

THE STILL POINT

Staying Whole *the first chapter*

for you, before the book is out

ELISA PERISSINOTTO

•

CHAPTER 1

The Hunger You Call Love

This time you don't want to think about it. You wrote what you wrote, you know he's still awake, but it's almost midnight and you have to be up in the morning. You turn off your phone and set it on the nightstand, making sure the screen is facing down.

You take a deep breath while you stare at the ceiling, then you turn onto your other side. You straighten the pillow, the one you even took the trouble to dab with a drop of lavender oil, the kind that helps you relax, but the sheets feel like they're smothering you. There's no fooling yourself: something is gnawing at your stomach.

Maybe he's answered and you don't know it. If you read his message, you could sleep in peace.

Okay, this is the last time, starting tomorrow you'll be strong. With a sigh you roll back toward the nightstand, reach out your hand, and press the little side button with your thumb.

It doesn't only happen at night. The next day you try to function; when lunchtime comes you start chopping carrots and zucchini without wanting to, scrape it all into the pan with the tricolor quinoa, and add water. You have no appetite, but you have to nourish yourself properly. Except

•

that even while the food is simmering, a stone in your stomach won't leave you alone and you almost have to work at breathing. A little later you sit out on the balcony with the steaming bowl in your hands, sink your spoon in, and nothing, you just sit there chewing. Something in your throat seems to have knotted itself, and every bite goes down hard.

Why does he treat me this way?

Allow yourself one question, one of the ones you only ask in the dark, where there's no one left to pretend for. That stone weighing on your stomach, honestly: how long have you been carrying it? Not since tonight, and not since this message that went unanswered either; it was there before, long before him. All he did was lend it a name, and a number to dial in the middle of the night.

And maybe, for you, it isn't even a phone anymore. The phone came first, years ago perhaps: a boy who didn't answer, and you would sit there wondering whether to write again or wait, whether you'd already said too much. Then time passed, and that same waiting only changed shape. Now it's a door: it's evening, you're in the kitchen stirring his favorite sauce, and you're listening for the sound of the key in the lock so you can tell, from the way it turns, what mood is about to walk into the house. You even married that someone, and you notice you're still making the same gesture you made as a girl. The man changes, the years change; but the gesture is the same: all of you leaning toward

another person, guessing his weather before he even arrives, forgetting yourself.

And do you remember the engagement? It was the same old craving, only dressed up as happiness. When he asked you to marry him you thought: *there, now he's chosen me*. There was no more room for those grinding doubts. For a few months the emptiness really did seem to go quiet. You spent your evenings choosing the dress and deciding who to invite, and you felt like you had finally arrived somewhere; you believed you'd found the cure, a person who loved you, someone who would finally make you feel worth something. Instead you had only moved the waiting further out; you were waiting for the wedding exactly the way you had waited, as a girl, for one of his messages.

In these pages you'll find the same situation described in different guises. It can be the phone you stare at during the night, the room where you hold your breath when he comes home, or the man you take care of until there's almost nothing left of you. It's always the same hunger, camouflaged a different way each time. Not all of them will be your story; take the one you recognize yourself in, and leave the rest.

I know none of this is light. It's a feeling as old as breathing, and it has a more recent name that you may already feel on you like a verdict: love addiction. But a word is not a sentence, and you are not a diagnosis; you're a woman with a primal need that took a wrong turn. And this inner need has strong hands: you feel it like fingers around your throat, it

pulls your eyes open in the dark and sends you looking for the screen the way a lung looks for oxygen. And all the while, about yourself, you've learned to think the worst. That maybe you're too much: too intense, maybe, too hungry for someone's presence, and that this, you've convinced yourself, is exactly what makes you hard to love. You think that somewhere inside there's a flaw, something other women don't have and that in you would need fixing.

Let me tell you this right away, before anything else, so no doubt is left in you: you are not damaged. There is nothing in you to repair the way you repair a broken machine. What you feel is not a defect you were born with; it's an ancestral hunger that learned early, and far too well, the wrong road to satisfying itself. This hunger is real, it's only turned toward the wrong place.

Because the hardest truth to accept is exactly this: the hunger doesn't lie. That emptiness under your breastbone is not something you're making up, your body is telling you that you truly need something. But that something is not him. He's only the wrong address you keep stubbornly mailing the right letter to.

And this is where it all starts. Look at what happens when he's finally there: when he answers, when for one evening he looks at you the way you dreamed he would. For an instant, one single instant, the stone dissolves and you can breathe again. *See? That's all it took.* Then, within an hour, sometimes within minutes, the sky closes over you again, identical to

before, and your hand is already reaching for the screen, already demanding the next proof.

