

—THE LIVING WORLD

by C. Michael Cook

Melissa emptied the cupboards and then the refrigerator. She put everything in the trash because she couldn't imagine putting any of it in her mouth.

Cereal, eggs, meat. Especially the meat.

She scanned the countertops, looking for anything she might have missed. She found the honey sitting next to the stove, and almost threw it away before realizing it was okay.

She could eat honey.

She fought with the lid then found a spoon. The honey was sticky and thick, so sweet it made her throat itch, and she swallowed one grateful spoonful after another. When it was gone she scraped the sides of the jar clean.

Tomorrow she'd tell Carrie about the honey and swear her to secrecy. Melissa could lose her job over it, her apartment and car and everything else. Then what? She could picture the whole thing ending with her back in Iowa, with her parents, at the farm, where everything, everywhere was destined to become food.

Beef, corn, milk.

Melissa loved working with the girls—and sometimes boys—at the hospital. They all arrived with at least one secret. It was the secrets that made them push the food around on their plates, or bring it back up in private, or rush it through their systems with pills, or refuse it altogether.

Secrets about the things they'd done, the things that had been done to them, the things they desperately wanted to do.

Melissa wasn't that much older than some of the girls. She believed this was why she'd been hired. The girls saw her as more of a contemporary, not exactly a counselor, even though she'd filled that role for over a year. Because she was young, they were more likely to be honest with her, more likely to share the secrets that made them want to be so thin, to starve themselves, sometimes even to die.

Carrie was different from the other girls. At nineteen she was a little older, her case more severe. She'd been pretty once, smiling from snapshots and school photos, with blonde hair and eyes blue as gas flames.

Her secret was different too. Different even from Melissa's. Once, Melissa had believed there was a door in front of her, one only she could see, and if she could only get thin enough, she'd finally be able to slip through it.

The passage would transform her, making her something both special and ordinary, perfect and unattainable. And then she'd be free to go, leaving her parents and the farm, her school and the little town around it, so far behind that no one—not

even she--would ever be able to see it.

That was her secret, and it had been coaxed from her at a hospital two thousand miles and ten years away, by a woman named Marilyn with curly brown hair and round hips like Melissa's. The secret was the key, she said, that could unlock the trap Melissa had created for herself, and eventually Melissa saw that she was right.

Eighteen months later, when Melissa finally did leave home, it was for college. She majored in psychology and earned her Master's and came to California. Now she helped other girls unlock the traps they'd created.

But Carrie was still a puzzle. She didn't want to escape a troubled childhood or adolescence. She wasn't interested in distancing herself from a family that trapped and embarrassed her. She didn't care about the admiration of other girls or the attention of boys and men, or fitting in or standing out.

Carrie just wanted to stop eating. She'd been hospitalized, gotten better and worse several times before finally showing up at Melissa's hospital, wheeled in on a stretcher, refusing to open her mouth even to speak.

Her parents had tried everything, they said, she'd been seen everywhere. They didn't know what to do for her, but they wanted her in a hospital environment. She was destroying their family. There were two other children to worry about, and Carrie's illness was affecting them.

It was all in the folder Melissa's supervisor gave her one afternoon. Carrie stood five-foot-six and weighed 92 pounds. She had a BMI of 14.8, low blood pressure and heart rate, alopecia, every sign of advanced malnutrition. Her academics had been good and her IQ was high. "Scary smart," is how her supervisor put it.

"No one expects you to cure her," she said. Her supervisor was blonde, one of those women who polish themselves to a high gleam, and Melissa always felt dowdy in front of her, no matter what she did. "Just see if you can get her to talk," the supervisor said, catching Melissa's eyes with her own. "See what you can learn."

Later that afternoon Melissa led a group. The topic was how the girls and their friends supported their disordered eating habits.

One revealed, "We competed to see who could eat the fewest calories each day."

Another confessed, "We tried to be the one who could go the longest without eating anything."

Yet another, "We took pictures and video of one another, looking as thin as possible, and posted them on the Web."

They told about texting their weight morning and night, of passing along diets designed to trick their bodies into shedding just a few more pounds, sharing cocktails of supplements and laxatives, taking turns with trusted friends in front of the toilet while the other stood by in silent, supportive approval.

Melissa listened to them all, and now she had a new secret of her own: Everything they talked about, everything they described, made her want to do those things again.

Juice, pastries, soda.

Carrie was too weak to move so they met in her room. She was nothing like her pictures. Now the skin hung from her bones like so much empty fabric, thin hair clung to her skull like it was wet, and her eyes, those brilliant blue eyes, bulged from sockets