TEA, TOAST AND RED LIPSTICK:
UNDERSTANDING PERCEPTIONS OF FOOD, BODY IMAGE AND AGE IN OLDER WOMEN

by

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Though life history methodology, I explore the question: what do the life histories of older women reveal about how lived experience influences perceptions of food, body image and age? The purpose of this research is to develop a deeper understanding of food, body image and age, as it relates to women over 70 years of age; a context infrequently explored in this generation of women and therefore, underrepresented in the literature. It also facilitates a healing process for my personal struggles. In committing to the defining elements of life history research, the stories of Sam and Lina are explored with intentionality, reflexive writing, holistic quality, communicability, aesthetic form and with respect and appreciation for the knowledge life history brings to our broader social context (Cole & Knowles, 2001). Themes, such as family relationships, peer influence, life achievements financial stability and the effects of a decline in health are explored.
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To Lina, thank you for making me laugh and for giving me such an animated glimpse into your history. I had a wonderful time with you. You’ve led a fascinating and inspiring life. Thank you for letting me in.

Finally, to Sam, thank you for welcoming me into your home and sharing your story. Your courage and resilience is inspirational. May you find your place among the soaring mountains. May your breath be as free as your spirit. May you rest in peace.
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PART ONE:

Jasmine
Chapter 1

Winter Rain and Thunder (Thighs)

I am sitting in the snow, watching my dog Abby run vicariously back and forth with her green rubber ball in tow. I breathe in the crisp, dry winter air and listen to the crunch of the fragile crystals that line the white, settled snow. Appreciating this peaceful moment, I look up, beyond my backyard fence and into the sleepy ravine. There is no visual pollution here. Just stars. No pressure. No wants. Just silence. No beauty ideals to shame me. No pressure. Just peace.

Figure 1 “Abby”

8.5” x 5.5”. Transparent watercolour and felt pen on watercolour paper. Image digitally enhanced. Completed in 2014.
It’s hard not to notice these moments. Most of the time I live in a constant vortex of white noise. These are quiet, but damaging messages that unleash an unyielding pressure. For many years I couldn’t name it, recognize it or even admit it. Though, it is in these moments I am at peace with myself.

It saddens me to think of the many years I lost the ability to enjoy being me. Happy memories were overwritten by feelings of “fatness”. Joy suffocated by disparaging self-talk about my thunder thighs, average hair or the ¼ inch layer of fat that I incessantly pinched off my love handles, constantly seeking false confirmation from friends and family of my real or imagined abject body (Rice, 2014). I grew up living up to the title of “the pretty one”. My height, tall nose and slightly fairer skin were characteristic of the Western aesthetic, rather than Filipina, which earned me the title.

An only child, I grew up amidst an extended family of sporty, smart, creative and talented “ones”. I’m not sure why I thought I could only choose one trait to define me, but my ignorance dismissed the beautiful complexities of living in my body, which moved through the world in a timid and insecure way. A societal construct or self-perceived rule of thumb, this trait quietly travelled with many others: passive, weak, quiet and quick to please. My parents certainly praised a plethora of good qualities about their only child; however they simply hummed in the background of the criticisms of others and even more harshly, me.
I remember being 10 years old, at home sick with the flu and watching Jenny Jones. It was the golden era of late ‘90s daytime television, well, in my opinion as a talk-show aficionado. As usual, thin, scantily clad women decorated the stage with fake breasts and hollow smiles draped in red lipstick, as if all holiday contests and audience giveaways warranted them. I watched as the audience exploded with excitement and enthusiasm, as the women danced daintily across the stage, unveiling prize after prize. Their outfits exposed the seemingly effortless, smooth lines and gentle curves of their body. During the commercial break, I remember standing in front of my parent’s full-length mirror, pinching my thighs back and setting a goal for thinness. I had the stomach flu. I was almost there.

This was also my earliest memory of wanting bigger breasts. Everyone always made fun of me for having two little mosquito bites underneath my training bra, which served as a rite of passage rather than any functionality. To everyone else, this may have looked like typical teenage angst, but my insecurities about my breasts secured my pursuit of thinness. After all, I had to keep my stomach as flat as possible in order to keep my breasts from looking like ant bites.

Standing in front of the mirror, scrutinizing the physical me. This memory set the stage for years of silent turmoil. It hovered over a sea of darker, more desperate memories, like a lily resting on the delicate water tension before a storm. The image staring back at me was a young girl who didn’t question the cruel complexities of society and context in which we live our lives, trying to identify her place in the
world. I made my way back into my cozy bed, made warm by a low-grade fever and closed my eyes. I was sadly oblivious to the shifting shape and colour of my self-perception that followed over time. My self-perception would eventually evolve as it intersected and sometimes collided with the experience, wisdom and love that would arise from life events, societal changes and relationships to come.

I grew up in a middle-class family. My parents, who emigrated from the Philippines, in their early days, struggled to live the middle-class Canadian life. Though I would have never known it, as they carefully hid their financial instability when I was growing up. My only hint was the first Tagalog word I learned to use while shopping as a toddler was, “Mahal?” meaning expensive, as I questioned every little colourful toy my little hands could grasp. I have fond memories of dance class, guitar lessons, our yearly travels overseas and a white picket fence that bordered our home. “Mama, Mama! What’s my surprise?” I would yell as a young child running to my mum with open arms as she came home from work. Almost every day she brought me home a small toy or chocolate bar, as my dad looked on with a worried, yet loving smile from the kitchen stove. My parents did everything for me.

My parents continued to love and support me unconditionally. They calmed me though my studies, my many public speaking panic attacks, they encouraged me in my ever-changing extracurricular interests and supported me through my black lipstick and hard metal phase. They were and are the type of open, yet sometimes overprotective parents that I feel incredibly fortunate to have.
Underneath their noses, something started to change. Thoughts of perfection loomed over everyday life. Rules around the length and fit of my shirts, colours that could and could never go together, the need for low-hip hugging jeans and flawless hair reigned over my thoughts. During sleepovers, friends would warmly joke about “typical Jasmine”, going to bed with a full face of make-up and my signature heavily padded bra. My mother also wondered about the hours I spent in the washroom, picking at every blemish, plucking every out-of-place hair, and straightening, straight hair. It was about control. I even started to find myself, more and more frequently, staring at porcelain than the mirror on the wall.

Food was becoming an internally contentious issue. The food I once enjoyed and celebrated with family was soon perceived as a plate full of fat cells, with a glass of cellulite. When I indulged, I regained control by escaping into the calmness of the closest washroom. I began to feel uncomfortable with smaller and smaller amounts of food, as I imagined it depositing into the foreign places of my body that I rejected as part of my identity. On days when I felt out of control, I sought excitement in the thrill of letting loose and quelling my shame with the ice cold touch of a white ceramic bowl. Despite being of a thin, natural weight, my distorted perceptions saw a fat, undesirable body that needed changing. It didn’t help that my mum would lovingly poke fun at how I had my dad’s legs – short, thick and stubby. I had so called, “thunder thighs” that looked even bigger underneath a slender torso.
Comments about wearing pants that disguised their thickness were relentless – both from myself, and those around me.

So I went on. Staring in the mirror, I celebrated the fruits of my efforts, in the way of defined pelvic bones and the ever-growing space between my thighs, hoping to achieve the look of bowed legs characteristic of malnutrition. By the end of high school, rules about food and physical activity ran rampant, disguised under a cloak of health. Meat only once per day, one meal made entirely of salad greens, a smoothie for lunch. Anything that was full fat was kryptonite. Beneath the banner of health, I started to believe the normality of my efforts. Thinking that I was a shining example of physical health, I found myself at the University fair engaged in a conversation about the dietetics program. Nodding my head and taking a program package, I solidified the decision to apply, not knowing the dark reasons behind my eager ambitions.

Fast-forward two years. I took my first steps onto the University campus walkway. The air smelled of fresh greenery. Towering trees and fat, decorative shrubs lined the walkway to my residence. The smell of fryer grease would waft into my unaccepting nose as I passed the main cafeteria. The hustle and bustle of students stirred loudly in the background as they settled into their new homes away from home.
“My little girl, starting University. Alright!” My dad took his arm and wrapped them tightly around my shoulders. Unsure of what to say, I just smiled back and hid my terror, anxiety and excitement. My parents were ecstatic about me pursuing University, though I could hear the tone of sadness and slight overprotection beneath their jovial banter.

“Lots of boys here – ha? Wag malandi”. My mum laughed with a half serious smile. She was warning me about flirting with boys in Tagalog. Somehow saying it in Tagalog made things seem funnier on the outside and the implication more subtle, yet pervasive. All my ears heard was... mistrust.

Boys were far down the priority list in my mind. I was entering a new world of opportunity, a place to start over and create a new identity. I was far away from home, far away from anything familiar, or safe. Swimming though a sea of people, rushing between classes, making their way to a career... or something more important than high school, made me feel insignificant and small. The ivy growing on the side of a historic building signaled prestige and pressure. New people to meet, impress and needless to say, a reason to intensify my efforts so that I stood out. To be that slender, pretty and smart girl (or at least being on a University campus felt like I had a license to think so). For the next two years I continued as I did, in secret, for fear that my friends and colleagues would see the shame in my actions, as I was learning to be an expert in health and nutrition.
Time Flies When You’re Having…. Study Group

Time passed like a speeding car, rushing toward a destination unknown. Before I knew it, I was studying to ace my next set of exams, while finding volunteer placements to add value to my resume, in anticipation for applying for the next phase after graduation, a dietetic internship. My time was filled with late night studying, writing papers and making big decisions. I didn’t have time to stare at the mirror for hours on end, looking for imperfections. I didn’t have hours of media exposure to shame me. I was too busy proving to myself that I was more than the empty space between my thighs.

My hard work was paying off. I was proving myself wrong left, right and centre. I was skeptical about my presentation skills, but I found the confidence to get through them. I was always horrible at biochemistry, but I studied hard enough to ace the exam. When I thought my only opinions were of self-hate, it turned out that I had tons of hidden opinions on political and economic matters that evoked excellent feedback on my papers. I had reached a point in my University career, where my next steps dictated the opportunities that would be available to me. I didn’t have time to think about anything else, but build on the success of my good grades and my newfound, non-weight based ambition. I had found a source of self-worth that I had finally listened to.
The summer going into my third year of University, I had met Devin, the man of my dreams while vacationing in the Dominican Republic with a bunch of girlfriends. He was quiet and a bit shy, though kept his gaze anchored onto my eyes, like nothing else existed. He was different. Certainly different than past boyfriends who seemed to perpetuate and feed off my insecurities. I had never met a man that so rarely commented on my, or anyone’s appearance. It was like he never saw my body, my clothes, my hair... just me. Just my authentic self. Of course, it would irk me that he wouldn’t notice when I tried to look my best, but that was okay. I needed that. I needed to have my environment shift away from a focus on appearance. Devin appreciated my good nature, my humour, my clumsiness, my intellect, even when I didn’t. Everything was falling into place. I was doing well in school. I had a clear path toward the career goals I had set for myself. I was confident. I had a healthy and positive romantic relationship. I had supportive family and friends that I cherished spending time with. I even started challenging my body in a new way by running 5k, 10k and not long after, a few half marathons. Soon, I was able to see myself as a strong, smart, complex person, more than just an outer, insecure shell with small boobs and thunder thighs.
Figure 2 “Beauty”

8.5” x 5.5”. Transparent watercolour and felt pen on watercolour paper. Image digitally enhanced. Completed in 2014.

My recovery happened organically. It was a process that required dedication, but flourished in a space that favoured it. I’ve learned that “feeling fat” isn’t a feeling at all. It’s a mask that disguises insecurity, low self-esteem, perfectionism and host of others depending on your experiences, surroundings and the harsh exposure to elements – a war zone of media saturation and oppression. It is no wonder body hatred exists. Women have been socialized to view their bodies as a tool to be displayed, not one of utility. To view fractions of bodies, devoid of all the complexities of a whole identity. The problem is, pretty is not a function. With being strong and athletic, you can strive to achieve medals, win tournaments and feel accomplished with performing at your best. With intelligence, you can achieve good grades, scholarships, degrees and the power to help change the world. With compassion, you help others feel validated, heard and supported. Being pretty is not
a function. If you perceive it as a singular characteristic to define you, then, the only thing left for you to strive for is an externally oriented, social standard of perfection... a toxic achievement. In pleasing the watchful eyes of patriarchy and capitalism, you strive to maintain a body that isn’t authentically yours, especially if it requires such a tremendous and unreasonable amount of effort (Hooks, Czarnik-Neimeyer, Denise, Troutman, 2014). Of course, function as a singular definition of self is also limiting. Feeling beautiful is necessary. We all want and deserve to feel beautiful. In contrast to hegemonic beauty ideology, giving ourselves permission and having the space in society to be our authentic selves, living in our authentic bodies (in whatever way matches our inner spirit and intent), should, without limits look and feel beautiful.

I wish I were born with this fragment of wisdom. I didn’t realize it at the time, but beauty ideology and the media had, and still do, have a strong voice within my narrative. Every time I would pinch the ¼ inch fat of my love handles and notice the unsatisfactory space between my thighs, I was comparing myself to something. Every time I forwent the sunscreen in the hopes of achieving the bronze hue of sun damage, I was almost there. Yes, I was probably looking for a sense of security, self-confidence and self-love, but there was something that kept telling me that I wasn’t quite enough. After all, that’s where ideology operates. It’s machinery works within the elusive space of unattainable and unyielding desire for perfection that is ever changing.
The more I am aware of it, the more I am able to destabilize it, even just for a few moments. Yet, those few moments can change the way I look at myself, and how I make meaning of the world. It takes work and like anyone else I fall easily into the abyss of wasted time, energy and money on the pursuit of perfect hair, makeup and clothing. Ideology thrives on blind desire and with media sources at such a mature stage of access and influence; I don’t think it’s an uncommon affliction in this generation.

Since then, I have come to know my potential to act in the world, not just to be seen. My relationship with the world became a reflexive one. I move through it, act on it and form relationships in it. I filter the messages it sends, accepting those that bring respect, kindness and truth and remain critical of those that don’t. Though, I’m thankful for this new relationship, I recognize that my experience is not the same as people who move through the world in bigger bodies. Where peace and acceptance with their bodies are at war with the constant judgment of society’s cruel misconceptions. I’m fortunate that my thin privilege masks my fight, but feel saddened at the long journey to democratizing this kind of peace.

Today, when I see “thunder thighs”, I see strength, not fatness. I see utility. They help me run fast and run strong. I see small breasts that enclose a compassionate heart. I see outer beauty and have come to appreciate the diversity in what is beautiful. The voices of externally oriented standards of beauty are getting weaker and more muffled. I see the beauty in the faint lines that are starting
to trace my smile, as the joys of every year gone by are being written on my face. I see the beauty in food... the joy, nourishment and memories that come with it. This is how I’ve come to identify myself. I recognize that these identities are dynamic and ever changing. They change as my identity intersects with experience. How will I see and make sense of my body, as I grow into a mother or grandmother?
Chapter 3

Alice in Wonderland

It’s Saturday night. Now into my late twenties, I find my Saturday nights filled with less cosmopolitans and more popcorn, perched on a comfy couch and an open invitation to whoever would like to join. Tonight, my 12-year old niece decided to take me up on the offer and spend the night watching Disney’s Alice in Wonderland. We watch closely as Alice navigates a strange and dark, yet eerily wonderful dream world filled with mysterious characters and a multiplicity of illusions that have you questioning a drug-induced mental state of the writers. Like my niece, I too was roped into every odd twist and turn, without any rational questioning of why a rabbit would ever need pocket watch.