Stop here, because this is the point where hunger and love go their separate ways. Love, when it comes, holds you up, it gives you something to lean on. This hunger doesn't: it fills and empties in the same motion, like a glass with a crack in the bottom. You can pour all the water in the world into it, every bit of his attention, every yes of his, and you're still left there with that thin thread of dread, wondering why it's never enough. It's never enough because he isn't what you're thirsty for. You drink, and you're still thirsty.

In the nineteen-seventies an American psychologist, Dorothy Tennov, sat down to listen to hundreds of people who said they were in love, and a great many of them described the same pattern. Their minds stayed fixed on the other person even when they weren't seeking him out, their mood rose or crashed at a single signal from him, and the constant goal was always to be wanted back. None of the words she had at hand said the right thing, so she invented one. Limerence. She cared about one point only, the one that perhaps nobody has ever told you: that this fever is not love; from the outside it resembles love the way thirst resembles water. If you mistook it for love, it isn't because you're naive. It's that you were genuinely thirsty.

You confused the two because someone, very early on, made them look like one thing. You learned it without words, nobody ever explained it to you. In your body you learned

•

that a look, in order to arrive, had to be earned. You understood that you had to make yourself good, calm, attentive, never too much; that your need was a weight to be kept hidden, and that love was earned by getting smaller. So you made yourself small, and you gave that disappearance of yours the name of love. It wasn't. It was hunger learning to behave, so as not to be left empty-handed.

Let's go back, then, to that emptiness under your breastbone, because now we can look at it for what it really is. It isn't a bottomless pit. Think instead of a house. A house of your own, inside you, that at a certain point you stopped living in. You closed its shutters, you covered the furniture with sheets, you turned down the heat, and you went off to knock at someone else's door, to ask under your breath if they'd let you in, if they would please keep you warm. All this hunger, in the end, is nothing but the cold of a house nobody lives in anymore. You feel it deserted and you think: *he's what's missing*. But that room was yours before he ever existed. Though it's true that someone is missing. You are.

A line of Saint Augustine's comes back to me, from the first pages of his *Confessions*. Before he wrote it he had looked everywhere: in rhetoric, at which he excelled, in teachers and sects of every kind, even in love affairs; he had knocked at every door outside himself, and one by one he had found them shut. *You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you*. He was speaking of God, and yet it isn't so different. You can't search outside, only inside. And

in the end, finding inner peace isn't far from finding God.

Restlessness is the exact word for that stone that doesn't dissolve even when he answers: the yearning of a heart looking for its own house, that knocked at the wrong door. It keeps knocking out there, while the right entrance stands behind it, ajar, waiting only for you to turn around.

I'm not going to tell you to stop loving, and I'm not going to tell you that he's the enemy. I won't suggest that in order to heal you have to be alone. It's true that sharing and celebrating together (which is a beautiful thing) shouldn't be a need, but staying alone at all costs is only another suit of armor, and you've worn enough armor already. I'm not promising to teach you to love yourself, as though it were an assignment to complete. I'm promising you something simpler, and more uncomfortable: together, without rushing, we'll go back into that house, and we'll open it one room at a time. You'll learn to move back into yourself, so that love, when it comes, stops being the place where you lose yourself and goes back to being a threshold: the one you leave from, and the one you arrive at already whole. Love will no longer be a hand held out through the doorway, but the woman who is finally home when someone knocks.

For tonight I'm not asking you to change anything. I'm only asking you to set a question down on the nightstand, next to the phone, and to leave it there without answering right away. Carry it with you over the next few days, while you chop vegetables with your favorite music playing and try not

to stare at that screen turned facedown. Don't look for the right answer: let the question, slowly, come looking for you.

The practice

Take a sticky note and write one line on it: "What am I really hungry for?" Stick it on your phone, right over the screen, so that you have to peel it off before you can unlock it.

From now on, for one week, that little piece of paper is your toll. Every time your hand reaches for the screen, at night on the nightstand or standing in line at the register, before you unlock it read the line out loud, even in a whisper, and give yourself the length of one breath to answer with a single word: sleep, warmth, a voice, fear, being seen. Then, if you want, go ahead and unlock it. I'm not asking you not to look at it: only to name the real hunger an instant before you send it, once again, to the wrong address.

In the evening, before you sleep, write on the back of the sticky note the word that came up most often. By the end of the week you'll have a small piece of paper, and on it, in your own hand, the name of what you're really hungry for.



If you have come this far, the rest of the journey is
waiting.

Staying Whole comes out **this October**. You will find it,
and the date as soon as it is set, at
elisaperissinotto.com/en.

Elisa