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Iconography

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ICONOGRAPHY

Soon there will be a girl who will not eat. Some will call her the Turkish Girl; others, the Starving Girl.

Like most, I will read about her, see her decline and rise on the news. I, like many, will find her beautiful, though I won't know why.

It will happen, simply, like this:

One day she wakes feeling full, and so she skips breakfast, then lunch, then dinner, and she wakes the next day so hungry she still doesn't eat, the pain so exquisite that it feels true. It feels exactly like her.

But that truth is little known.

Most think she got the idea from the news, from the hundred and one Turks, including teenage girls, who died protesting the government's treatment of those imprisoned for their politics. Others think it was Gandhi. Or Thoreau, whom she read for her freshman seminar at her American university, or Kafka in European Lit the next semester. Some blame websites, call it an eating disorder. Some call it misguided idealism, student politics overrunning common sense, the fault of a twenty-four-hour fast sponsored by the Students for a Sustainable Society (which she joined on her way to the dining hall one night). Actually, there is no evidence that she participated in the fast, as it was an honor system kind of thing, and in fact she forgot to starve that day, which was weeks before her own fast, and in fact that day she not only ate three meals but also shared a sausage pizza with her roommates around nine p.m., three hours before the fast, which she forgot to begin, was to end.

Before she will be the Starving Girl, she is not even *the* girl, but merely *a* girl, an international student at an expensive American university, not terribly political, not terribly religious. Not even terribly Turkish.

First she fasts in silence. Nobody notices. Then they ask if she is losing weight. You look great, they say. And then, you look thin. And then, do you want my ice cream, pasta, cereal bar, bagel, Diet Coke? And finally they call university administrators, who call her parents, who fly in, as soon as they

can, from Ankara where they run a hotel near the Atatürk mausoleum, which they are forced to leave in the hands of their assistant manager, who takes the opportunity to allow all of his distant relatives from the East to visit for free, with the result that one impressionable cousin removes her headscarf at the foot of Atatürk's statue, refuses to replace it despite the quiet insistence of her parents, and ends up leaving her family for good. The Starving Girl's parents would be affected by this story, by their implicit participation in the splitting of a family, but they, because of their own troubles, never hear it.

Never does the Starving Girl think of herself as anything but hungry. It is the others who give her act drama and meaning, which, in the end, she is happy to accept.

The American university moves her to the student health center while they wait for her parents. Nobody, even she, is exactly sure how long it has been since she has eaten. At the health center, her professors, her roommates, her friends, and a number of strangers are brought in one at a time and then in groups. They ask her to eat. The president of the American university asks her to eat. Her roommates ask her to eat. The nurses ask her to eat. The president, the roommates, and the nurses together ask her to eat. What do we need to do to make you eat? they ask.

Change everything, she says.

It is the first thought that comes to her mind.

The next day the president of the American university brings in a boy who lived in a tree for nearly two years and who is also an alumnus, and he asks her to eat. You need to live so you can spread your message, the tree boy says. My death is my message, the Starving Girl says. My hunger is my message. She smiles a little smile as she says it. Or so the alumnus tree boy will write in his memoir years later.

Can you be more specific? the president of the American university asks. About the message?

It is a very political university. They do not mind political actions as long as they have meaning and nobody is seriously hurt.

I hunger, the Starving Girl says.

For what?

For everything to be different.

The tree boy gets angry. Not everything should be different. Some things are really great. Some things need to stay exactly the same, he says.

The Starving Girl looks at him and again she smiles. It may be that she is too weak to speak; it may be that she has nothing to say. Or maybe she finds him funny. I wouldn't like to say.

Because of the visitors—the friends and strangers—most of campus hears about the Starving Girl, and so a reporter, who is in the Starving Girl's European Lit class in which they read Kafka and who is also from the university newspaper, comes to interview her.

What is it that you are trying to say? he asks.

She leans in closer to him, sliding along her bed, and looks into his face, but she does not answer.

Do you resent the contribution that food growers are making to global warming? he continues. Is it the pesticides? The cattle farts? The trucks and planes that move food millions of miles every day? People's need to eat tomatoes all year long, as if summer were eternal?

Could you repeat the question? she says, and they both laugh.

But really, he says. Doesn't that stuff bother you?

Of course, she says, just above a whisper. Everything bothers me.