I couldn’t help but drift back and forth into the weird and wicked world of beauty ideology. I was first introduced to the work of Slavoj Zizek, a psychoanalyst, culture critic and Slovenian Marxist on another one of those Netflix Saturday nights of mine (The European Graduate School, 2012). My mind was fried from a day of lounging around the house, so I decided to click on a documentary called *A Pervert’s Guide to Ideology* (2013). Three hours and forty-seven minutes into the two and a half-hour movie, my mind was a moving train. I hung on to each statement, rewinding back and marrying his words with the ideologies of beauty. His simple statement of “we live in ideology” redefines ideology as being in a reflexive relationship with society, as opposed to the often-perceived devious fictional...
character that magically appears and bestows his manipulative actions upon us. This is one of the reasons why ideology is inescapable. Often mired in oppressive systems, dominant and hegemonic ideologies are embedded in very institution, every advertisement, every choice, every way we measure ourselves and oddly enough, every food choice.

Figure 3 “Slavoj Zizek”

5.5” x 8.5”. Transparent watercolour and felt pen on watercolour paper. Image digitally enhanced. Completed in 2014.
Another powerful theory of ideology from Zizek is that violence is a reaction to the inability to realize the ideology. He used the example of the 1976 classic *Taxi Driver*, where a young Robert Di Nero plays Travis Bickle, a lonely and depressed ex-marine who roams the seedy underground culture of New York City (IMDb, 2015). Zizek proposes that Travis’ inability to attain love, money and freedom mobilizes him to become a vigilante hero and violent martyr. This, in some twisted way, redeems him and allows him to take a piece of ideology with him.

When it comes to beauty, the majority of the violence inflicted, isn’t as obvious, though equally gory. In an effort to realize the ideological body, violence is imposed on our bodies by physically cutting, manipulating, implanting, breaking and reshaping it to resemble that of the ideological body. Although many women and men are choosing to go under the knife, we also inflict more subtle versions of this violence to our bodies (and our pockets!) with toxin infused wrinkle injections, chemical laden anti-aging creams, numbing lip plumping lipstick, noxious synthetic perfumes, baking in the natural or synthetic sun to achieve a cancerous glow and the list goes on.

We also choose to nourish our bodies based on this pursuit. Our bodies get deprived of key nutrients as a reaction to the moral panic created by the *obesity epidemic*, which successfully crafted a destructive culture of fat shaming and fat-phobia…. And voila! The culture of chronic dieting was born. Dieting has even worked its way into the identity of women. It’s become a normative standard to
always be on a diet. This subtle and elusive form of violence has slithered its way into our daily conversations as we remark on other’s (or lack of) weight loss, we compare dieting stories, tips, experiences and inform each other of the latest Dr. Oz endorsed diets. With a steady diet of calorie controlled, industrially made, nutritionally empty, pseudo-foods, we effectively under-nourish our bodies and layer a sense of guilt for our cravings, which are perhaps, a result of under-nutrition and the oppressive, deprivation of the joys of food. We also sprinkle a hearty portion of blame as we fault ourselves for “a lack of will-power”.

Figure 4 “An Ugly Chaos”

5.5” x 8.5”. Transparent watercolour and felt pen on watercolour paper. Image digitally enhanced. Completed in 2014.
Even when we shift the processed, calorie-controlled pseudo-foods aside in favour of whole, nutrient dense foods and mindful-eating practices, as well as regular and enjoyable physical activity, some people believe it is still not enough. After all, is there such thing as a healthy amount of arm jiggle? So we restrict more and push ourselves to work out more than our bodies enjoy and can tolerate. All of this, to find a balance, not in life or in a true sense of health, but a balance of calories in, calories out and avoiding the misguided yet well meaning, weight-based warnings from our health care providers telling us we’re too heavy to be healthy, while they dismiss the value to asking the details of our lifestyles habits.

Unfortunately, society as a whole – the media, the medical community, friends and family, has conflated weight and health into an unrecognizable monster (Bacon, 2010). As a result, we make judgments about health based on a person’s weight and not by their lifestyle, stress level, sleep, relationships or level of happiness. We develop studies with conclusions that focus on weight as being the primary cause of all ailments and ignore the negative lifestyle habits, as well as other factors such as poverty, trauma, racism, sexism, homophobia and so on. Studies that, at the very least, asked about the lifestyle of the participants or intervened using modified health behaviours, show less and less support for losing weight as being the holy grail of health (Bacon, 2010).

As health is intertwined with a narrow vision of an “acceptable” weight and shape and is layered with an insatiable desire that beauty ideology creates, we are
effectively creating a shrinking identity that has less room for what makes us happy, whole and fulfilled. I remember watching a documentary called, *MissRepresentation* (2011) and one particular quote from Katie Couric had since stayed with me, “If women spent more time helping a sick neighbor or volunteering at a homeless shelter... focusing on how to use all their energy to solve some of the world’s problems... if they spent a tenth of the time thinking about those things then they do thinking about their weight, we’d solve all the world’s problems in a matter of months.” My struggles and triumphs with food and body image, my experience as a dietitian and my newfound understandings and curiosities about oppressive systems and hegemonic ideologies have deeply influenced my perspective and culminated in this chapter’s rant. They’ve shaped the way I see food and body image, both within myself and it’s relationship with the world around me. Though I recognize, this is just one perspective.

Though I find solace in the arms of the counter-culture documentaries, books, organizations and research about beauty and health, they often tell the stories of those who are in their teens, young adulthood or middle-age. Unfortunately, we don’t hear much from seniors who struggle within these beauty ideologies like the rest of us. In my practice as a Registered Dietitian, working in primary care, I often see older women in the context of health, while yearning to hear stories that crafted their perspectives. At times, I’ll catch a glimpse of the other aspects of their lives that influence their eating, for example, the stress created by family disagreements, the weight of heavy financial and life decisions, isolation,
reminiscing about earlier days and so on. More often than not, I’ll hear comments about “losing weight to help my knees” and “needing to slim down for my granddaughters wedding”. I have an hour to gather an assessment, in other words a story. My curious mind gets to explore many questions and those about their perceptions of body image and age always linger at the tip of my tongue, but are handcuffed to the back of my throat in fear of being “out of my scope of practice”.

Chapter 3
I am sitting in my office, listening to my client bare her vulnerabilities. The room is quite, the walls soaking in the intricate details, like the others before her. This time, she’s a 79 year-old woman, whose physician sent her to me for weight loss. Although diet based interventions can put older adults at risk of compromising their muscle mass, older adults who suffer the pain of arthritis or other conditions seek weight loss, hoping to find relief under the false pretense that weight loss is the only way.

This is my third session with her and I’m honoured that she felt safe enough to tell me more. She eats well, has a balance of nutritious foods, eats regular meals and loves to cook. She is active, has many hobbies and is part of many social groups, like the choir and joins friends in tai chi. Despite all of these healthful habits that keep her nourished, active and in good spirits, her goals continue to focus on weight loss. Every time she leaves my office, I can’t help but feel helpless, as all I could offer is a discussion on natural weights and try to shift her focus away from weight-based measures of health. She was, politely, not having any of it. “I want to get rid of this”, she says, as she takes both hands and violently grabs her stomach. I begin to realize how much of her motivations for weight loss stem from her desire for thinness.
Like many, she disclosed her feelings of failure after her increasingly frequent trips to the freezer for ice cream and pie. Clients often expect a discussion on portion control and suggestions of “light”, and often tasteless, versions of these indulgences; however it is these misconceptions of dietitians that often create feelings of an unsafe environment, full of judgment and disdain. I gently encouraged her to recall the emotions she felt, the triggers that enveloped these urges for rebellion and the thoughts that led to needless feelings of guilt and shame, which provided some insight into her personal relationship with food.

She recalled organizing old pictures that she took with her, after recently downsizing. Picture after picture, while an old movie from the 1950s played on TCM (the classic movie channel) in the background. “I used to be so thin.... You know, it’s hard when you see those beautiful and slim movie stars and everything is perfect”. It seemed as though the perception of physical perfection was a solution to whatever was imperfect in her life. It is wrong to assume that only teens, young adults and pre-menopausal women fall captive to the magnetic, false promises of beauty ideals that lay juxtaposed to the realities of aging. Unfortunately, there are very few examples within the media of healthy, vibrant aging. Betty White seems to be the one of the very few that get any air time. Despite the subversive and damaging messages of self-hate and shame of anti-aging campaigns of the 21st century, aging is beautiful. Each wrinkle, age spot, scar and body change tells a story. It shows that we’re all unique, dynamic and ever changing. Our bodies tell stories of joy, sorrow, new life, stress, happiness and the list goes on. Our bodies also reflect the food
available in our environments, as well as points in our lives where it was feast or famine. Our bodies also serve as a barometer for environmental exposure to chemicals of the industrial age. They reflect the choices we make and the choices that are made for us. Our bodies reflect what we think, feel and how we respond internal and external cues. Our bodies are the vessel that forms relationships not only with others, but with ourselves. Many things, including food, body image and age, contextualize our relationship with the world and with ourselves. Our bodies are meant to be different. Unfortunately, they have been submissively reduced to the narrow varieties of body shapes, sizes, ages and skin colours, remiss of their individual stories and experiences.

All of this remains in the cerebral part of my brain that wishes it could pour these discussions into our sessions. I don’t know what silences me. Perhaps it is the fear of being outside my scope of practice, not having enough “evidence” or fear of rejection in my counter-culture messaging. Whatever it is, I hope to one day overcome them, as I can feel these unsaid thoughts burn a hole through my heart. I thought of her on my drive home. I wondered what she had left my office thinking, whether I had any imprint at all or if that imprint would last after her next appointment with her physician.
Chapter 5

The Dog Days are Over

That same night I rushed home to pick up my dog for her annual vet check. I’m glad my dog doesn’t understand English, well. Like many others, she would probably have started a life of body-hatred a while ago. About a month ago I brought my 3 year-old cock-a-poo, Abby, to the vet and like many doctor’s appointments, it began with a routine measure of her weight. “Ahhh, 20.5 pounds. That’s 0.5 pounds more than last time. Well, I guess if she just stays that way it will be okay. No more than that though”. My very presumptuous, yet lovely vet warned.

Figure 5 “Ignorance is Bliss”
5.5” x 8.5”. Transparent watercolour and felt pen on watercolour paper. Image digitally enhanced. Completed in 2014.
I slowly begin to feel fire ignite from my gut and spread through my veins. “Again?” I thought. Did she even ask about her lifestyle, eating habits or activity level? Who is she to tell me that her weight isn’t healthy? Her blood work (yes, she gets blood work!) always comes back normal and for all intents and purposes, she is a well-rounded, happy dog. She gets two walks a day, 30 minutes each and a 20-minute play session outside to get her heart rate up. We take her hiking all year round and swims her little heart out at the cottage in the summer - all of which she enjoys and would never consider it exercise or an attempt to control her weight. Her dog bowl is constantly full of dog food that’s well balanced and natural. She eats intuitively. She eats when she’s hungry and stops when she’s full. She gives me her paw 2-3 times a day for a few treats, though mostly made up of her favourite vegetables - raw carrots and broccoli. Does this sound unreasonable? Would strapping her onto a treadmill make her any healthier, let alone happier? Would I be reducing her risk of heart disease by measuring out what how much food I think she needs, leaving her to depend on someone else or the time of day to decide whether she needs nourishment? What would Abby think if she could understand those offensive and poorly evidenced comments pouring out of this vet’s mouth? Or, if she could read the label on the bag of kibble displayed at their reception area, Weight Control Formula. How would she view our time together outside? Would she think twice about approaching her bowl of food? How would this change her? Unlike in the human world, I guess in the dog world, ignorance is bliss.
I remember my first car. It was a green, US army jeep that I bought for a really cheap price after the US liberation. All the chicks used to look at me. They all wanted to ride in it. It had a small radio and I used to turn it up really loud so everyone could hear. I remember being so excited to pick your Lola up in it. It was our first date. I was so nervous...

Figure 6 “Lolo”
5.5” x 8.5”. Transparent watercolour and felt pen on watercolour paper. Image digitally enhanced. Completed in 2014.
I was sitting by my grandfather’s bed listening to stories of his young adulthood. He grew up in the Philippines during the Japanese occupation and then, the U.S. liberation. He told me stories of playing with toys, while eyes dropping on conversations about politics. His dad was a pro-American Mayor of the town, who was well known for his dedication to improving the community, his love for his family and of course, for his fedoras. His palette was raised on traditional Filipino foods, as well as a healthy dose of processed Western foods, a luxury that signaled their allegiance. Food was a sign of wealth and affording to dine out was a mark of prosperity and health. Even when he immigrated to Canada, Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC™) always won over my step-grandma’s Caldaretta and half-melted Werther’s™ candies always lined his linty pockets.

Now in his eighties, his days are filled with reminiscing from the hospital-type bed, perched by his window. His once insatiable appetite for KFC™ has been replaced with a struggle to finish one bottle of Ensure™ and a few bites of a Tim Horton’s™ Sour Cream donut. “Food is just prolonging my life. I’m ready to go.” He said softly. I’ll never forget these words. Before then, I had never thought about food in this way. My whole career has been centred on nutrition as giving life; however what about those who no longer want to live? The very nutrients that were sustaining him were actually keeping him in shackles. Everyone’s relationship with food, body image and age are truly different. There are so many stories to be told...and heard. I immediately held my tongue, as I was about to encourage one more bite of his donut.
In reflecting on my own life history, my interest in the seniors I encounter through my work as a dietitian, as well as my observations of how mainstream beauty culture can penetrate our relationship to food and perceptions of self, it was natural that my curiosity led me to explore the histories of older women. Though, before I convey the purpose of this research, as it relates to older women, my intention behind this thesis is three fold. Firstly, I felt it was important to write my own history not only to locate myself as a researcher, but also for selfish reasons. I included my story as process of healing. This is first time I have made my struggles with food and body image public knowledge. The vulnerability I have and will continue to experience with such accessibility to my story is one of the last, liberating pieces of recovery for me. Secondly, I wanted to explore whether beauty ideologies were unique to a younger age group of women, or if it were also a dominant character in the histories of older women. I wanted to understand the conditions and experiences that led older women, women over 70, to perceive food, body image and age, in whichever way they did. I wanted to hear stories that were rarely brought to the surface, especially experiences that were anchored in different points in history. I wanted to explore how these influences cultivate differences and sameness among histories of women. Lastly, I recognize there is a growing body of narrative research and books written on this topic, or at least one of food, body image or age. While the value of exploring narratives among women have been
honoured and legitimized as research, the perspectives of women over the age of 70 continue to be underrepresented.

The difficulty with embarking on this journey into life history research is that I was trained in the medical model of what legitimized knowledge. Throughout my academic and professional career, streams of empirical data raced off the page of my textbooks and journal articles, made a brief imprint into my brain and simply disappeared amongst the rest of the knowledge trying to make its way in. I remember cringing every time I read the words, *not statistically significant,* as studies would dismiss a participant's experience – positive or damaging. Now, I read studies to keep my clinical knowledge up-to-date and piece together an understanding of certain topics to help, at least partially, explain a client's nutrition-related ailment and provide the best direction to move forward. Though, these types of studies don't always help when navigating the weird and not-so-wonderful world of weight, health, food and body image.

