator: At that moment, Marilyn appeared in the doorway. I stared at her huge body filling the door frame and felt a flush of embarrassment. Smoothing away a loose strand of hair, she invited us in. I felt her staring at me like I was retarded. I wondered what Shelly told her about me. It couldn't be all that bad, I reasoned. I'm basically well adjusted, considering.

Shelly immediately sat in the chair closest to the door. My father sat in a chair next to her. My mother opted for the couch. I was still standing, unable to pick a spot, worried that Chubby was assessing our relationships by where we chose to sit. Finally, I parked myself next to my mother, but not too close.

As I sank into the leather couch, I debated whether I should go into the mental health field.

Chubby must be doing pretty well, I thought. I definitely want a job where I can have my own office and decorate it tastefully. *Tasteful*. What a great word. It's a food word, like succulent. My mother was listening intently to Chubby. I cocked my head as if to say, Look at me, Chubby, I'm a young professional helping my sister get rehabilitated. I would have worn a suit, but no one told me your office was so *tasteful*.

Chubby: Shelly, do you want me to start?

Shelly: (looks at her hands, murmurs something about Chubby going ahead)

Chubby: (leans forward) I asked you to come today to help you understand why Shelly decided to go into St. Mary's. As a family therapist, I believe it's important to involve everyone in Shelly's treatment.

Mother: We want to help Shelly in any way we can, Marilyn.

Narrator: Mother rolled the name Marilyn off her tongue slowly, as if she could thin her out by stretching her name into long, elaborate syllables.

Mother: But I don't know if hospitalizing her is the best idea.

Chubby: (pointedly) That's not your decision, Marsha (looks at Shelly as if asking permission to continue)

Shelly: (shrugs)

Chubby: Shelly is severely depressed. In order for us to deal with the depression, we must first stabilize her weight.

Mother: I realize this, Marilyn, but I don't know what can be done for her in the hospital that we can't do out here. If Shelly is that depressed, I don't know if she's in a position to determine what is best for herself.

Narrator: I followed mother's gaze. Chubby got her medical degree from SUNY Albany.

Mother: (dryly) In fact, I don't know who is in the best position to help her.

Narrator: If only you were thinner, Chubby, I thought sympathetically, then my mother would take your advice more seriously. She wouldn't even care where you went to school.

Frannie: Well, who should we listen to? The person who got her here or the person trying to help her?

Father: (shifts in seat) Frannie. Don't talk about your mother like that.

Frannie: How do you know I was talking about Mommy and not about you?

Narrator: No one said anything for a second, and the words hung in the air like a cartoon bubble. I took a deep breath.

Frannie: Shelly's not an idiot. If she feels she needs to check into a hospital, then she should. End of story.

Mother: (rolls her eyes) Please, Frannie, Shelly should be with people that love her. A hospital just feels so anonymous to me.

Frannie: And forcing your daughter to go on a diet is loving her?

Mother: I never forced you girls to do anything. I was just afraid that if you didn't watch yourselves, you'd end up heavy and miserable.

Frannie: Bullshit! If we ended up heavy, you'd be miserable (turns to Chubby). We had to be perfect. For my mother that meant being thin.

Mother: That's not true, Frannie. (Looks at Chubby, voice is even and controlled) I was very overweight as a teenager and very self-conscious about my body. My mother, in fact, fed me too much because feeding me was showing she loved me. Crazy! I made the conscious decision to teach the girls that food is not a replacement for love, that eating right and having a fit, healthy body is much more important (leans back). I did what I thought was best. Given the opportunity, I might do things differently, but my intentions were good, and I won't apologize for them.

Narrator: We sat in an excruciating silence. Having gotten up late, I didn't have time to shower and I knew I stank. I turned my head slightly, trying to smell myself. The digital clock flipped a number once then twice as we waited. Chubby wrote something down. It pissed me off that she wasn't saying anything, especially at \$150 an hour. She was totally wasting my sister's money. No wonder Shelly was severely depressed.

Chubby: It's obvious that we all care about Shelly and we want her to make the best decision about her treatment. For any patient, our first challenge is to assess the symptoms of her disorder. We'll try not to dwell too much on the past at this point.

Narrator: I know that was directed to me. Oh fuck you, Chubby.

Chubby: I think most families have good intentions, but there comes a point when good intentions aren't enough, and a patient needs care that her family isn't capable of providing.

Narrator: That, I know, was for my mother.

Chubby: Now. I'm saying that Shelly needs inpatient professional care. This isn't a new disorder, Marsha. St. Mary's is staffed with some of the best clinicians in the Northeast.

Mother: What are our other options? What if Shelly moved home? David, don't you think...

Father: (quietly) I don't know, Shelly should decide.

Narrator: Oh shut up, I thought. Until you get a backbone, you should just shut up. Shelly sat, her lips pursed. She wore baggy jeans, her long legs crossed, and she bounced her foot so hard, I could hear the fabric rub. Look at me Shelly, I commanded in my head, let me see your smile. Instead, she looked at Chubby.

Shelly: I just wanted them to understand that I didn't mean for this to happen. That if anything, I'd rather not do it at all.

Mother: We know that, Shelly! Which is why if you just came home with us rather than going to the hospital, we can spend some time together and figure this out.

Shelly: That's not what I meant. (Shakes her head, bounces her foot)

Chubby: (firmly) Right now, we want to stop Shelly's weight loss. Then she can decide her next step.

Narrator: From the corner of my eye, I saw my mother watch Marilyn trying to maneuver her girth in the soft seat. She wasn't going to be undone by this fat lady, not my mother.

Mother: She's my daughter. She should be with me.

Narrator: Hunched in her seat, still wearing her yellow jacket, my sister buried her head in her hands. She looked like a quilted bumblebee awaiting capture.

Chubby: (calmly) If you really want to help Shelly, you will support her decision.

Narrator: Shelly cried softly. I wanted to run to her, but I was paralyzed.

Mother: She is my child. I wanted her home (shaking a finger). Shelly will go into a mental hospital over my dead body.

Narrator: From somewhere in the coat, I heard my sister's voice. It was muffled through yards of down and a thick coating of tears.

Shelly: Bang bang. You're dead