Is it the fattening of the poor? The fast-fooding of the nation? The Starbucking of the city? The drive-through, drive-by habit of eating that allows us to graze all day until our hearts explode with oversatiation and implode with alienation?

It's everything, she says.

That is where it really begins. "Student Protests Everything" is the headline of the article picked up by the *New York Times*.

The Starving Girl's parents are temporarily detained when first the Turkish government and then the American take them in for questioning, first for leaving the country, and then for entering.

The reporters come, and at first she is just another idealistic teenager put into the spotlight before she has the skills to handle it. It is part of her initial charm. She quietly says things like: I'm not a role model. I'm not trying to change anybody's behavior. I'm doing this just for me. She was always soft-spoken and on the verge of thin. But then one day she stops talking, just as she had stopped eating, and becomes something more.

The students camp in front of the student health center at night and carry signs saying “It’s Everything” during the day. They would continue with their coursework—it’s a good school after all, the students practiced multi-taskers—but the faculty take a bus to Washington and camp in front of the White House, and so classes are cancelled.

Soon there are articles speculating about the Starving Girl’s love life, and reporters ask her opinion, which she does not offer, on many different world matters.

Bono comes to visit.

It all happens very quickly.

Soon the world is split between those who want to feed her, those who want to join her, and those who are afraid.

In Turkey, she becomes first a symbol of the East—the sacrificial martyr—and then a symbol of the West—the liberal protestor—and finally, yet one more point of interpretation and argument.

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In a midnight visit, the president of the American university tells the Starving Girl how proud he is of her—this may be a real chance, he says, for not just the nation but the world to change—but the only way to keep this thing going is if she does not die and so won’t she please eat. It would be their secret. The president is an exceptionally tall man, an advantage when speaking to crowds, but now he tries to round his shoulders in, to bend at the knees, to get closer to the Starving Girl. He crouches down by her bed, puts his hand on hers, and has to resist pulling it away when he feels how cold her fingers are.

No secrets, she says, speaking for the first time in days. But I will take some water.

For just a moment the president of the American university wants to call her a stupid bitch, even though he is not the kind of person to think, let alone say, such a thing. Look what this is doing to me, he thinks. He straightens in a bolt, yanks his hand out of hers when her fingers tangle with his, and leaves without remembering to bring her water.

Inside the Starving Girl’s mouth, the soft palate, the uvula, the tonsils, the anterior and posterior pillars are all dry. The nurses have been teaching her anatomy, with the hope that it will connect her to her body. And in some sense it has. Now when she is bored, she reads herself like a textbook, cataloging her parts and how they feel.

A doctor who is famous for talking on television and who happens to be Turkish comes in and explains what will happen to her body if she continues to refuse food: the ache, the muscles burning as they deteriorate, constricting in on themselves, the disintegration of her organs, the blackening of her sight, the elimination of her hearing, the bleeding under her skin.

I can live with that, she says, her voice a quiet croak. She is disappointed when the doctor does not deliver the obvious comeback: not for long you can't.

In fact, with each day, the sensations of her body are a mystery, awe-inspiring in their intensity. The Turks were among the first to infect a person with a disease in order to prevent it. They knew sometimes you had to be sick in order to live. The Starving Girl does not know this intellectually, but in her body she does. She thinks, in her long dying, she is completely alive. And strangely happy.

Finally the Starving Girl's parents arrive, and at first, like the university, they refuse to force her to eat. They take her from the student health center into their room at the local hotel and let her lie in bed and watch cable television. They have heard that watching television leads to eating. Their daughter has changed since coming to America; they think maybe they need to treat her like an American. But they do not know the Starving Girl is only watching the shifting lights on the screen as if they were an unending Fourth of July display.

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Sometimes she drinks water with sugar from the hotel's in-room coffee station. She can still stand and walk to the bathroom if she takes her time.

When she wakes at night with her mother beside her and her father on the cot the hotel had rolled into the room and unfolded like a hospital bed, the Starving Girl thinks of what will happen when she dies. Her mother will wash her body alone, not even looking at it as she works her hands and washcloth underneath the sheet that shrouds the body, no longer recognizable by touch. For the Starving Girl it is a beautiful memory.

For years, her cheeks held a roundness that was not matched by any other part of her body. When she was a young girl, her mother would cup her fat cheeks and say, Baby. Sometimes she did it even when the girl was a teenager. Sometimes her father did it. Baby, they would say.