There are a multitude of studies, crafted in a positivist paradigm, that make seemingly absolute connections and causations of poor health based on weight alone. They often bypass the complexities of nutritional intake, physical activity, smoking, alcohol, stress, sleep, trauma, poverty, education and other factors that determine health (Bacon, 2010). It is also rare to see the intersection of media influence, body image and beauty ideals with other health-based outcomes. Participants get lumped into a weight category that fails to explain the nuance of
each individual story. We often think those connections and causations are benign. We often think the message about obesity and health is innocuous. They're not. Stories of fat shaming, disordered eating, moral panic, low self-confidence and health access inequality are all buried underneath the harsh concrete foundation of obesity research.

Life history research on the other hand, gives a voice to the stories that encapsulate knowledge. It is a type of qualitative research that helps make meaning of life histories within a broader social and historical context (Muchmore, 1999). Life histories carry meaningful experiences that contextualize phenomena that lead us to an understanding. Unlike more traditional forms of qualitative research that codes, cuts, reduces, categorizes and separates experiences from a broader story, life history examines and explores whole histories, within a particular context and allows themes surface. For me, it was the vehicle for exploring and co-creating an understanding of the perspectives of food, body image and age in older women.

Many people misunderstand life history research. Some relegate the methodology to the fringe areas of more traditional and readily accepted research methods due to its allowance and encouragement of creativity, personal connection and placement of the researcher. Despite these freeing qualities, life history research is anchored methodology and process. Throughout my process of inquiry and analysis, I am guided by these enduring principles, (Cole & Knowles, 2001):
1. Stay true to the artful quality of life history in my representation. Stories inherently have an artful quality to them. There is a craft to the imagery and the creation of an experience as real and authentic as possible to the reader, as the story itself.

2. To be intentional in my writing and be committed to a moral purpose. By deconstructing the relationship of lived experience to our perceptions of food, body image and age, I hope to expose the elements - socially, institutionally and culturally, that allow a person to have a nuanced, joyful and at times, negative relationship with food and their bodies. My intention is to add these narratives to a body of literature that underrepresents the perspectives of women over the age of 70.

3. To always be present in my writing. I am careful not to mislead readers into thinking that my writing is unbiased. We all see the world through a different lens, but a lens nonetheless. I want to lend my lens in order to help readers glean the inner-workings of how I interpret meaning from the stories told. To achieve this, I try to make an honest attempt to be as reflexive in my writing as possible.

4. Remember that there are no absolute truths. Contrary to what I’ve been taught in the past, my role as a researcher is not to uncover an absolute and generalizable truth that subjects lived experience to hollow explanations and correlations. My role as a researcher is to mutually uncover stories that are coloured and contextualized by a personally relevant, though transparent line of inquiry.
I feel honoured and extremely fortunate to have two courageous and fascinating women graciously agree to take me on a journey into the stories that punctuate the different eras of their lives and shape their perspectives. Over several days, I spent time with them, eating cookies and drinking tea, while my ears and voice recorder soaked in all the buttery, yet delicate details. Although how I met Sam and Lina was serendipitous, each element of how this thesis is crafted, is intentional.

Together, 10 hours of interviews were manually transcribed and analyzed chronologically, line-by-line, making sure to listen to each and every inflection and meditate on the meaning of every pregnant pause. I asked myself several different questions to help me make sense of it all. Why did this story stand out to me? What was the significance of this? How are food, body image and age oriented within this story? How do my perspectives compare? I paid close attention to every nuance of their reactions. Each pause, smile and downward gaze reflected the impact of each experience and gave insight into the type of emotions that permeated Sam and Lina’s memories. Keeping these observations present throughout my writing facilitated the meaning making processes by affording the time and reflection needed to formalize my thoughts and make sense of the many pieces and complexities of their lives in context.

Art has always been my vehicle for integrating and synthesizing my understanding, which is why I added visual representations to each chapter. After
analyzing each story and reflecting on my loosely drafted chapters, I put pen (and paintbrush) to paper in a more visually creative way to add vigor to the meaning making process. Some pieces reflect feelings I perceived Sam and Lina to be experiencing in the moment of the interview or at the time of the story being told. Some reflect the feelings that I experienced listening to them. Some reflect the imagery that surfaced during my analysis. Some reflect the story’s orientation to ideologies of our culture and society. All reflect the significance that I came away with.

In writing up their narratives, I did my best to present the fullest version of their histories. Each story was written, some in more detail than others; some paraphrased and some verbatim. We took a few tangential adventures, which I decided to exclude. For example, Lina’s stories of former students who are now famous, stories of her father’s experience as a young child, and an unfortunate family issue that was causing her much stress that she asked me to omit. Everything else, I felt it important to include, to keep their histories as whole as I could present them. Of course, being written through the lens of my experience, I also felt it was important for myself, as the researcher, be present in my writing. I did my best to be honest and to be transparent by infusing my retelling of their stories with my reactions, thoughts, questions and feelings that surfaced with each layer of discovery. I wanted to ensure that readers were presented whole histories, while never losing sight of how they were oriented.
Since Sam and Lina’s narratives were told chronologically, as they were recounted, the chapters are separated by breaks in their storytelling, rather than the themes that surfaced. It is an unconventional way of dividing and arranging the structure of the thesis, especially with so many chapters contained in just over 100 pages of narrative. I felt this was the best way for me to reflect the snapshots of time that Sam and Lina welcomed me into. Some of these snapshots were more robust than others, so their weight was represented in the length of these chapters. Some of these snapshots were less detailed; stories seemingly meant to remain in the background to support other, more noteworthy stories. One thing I’ve learned through counseling as a dietitian, even the smallest stories deserve a place at the table. They may not be groundbreaking, but they still provide insight. More importantly, they provoke curiosity. They prompted questions that arose long after the interview and unfortunately, after I had the opportunity to get answers to them. Sadly, one year after the interviews were conducted, Sam had died and Lina was struggling with acute health issues, too serious to be available for a final review of this thesis. Part of my methodology was to work together with Sam and Lina in co-creating this thesis. To obtain their feedback on what was included, excluded and to co-create meaning, I was only able so show them bits and pieces of my writing before I received news of Sam’s death and the severity of Lina’s health issues and so for this reason, I felt all of their stories no matter how small, needed to be honoured with full chapters, rather than be relegated to chapter subheadings. It was still important to me that their family members received a copy of this thesis. Unfortunately, Sam was an only child and did not speak of any living family
members. She spoke of her close friends; however I had no way of contacting them, especially without knowing their full names. I was also unsure about the ethics of contacting her friends, whom she may not have wanted to disclose parts of her history. Thankfully, I was still able to contact Lina and her husband Harry, who received a copy.

Each chapter was placed in one of four parts of this thesis relating to the histories of Sam, Lina, myself, or in the final part that contains my analysis and final reflections. Throughout the thesis, time is spent on themes that arise, which threads each story together - themes, such as family relationships, peer influence, financial stability, life achievements and the physical and emotional effects of a decline in health. These themes were present in the storytelling and explored in greater detail later in the text under the foci of food, body image and age. To explore these themes, I gathered a number of different sources of information to draw from, ranging from journal articles, narrative books, to documentaries. Some sources I actively searched for to fill the gaps in my knowledge and others I encountered in my day to day that sparked new revelations and lines of inquiry. This was an intentional shift away from the sole use of peer reviewed journal articles to inform my understanding. I wanted to honour one of the most important points about knowledge that I’ve taken away from my studies in education - there are many forms of legitimate knowledge and the inclusion of these varying forms of knowledge can still be considered scholarly.
This methodology and structure allowed me the freedom to explore the fullness of Sam and Lina’s narratives, as their histories are rich. They uncover insights within and beyond the context of food, body image and age. Their stories are telling and inspiring. They're funny and somber. They so eloquently capture the essence of a singular moment, yet simultaneously embody the complexities of life.
PART TWO:

Sam
Ever since I met Sam, I've been drawn to her story. I met her through a colleague at work and I was so happy to hear that she was interested in my research. I was excited to meet with her that day. I pulled into the parking lot of her building and parked by the beautiful manicured gardens on Fashion Avenue. I walked into the lobby and anxiously rehearsed some of the questions I was hoping to ask her. I always believed that good interviews were supposed to happen organically, but the type “A” personality in me needed a back-up plan. I wiped my palms onto my skirt and dialed her entrance code.

Bzzz....bzzzz....

“Hello.”

“Hi Sam, it’s me... Jasmine.”

“Come on up, I’m on the 8th floor in 801”.

I pushed the heavy glass door and headed to the beautiful wood crafted elevators. I gently knocked on the door, hoping to appear less intrusive than I had already been, taking up her time on a beautiful summer’s day. She greeted me with a warm smile and I immediately felt more at ease. She dressed well – sharp and polished without making you feel underdressed. She wore a crisp white collared shirt that hung comfortably on her body and were tucked into heather grey trousers. Her gold earrings, with ornate filigree glinted in the sunshine that came through her large floor to ceiling windows.
Her house was impeccable. Elegantly decorated without a speck of dust in sight. Her home had order. Every envelope of mail, book, placemat and painting had a place.

“Would you like coffee or tea?” Sam asked.

“Tea please. Thank you so much.”

“Great, I’m a tea person too.”

Figure 7 “If Teacups Could Talk”

8.5” x 5.5”. Transparent watercolour and felt pen on watercolour paper. Image digitally enhanced. Completed in 2014.

She poured the two cups of tea in beautiful, white and rose coloured teacups, with hand-painted details and matching saucers. I offered to help, but she insisted that I sit down and get comfortable. I sat on her sofa in the living room and took out some paper, a pen and my voice recorder. I placed the recorder on the coffee table,
where a decadent plate of chocolate covered biscuits sat. Next to the biscuits was a coffee table cookbook filled with recipes, with a cover photo that made my mouth instantly water.

Through our casual banter, before getting to the interview, I learned that Sam was a very social person. Her face lit up as she spoke of her Sunday afternoons playing bridge with her girlfriends and traveling with them to exotic and far off places. Even scheduling a time to meet was a bit tricky, as she juggled bridge, yoga, physiotherapy, social outings and her medical appointments. She also took interest courses at York University and indulged in the liberal arts.

“So tell me about your early years...” Sam began her story with painting a picture of Montreal. She was born in a small town just north of the city in 1936. My mind wandered into the town – imagining the history that comes with cobble stone walkways, the streets lined with the humble shops and restaurants of the 30s. I can hear the faint chatter of French being spoken, possibly about the pre-WWII conflicts or the Great Depression. I continue walking the street and explore her childhood.

Sam was an only child, born to parents who emigrated from Scotland. Her Scottish roots glinted in the sun, as her auburn hair soaked the warmth from the 8th floor window. It was clear she had a very close relationship with her parents. Unlike many of the fathers during her time, he was at home versus being overseas. He had a
long history of illnesses, like Scarlet fever and a following mastoid operation, which prevented him from serving in the war.

She spoke of them fondly. “Mother was a homemaker, but hairdresser by trade. She used to cut all my friends hair. Everyone would just come over.... Our house was the kind of house that was always open.” I start to imagine a woman with short, auburn hair and curls tucked behind her ear like a smiling June Cleaver with a lemonade tray in hand. “Mother was shy as a young girl. Apparently my mother was desperately shy as a youngster, but certainly came out of her shell. She was very stoic, a very wise woman”. I then imagined the same woman, with more stories and emotion behind her stoic shell, holding a tray of lemonade.

Sam loved to bake. “Cookies, chocolate cakes, you name it. Though my mum always hated the mess I made afterward.” Her face lit up. You could see the joy in her eyes, as she remembered simpler days when food was fun. “When I was a little kid we had this great big kitchen in our French-Canadian duplex. The kitchen was the biggest room in the house. We had this big long table... and my mother would bake and I still remember being on my hands and knees, hanging over the table, watching her. And then she’d let me mix together flour and water or something. I was interested in baking right from the start.”

Her voice became playful. “When I started to bake, mother couldn’t stand it. She said, ‘Leave the kitchen the way you found it!’ That’s how it started, but I
remember getting my cooking badge from girl guides. When I was in grade 7, I won first prize for making a chocolate cake with seven minute frosting! I was so pleased because I got a little red recipe tin and a blue ribbon.”

She described her diet as being “mainly meat and potatoes”. Though her mum loved to cook, she seemed to be unable to unleash her mastery due to a number of dietary restrictions her father had. Her father had suffered from multiple duodenal ulcers, aggravated by a chronic high level of stress at the time. He later needed a partial gastrectomy, which further exacerbated his list of tolerable foods.

“From the time I remember, my mother catered to his stomach. He’d be on a milky diet or one where you would cut (everything) out. You know, under doctor’s supervision. Sometimes, he would only have apples and porridge. The one thing that I can remember as a kid is cornstarch pudding, which was made of milk, sugar, thickened with cornstarch and jam on top”. This seemed like a subtle, yet powerful introduction to food at its most functional level. Food sounded prescriptive and based on merely symptom management. It sounded free from the complexities of meaning... and joy. Just bare sustenance.

As a kid, Sam ate everything. She didn’t seem to have any picky tendencies, as she says. “I was never one to say I didn’t want it”. Things were quite structured at home, “for example, shepherd’s pie on Mondays, hot roast beef on Saturdays and
cold roast beef on Sunday”, her nose crinkled and her face went sour. Sunday sounded like her least favourite day of the week.

Sam went on to tell me she grew up in the suburbs, just north of Montreal. “I lived at home as an only child, but it never felt that way because my parents were wonderful and our door was always open to any of my friends!” She had always been a social butterfly. I had imagined a burst of laughter as a bunch of 6 year-old kids fled through the doorway, into her kitchen. Her home seemed lively and full of chatter, even though it was mostly just the three of them.

Sam was close to her parents. “My mother and I developed the most wonderful friendship... when I was older”. She paused. It was almost like she was remembering a specific time, when her relationship was distant and cold. I desperately wanted to tap into her moment of reflection; though I had a feeling my curiosity didn’t have a place there. Out of respect, I swallowed my questions.
When Sam was 6 years old, she was diagnosed with polio, a highly contagious viral infection that ravaged the western hemisphere during its peak in 1940 (Rutty, 1999). In 1943, there were 1612 cases in Quebec alone. It was devastating for her family. Knowing its potential to cause long-term paralysis and even death was difficult. She spent several lonely months recovering in hospital and was finally able to go home. As her eyes gazed into the past, it was clear, she was in dark place. “This was very hard on my father”.

It seemed like a transformative event for her relationship with her father. She took a breath and sipped her tea. “My father and I had our times... but I look back in retrospect and ummm...he had a very profound influence on me and some of it wasn't great and some of it was fine." Again, she paused curiously. “He adored me and he was so anxious that I do well. He never said that you have to get an ‘A’ and you have to do this, but I, being the sensitive kid I was, I felt the pressure to do well and be a bit of a goodie goodie.” I knew exactly what she meant. “Yes, I did feel that pressure, but I can’t say it was because of them. My father said, ‘you can do anything you like, you can be a secretary... you can do anything’. By the time I was fourteen, I knew I wanted to be a physiotherapist and I never wavered from that. They were thrilled.”
“If we are thinking in terms of body image... I got really quite chubby. I was a solid kid. Just...you know... normal figure. I was the tallest kid in the class, during those early years.” Sam smiled with a soft shrug of her shoulders. Her voice was calm with a faint undertone of pride. She seemed at peace with her body at this age. There was no judgment in her tone. No shame to be implied with a crinkled nose or crooked smile.

