

For Siblings



Feed Me ~excerpts

When my sister died in 1995, I didn't eat for three days. I was 20, Emily was 16. She was my best friend, my only sibling, my confidant and comedic partner. She died in a stupid spring break car accident and my entire world collapsed. Suddenly, everything was irrelevant. My parents were zombies going through the motions: Make the phone calls, buy the coffin, buy the plot, pick out the clothes, have the wake, have the funeral, cry and cry some more. There was no pleasure left, no happiness or rest. Sleep did not matter. Food did not exist.

Things I learned about death: people talk a lot about God to you, people don't know what to say and they say the wrong things, people bring you a lot of food. By the time my plane touched down my parents' house was full of food: spiral-cut ham, turkey, deviled eggs, baked ziti, pasta salad, bagels and rolls, boatloads of lunchmeat, mountains of potato salad and enough casseroles to feed a football team. And even though I have about ten times the normal amount of relatives, we had more food than we could ever eat.

I wanted none of it.

I couldn't look at food. Every time I even thought of food, I was nauseated. I would slip away down to the basement, past my sister's bedroom and out the back door. I consumed cigarettes like potato chips – I couldn't smoke just one. I wondered how they could think or talk about anything other than Emily's death.

I was offered food a hundred times. What can I get you? What do you want? You need to eat something. There's pasta salad here. Can I fix you a sandwich? A million plates were put in front of me. Cigarettes became my only form of nutrition. Cigarettes and a bit of vodka. I spent the first nights after her death on the phone in my childhood bedroom, smoking and talking to the few friends I could stand until it was late and they needed sleep. Then I walked around the house, absorbing the quiet and feeling the ghosts of all the people and voices there just hours before. I avoided the kitchen.

By day four, I had lost fifteen pounds and was working on a nice stomach ulcer. I looked gaunt and frail, but somehow this made perfect sense to me. How else should I look after my little sister died? Funny though, this was the first day that anyone noticed I hadn't been eating at all. My parents were locked deep in their own grief, unaware of much else.

My aunts, uncles, cousins and friends continued to fill the house like some morbid afterparty, some cleaning up, but mostly just milling about, looking for something to do. So when I decided to come up from the basement and sit in the living room, my skeletal frame was clearly something new to focus on. Everyone immediately started trying to guilt me into eating. Come on, you've got to eat something: your parents are worried sick. You don't want to give your folks something else to worry about, do you? Emily wouldn't want you to act this way; have a little something to eat. Your sister would want you to eat.

This talk made me furious. I didn't want to be noticed or stared at or be the topic of conversation. I just wanted to fade into the wallpaper with my cigarettes and bad midnight TV.

All I could think about was Emily. Gone. Not coming back. Emily would not be at the Thanksgiving table or opening gifts at Christmas. Emily would no longer sit across the table drinking milk and making embellished swallow noises to make me laugh. I couldn't imagine moving forward without her. I suspect this was my problem with food. Food was meant to nourish my body and give me energy to live another day, something I doubted I wanted to do.

I was staring into space when Aunt Vikki sat down on the other side of the coffee table. She rested her arms on the table, elbows out; fingers laced together, and stared me straight in the eye.

"What do you want to eat?" she asked, serious voice, not sing-song-y sweet Southern.

"I will go and get you whatever you want. Just tell me what it is and I will go and get it."

I looked at her and realized she was serious. I could send this woman up to NY to get me a hot dog from Papaya King or off to Rome for authentic gelato. I put my head down and scrambled for an answer. "Fried chicken from Bojangles."

Some time later she returned with the food and placed it on the coffee table. There was no presentation, not even a plate. Just a yellow and red take-out box of chicken. It was clandestine, like she had slipped me a drink...or more cigarettes.

"Thanks." I opened it, instantly inhaling grease and cayenne pepper. My stomach turned over and growled simultaneously. I looked up pleadingly at Vikki. How do I eat?

I gingerly plucked a chicken wing from the box, brought it to my lips, and took a small bite.