At first her parents do nothing but suggest room service, chocolate from the mini-bar, pretzels from the vending machine on the third floor. Then

they bring in *manti* and *lahmajun*, the Starving Girl's former favorite foods, from the closest Turkish restaurant, which is more than fifty miles away. The restaurant's chef, when he hears who the customer is, volunteers to travel to the hotel and cook fresh in their kitchen, but her parents say there is no reason to come; she will not eat. She is no longer hungry.

And how would you describe hunger? We live as if we know what we want, as if we are capable of deciphering the signals our bodies send out, but what if we are wrong? I may say hunger feels like illness, but how can I know how it felt to her? Or what if hunger is an illness that eating covers but doesn't cure? Could eating be one more drug that masks the disease?

Most of the time, she is in a state between fantasizing and dreaming. Newspaper headlines float in front of her, captioning a future in which hundreds, then thousands of students join her fast, followed by the elderly, then the overworked, the immigrants, the stay-at-home parents, their toddlers, the teachers, the small business owners, the used book sellers, the hedge fund brokers, the CEOs, residents of the West, of the South, of the East, until finally no one is eating. It is a hunger strike so large that everything changes, and for at least a year, ours is a world in which everyone helps each other, and the worst things that happen are the kinds of arguments you have when you are tired but that can be solved when you are rested again.

It is not a future she invents; she believes it is the future come to her.

And maybe it is.

What is the word, she asks her mother in a whisper. Her mother waits. The Starving Girl points a finger into her upper arm, like she is shooting herself. Inoculation, her mother says, and the girl nods. I am the inoculation, she says. I am the little bit of sickness that stops the disease, she says. Her mother shakes her head, but her daughter has already closed her eyes. I am the spotlight, the Starving Girl says with her eyes closed, and it is as if she has shut them against her own bright light.

When finally the Starving Girl cannot rise without help and wets the bed, then lies without comment on the damp sheets until her mother slides in next to her and says, what's this—only then do her parents call the president of the American university again. They do not know who else to ask for help.

The president suggests an eating disorder clinic that will take the girl in, lock her in, feed her one way or another. If it is a choice between saving the world and saving his student, he will save his student, he tells the administrative assistant who is in the room when he takes the call. The president offers to arrange a ride to the clinic. The Starving Girl's mother does not want to say yes—she is ashamed of her inability to care for her own daughter, to convince her to live—but she does say yes, as does her father. What else can they do? They do not want to be parents to a martyr; it is not an honor they would choose.

So that afternoon, just as the first of a convention's-worth of pharmaceutical sales representatives is checking in at the front desk, the Starving Girl's father carries her through the halls of the local hotel, down the elevator, and staggering through the lobby, into the waiting car arranged by the president.

She is not light; she is heavy.

The pharmaceutical sales representative and all those in the hotel lobby that day are the last to admit to seeing her or her family. Later, they comment on how the father seemed as if he might fall, and how he refused their help, which in truth they did not offer.

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There will be a dispute over what happens next.

Some say the Starving Girl is cured by the clinic, is either unbrainwashed or brainwashed, depending on your point of view, so that she eats and maybe forgets her hunger. She returns to the American university under a different name and graduates and returns to Turkey, or she returns to the American university under a different name and graduates and stays in the U.S. Or she returns to Turkey under a different name without graduating. Or she stays in the U.S. under a different name without graduating. In any case, she blends back in with the rest of us.

But some say the car she is riding in is intercepted by the Students for a Sustainable Society, who held the first twenty-four-hour fast, and who have been holding a sympathy strike of their own, though they alternate days of not eating, as death is not part of the sustainable message, and the Students for a Sustainable Society take the Starving Girl to an undisclosed location where they offer her a choice: eat or don't. We don't mind either way. Some say that given this freedom, the Starving Girl eats. Some say she doesn't. Some say her beauty and her hunger inspire all of the Students for a Sustainable Society who took her to the undisclosed location to stop eating,

and they all die, unseen and unbound forever. Others say the Students and the girl start a revolution so underground that few people even know the effects of their actions, which are many.

Some say she moves to Canada.

Some make jokes.

Others say other things.