“I did start to blossom in earlier puberty or pre-puberty and I got a bit chunky. My mother was really upset because she couldn’t get clothes to fit me. Kids today nine and ten (years old) pick out anything they want, but in those days we didn’t have the money and none of my parent’s friends were in the upper echelon bracket...” Puberty was the first time she mentioned feeling uncomfortable in her body. Well, more so the first sign of external discomfort about her body. It seemed like a rational and pragmatic take on body dissatisfaction, though unfortunate nonetheless. Until now, I had never thought of body image within the context of financial constraints.

“My mother was quite disturbed (by this) and my mother said... ‘I think Sam needs to lose some weight’. My father said, ‘LEAVE HER. She’s just fine!’ That was the only thing they fought or disagreed about.” Despite a curious pause that completed
her sentence, it was clear her father adored her as she was and protected her.

Though, the tension felt strong. As if they were arguing by the television in front of me, while Sam’s body sat quietly on the couch being debated.

Figure 8 “Body Tension”

8.5” x 5.5”. Transparent watercolour and felt pen on watercolour paper. Image digitally enhanced. Completed in 2014.

“In grade 7, I cut out the second piece of chocolate cake and chose milk instead, you know just modified my diet, with my mother’s help. No pressure, and that worked well.” Sam looked at me with an assuring smile. I remember how joyful that moment was as a kid. Getting a slice of moist, fudgy chocolate cake was such a treat and that excitement of even possibly getting a second piece used to put me over the moon. It didn’t happen often, but when it did, it was a moment to remember. To hear that moment be snuffed out by a weight standard was hard.
She was pleased with herself for losing the weight. This seemed to be the first time she felt like her body needed changing. Though, it seemed to be in a *matter of fact* kind of way, devoid of emotion, self-loathing and internal struggle. I wondered how distant her feelings of the time were from this hindsight perspective.

At the age of 15 to 17 years old, she was 5 foot 7 and a half and was 140lbs. “I had a really good figure... I was solid, I was a swimmer”. She exuded strength. Utility. Confidence. She was happy with her solid, strong body. Dieting seemed like a more distant practice buried in her pre-pubescent years. “But at age 16 and a half, my father was transferred to Toronto.” He was working for J.S. Fry & Sons, which eventually became a wholly owned subsidiary of the multinational confectionary giant Cadbury in 1935 (The National Archives, n.d.). He was transferred as Ontario’s new branch manager. “I was devastated. I had just been named captain of the swimming team, it was my last year of high school and was planning to go to McGill and all of this lovely stuff... but... we moved to Toronto.” The thought of a new start made her anxious. She fit in and was at the top of the swim social crew. She was doing well academically and had plans to go to the University in town. Suddenly, her path became clear as mud. Sadly, it was out of her control.

“It turned out to be the best move that ever happened to me”. They moved into a modest house in the west end of Toronto, Kingsway. Even in the 1950s, the Kingsway was an affluent neighbourhood. Like many big cities, mixed in with the affluence were small pockets of dwellers trying to make ends meet. Her high school,
Etobicoke Collegiate, was the same way. Cliques of the popular and elite were hard to infiltrate. Amidst the intimidating, classist eyes judging her worthiness, Sam met her first friend and now, longtime friend Rose. She was “another transplant, from Edmonton”. They were two new and therefore, sort-of outcasts looking for a way in.

“It was a very different situation (from my school in Montreal). There was a football crowd and all the girls who were ‘in’ were going out with the football guys and so we were more on the periphery”. She was on the sidelines of the popular, high school Prom Queen ideology. “I was very conscious... not of my figure, but of my clothes I wore. My parents didn’t have much money. Periodically my mum would get me something new and I learned how to mix and match. I got quite good at it. I then had a boyfriend almost immediately!” Sam laughed.

“When I graduated high school that first summer and heading off to University... that’s when the anorexia hit." Suddenly, the air became heavy and the city noise that would occasionally drift through her windowpanes became still. “I began to lose weight gradually. You know how some kids plummet? Mine was a gradual weight loss.” Sam emphasized that her weight loss was slow. Though a product of restriction and deprivation, perhaps she was trying to convey how pervasive and insidious it was. How it quietly took hold without her knowing. I wondered if she was gauging my preconceived notions of anorexia. To some extent, I was exploring my biases too. I understood the feeling of finding yourself in the deep, swampy waters of disordered eating without even knowing it. I wish I had told
her that I too, found myself standing in quicksand. “(I had) no idea what had contributed to it. Consciously, I have no idea. I wonder if there is a physiological basis for this. I don’t know what precipitated it...”

“The year before, I didn’t have my period for five months and nobody knew why. My menses stopped even before I lost the weight, which makes you wonder. I kept on and on and on. I was very self-conscious of what I was doing, but I ignored it and of course, in those days, no one knew about anorexia and no one talked about it.” I sensed that she was skeptical that her amenorrhea, a known hallmark of anorexia, was attributed to any disordered eating that may have silently surfaced.

“I worked for a year and me and a couple of friends quit our jobs and went to Europe for three and a half months and I behaved. I didn’t eat a lot of stuff...I just covered it up and none of my friends ever said anything. No one approached the subject... and neither did I. I was ashamed. I was very self-conscious.” Sam reached for her cup, took a sip of tea and went on.

“My father was around the bend. He did... hurt at times. He said, ‘You’re bright in every way Sam, but you are so stupid when it comes to eating’. And he took up my arm that was skinny.... That hurt. That really hurt.” So this was what the curious pause was about. From the outside looking in, she did everything to please them and the one thing that pleased her mother once before, became the one thing that displeased her father. She couldn’t win. Though, it was clear that Sam wasn’t
doing it to overtly please anyone. Neither of them understood what was happening. Sam didn’t seem to know or fully understand what was taking hold and for her father to assume it was out stupidity… that must’ve been devastating.

“But I never retracted from society. I was always out and in front.” Sam was always involved in extracurricular activities throughout University. “It never held me back from my career. It’s a little harder now, because I’ve had a lot of physical assaults and with my bronchiectasis getting progressively worse and it’s just… it’s very frustrating at times not being able to do what I used to do; however I have to accept that… but it’s easier said than done.” She stared off somewhere behind my shoulder. You could tell she was slowing down. At times, gasping at a steady stream of air to fill her lungs comfortably. There was a slight wheeze when she took a deep breath, especially before a memory that needed more rendering. I wondered if her struggle with polio in her younger years contributed to the deteriorated state of her lungs. Or, maybe it was the decades of her body grasping for nutrition at the hands of her anorexia. Or was it the multiple assaults from her yearly pneumonia attacks that weakened her spirit. She was a brilliant and active woman who was full of life and loved her friends. Sadly, she was trapped in a body that wouldn’t let her be.
Throughout all of this, I was still very conscious of how I dressed. I was always smartly dressed. It was very important to me. I think it probably... I never thought about it, but it probably started shortly after I moved to Toronto. All of a sudden I'm going to this school in a wealthy district and all the kids are driving their parent's cars. (There was) lots of money floating around which my parents didn't have. I never felt deprived, but I did feel self-conscious initially... when I think about not having as many clothes. My friends had many, very nice clothes. But that gradually changed.

This part of her story was saturated with comparisons and measuring up to her peers. This sense of inadequacy was pernicious and inescapable with comments scattered and woven throughout the narrative of her high school life. She seemed to
shrug it off as a teenage rite of passage, but I couldn’t help but feel its grip. “When I was at Montreal high, our high school drew from all areas of the city - from the wealthiest of the wealthy to the poorest of the poor. The wealthiest of wealthy was predominantly a Jewish population... but because we wore uniforms, we were all the same. I was fairly smart, so I was put in another class. Anyway, there were three or four of us who were Gentiles and the rest were Jews and when there was a Jewish holiday of course, the class was empty... and then these kids would have their sweet 16 parties! These were balls, from formal gowns to whatever to whatever and here I am, a little kid from the back woods... sort of.... And they had cashmere sweaters and all this stuff... its funny when I think about it... but maybe I had a sense of how I looked back then.” She reached for our half drunk, hand-painted teacups. “I'll get us more tea.”
Chapter 11

The Institute

The anorexia eventually sank its nails deeper and wouldn't let go. Sam was admitted into an eating disorders program at her parents’ hand, early in her career as a physiotherapist. She was admitted into the Allan Memorial Institute, part of the Royal Victoria Hospital, which was back in the heart of Montreal. It housed the infamous Psychiatric Hospital and Research Centre (McGill Archives, n.d.). I had chills that lasted for days after Googling a number of websites citing its unspeakable history of using human guinea pigs to test new and dangerous, inhumane and oppressive strategies to treat mental illness. Although Sam’s time there seemed bleak, thank goodness it didn’t resemble the histories I found through my quick search.

“I’d use the word, hard and troubling… there’s no two ways about it. It was demeaning really.” Her eyes left mine. She stared into back into the memories of darker times. She didn’t say much about it. I could tell her heart remembered the struggle, but her lips just grazed the tip. As she entered the program, she was stripped of all her possessions, her autonomy and... to some extent, her dignity. “They took everything, even my favourite pen. First of all I bargained to get out and to go back to work part-time, when I was 105lbs. When I was in there, I was 81-82lbs and they told me I had to be 110lbs in order to get out. It didn’t matter about anything else...it was just the weight. So I took the bargain.”
I was puzzled. How could a preoccupation with weight, the driving force that led her to a medically supervised in-patient treatment program be her same ticket to freedom? The meaning that we, as individuals, the medical world, the media and society at large, attach to weight operates more like religious doctrine, versus tangible fact. I've seen many people, both in my practice as a dietitian, but also in my experience running half-marathons that it’s not about weight. Cholesterol levels and high blood pressure can be improved with balanced nutrition and physical activity. High fitness levels can be achieved with practice, dedication and enjoyment. Joint problems can be improved with regular, targeted exercises. Mental health can be supported with healthy personal relationships, a positive relationship with food, good sleep, physical activity and positive coping strategies. I have a hard time believing that all of this could be achieved with weight loss. With that same token, I don’t see how high anxiety, a low self-esteem, a strong drive for thinness, strained personal relationships, a negative relationship with food, and a body lacking the complex set of nutrients it needs can be addressed with 20lbs of aimless weight gain.

“I didn’t want to be forced to eat what I didn’t want to eat, but I did. I ate lots of food...healthy...but lots. I guess there was a lot of pressure in the food realm and a lot of pressure in weekly weigh-ins. The good thing about it was I got introduced to painting - oils, watercolours and charcoal. They had beautiful grounds and I remember doing a tree in charcoal, which I loved... I did it quite well. I sewed too. I
made a dress for myself...it was very attractive. I was quite proud of myself.” She paused and took a sip of her tea. I look around and noticed beautiful art pieces neatly hung on the walls of her condo. They were mostly landscape paintings of lush gardens and a rolling hillside. “Do you still have it? I mean... the paintings you made?” I secretly wondered one of them were hers. “No.” She replied with a hint of regret in her voice. “I packed them up once and put them in storage years ago. I can’t seem to find them anymore.” I wondered if it just slipped her mind, or if her bittersweet paintings were consciously forgotten.

Figure 10 “Allen Memorial”

8.5” x 5.5”. Transparent watercolour and felt pen on watercolour paper. Image digitally enhanced. Completed in 2014.

“You know, I tried to eat to get out of there. And I had a good psychiatrist, but he couldn’t keep me on and I had to go back to the other fellow that I didn’t really
like, but I didn’t have the guts to really say, ‘I don’t like you.’” Her laugh lines made a joyous appearance as she chuckled. “He was one of these types that... I don’t think he did very much. I saw him three times a week and I would lie on the couch and he would sit behind me. I never saw his face. I never knew what he was doing. I never connected with him... ever!”

“After I got out, a very good friend of mine Harriet, who worked at the Royal Victoria Hospital, which was attached to the Alan Memorial Hospital used to visit me. ‘Would you like to come and live with my mum and dad and while you got settled?’ she asked me. So I lived with the Samson’s for a couple of months and Harriet’s parents were a lovely couple. While I was there, Harriet got married and we enjoyed all the festivities that went with it. And then I got my own apartment... it was actually quite an attractive, little two-room apartment with an alcove bedroom and kitchen.” Life after the in-patient hospital experience seemed to be looking up for Sam. She seemed to thrive in her newfound freedom.

“Four months after I got out, I was made Assistant Head Physiotherapist and I was made Head Physiotherapist at the Occupational Therapy and Rehab Centre right in lower downtown Montreal and we then built a fabulous rehab centre. We had a wonderful Executive Director that involved the staff... so I had to lead my staff through the planning and working with the architects designing and going out to see the place. How often do you get to do that? I was in the right place at the right time. I
guess they had the confidence in me.” The resounding sound of pride and accomplishment entered the room.

“My struggle with anorexia was very separate. I didn’t talk about it much. At that time, I was visiting the psychiatrist three times a week and paying for it out of my own pocket. I had no help from my parents, but I was always very independent and I knew my parents couldn’t afford it.” Sam went on to describe her relationship with her parents. With so many pregnant pauses when remembering her parents, I was naturally curious.

“My relationship with my parents during this time was very good. My dad was hard on me during the last few years of his life. He was losing it a bit too. And he was hard on mum... just ... verbal abuse. But he was so supportive...but in private...he was desperate with my thinness. This was before I went into hospital, after I finished high school... when I was going through University maybe and even after that. He was very hard on me. I realized it was because he loved me and he couldn’t stand to see his little girl (like that). He was losing it a bit in his later years. He lived until he was 90, but it started around 87. He would sound very sane. He didn’t think he had any money problems. I can remember this very strongly. And I worked out how much he had and how long it would last for...absolutely he wouldn’t believe it. And he thought I was just crazy. My mum was very torn between loyalty to him and loyalty to me, but you know, you work through it. There were tough times, but you know, as I said before...some of my friends said, ‘aren’t you
angry with your father? And I say, no. After his death and after time goes by, you don’t remember those times. You remember the good times through my lifetime.” This was a true testament of how strong and compassionate Sam was.
Sam retired in 1999, when she was 63 years old. Her mother wasn’t doing well at this time, with her health declining at a faster pace than Sam had hoped. Before she could reap the rewards of decades of hard work, her mum was in and out of the hospital and eventually, moved into a nursing home. “I was exhausted after I retired. I remember returning in the beginning of August from a vacation with friends; my friend has a great cottage up in Muskoka. We went up for the weekend and I was wiped. I came back on the Monday and there was a bed for her! It was the biggest gift.”

“After my mum had died... the first four years were hard. I played bridge and I was part of the Women’s Musical Club. I can’t remember all the stuff that I did, but I didn’t worry one bit! I’m finding now that it takes a little more time and I have less energy with all the bouts of stuff I’ve been through, with having fractures and pneumonia a couple of times. The last few years have taken a lot out of me. Though, it’s still been a good year.” I admired her optimism.

“A big part of my life was taken up by hiking. I hiked every Wednesday with a group and I hiked often on the weekend. All my travelling until 2007 was overseas travelling...hiking. Twice to Scotland, once to France, once to Madeira off the coast of Portugal, Slovenia, Spain and I hiked in Iceland and New Zealand. I loved hiking. So
that left a big, BIG hole... but I can’t do the hiking and I can’t do the walking because of my breathing. It wasn’t just the hiking, but there was a social aspect and a spiritual aspect, going away to these beautiful places. I love it.” I can only imagine the emptiness she must feel with such joy being stolen by a failing body.

“What about the anorexia?” The words just flew out of my mouth before I could filter it and assess whether it was okay for me to give it a name. Throughout the whole afternoon in walking me through her life’s struggle with an eating disorder, she only said the word anorexia three times. I bit my lip hoping it was okay for someone other than her to name her struggle.

“I never felt like I was struggling. I guess I was... but I just live with it, you know? It’s a part of me.” She responded without the least bit of discomfort. It seemed to be an extension of her at this point in her life. My mind scrolled through the details of her life history, searching for the significant people, milestones and events that grounded her story. I wondered how different her life would have been. How many close friendships or romantic relationships would have replaced the time, energy and space that the anorexia demanded.

“Well, you know... I had aging. I think my mind is slowing down. I do silly things...I forget... I sometimes search for words, though I don’t think it’s terribly unusual. Then there’s thinking about my future. I don’t have any family. Thinking
about going to a nursing home... I'm not one to sit and do nothing... I'd be very lonely. I'd be very upset.” I began to feel her loneliness.

“Now it's very expensive to go to a senior's home. Do I want to go? Can I afford to go? Do I look now? It would be nice if several of us on this floor can hire someone so we can all stay in our homes, but you know there are other times when I feel very lucky. I find, now that I’m older... there are illnesses all around me. You know, I haven’t lost many close friends, but I have a lot of friends who are ill or have had a knee replacement or hip replacement. So, I guess I don’t have a lot to complain about, but if I can lose the fear of losing my breath, I would feel a lot better. I find that very hard to accept and to accept it on a realistic basis. I’m also having another problem with my bladder and I just have been hesitant to do anything about it. I am and do have anxiety... I just feel anxious at times. For example, if I walk further than I know I usually can, I find it very difficult to control my bladder. And that is so embarrassing... it’s so frustrating. This week I've been so upset about it... so I think I'm going to phone the doctor.” She took another sip of her tea. It must've been cold by now. “Oh geez, that’s going to leave a stain.” Two drips of her orange pekoe tea soaked into her pristine, white collared shirt.

“I've got some really good friends and we don't talk about it... but we know. I belong to a wonderful early morning women’s group at my church and we meet once a month at 8:00am for breakfast and a program. It came up the last time that
we should really talk about dying and death... what it means to us. We’ve all grown old together in this group. You never know when it’s going to happen.”

The sun was starting to set just behind her, casting a shadow on her auburn hair. I had a lot to digest. Her story was complex and layered with so much unspoken emotion. I was deeply grateful for her time and thanked her for letting me share a glimpse of her life history. “You’re welcome dear. I’m happy to have the company.” I scanned the coffee table for anything I had left behind, in particular the recorder that I had unknowingly already put into my bag. I looked back, met her eyes and said another, “thank you.” She waved goodbye and walked me to the door, leaving the background of a coffee table with our cold tea and plate of uneaten cookies.
“Hi Sam, how are you?” Sam welcomed me into her home for another session.

“I’m fine, I’m fine. Please, come in.” Sam already had a kettle on the stove and the teacups on the table with a plate of chocolate covered digestives on display. She poured us both a cup of orange pekoe and added a touch of milk.

“Are those your real eyelashes?” I didn’t know why I felt comfortable enough to ask. Was I feeding into what I wanted to hear? Was this a blatant example of me internalizing beauty ideology? Who knows... they were striking- lush, long and dark. “Yes!” She smiled. “It’s a side effect from a medication... it’s a GOOD side effect!” We laughed. We understood this was a normative standard that most women strive for... long and lush lashes. Though, underneath, I knew that both of us had histories so intertwined with beauty ideology that jokes like these often ride the border between funny and dark. I wondered which side we were on.

During the last session, Sam walked me through her life of academic success, her relationship with her parents, a yearning to fit in and her battle with anorexia. This time, I wanted to know about her life in the present. I wanted to know about her friends, her support network. I wanted to know how she perceives herself - her body, her health, food and how age fits into her schema.
First I wanted to explore her perception of self. I wanted to get to know how she sees herself fitting into the world. When she was in high school, she measured herself against her peers— their clothes, their achievements and whom they were dating. I wondered if she had any current measures. Who did she look up to? Was there someone she compared herself to? I couldn’t help but think of the hundreds of television personalities, family and friends that I looked up to for several different reasons. I admired Mindy Kaling for her wit, confidence and her talent in writing, producing, acting and owning her own production company. I admired Lisa Ling for the brilliance and courage she reflects in her journalism. Not only are they accomplished, but also beautiful and strong examples of smart, confident and hard-working women. Of course, I also looked to Natalie Portman and Jennifer Lawrence for their effortless and unique features. This is all in addition to the strong female role models in my life, such as my mum and three of my beautiful, funny, accomplished and incredibly athletic cousins... that’s of course, how I came (begrudgingly) to be named “the girly one”.

What were Sam’s measures? I recently found the shameful statistic that seniors over the age of 65 represent less than 2% of the people seen in the media (Elder Watch, 2014). I tried to think of one example of a strong senior woman in the media who represented brilliance, beauty, humour and vibrancy. I could only think of a small handful that I’ve recently seen on television – Betty White, Judi Dench and Maggie Smith. Wait... I did recently see an older, more seasoned Uhura in the one of the newer Star Trek movies, where she continued to play a smart, tough, beautiful
and unfortunately, persistently objectified communications officer aboard the USS Enterprise. I'm certainly missing a number of female actresses over the age of 70, as I'm not an expert by any stretch, but I like to think that all of those hours of binge watching a variety of shows, movies and documentaries count for something.

“I think of my friends and I always compare myself to those who are really good and that doesn’t do me any good. By that I mean those who can do everything. I can’t say I have role models or mentors... I’d say I have friends.” She goes on to tell me about two close friends that live on her floor. There’s also that women and men’s group she spoke about last time, through her church. “I say they’re my gang!” You could see the love she had for her friends through her warm eyes and tender smile. I was surprised that the media was barely a part of her narrative, since it was such a strong piece of mine. Or was I? I grew up in an era of mass media. In a short amount of time, media became increasingly convenient. The rise of the Internet democratized our access to it, or them to us. Sam didn’t grow up with the same quagmire of highly convenient, misguided messaging. Even looking around Sam’s condo, there was only one screen in my view. She didn’t have a computer sitting on a desk on standby. She didn’t have a tablet or smart phone within arm’s length. While there are certainly a growing number of tech-savvy older adults, Sam didn’t seem to be as interested in the world of tech.

“Two doors down I have a friend and we talk quite in depth, but we aren’t close friends...well, we are in a way... almost like supportive soul mates. She’s been
through a lot of depression and she gets anxious at times but we sit down. Well, she’s pretty fussy about what she eats and how she eats, so we get together for a glass of wine... but she’s a very good friend in a different way.” She kept on, though I couldn’t help get stuck on the fact that she was fussy about her food. She moved on so fast that I just pinned this observation to the corkboard of thoughts I kept in the back of my mind.

Figure 11 “Abandon”

8.5” x 5.5”. Transparent watercolour and felt pen on watercolour paper. Image digitally enhanced. Completed in 2014.

“I have another friend out in the west end and she’s an actress in a retirement home. She’s a very good friend, but we don’t see each other often. We go to Stratford every year and talk on the phone. She’s amazing. She’s 82 and gets everywhere by subway and bus and she goes downtown to the U of T gym, which amazes me because she was never the least bit athletic, but she goes down there and
pumps her iron and whatever. She retired early from U of T and has really thrown herself into acting. She’s excellent. She’s English and very much affected but she is really good and has really thrown her heart into it and has done some really nice work at the Bloor West Theatre and has directed a couple of things. So at my age, I really don’t look at role models. I look more to my friends.” It sounded like she admired health, vibrancy and resilience and this friend certainly embodied it all. I wondered how she must’ve felt spending time with someone that was able to live life without the constant and impending threat of declining health. Sam took a strained breath, and moved on.
“Would you say you value appearance as much as you used to?” I wasn’t quite sure how to ask. Nervously, I took a sip of my tea and grabbed a cookie to distract from my question. “I have always been very, very conscious of my appearance and very conscious of looking well when I go out. I hate it when older women who don’t bother putting on a little make-up when they go out. They look so dowdy and old. No, appearance is very important to me. Even if I’m sick and at home, I will put on a little powder on my nose and a little lipstick... and I’ll put on a pair of earrings! It makes me feel better.”

What did I expect her to say? Did I think she was going to say that she didn’t care as much? Or, did I think she was going to respond in the way that she did? She was just as self-conscious about her appearance as many women in their 20s and 30s. When women in their 70s and 80s would tell me about their struggles with weight and pinch their bellies, there were many times when I thought to myself “why, what’s the point?” It wasn’t until I really listened, that I realized how entrenched I was in the dismissive, societal view of older women. Attractiveness, sexuality and the social pressures to be thin, young and beautiful are ideologies that we all live under. Our response to them may differ as we get older, though on some level, we all grapple with them in our own way. For older women, perhaps in some ways, may be more difficult as they strive to also counteract such dismissive
treatment. With less than 2% of seniors being reflected in the media, and most of them depicting harmful and ridiculous stereotypes, such as the extremely frail elderly, the lost grandma with dementia or an elderly and incompetent villain, there doesn’t leave much for older adults to look up to and find a positive and comforting example of how they fit into the world (Aging Watch, 2014). Even the sexual prowess of an older woman is often intended for comedic effect, as the audience is cued by a 90s laugh track. Knowing this, it was somewhat comforting that Sam looked to her friends as role models or self-comparisons, those who on some level, are going through similar experiences. Though, in some ways, this can be even more difficult, as Sam describes. The pressure that comes from if she can do it, I can too, can be hard to swallow if one’s health declines faster than the other.

“I would say that my friends feel the same. Except Barb that lives over there.”

She pointed toward the west side of the building. “She has never really bothered and she can’t seem to control her weight very well. She always looks nice, but she could do with a little bit of make-up. She just doesn’t have the same interest...like me. I’ve always had an interest in clothes... and shoes! Barb is going to be 70 in July and she’s tried Jenny Craig, she’s tried Weight Watchers and she’s spent $700-800 on having food delivered and she keeps saying, ‘I’ve got to lose weight, I’ve got to lose weight and I think of food all the time’ she says ‘Oh I don’t know what to cook for myself’ so she goes and makes herself a pancake for dinner. I ...certainly food is on my mind a lot...but I eat a very balanced diet.” I wondered if her private food rules magnified the less restrictive habits or even, the perceived loss of control of others. I
imagined how heavy the weight of these unspoken food rules must’ve weighed on her shoulders when she already had a couple of chronic conditions to manage. I wondered how much the years of restricting her diet contributed to her current decline in health. To make things worse, I could imagine the medical community unknowingly adding a few more food rules onto her already long list.

“How does anorexia fit into all of this?” I feared being too forward.

“Yeah, I guess I’ve lived with it for so long but I probably hold back a bit. I have had digestive problems and I’ve had them for a while...and I find that I’m very uncomfortable after dinner...and then it goes away...but umm... I mean I work out my meals and I cook for myself. Though, I find recently I’ve been getting bored during dinner, but usually I look forward to my meals. As I said, ‘it’ is there all the time and I know my friend that I just saw... she is SO rigid. Well she’s rigid about everything. She’s a beautiful woman. She’ll give you the shirt off her back. She’s a beautiful mother and grandmother, but I don’t know what it is about food. I mentioned it to her husband a number of years ago and he said ‘Sam, I don’t know what it is and I don’t ask’. She never takes butter on her bread and everything is skim milk...skim milk powder.... da da da da da. She entertains and she’s an excellent cook ... and she spares nothing, but she’s very rigid. Cindy is going to be 77 this year.”

A negative relationship with food in older women seems to be more common than I thought. In the four friends she spoke of, three seem to have a tumultuous relationship with food. So often we think that the struggle with food and weight
weighs only on those in their 20s, 40s, 50s and maybe 60s, but why would they care in their 70s and 80s? We often say, “What’s the point?” Again, this attitude is our internalization of the shameful message that is placed upon older women. They’re invisible. They don’t matter. In hearing women like Sam, every day of my practice as a dietitian, I hear that they want to feel beautiful, just like everyone else. In turn, the definition of beauty and the pressures that come with it escape no one. Neither does the nature of using food to cope with anger, fear, happiness or how food can be target of our need for control, when we feel that we have none. As part of the medical community, we often miss these conversations as our vision is blurred by our biases and narrowed by the ticking clock of efficiency.

“Ever since last fall I couldn’t bear to weigh myself because I was scared I had lost weight, but I knew I had gained. And I hadn’t weighed myself in my house in 6 or 8 months and that has been so much better for me. I did put on weight and I don’t know where I’m at right now, but everyone tells me I’m looking well and I’m eating well and I don’t care. There are restraints when it comes to very fattening foods, but I don’t have any great desire... I mean.... I’ve got chocolate in there... but I have a chocolate once in a blue moon... but I don’t go crazy... some people give it away because they don’t want it in the house or they won’t stop eating it. Barb is that way too. She won’t buy a box of cookies or chips because (if) they bring them into the house, they’ll eat them all. I’ve seen her and my friend... and they sit there and *bom bom bom bom bom* with a drink and a bag of chips. I can’t consume that amount of
food!” The laughter in her voice was curious. There seems to be an undercurrent of superiority in her restraint.

“What do you see when you look in the mirror?” I asked gently.

“It’s hard. When I’m standing up drying myself (after a shower) I think to myself ‘geez, you really are skinny’. But that’s as far as it goes. I’ve learned to dress for my body. And that has been very important. And now that I’m older...that has become very difficult because I can’t wear these little skinny T-shirts because my arms are so skinny...but most of my older friends don’t like their arms anyway and we wonder when they’re ever going to make sleeves until there.” She pointed to her elbow. We laughed and her eyes lifted the heaviness of our conversation.

“But I see my ugly teeth. They are dark and they are crooked- Urg! I’m going to the dental hygienist and I’m going to inquire about getting them whitened a little bit. Well, if I had my way I would pull this tooth out but you’re not going to do it at this stage...but I see myself as UGLY in a picture... yeah, I really do.” I wasn’t sure what to say. I felt my eyebrows furrow and my lips smile, as I wanted her to know that I disagreed. That I thought she was beautiful but just didn’t know how to say it. I felt the same fear that I would be treading on an unprofessional boundary as I often feel at work when the words “you’re beautiful” rest on the tip of my tongue. Looking back, I shouldn’t have felt so afraid to tell someone a truth they may need to hear.
Now, it was my turn to lighten the conversation. I pointed out the beautiful cookbook on the coffee table. It was full of beautiful pictures of plump tomatoes and luscious garden greens on the side of creamy pasta, sprinkled with chives and spicy sausages peeking through the penne. She had a number of cookbooks that lined her shelf beside her television. They were big and expensive looking books filled with expansive pictorials of food that made me instantly salivate.

“Do you like to cook?” I asked.

“Yes, but I must say it’s waning now... right out the window in that heat. I don’t have the same desire to go through all that fuss and bother like I used to. But I’m not alone in that, my friends are much the same. But I do bake, I do have friends over, but I don’t have big dinner parties. And if we do, we usually all contribute.” As Sam spoke, I thought about all the older women I’ve met through my practice as a dietitian. Many live alone and don’t have anyone to cook for, once their spouse has died and their kids have grown. I imagined Sam sitting at her table with her tea and toast, saving her energy and inspiration for the next big gathering with friends.