One story is this:

The car does not take her to an eating disorder clinic. It takes her to a secret location set up by the government underneath another secret location, where her parents are immediately disappeared. They last see their daughter with her eyes closed and her head tilted against the window of the limo, a small smudge of fog on the glass where her breath hits it, the only sign that she is still alive. They are taken from the car—forcibly in the case of her father, who was brought out first, and docilely in the case of her mother, who was second—by two men who are neither tall nor short, large nor small, dark nor light, wearing clothes that are instantly forgotten and expressions that are cold in that they are blank. The men take the Starving Girl's parents to another car, a black sports utility vehicle, and that is the last that is known of them, though years later it is believed by many that an elderly woman who surfaces at a Tibetan monastery with no memories of her past is actually the Starving Girl's mother.

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The Starving Girl, who cannot anymore remember if she is a person, is placed underground in a room that looks like a hospital room but is not. The government keeps her alive while they decide whether or not they prefer her to die. There she floats, a body adrift without its mind, and a mind adrift without its body, for several days, until the doctor who is assigned to care for her, a man who has never married and never had children but has always longed for both marriage and children, and who is believed to be working for the government but isn't, brings in a select group of journalists, celebrities, and intellectuals, all of whom he was once a doctor for, to meet her during the night.

Her skin is tight in places, sagging in others. Her bones show. Her hair is mostly gone. Her fingers twitch. And she smells.

I am the only one to touch her. I kneel next to her bed and encircle her wrist with my thumb and forefinger. She does not move.

“What do you want?” I ask loud enough for the others, clumped together across the room, to hear.

Some believe she does not answer. Others believe she says, “Get up.” Others insist it is, “Give up.”

I know what she said. But I will not tell you. This is your story, not mine.

The doctor asks the select group of journalists, celebrities, and intellectuals what he should do. Should I save her? he asks. Or do I maintain my cover and see what else the government gets up to?

The group is silent, thinking the same thing, until finally one of them, the oldest and most famous, a woman with a sheath of bright white hair that she has pulled back in a slick ponytail, says it: You should let her die.

The others look to me as if, having touched her, I have some special say. My fingers tingle where they touched her wrist. Maybe it is her action that allows our inaction. Maybe her action was so large it left no room for ours.

Remember: an absence of action is an action, just as an absence of belief is a belief.

Remember: it is easy to love and hate her, both. To believe “get up” and “give up” are simultaneously sensible options.

And so she dies.

This is the kind of thing that can happen when you give up your body. Others do what they want with it. And your body is more of you than you perhaps imagined—with her body went her intent, her words, her self.

She’s mine now. And yours, too.

The headlines are huge.

But that is not the only way. Here is another:

At the eating disorder clinic, where she is delivered without incident, the Starving Girl meets many girls and older women, too. We don’t talk much. Meals—when so many others socialize—are too fraught for us. Many of the girls eat in their rooms, with only a counselor present. Even when we are together in the dining room, it’s an unspoken rule that nobody speaks. Talk is usually in the shared bathrooms or late at night with our roommates, and mostly that is the whispered swapping of strategies for when we are clear of this place.

We did not know she was coming, but when she arrived, it was obvious she was special. There were photographers outside—we could see them from the windows. And the staff whispered together. Finally somebody saw her,

recognized her from the news. She was for us a hero. She hid her disease in plain sight: hunger strike.

At first she was in the medical ward. They called her by a different name, but we knew it was her. We decided to strike, too. Just as soon as we were on the outside. She was an inspiration. Even when she told us not to, when we watched her gain weight, when we watched her family visit and leave smiling and finally one day leave with her, walking on her own, we all knew we would strike. She could have said anything, and it wouldn't have stopped us. She had given us the idea, created the cause, and each of us waited, eating our half portions, gaining our single digits, eating just enough, saying just the right things to move to our freedom. She ate, but she left the rest of us hungry. And you have to understand, hunger for us was proof that we were alive. Our future strike glowed inside each of us, something to live for, even if it would kill us. I do not exaggerate. Inside of us, she glowed.

Really, there are so many ways this story could end. Remember, it has not happened yet. But here is my last:

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I help the Starving Girl and her parents into the car, then slide in behind the wheel. Her mother sits in front, while she and her father sit in the back.

"Please," her father says as he straps on her seatbelt and then his own, and the Starving Girl looks at him gently.

"Without you, I would not be able to live," he says.

He is not one to beg.

She pauses. Then finally she says, "Okay."

And instead of saving the world, she saves him.