I wondered how much her anorexia affected her daily choices around food. How many of her choices, her love for cooking and baking were restricted by the rigidity that plagued her relationship with food? Did these cookbooks play a role in feeding her illness? Did they satisfy her in some way? I wondered if they filled her belly as it saturated her eyes with beauty. I don’t think I’ll get to know the answer. Although Sam was quite open and inviting, Sam seemed guarded about her current
eating as it related to her anorexia - a completely expected and respected response.

It was a narrative that was woven through her child and young adulthood with a heavy thread and now, it just seemed more like the fluff the builds atop of an old quilt.

Figure 12 “Delicate Orchid”

8.5” x 5.5”. Transparent watercolour and felt pen on watercolour paper. Image digitally enhanced. Completed in 2014.
PART THREE:

Lina
Chapter 15

Tea and Toasted Halla

_Ring, ring ring..._ the doorbell calls Lina, who is hastily preparing breakfast for herself and her husband Harry. The smell of toast and brewed coffee fill the air of their cozy kitchen, while the familiar voices of the CBC news playing quietly in the background. I've been looking forward to this visit ever since I spoke with Lina on the phone a week earlier. She seemed delighted to have someone take interest in her life. I had an ear to listen, and she had stories that poured through the phone, even before we had set our first meeting. I knew she was the perfect person to talk to.

A tall lady, with short white hair and a smile, greeted me at the door, “What a cute car you have. Harry, come here. Come look at her car!” I immediately felt right at home.

“Is that a Ford Fiesta? You know, those are great cars. I read the reviews and they’re the best on the market for fuel efficiency.” Harry said, as his eyes evaluated the car. Harry also made me feel welcomed. Lina and Harry continued their banter, back and forth. I could feel the comfortable, loving, companionship they both shared.

“Come, come in and have a seat where you like.” Lina’s American accent piqued my curiosity.
Lina had an array of spreads, crackers and coffee ready to serve. She cleared off a section of the kitchen table for me. It seemed as though she was in the middle of purging some old documents, which lined the other half of the table. Her kitchen reflected a busy life, filled with decades of memories. “Let’s chat a bit before we get down to business. So tell me about yourself.” Genuinely curious, she leaned in and asked.

In my search for life stories, a series of serendipitous events led me to a group of older Jewish women living in the north end of the city. They were mutual friends who lived in similar circumstances and shared penchant for storytelling. I felt at ease. Growing up, my Filipino-Canadian roots were anchored within a predominantly Jewish community. I have the fondest memories of buying rugelach at the corner bakery and trading Yiddish for Filipino words with friends at the park. Growing up near a large, conservative synagogue, the deep observance of religion and tradition could be felt anywhere, especially during the high holidays. I remember the resonating feeling of sheer disgust and horror, when that same synagogue was vandalized with anti-Semitic slurs that crushed the heart of the community.

I was most intrigued with a woman named Lina. She was a treasure trove of historical snapshots of being a Jewish woman, who grew up through the Depression. She had a very distant, yet warm perception of food, body image and age. She was comfortable in her own skin, letting age remain a number that didn’t dictate your
abilities or worth, “You’re only as old as you feel” she said once on the phone. She was a leader. She was active in her community and never adhered to the imaginary boundaries that reduced her life story to societal expectations. Like Sam, her role models weren't of old movie stars, but instead, the strong women that made an imprint on their lives – mothers, sisters, aunts, caregivers. Most notably, food was enjoyed and the process of making foods even more fondly remembered.
The Great Depression of the 1930s sprouted a humble beginning for Lina, whose roots began after World War I, when her father fled Bessarabia, a historical region in Eastern Europe, now divided between Moldova and the Ukraine (Yivo Institute for Jewish Research, 2010). With a fiery intensity, she described the unrelenting surveillance of the Nazi’s and the desperation of Jewish mothers disguising their son’s as daughters to avoid losing them to the army. Lina was a phenomenal history teller. Even the histories of others, she told with such passion, enthusiasm and detail, like they were her own. Although her memories of recent experiences were a little less vivid, as she says, memories of her childhood and adulthood remained crystal clear, intact and untouched. Stories were highly regarded by Lina. She made sure she knew the stories of her mother, father and even in-laws before they died and encouraged me to do the same with my grandfather. It was good advice.

After arriving among the crowds of immigrants to Ellis Island, Lina’s father and brothers split up and started building their lives in Maryland and Pennsylvania. Unfortunately, his younger sister was ill with a very high fever and wouldn’t pass the inspection, leaving his mother no choice but to take her back to Bessarabia. The boys were confident they could make it. The journey had already made them into men.
Her father began as a peddler in Wilmington, Delaware and shortly after, met her mum, who had emigrated from Russia much earlier. She was an educated woman. She had finished grade 8, but like many, had to leave school to take care of her siblings during the war. She also worked, selling shirt-waists in a fine, up-scale clothing store. “She spoke perfect English. She had an air about her. She was very well mannered.” Lina tilted her head upward, mimicking the regal self-confidence of her mother.

Her father and mother had been married for several years and had four children when the Depression hit. It was the tough time for everyone. Making ends meet was day-to-day struggle. “Each day I would watch my father load up his truck with goods from the store to sell.” Those who knew her father, and those who could afford it, would be generous enough to give him their leftover ration stamps to help stock the store. Lina painted a scene of a beautiful community of kind souls who were rocked by the Depression.

“During the Depression, people couldn’t pay the bill.” Imitating an older woman she knew, ‘Oh Mr. Plunk I can’t pay you today, but do you see those berries? Take all the berries you want.’” She continued, “Well... he wasn’t going to pull berries all day, so he’d say, ‘It’s okay Mrs. so and so. I’ll see you next week’” she imitated her father in a saddened, yet understanding tone. “Well, of course there was no next week. ‘Oh you see that bedspread? Please take it to your wife’... they didn’t have a
nickel! And we didn’t have a nickel either. The Depression hit us hard. He was trying to make a buck to keep the family together. See we don’t know these things, as we don’t have that today. It doesn’t exist. It’s a different world.”
“Mrs. Plunk! Need any ice today?” Lina describes how ice and many other common goods were sold at the time.

“Yes, a $0.10 piece please’, mother would answer. ‘Are you sure? It’s going to be a hot day. You’d better take a $0.15 piece.’"

Growing up, Lina remembers opening the refrigerator door to replace the block of ice that kept their perishables cool. A wooden icebox and a block of ice was all it took. Food, from storage to grocery shopping at the corner store to meal preparation and cooking- food was community affair. You were dependent on each other. You formed relationships around food.

“We were never hungry. We had a chicken coop in the backyard. According to Jewish laws, you know... it has to be Kosher. There was a religious man, called a Shochet, who used to come to our house. He would start by pulling out his knife. It was a sharp knife, which it had to be in order for it to be humane. I’d watch him hold it up to the light, inspect the blade and sharpen it if he needed to.” Lina used her hands to re-enact the ritual. She looked at the imaginary blade, as it glinted the reflection of nine-year-old Lina.

“We had this dog Teddy. Teddy was the love of my life. He always knew the day that this man would come, he came once a week and he would get so excited.”
She stuck her tongue out and panted like an excited puppy. "Arf, arf, arf", I could imagine Teddy, their German Sheppard/Husky greet the Shochet at the door. Lina spoke of Teddy with a glimmer in her eye and smile on her face, as she looked beyond me, into the distance, as she recalled her beloved Teddy. “Mother would tell Teddy which chickens to kill and Teddy would greet Mr. So and so at the door and take him to the chicken coop. Teddy was very smart. He would get whichever ones mom told him to get, whether it was the black one, the green or the white one and with one swing, the chicken would be dead... but not in pain. Though I haven’t talked to a chicken so I can’t be sure.” We laughed. Lina had quite the sense of humour.

Figure 13 “Teddy”

8.5” x 5.5”. Transparent watercolour and felt pen on watercolour paper. Image digitally enhanced. Completed in 2014.

“Then, Teddy would get to work. The chickens were thrown onto the grass to bleed out and Teddy’s job was to hold them down with his nose until they stopped
squirming. Teddy must’ve felt so accomplished. I just have wonderful memories.”

Being a vegetarian, part of my brain, and stomach for that matter, wanted these images to disappear but in hearing her tell this story, there was an undeniable sense of beauty.

Lina went on to describe another fond memory about food. “We rarely had (red) meat, it was mostly chicken... and fish. Meat was too expensive. Once in a while daddy went into Philadelphia and he would pick up special kosher meat, but it was too expensive. I remember, one night, daddy brought home hot dogs. I had never had a hotdog and I remember having a little stroller for my doll, which I used to park in the corner of our living room. ‘What’s this?’ I picked up the hotdog in excitement. I then wrapped a napkin around it and hid it in the baby carriage! My mom asked ‘honey, what are you doing?’ I’m saving it for later.” She hit her knee in a burst of laughter.

Lina’s memories of food were plated in the warmth and love she had for her family. In setting up her interview, I was grateful that Lina was able to squeeze me in somewhere between dinner and opera outings with Harry, Shabbat dinners and family brunches. Unlike many women I’ve met, there were no audible sighs or self-shaming comments about how much food she was going to have. She gave herself permission to enjoy food and everything else that comes with it.
“But there were many hard things about life too. Daddy fell ill and we lost the house.” Her tone quickly changed. She described how they coped with the fading of cheerful memories, now overshadowed with memories of struggle. They found an affordable rental apartment behind a corner store. Close friends in the Jewish community told them about it. “But we couldn’t take Teddy. Daddy was heartbroken but had to give him to a good friend of his who owned a farm. He trusted him and knew he would take good care of him.” A light dimmed in Lina.
Chapter 18

Cents, Coins and Pounds

“Rebecca, the middle one and I bonded. There were four of us girls in total. We used to sit on the front porch in sunny Wilmington and make doll clothes. We were so close. She was older, but she was patient. She’s the one who went off to nursing school. She paid every penny of it herself! She worked with a newspaper. She was a bright one.” Lina clearly had much respect and loving memories of her sister- a strong, compassionate and hard-working woman.

“Did either of you like to cook?” I asked, as my mind wandered toward food.

“I didn’t. As a teenager I helped Mom cook, but of course, she was in charge of the kitchen. I always helped clean up afterward... cleaned the dishes, wiped the table, and all the rest of it. My sisters would help too, but it was my Mom’s kitchen.” Lina didn't show too much of an interest in food or the meaning it had in shaping her current relationship to food. Every story and every reference to food seemed to be an honest and impromptu story that reflected a spontaneous relationship with food.

“What did you think about your body at that time? Your clothes? Your weight? Did you ever think about that stuff?” I asked curiously.

“Nowadays, I hear little girls wanting the newest clothes, heels and that sort. This was the Depression. Everyone suffered... so people didn't have time to think
about that stuff. We ate what mother cooked. Well, probably a little more because she wanted to keep us *fed*, but we didn’t think about that much in those times. It was a different life.”

It was true that food and body image was not a strong narrative at this point in her life history. Stories of struggle, hardship, joy and family saturated the pages of her early life and left little room for her to think about how she felt about her body. Though I’m weary of solidifying such a statement in the pages of this thesis, as the written word often does, body insecurities often know no race, gender or socio-economic status. Its complexity makes our relationship with our bodies, food and how we make meaning of the world elusive. However, for Lina this was her experience...making it true for her.
Despite their struggle, Lina and her sisters were able to go to school. After grade school, Lina worked every moment she could to pay for her college tuition for teaching. “I worked and worked my head off! I didn’t come from people with money you see. I used to work in my father’s store part-time and babysitting for $0.25/night. I babysat for everyone I could until I could get papers to work.” At 14 years old, Lina was working as a file clerk for an insurance company. Her paycheck was $20.22/week, but saved $0.22 from each paycheck. “I started saving and never had to ask for money. I didn’t have dresses like the other girls. It was a struggle but I didn’t know any different. It was tough, but wonderful. Led to growth, you know. You learned to be self-sufficient.”

It wasn’t long until Lina was attending the University of Delaware for teaching and was a straight “A” student with a minor in Spanish. By this time, her father was back on his feet and doing well financially. He started a business as a landlord of a local rooming house. “Each one had a bathroom and a bedroom. It was a dingy ol’ place. I remember it smelling so musty... and dark, but it worked and it was a business. The whore would go in and then out... you know, it was a strange situation, but he made money. He’d collect the rent, put it on the books and that was it.” My eyes widened, as my ears were caught off guard.
Lina chuckled, as she noticed the unexpected element of her ‘matter-of-fact’ story. She had an incredible talent for crafting an animated and rendered recreation of her history, complete with fast flying jokes and nuances that slip away if you’re not quick enough to hold on.

Then, a more monotone Lina appeared. Her dad fell ill with little hope of regaining his health. It was a massive heart attack. “I found him hunched over on the toilet. ‘Daddy! Daddy! Daddy! Oh Daddy! Hurry, call an ambulance’ I shouted to my sisters. No one should have to find his or her daddy in that way. We rushed him to the hospital, where we waited and waited and waited outside the door for the doctor to give us the prognosis. He finally came out with a very serious face and said ‘He doesn’t have much time, I think it would be a good time to say goodbye’. I walk in quietly. Mom was sobbing behind me. I kissed his forehead and said goodbye from his little girl.” Again, a light dimmed in her as her eyes gazed at the ground and her voice lost its life.
After much grieving and being with her family, Lina eventually moved on, graduated University and became a high school teacher. She was full of creative ideas, long hours of preparation and hard work. She worked and made memories with the students, until she met the love of her life Harry at a teacher’s conference in Florida. He was a former band member with the Canadian military and was visiting a cousin at the time.

“It was just meant to be” She blushed. You could almost feel the love she had for him. She went on to move to Toronto, his hometown and had three beautiful, successful and intelligent children for which she took a brief hiatus, until her passion for teaching lured her back part-time.

Her recount of this part of her history was quick and less detailed. I suspected that it was because she was getting tired, rather than an indication of significance. I waited for a break in conversation. “Well Lina, I can’t thank you enough for sharing your story with me. I would love to hear the rest; you know, life after kids, retirement and now. Can we schedule another time to meet?”

“Sure thing honey. Next time I will make a better snack. I’m not cooking the way I used to; I have arthritis and my arms, my back and my legs hurt. Harry bought
me a machine to improve my circulation and to get rid of this purple... These are my Halloween socks, don’t mind them!” She lifted up her pajama pants and revealed her orange and black striped knee socks. Just like the layers of Lina; her tired and aching body encases a vibrant and funny soul.

Lina went on to describe her body’s ailments. She used her hands to describe a section of her leg and foot that caused her the most grief. “From here to here you have a bone that should connect, but when I was a child I had noticed that they didn’t connect and I had a bone that stuck out. I had to wear a Whitman brace, because I’d slip from one side to the other. I have lots of foot problems, which is part of the reason why I decided to go back to school to become a Chiropodist. I was 51 or 52, 53 maybe? I read about a new program at George Brown, a 2-year certificate program taught by Chiropodists from London. I’ll save that story for next time! You can say you met somebody and that she never sat on her ass!”

I smiled and emphatically agreed, as I switched off my voice recorder. “May I use your washroom before I go?”

“Of course. It’s just down the hall to your left.” She replied.

I made my way down the hall, dodging small piles of magazines and books that had overflowed from the kitchen. It was clear she had been trying to organize for a while now. I could see the dust beginning to gather, as they sunned themselves underneath the beaming rays that came though the bay window. My hand reached
into the dark washroom, patting the wall in hopes of finding the switch. The light switched on and my eyes soaked in the unexpected sight. The walls were lined in the most interesting wallpaper - *vintage beauty adds*. Advertisements for creams, perfume and even control top nylons stared at me as I washed my hands.

Figure 14 “Writings on the Wall”

8.5” x 5.5”. Transparent watercolour and felt pen on watercolour paper. Image digitally enhanced. Completed in 2014.

“What an interesting choices of wallpaper Lina. How did you come to decide on it?” I was incredibly curious.
“Isn’t it fun? I just liked it and thought it was pretty.” It was clear that she appreciated the vintage aesthetic, though her reasoning didn’t seem to go any deeper. I wondered if her affinity towards it came from any internalized beauty ideals, if not now, maybe during the time of those ads. Beauty ideals often have deep roots, like an invisible etching on the lens of a pair of glasses. We see everything through these glasses. We see the world. Our relationships. Our self-perception. It can be hard to spot if the stylish Dior frames distract you.
“Oh hello Jasmine.” Lina greeted me at the door. It looked like I had interrupted her in a frantic attempt to locate her glasses. It was actually a medical contraption she was looking for. She has poor circulation in her legs and was looking for a machine that Harry had recently bought her to improve it. Shouting from the top of the stairs, I heard “Oh silly me. Never mind. It was in the bathroom all along!”

She mentioned once before that she had started to forget minor things like where she last put her scheduler or that her glasses were on the top of her head. Though, she never forgot the names and birthdays of family members or past events, which was probably why she is such a good history teller. She has a crystal clear memory of every detail. You could almost smell the chicken on the stove and hear the shuffling of her feet as she rolled her toy baby carriage around the creaky living room floor. Her storytelling ability is phenomenal.

She set up her contraption to use after our interview. She said it was too loud to run while we chatted. “My legs are just terrible. They’re so purple today. Just terrible.” She had a small grin on her face with a twinge of sadness in her voice. I could tell it was starting to get to her.
“It’s probably because Harry and I went to that 90th birthday party last night. The party was at this huge mansion! Geez, I would hate to have to clean that place. I can barely keep up with my place.” She pointed to the piles of magazines, loose papers and pill bottles scattered around the kitchen.

“Harry wants to go to the opera tonight – a four hour concert! Can you believe it? He just loves the theatre. He wants me to go, but I don’t think I can do it. I don’t want to bother with it.” Lina went over to the fridge to get a glass of water to swallow her pills with. She opened the flap of a pill container labeled Sunday and shook the contents into her hand. Seeing how she cupped her hand to catch them, I knew there were quite a few.

Figure 15 “Rain”

5.5” x 8.5”. Transparent watercolour and felt pen on watercolour paper. Image digitally enhanced. Completed in 2014.
“I don’t know what, or even why I’m taking them. It’s very common at my age.” This is the first time I saw Lina fall flat. That bubbly character I met at the door seemed to dissipate for a moment. She took a big gulp of water and said, “So where did we leave off last time?”

I reminded her about her journey to becoming a chiropodist after her youngest child graduated from high school. She was about 54 years old at the time. “I decided I had something more to do in my life.” I could see the excitement in her eyes. She told me about that day when she was routinely reading the morning paper and saw an ad for a new program at George Brown College in Toronto.

“I was in a class full of kids who had just come out of University and who didn’t even know what a foot looked like!” She joked. “The lectures were so boring!” She joked some more. After her graduation, she had landed a job at the Branson site of North York General Hospital. Since chiropody was in its infancy at the time, Lina was seen as a trailblazer in advocating for the profession. Lina had worked there for the next 10 years until her retirement. It wasn’t just a second retirement, but a final one that would allow her to spend time with her kids and grandchildren. I could tell how much she enjoyed it. Anyone could tell she was incredibly proud of this achievement. Personally, I was in awe of how inspiring this part of her story was.

“What about now? Tell me more about life more recently.” I wanted to shift the focus to her more recent life experiences.
“Well, it’s not good. It was like a bomb exploded.” She looked down at the table and held her head. She was referring to her family. She asked me not to write about it, as it was a private family matter. So I stopped recording as she confided in me. After she wiped her tears, a smile resurfaced as I noticed her dentures soaking in a drinking glass on the table. “It’s okay, I feel comfortable with you.” Lina chuckled and decided to keep them there rather than wear them. This lightened the conversation, as she finished telling me her situation.

I decided to ask my final question. One that I asked Sam. “How would you describe your experience of getting older?”

“I don’t like it.” She answered sharply. “Nobody will tell you it’s wonderful. Everybody does things for you. Nah, I don’t like it because it cramps my style. All of a sudden I just feel like staying home and reading the paper, instead of going out to the Opera or whatever with Harry. I’m fighting. I have no zest. Did I tell you how old I am?”

“83?” I guessed with a twinge in my voice.

“Well in my head I’m 34, but my body says different.” Lina said this with jovial laughter, though I knew it was a smoke screen for what she was really experiencing. I admired her for her ambition, the passionate way she tells her history and of course, her sense of humour. Even though her body is slowing down, she was a free spirit. I really appreciated her ‘no holds barred’ perspective on life. In retrospect, I should have told her that.
After few more sips of the tea that accompanied a few slices of cheese, rice crackers, grapes and digestive cookies, I began to gather my things. I could tell that Lina wanted to use that machine to help her legs feel better. She was feeling uncomfortable and out of respect, I turned off my voice recorder and thanked her profusely for welcoming me into her home... and her life. She got up from her chair with a bit of a grimace and walked me to the door.

“And please tell Harry I say goodbye. I’ll be back with the first draft for you to read. Have a good day!” I made my way out to my car.

“Alright dear. Take care of that little car now... you too!” She waved and sent me off with another warm smile.

Figure 16 “Sunlight”

5.5” x 8.5”. Transparent watercolour and felt pen on watercolour paper. Image digitally enhanced. Completed in 2014.
PART FOUR:

Reflections
Chapter 22
Food as Narrative

Food is embedded, in some way or another, in the many narratives that make our life’s history. At times, food provides a context for a family memory, or serves as a benchmark of financial struggle. Food can be a comforting character during times of emotional stress or play a villain in our stories of calorie counting and body dissatisfaction. Whether we realize it or not, food is a means of understanding ourselves and the complexities of the social world around us.

As Sam recounted her early memories of food, my impression was cold and mechanical, unlike the warmer feelings and illustrations I imagined with Lina’s stories. Sam described her diet back then as “meat and potatoes” style. To many, meat and potatoes can come with warm and sumptuous memories of mum’s home cooking, though by the tone of Sam’s voice, she was meaning to describe a diet that was plain and predictable. This depiction of food began to percolate through her story with the introduction of her dad, who had a number of dietary restrictions that helped manage the chronic ulcers he suffered from. Although eating in this way was a physiological necessity for him, I wondered if it set the stage for a more distant and functional approach to food for Sam. As she grew older and eventually started her journey through anorexia, food seemed to have a similarly cold depiction: one of necessity and mechanical sustenance, devoid of much joy. The only real enjoyment related to food was before her anorexia, when she described her love of baking. Sam
seemed to like the aesthetic of food, which I gathered from the beautiful plate of cookies she would have ready for my visit and the stunning coffee table cookbooks that lined her bookshelf. Though, whenever she described either herself or her friends indulging in it, her voice incurred a twinge of disdain.

Sam’s stories about food were also imbued with surveillance and her eating patterns were rigid and controlled – an unquestionable parallel I see in my younger self. In hindsight, I wondered if her pristine home and crisp white dress shirts foreshadowed these attributes. Although control and rigidity are referred to as cornerstones of anorexia, there is some suggestion that the anxiety precipitated by transitional life events, perhaps such as Sam moving to a new province as a young teenager or moving to a different school can lead to eating disorders, when paired with other risk factors (Marshall, Lengyel & Utioh, 2012). I wondered if she felt that food and weight were the only things she could control in a world that to her, seemed out of control. The desire to fit-in and make your parents proud are two aspects of social approval that many teenagers naturally subscribe to. Unfortunately, comments about weight control and body monitoring by Sam’s mum, though well meaning, appeared to have a profound effect on the trajectory of her narrative. Although Sam brushed it off, as though it was (and still is) a social norm to “be on a diet” as a woman, it is the part of her narrative I keep coming back to. I find myself drawn to the power and influence of those words on a child who is so eager to please her parents and is so far, naïve and innocent of weight-based pressures.
and unfair standards. A child, who yearns for love and attention, and unfortunately perceives it as conditional on food and weight.

Nowadays, Sam’s relationship to food appears strained by the fatigue of her health conditions. She is easily slowed by the shallowness of her breathing and the frailty of her weakened muscles and fragile bones. She has a number of chronic health conditions that she manages day to day. Sometimes, I can see how tired she is. Tired of juggling appointments, medications, sustenance, friends and all other facets of life. She mentions having a difficult time preparing meals, though still enjoys the company that food brings. When describing her current relationship with food, her tone seemed to imply a sense of acceptance, not peace, but acceptance. It’s almost like she has accepted her eating patterns for what they were, saying that overall, her meals are balanced, but more so, that food isn’t a big part of her life. That it carries few joyful memories, inspiration or passion. It mostly seems to carry more pain and became a wedge that ultimately strained her relationship with her father.

Lina’s memories on the other hand, were different. Food was imbued with warmth and joy. Unlike Sam’s story, food seemed to bring her and her family closer together. Lina’s eyes smiled as she remembered her dog Teddy helping the local Shochet with their chickens. The roomed filled with jovial laughter at how excited she was as a child to get a hot dog. Food had good memories for her. Food was also a source of income. Her dad’s ingenuity built a foundation off the sale of food, as a
peddler. The community helped lift them from financial ruin by offering their food rations. Food was clearly a form of love and prosperity for Lina.

Figure 17 “Food, Family and Pastimes”

8.5” x 5.5”. Transparent watercolour and felt pen on watercolour paper. Image digitally enhanced. Completed in 2014.

More recently, food wasn’t a big part of her narrative. It didn’t take up as much space as it used to. She continued to enjoy the company it brought. She mentioned having Shabbat dinner with her kids and going to parties that offered delicious spreads of fine foods... but she was slowing down. I could tell that family meals at her house used to be elaborate. Now, from the tone of her voice and the change in her demeanor, meal preparation seemed arduous and less rewarding. I wonder if one day, I will feel this way too. I often hear this from the older women I see for nutritional counseling. Though, in Lina’s case, this shift in her relationship
with food didn’t seem to sour the memories of the past. It seemed more like a common symptom of slowing down, having less people to cook for and a much-needed break from years of extravagant meals. Nevertheless, it does make me think. All of those times I pleaded with my grandma to make my favourite Filipino dishes, did she sigh in secret?

I wonder what the trajectory of my perceptions of food will be 40 years from now. Forty years is a good chunk of time. It’s enough time to continue my passion for food, caring for my beloved vegetable garden, cooking elaborate and worldly meals for a family of two and eventually more. It’s enough time for me to grow tired and start to feel other priorities take hold. It’s enough time to rediscover my passion... and for that passion to dwindle. It’s enough time for me to see food as love, as sustenance, and as pain. For now, I have the privilege to enjoy food without having to consider and accommodate any health conditions or physical restrictions. On the other hand, graduate school, a full time job, my husband, dog, friends and family have stolen time dedicated toward meal preparation, grocery shopping and exploring new restaurants. For now, I will continue to balance my time as I have and make time to enjoy the positive relationship with food I’ve worked hard to nurture. I will continue to quell the effects of body shame and the yearning to please. During times when weight based intentions get the best of my food choices, I will continue to be committed to curiosity, not punishment.
Everyone is on a diet. I met a woman today who told me that she has been jumping from diet to diet for the past 50 years. Now in her 70s, she has come to me asking for the newest eating trend on the market. When we spoke about letting go of “weight” and finding other measures of health, she responded in a way that was discouraging, yet unsurprising. “I’m scared I might just let myself go if I don’t monitor it. What if I just keep gaining?”, her voice was jagged with anxiety. She then offered a misguided solution, “What if I just put a picture of myself at my ugliest and heaviest on my mirror to motivate me?”. Only in a culture where body surveillance and maintenance is normal and naturalized within daily life, would this body shaming practice be seen as motivation.

Beauty culture is a term I recently picked up while reading *Becoming Women: The Embodied Self in Image Culture* by Carla Rice. For a while, the intersection of beauty ideology and current societal constructs didn’t have a name to me. There are so many elements that made any term to describe it so loaded and heavy, though none seemed to sum it up as nicely as beauty culture.

Beauty culture is not just skin deep. It is internal and silent. Just like the wallpaper in Lina’s bathroom. A sleeping giant that awoke a slew of questions in my mind of how much influence beauty culture had on her choice of décor. When I
asked Lina about it, she called it “fun and pretty”, which led my inquiry to internalized beauty ideals. This is often a challenging topic to examine and especially, self-examine as it’s difficult for a person identify the influences that inform our decisions. These influences are so ingrained into the way we perceive our surroundings and the meaning we make of the messages we take in, that it’s presence can be quite elusive. Beauty culture and body image surfaced and resurfaced in different ways throughout the narratives of Sam and Lina. Some were stronger characters, appearing in more overt ways and others in more curious and subtle forms. Family relationships, social and financial pressures, health and other influences helped shape Sam and Lina’s perception of self and body, in addition to how they measured up and fit into the world around them.
Body dissatisfaction and maintenance routines were certainly present and more pronounced in Sam’s narrative. Though, she often dismissed many of her comments and attributed them to the understanding that all women wanted to be thinner, eat less and look their best. This seemingly universal understanding, a normative standard, was like the invisible man sitting in the room, watching us with his clipboard and pen. The patriarchy, capitalism, internalization and naturalization of body dissatisfaction and maintenance were at work. Her delight over the side effect of her medications that caused her eyelashes to grow long and lush and the

Figure 18 “Lilly on Rough Waters”

5.5” x 8.5”. Transparent watercolour and felt pen on watercolour paper. Image digitally enhanced. Completed in 2014.
fact that she would put make-up and earrings on when she was sick at home with the flu, to me, were examples of a subscription to beauty culture. Similarly, I can’t help but put myself in her heels and think, *I would put make-up on too if that would make me feel less awful about my fever*. Or maybe I would feel thankful that my eyelashes magically grew longer, at a time when I felt like my physical health, was spiraling out of my control. I guess it’s one of those perspectives you can only fully understand when you get there.

The parts of Sam’s narrative that struck me the hardest were narrated more as punctuations, but to me, were at her story’s core. In a pragmatic and a matter-of-fact sort of way, Sam told me about her mother’s comments on her body and the subsequent surveillance on her intake of food. In our time together, this marked the first appearance of body dissatisfaction – perhaps a more significant piece of history that her casual telling of it had let on. She also expressed, several times throughout her history, a desire to be like her peers. Many of her stories were saturated with trying to find her place in a life that was constantly moving and transitioning.

Mothers can also have a tremendous influence on a young girl’s perceptions and socialization of their body (Clarke & Griffin, 2007; Rice, 2014). At first, Sam described her body as a “...solid kid. Just...you know... normal figure”. After all, she was a swimmer and prided herself on her strength. As a young girl, Sam described her mum as being disturbed by her shape and size and verbalized to both her and her father that Sam needed to lose weight. This was also a point of contention.
between her parents and the anorexia, eventually created a growing distance between her and her father. I can only imagine how Sam felt as a small child, especially when you are just being you. In her story, this appeared to be the earliest evidence of Sam learning to evaluate her body. Her perception quickly shifted from one of utility and function to an object to be looked at, critiqued and appraised. Like any child, she seemed quite eager to please her parents and for her body to be a source of contention between them, I wondered if this set the stage for a lifetime of contention with her body.

In my readings on the topic of body dissatisfaction, I came across Self-Determination Theory, which focuses on one’s intrinsic or extrinsic source of motivation (SDT, 2015). One article in particular stuck with me. Although I’ve come to recognize the misgivings in more traditional forms of research, I still find myself drawn to them. More than that, I often find my computer mouse clicking on its links and following its trail out of reflex. Nonetheless, this theory proposes that those who have an autonomous orientation to their social environment are more protected from socially constructed beauty ideals and are concerned more so with the quality of food (Mask & Blanchard, 2010). In contrast, those whose orientation is more dependent and relational are more susceptible to messages that perpetuate the thin ideal and are more concerned with the quantity of food they eat, thus setting the stage for dysfunctional eating attitudes. The more women with low self-determination feel controlled in their behaviours by external cues, the more
vulnerable they are to body image and eating disturbances (Mask & Blanchard, 2010).

Perhaps this particular article resonated with me because I found myself in it. I found myself in the characteristics they described in those who had low self-determination. I immediately thought of the approval I sought from my friends, my parents and the fashion trends that I so desperately tried to mimic, not because I liked the colours, cut or style of those clothes, but because they owned the automatic, social stamp of approval if they were worn by my favourite celebrities. As I read through the article, all the memories of a habitual surveillance of my body returned. To fit the shape and look that garnered more positive comments from the people around me came back to life. My personality was no different. It was shaped by those I hung around with. I remember saying to myself quietly, “I’m such a chameleon”. It’s only now that I realize how painful it was to have an identity, buried beneath a multitude of computations, modifications and iterations. To have an identity that didn’t feel safe to surface until more recently. I don’t think I’m alone.

I also see some other parallels in Sam’s story, as she often relates each of her stories to pleasing her parents, or fitting in. She orients herself in the classist system of her high school and uses her sense of style to hide her financial insecurities. Her later years, in particular, those lived in the hospital recovering from her anorexia, was a situation that ironically forced her to rely on external cues, such as weight goals, in order to regain her autonomy. This is not a judgment on her strengths or
weaknesses, nor is it meant to compartmentalize or diminish her life history and lived experience. I felt this pertinent to my attempt in making meaning of her story by orientating parts of her narrative to existing theories and piece together an understanding. Theories like this simply help inform my thoughts, though certainly do not encapsulate my understanding of the world with an objective truth. In doing interpretive research, such as life history, I must recognize that they shape the lens of my interpretation (Muchmore, 1999).

In Lina’s story, her narratives seem more divergent. Her stories told in the context of body image were much less pronounced. Perhaps her family’s deeply exhaustive financial struggle after the war as Jewish immigrants played a role. Often, the financial, social and emotional resources that are limited by poverty are spent on the struggle to provide the essentials for survival and there is often little left to engage and participate in beauty culture (Clarke & Griffin, 2007). Her stories were anchored in finding joy in the simplest of possessions. A common thread that wove through her narrative was that adversity leads to growth, self-sufficiency and the confidence to transcend boundaries. Her stories always seemed to originate in her feelings, needs and desires. She rarely spoke of measuring up to the successes, physiques or social standings of those around her, even her three sisters. The way she describes her relationships also seemed fluid, well reciprocated and balanced. She had a loving and supportive relationship with her parents and siblings.
Sam also transcended the boundaries of her time. She was a strong woman who rose to the top of her profession, supported herself and cared for her parents until their death. Yet, I’m curious about the positioning of these elements in the telling of her history. Growth, self-sufficiency and confidence, to me, were at the centre of Lina’s history telling compared to Sam’s. There seemed to be much distance between Sam’s experience with anorexia, as well as the events leading up to that time and the stories about her career, life on her own, the people she met along the way and so on. Was this a conscious separation throughout her history, or was she simply more conscious of telling her story within the bounds of food, body image and age? Perhaps I didn’t ask enough questions about her professional life. I don’t know, but I know that part of her history was there.

Near the end of my time with Sam, when she told me about her more recent life experiences, her orientation to beauty standards seemed to shift from the pursuit of perfection to “not sick” by way of looking “put together”. The key here for me, was that the pursuit of some element of beauty or an appearance that measures up to a standard of “looking well” never really goes away. The influence of beauty ideology often stays with us, though perhaps gets weaker as we age (Peat, Peyerl & Muehlenkamp, 2008). This is what I’ve seen reflected in people, stories and bodies I’ve had the privilege of meeting as a dietitian. For Lina, who didn’t struggle with an eating disorder, though nonetheless lives in beauty ideology like the rest of us, seemed to have more body dissatisfaction in relation to function, rather than beauty later in life.
Perhaps the accumulation of life experiences broadened their ideas and deepened their feelings of self-worth for Lina and Sam (Marshall, Lengyel, Utioh, 2012). Maybe professional achievements, relationships, travels and health cast an expanding shadow over the narrow confines of beauty culture that once helped define an identity. The light I saw in Sam and Lina’s faces when they spoke, even if briefly, of their achievements enlightened me to their fuller selves. I wonder if this wasn’t specific to my experience in listening to them, rather was inherently integrated into their identity with each experience.

This weakening of beauty culture influence could also be connected to our tendency to compare our bodies, as we get older, to self-derived benchmarks of people who are the same age and have similar social and cultural backgrounds, which also lends to an acceptance of a wide range of body shapes, sizes and appearances (Marshall, Lengyel, Utioh, 2012). When I asked Sam about who she looked up to and admired, she didn’t rhyme off a long list of movie stars. She told me of a number of different, non-physical characteristics that her close friends had. Sure, she also admired a few for looking well and “put together”; however it hummed along with a multitude of other qualities that might not have entered her response if I had asked a 21 year old Sam. Despite the calming and reassuring feelings that accompany the word acceptance in this context, I am reminded of a different kind of body dissatisfaction that Sam and Lina described – one that nestles
deeply into the challenges of food, body image and age and an evolving identity...

*functional ability.*
Chapter 24

Age as Narrative

It’s another snowy and lazy Saturday. I’ve burrowed myself into a throw blanket on the couch for hours with a cup of hot tea and a book in hand. I asked my mum to borrow a book I gave her for her 56th birthday called, *I Feel Great about My Hands: And Other Unexpected Joys of Aging*. It’s a compilation of women’s counter-culture perspectives about aging. It’s a beautiful and captivating read, but how can I make sure to remember these words when *I’m 56, 79 and 85*? Will I embody these narratives and feel this confident and joyful about my age and my body? There is so much distance between there and now. Within that distance, how do I ground this perspective to make sure it makes it there? When I think about Lina and Sam’s lives, there is so much that happens within that distance to shape our perspective. There are cultural influences, joyful and difficult relationships, transient people and surroundings, transformative life events and the list goes on. Then I think about how easy it is for me to say that I’ll find the pleasures in aging when I don’t have the same physical evidence or in some cases, ailments of it.
Lina and Sam are two strong women whose journey through struggle and success were inspiring. They held my hand and transported me through their life's proud and shining moments, imbued with stories of will, strength and hard work. At first, these narratives were interspersed with shadowy memories of defeat and heartbreak. Though, as their journey went on, their light grew dimmer and their narratives became heavy with disappointment. Their dreams and desires slowly stifled by their failing bodies.

Hearing Sam describe her measures of so-called successful aging in her social comparisons was difficult, knowing what I had already discovered about her declining health. Throughout her description of her 82 year old, iron pumping, actress friend, I couldn’t help but notice her pausing to take deeper, fuller breaths. I
could feel her sadness in the loss of her hiking days, the pain she felt with every unsatisfying breath, and the loneliness she felt with her shrinking social circle. For those on the outside looking in, her crisp white collared shirt, pristine home, luscious lashes and red lipstick seemed to mask the fractures in her identify that her story was exposing.

Lina’s discontent with her slowing body was even more pronounced. Narratives from her more recent years seemed like a stark contrast to those of an earlier, feisty and animated Lina. “… I have no zest.” She says. Like a dagger piercing the heart of my imagined, fairytale end. Hearing those words felt like a darker reality had nestled itself into my hopes for her current and future narrative. Perhaps I’m exposing my naïveté.

“… Everybody does things for you. Nah, I don’t like (aging) because it cramps my style.” In transcribing the last few paragraphs of Lina’s story, this line stood out the most. It was loaded with the rich authenticity of who Lina was and the grief and betrayal she must’ve felt in finding a way to fit her spunk and spirit into her now failing body.

Lina’s life history seemed to be built on the utility of her body. She prided herself on her ability and hard work to be self-sufficient. From helping out her mother in the kitchen, to working at a young age to achieve financial independence, to raising three children and taking up a second career when most people would be
ready to retire; Lina was used to doing. She did things on her own terms. She didn’t pride herself on body aesthetic or view her body as a passive object to look at. Her body was an active means to fulfill a purpose. Now, poor circulation and the dull and persistent pain of arthritis slowed her spirit. Her wit and jovial laughter seemed to bridge the distance between a darting mind, will and spirit and the chair she was begrudgingly tied to.

I wondered how their situations were positioned within the strata of vibrancy amongst their social circles. In asking Sam and Lina who their role models were, I was surprised and comforted by their admiration for their friends. Before asking the question of who they looked up to, I was entrenched in the power of media influence and my own affinity and appreciation for celebrity style. While I’m disturbed by media stereotypes that narrow the reflection of aging in the media, it was empowering to hear that Sam and Lina’s self-comparisons were more local and realistic. They admired a friend’s ability to be supportive, to maintain close relationships and to exude vitality. Their measures had much more depth and breadth than the hollow appearances of scripted celebrity stardom. They were strong, consistent and enduring characteristics. Though, I wondered – is it easier to feel that you don’t measure up to a distant, fictionally crafted starlet or a friend that you can see yourself reflected in? This was a question that I unfortunately didn’t ask, but nonetheless, pondering it helped me process the weight of emotions on aging.
I will never know how they truly feel. I have not had to deal with a decline in health or have to negotiate how I feel on the inside and what my body can do. From an outsider looking in, I admire them. I see vitality with every joke, laughter and smile, untouched by shallow breaths of overworked lungs or the stiffness of arthritis. I see the love, closeness and devotion Lina feels for her husband and children. I see Sam’s dedication for her friends and the warmth and joy she must feel playing bridge with them. I’m grateful for their willingness to walk me through their life history, grounded by their perspectives on food, body image and age and punctuated by so much more. I thank them for making my curiosities feel at home. I can only hope that Sam and Lina felt just as full and satiated with my offerings of good company, my fascination for their life histories and this platform for discourse on food, body image and age. Thank you Sam and Lina, for everything. Rest in peace Sam.
Chapter 25

Quilted

I come to the ever prevailing question, *so what?* This journey into the lives of Sam and Lina takes us beyond the stereotype of body dissatisfaction among young teenage girls; rather their stories broaden, contextualize and chronicle the normative discontent felt at any age (Peat, Peyerl & Muehlenkamp, 2008; Rice, 2008). They give insight to a discontent that ranges from beauty aesthetic to functional ability, intertwined with a dynamic relationship with food. Their stories uproot the events, emotions, thoughts and conditions that nourish perspectives on food, body image and age. Stories of financial struggle, family relationships, social pressure, our life achievements and our health all shape our perspectives. Presenting narratives, as whole as they can be, help us to understand the nuances and appreciate the many, unique facets of how we live in our bodies, rather than default to the generalized and often, reductionist conclusions of more traditional research methods. Their narratives add to a growing body of literature that respects our life histories as legitimate sources of knowledge and are integrated into the fabric of our current knowledge about food, body image and age. It identifies, contextualizes and accepts the sameness, as well as the differences among our stories. It gives voices to those whom otherwise would not have the space to tell their stories. Life history research also encourages us to reflect on our own stories and how they intersect with and shape our perspectives.
This journey has also facilitated a healing process for me. Typing out my deepest reflections on my own food and body image struggles allowed me to feel a sense of closure. I feel more confident in truly being in the next chapter of my life. Hiding my struggle prevented me from being present, as I was constantly working to bury it. The vulnerability that accompanies this exposure, builds on my will to overcome the parasite of shame and stigma of my identity, being a practicing dietitian who struggled with a very dark relationship with food. This experience has been tremendously therapeutic and for this, I am grateful.

*Now what? Where do I go from here?* Personally being aware of how my life experiences shape my understanding carries a power to choose experiences or how we perceive these experiences, to create a positive relationship with food, body image and age. This awareness positions me in a place of curiosity and critical thought, rather than moving through life on autopilot, where the negative and opportunistic facets of society and beauty culture can take hold. In my practice as a dietitian, I now give myself the time and space to explore someone’s life history in the context of food. By honoring the influences of their life history on perceptions of food, body image and age, I can help them acknowledge the complexity of their relationships with food, allowing them to lift the pervasive self-judgment and blame that accompanies certain eating habits, attitudes toward physical activity and feelings toward our bodies. This knowledge and awareness can help refocus the trajectory of these relationships in a way that is more empowering, shifting away from the traditional mantras of “I just need more will power”. This journey helped
me glean insight into the possible emotions that older women experience about their bodies and the difficulty they experience in negotiating their identity with physical ailments. It helps me to contextualize their attitudes to food and barriers to good nutrition. With a better understanding of how beauty culture intersects with our histories as we age, I can help validate the social pressures of beauty culture older women experience, when I so frequently hear others, as well as myself at one point say, “but why does it matter?”

I’m sitting in my empty living room, getting ready to move into a new place. The walls are naked, memories stripped to make room for someone else’s. It’s been three years since I wrote the first pages of this thesis. Since then, I’ve finished my courses, got married, moved cities and noticed a few more sunspots along the way. Five pounds have come and left... and so have loved ones. In this experience, of writing my story and those of Sam and Lina, I’m even more aware of our dynamic and fluid perspectives on food, body image and age. With every new page of our story, our perceptions of living in our bodies are broadened, narrowed, crafted and sculpted by the intersection of our relationships, hardships, adversity, hopes and social constructs.

I can see these changes in my own perspective. I see greater distance between me, and that pre-teen pinching her belly fat while watching Jenny Jones. I love to cook, but instead of choosing my foods based on its calorie content, it’s nutritional value, taste and social aspects rank much higher on my list. I still value
my body’s aesthetic, though I have even greater appreciation for its utility. Age, to me, is punctuated by fear of the unknown, but is grounded in wisdom and excitement. I can still feel the tendrils of beauty culture poking at each thought, nudging them toward the meaningless space of body shame. The type of shame that dictates your food choices and makes you worry about the aesthetics of your future. Though, with each reflection, I take a step back. I turn up the volume on the critical voice in the back of my head that has been educated by the knowledge of oppressive systems and other critical analyses I’ve learned to engage in. I also think about our stories. The weight of influence they carry. I think about how much meaning and how much beauty our life stories have.

It’s time to get up and continue cleaning my dusty and empty living room floor. I’m tired and my eyes feel heavy. I take my duster and run it along an empty ledge, where I kept my favourite orchid. I can hear my husband cleaning up the fast food we had picked up for dinner. The crunching of the paper bag releases the pleasantly pungent smell of french fries, stranded at the bottom. Looking for the last sip of his pop he lovingly shouts, “Ughh! Jasmine, you got lipstick on my straw again!”
Figure 20 “Journey”

8.5” x 5.5”. Transparent watercolour and felt pen on watercolour paper. Image digitally enhanced. Completed in 2014.
End
References:


