

Eat. Shit. Die.

HELEN GILDFIND

NOW GEORGE, THAT IDIOT AT BRINDLES, might have been a crap cook, but he was on to something when he said—as he did every night he forced his muck down me—Leo! If you don't eat, you don't shit. If you don't shit, you die! Eat up! I suddenly thought of him at the club last night, while Bryce and Nina and Renee banged on about their alienation as creative artists and so on. The usual spiel. Another night lost to blah blahs. Then the inevitable boasting about who'd screwed who since last time. Renee won as usual: she loves beating us boys; she loves rubbing Nina's fat face in it. She finally got with the red-headed chick from the café, and the thalidomider from the studio, the one with the pierced stumps who paints with his feet. I was too busy nursing my juicy, cramping guts to really listen, but when finally, solemn as a saint, Renee led the usual closing sermon on how everything comes down to the universal, elemental, fundamental sex drive, I just wanted to scream, What are you *talking* about?

If you don't eat, you don't shit. If you don't shit, you die.

When your guts are broke you realise pretty quick what's fundamental. Eating. Shitting. I don't know about dying, except that it's like sex: there's too much written about it and it's all crap.

Time someone wrote about what really matters.

Time someone wrote about shit.

Nina, you eat too much. Every meal you tell yourself, this is the *last* time: you've got to stop eating like this. You never feel hungry. You never feel full. You're always out of control. Now, it's 9 pm. Again, you've sent yourself to bed to stop yourself eating. Again, you can't sleep: all you can think about is food.

Maybe Glen's right: you've overstretched your stomach. How does he put it? That, inside, you're like Doctor Who's TARDIS: Tard-arse, he says, Tard-arse lard-arse. Or you're like Mary Poppins' handbag, your guts looping around inside you without limit or end. He says you're a walking, talking black hole. That you could swallow stars. That you're a star's graveyard. He's getting very cosmic about your condition. There's no metaphor, he says, astronomical enough to explain where all that food goes. I could have done my thesis on you, he says. A new physics: Arsetronomy!

Well, of course you haven't defied physics. Energy is *always* conserved, and last week he caught you arranging the newest bulges of your stomach around the table—with your hands—as if they were an annoying object that was getting in your way. The shame! Worse, the realisation: they *were* an annoying object that was getting in your way! Since then you've noticed how your fleshy armpits

pinch and pull when you reach for things, and how, when you drop something, you just peer helplessly at the floor, distrusting your body's turgid hinges. A few nights ago, when Glen was in his room schmooing on the phone to Sally, you set up the bathroom scales. You filled a bucket with seven kilos of water—the weight you've gained these past few months. You told yourself: that's fat, Nina, blobbing through your blood, plugging your heart, exploding you slowly—a slo-mo super duper nova. You lifted the bucket: it was heavy! How disgusting, to pour such muck into yourself. How exhausting, to carry such weight around with you, all the time, *all* the time.

I'm getting in my way! you cried to Glen last night, as you shared the feast you'd cooked him because he was missing Sally badly. Look, sis, he said, you know the deal. Energy in—he stuffed in another mouthful—must be equal to or less than energy out. He leant over, as if to fart. You didn't laugh. He stopped fooling. He patted your arm. It's just flab, Nina. Just food. Accept yourself, or change yourself, but stop obsessing, cos you're driving me nuts. He went back to his dinner, muttering, What is *with* women and food? and you found yourself travelling his words up, up into space. You looked down on the earth and you saw how its men never thought about food, beyond wanting it and eating it, while its women cooked and gorged and starved and vomited and cried, their food morphing into all sorts of strange things in their guts: thoughts, feelings, rituals. Glen burped you back to the table, demanding, Cake, woman! Of course you'd baked one. Of course you ate the whole thing once he'd taken his slice and disappeared for some optical sex with poor Sally stuck in Wadey.

Well, it's easy for Glen to lecture you, with his laddery ribs and his hoppery limbs and his horsey face, all bony plains and stretched skin. It's easy for him to reduce everything to rationality. He might be right—you've just got to 'get a grip'—but what if he's wrong? Can physics really explain everything? Can it explain compulsion, this force that's not quite a thought or a feeling or an urge, but some sort of a cell-deep primal call to just eat and eat and eat?

Oh, rubbish! It's not your flabs getting in your way, Nina. It's not some profound ancestral memory dictating things: it's you; it's just *you*.

Once again, your nightly prayer and promise. Today was the last time. Please let tomorrow be a new day.

I've finally forced myself to see Gallows (to get to the bottom of it, ha ha). I'm sitting outside his surgery, thinking about shit and society. I started thinking about this years ago. I was at a supermarket checkout, waiting behind an old woman, when a voice yelled from my elbow, 'Pwoar, something *stinks!*'

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A fleshy slap. I turned and saw a mop-haired kid with brimming eyes and a finger-pegged nose. His mother kept thumping groceries onto the counter. I suddenly wondered if, in my dreamy stupor, I'd farted or burped. Maybe I had BO, having spent all that humid morning sweating and writing in days-old boxers. As I turned away, disgusted, a warming stench hit me. 'Mum—look!' Thump. I went to check my shoes, and then I saw it. I stared at the pencil-thin ankles of the oldie in front of me: over her heel and smearing onto the floor was a slug of soft yellow shit.

The old woman seemed oblivious to the squalling kid and the retching air. In fact, with her pin curls and mint dress and tan handbag, she oozed refinement; pure refinement, except for the shit—her shit—spreading over the floor. The checkout chick carried on heroically, chatting away as people began to move around the edges of the store: a manager, a boy with a mop. Finally, the old dame counted out her coins, put her bags in her trolley and disappeared up the street with her head up, her pearls shining and her shit streaking a trail behind her.

For seconds, then, everything stopped, as if the building's very fabric knew that something profound had just happened within it. Then the checkout chick smiled and asked me to step back. The boy trundled the mop over and we all stood, quiet as a funeral congregation, as he scowled and swirled and smeared the shit into bleach-smelling nothingness. As I watched him I knew everyone except for the hollering kid was wondering, Did the old woman *know* what had happened? If she did, was she okay? If she didn't, would she be okay when she realised?

As I walked home that day I wondered what I'd have done if it had been me. Irrationally, but definitely, I knew I'd go home and kill myself. Realising that, I began to wonder seriously about shit and society.

When you were little food was a treat. On Thursday nights you and Glen paced the shiny pink lino of the supermarket's junk food aisle while your mum stormed off with the trolley. You each had a dollar to spend. Every time you chose something Glen would say, I dunno if I'd choose *that* one, Nina, so you never got what you wanted and always coveted what he got. At home you'd watch TV and play your silent weekly game of losers finish first. You always lost and later Glen would lie in bed with his sweet trophy propped on his pillow. Nina, he'd say, look. He'd go Mmmm-mmm and lick and slurp and suck in a creepy way until you ran over and thumped him, yelling for your mum, who said it served you right for being a pig. It's always been like that

between you and Glen: you wanted to eat, he wanted to compete; you scooped, he savoured.

It wasn't just sweets that drove you. It was every food, every day. If you'd done your chores or walked Spooker, you got snacks or seconds at dinner. If you achieved good grades you won two chocolate bars on Thursday nights and none if you'd done poorly, which wasn't fair because Glen was good at everything and you were good at nothing. On Sundays, you hustled for the weekly roast, your mum tossing it to whoever she deemed best behaved, or she'd tell you to buzz off and would sit on the back step—the picking place—tearing the juiciest shreds from the bones herself. If your dad scored the corpse, you and Glen would hang around like scrap-yard dogs, poised to pick his pickings because he just didn't understand the art of stripping flesh from bone. Once he tossed a carcass onto the grass to see what you'd do. Of course, you fought for it, and the only thing weirder than that is the image of your dad sitting by as if it were perfectly normal for a man to treat his kids like hyenas at a zoo.

Yes, your parents subscribed to the Pavlovian school of child rearing. Just as they used Schmackos to make Spooker turn tricks, they trained you and Glen with chocolate and meat. But now, Nina, you're your own food-treat-dealer. You're the only judge of whether you've been good, and there's nothing you won't reward, is there? At recess today you trotted to the café to celebrate getting your year 9s into poetry. In the afternoon you hosed down two horny year 10s without sounding like a dried-up old hag: you rewarded yourself with fish and chips at the train station. So why did you then stuff down all that pasta when you got home? And why did you eat the slab of cake that Glen brought back from the lab? *Slab*, not slice. You can still see the look on his face when he came in from Telephone Sally and saw that the cake was gone. He wasn't pissed-off silent. He was just ... say it, Nina. He—the closest person to you, the only one left—was disgusted, disgusted by *you*. Now you've slunk off early to bed again, and you're blaming your parents—*dead* people—for what you do. If it's their fault, Nina, then how come Glen isn't a porker too? If it's their fault, how come you've gotten so much worse just recently?

Again, your nightly prayer and promise. Today is the last time. *Please* let tomorrow be a new day.

'Stool sample.' I'd rather give Gallows my blood, my piss, my semen, my goddamn bone marrow than my shit. Doesn't matter that he's an old man and a doctor and won't even look at it. Doesn't matter that he asks people for shit a dozen times a day. It matters that he's going to read *my* shit, that he's going to

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read *me*. Bloody George. You eat to shit to live, he said, but I've been eating and shitting and yes I'm alive but I might just be dying too.

So here I am at home, 'defecating into a clean container'. I make sure I don't 'urinate' on my 'faeces', though some lab rat will think I've misread instructions: I've been pissing out my arse for weeks. I take 'the clean wooden spatula' and try to put my 'faeces' into the jars: easier said than done. I go to the kitchen. I contemplate a straw, settle for a spoon. Who'll know? Somehow, I'm having fun. It's not every day you get to play with your poop. It's not every day you learn that things like dignity and integrity aren't all they're cracked up to be, that maybe they're just ideas in your head because it's the integrity of the body—not *you*—that matters. Finally, I spoon the murk into the jars and seal them into the bag Gallows has given me: it's yellow and stamped up and down with the sinister black sickles of the biohazard symbol. Faeces, stools, biohazards: even shit-testing kits can't name shit.

I don't know whether to walk or drive this bounty back to Gallows'. For the past few weeks I've hardly left the flat. Lucky I'm on sabbatical because I can't go anywhere, now, without getting strategic about toilets. The club's become impossible too: so busy; no privacy; people noticing. Even Renee looked twice when I arrived last time. I walked straight past her to the crapper. When I returned she was all over me, saying, Wow, Leo, you look *great*, as if I've been fat and ugly all these years and not known it. How'd you do it? she kept asking. She's forever trying to hone herself down to her bones: I discipline my body, she says, I discipline myself. I discipline myself, she says, I discipline my art. Maybe she's right. She's the only one of us whose work's going anywhere.

That was a weird night. I was spacing out while she and Bryce sparred over their 'open relationship', sparred because he's had no-one and she's fucked everyone. Then he started banging on about his show, saying it's flopped because he's a tall poppy who's truly creative because he confronts the conventional blah blah. I just had to ask him how artified porn was anything but derivative. Artified porn? he squealed. Derivative! Renee pissed herself laughing, So *true*, Leo! Even Nina giggled in that snorty, goofy way of hers. Bloody Nina. She just kept peering into me that night. Otherwise she held the floor for once, though maybe she just seemed to because I couldn't take my eyes off her huge freckly tits heaving in and out of that ridiculous black dress of hers. She always looks like a dog's breakfast—like she'd *eat* a dog's breakfast, Renee would say, like she'd eat a *dog*—but there I was eating her with my eyes and pretending to give a damn about her classes and her poems and her new publisher. She was so happy that Renee just had to cut in and cut her down,

looking at her while commenting for the millionth time on my *fantastic* weight loss. Of course, Nina shut right up and sat there, swamped by the fact of her fat.

Stupid Nina, and Renee, you shallow bitch, you'd be stunned if you saw me now: even Gallows stared when I walked into his office yesterday. He felt about my caving guts and jutting ribs and weighed me and hmed and haaed and though he never mentioned it we were both thinking of the C-word as he handed me this shit-kit. And no, Renee, no, Bryce, we weren't thinking of cunts and cocks and cunnilingus, or convention-confronting creativity. We were thinking of that good old plot-moving, world-shaking crisis that gets everyone interested in a B-grade story: cancer.

Hell, I'll take the risk. I'll walk this stuff back to the doc's because I'm bone cold in here and it's burny bright out there and if that old dame could stride her shit down the street then I can flaunt my biohazards too. What have I to lose? I'm in Gallows' hands now.

You couldn't believe it when Leo appeared in the doorway. Your insides tumbled: once, when you thought he'd seen you; again, when you saw he hadn't; and then again, when you saw the change in him. You've never seen anyone so thin. You've never seen him so beautiful.

He strolled across the waiting room, as bendy and bouncy as a blade of grass, swinging a plastic bag and whistling the jolliest tune you've ever heard. That was when your dread from the club forced itself to thought: Please, not Leo! Not my Leo! (*My Leo? Look, there's another feeling morphed into thought and you must be insane, Nina. Leo stopped caring years ago. Why would he care now, now that you're as big as a whale? Now that Renee's always there, between you? Damn Renee! Damn her body and her talk and her brilliant sculptures: all that sex into stone; all her sex, all her stone.*) You know your dread-feeling for Leo is right because his lightness hurled you straight back into that sharp morning years ago when Eddie waltzed in and ate breakfast with you and kissed you and looked into you just as he used to. You'd thought everything had shifted into place. But no. Eddie had just worked it out: weight doesn't come from the past; it comes from the future. You weren't seeing things fixed. You were just seeing what a man looks like when that weight lifts off of him: he looks as floaty-free as Leo looked yesterday at Dr Gallows'.

You watched Leo give his bag to the nurse. When he turned to go he saw you. He stopped whistling. He stared. He saw that you saw. That was when your insides really sickened: he was so freed up that he wasn't even mad, not like he normally is when you catch him on guard. He just hesitated, smiled, strolled

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over and said, Hey, Nina Boppalina, good to see ya. He just stood there, playing that stupid rhyming game you played at uni when you were both practising to be 'great writers', that game he dumped once you'd spent years writing nothing very great and getting nowhere very much. Hey, Leo? you said, tripping over your own question mark. He shrugged, answering you with a jangle of his terrifying bones. Then you blurted it out: 'Come for a feedo, Leo Schmeo? Glen's away seeing Sally.' For once, he wasn't all excuses. Indeed, a feed! was all he said. You rhymed up a time and he said, Cheerio, I gotta go, and tootled out the door.

Then you went in to Dr Gallows. You told him you needed a check-up. He checked things up and said, You're obese. Lose weight. So then you asked him what you were *really* there to ask him. He looked at you as if you were stupid. He said, What do you mean you can't stop eating? Like an idiot you repeated, I can't stop eating. Like an idiot, he repeated, What do you mean you can't stop eating? You both sat there, staring at each other, baffled. Stop eating so much, he said, and exercise more.

Behind your sunnies you bawled all the way down to the café. Then you stopped crying and went inside and ordered your usual—as you knew you would, as you knew you shouldn't. You sat in your favourite sun-drenched seat, loving and hating every sweet bite as you erased Dr Gallows' face behind lists and lists of what to cook for Leo, your Leo, coming to dinner next weeko.

Gallows was not happy. Nothing conclusive could be said about my shit. Nothing conclusive could be said about me. Now I'm in hospital getting ready for what they call a 'top and tail'. Sounds cute, but it's not, though the real agony lies in sitting across from this woman while she talks about how she's going to enter my anus and go down my throat and read me from the inside out. I came here to see the gastro-guy, not this film-star beauty. I can't even look at her face.

Had a spectacular time on the shitter last night after chugging the potion that Gallows gave me. To clean you out for tomorrow, he'd said, handing it over. Dab—don't wipe! he'd joked, but he looked grey as he shrugged over my results and poked around my gutless guts. Later, as I rode a tsunami of shit into the night, I thought of Renee and her detox diets and the million times I'd mocked her: You detox every time you shit, I'd say, every time you piss. As I rode that tsunami, I wondered if she's right after all for, though my body's been purging itself for months, last night showed me that I'm still full of filth. As I watched it gush away, I felt great, like I was cleaning myself right out of myself, and when I woke up this morning, I felt sore and raw and newborn. Stupid Renee!

And stupid me for thinking she'd ever be right about anything, because I'm still here, stuck in myself and squirming in front of this beautiful woman.

Weird, how I spent all last night worrying Renee or Bryce or someone would walk in on me. Later, as I lay in bed, waiting for the smaller waves to hit, I realised what a fool's fear that was because no-one ever drops by and no-one will: no-one's seen me for ages; no-one except Nina, and Nina doesn't count. I realised I might as well flush myself down the toilet for all the world cares. Realising this, I suddenly felt them, all the people in the world who're exiled by their shit and piss and pain and I wanted to scream, How the fuck do you live? and, What will happen to you? Then I asked myself those same questions, but I found no answers. I guess there's some things you just gotta live with even if they stop you living.

The gastro-girl stops talking. She leads me into her surgery and introduces me to the hunky guy who's going to shoot me up with the sleep-juice. He looks over me, to make eyes at her, and it turns out I've got nothing on that old lady from that day: I'm humiliated; I'm scared; I can't hold my head up high or look either of these two good-lookers in the eye. I thank God when a middle-aged nurse walks in and I focus on her lumpy backside and watch her looping a long black hose over a silver hook. What's that for? I ask. You don't want to know! she says. Everyone titters as the liquid sleep pulls me under.

Suddenly I'm awake and surrounded by chattering patients and a glorious symphony of farts. I realise the symphony is my own but I'm so relaxed that I don't care a damn. My nurse appears and asks, Okay, luv? and I say, Great! and my arse says, Fart! She gets me dressed and leads me to a room full of armchairs and TVs and sits me near three cushiony old biddies. They smile at me, like I'm one of them. For the first time panic swells inside me. I focus on the TV. I watch some fatsos confess their teary tales to Oprah. Then I remember Nina, sitting like a big pink pudding at Gallows'. I was walking on air that day, relieved, resigned to whatever fate Gallows was going to read from my shit. I think that's why I said yes to dinner: perhaps I thought I'd die first. God, she annoys me. How she acts like she cares about everyone and everything. I might be a selfish prick but I don't see how caring about everything is so damned different to caring about nothing at all.

The gastro-girl appears next to me. She shrugs like Gallows: she's found nothing, nothing conclusive. She mentions the deadly C-word, then she uses a new C-word and I'm caught on its curves and spikes: catabolic. That's *it*. That's what these past few days and months and years—my life—has been. Catabolic. I stare at the doc's smooth, bare neck. I want to touch her. Before I can do

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anything so stupid, a miracle happens: she touches *me*. She strokes my hand as if she can sense the realisation uncurling inside, that maybe I'll never touch or be touched by anyone ever again.

She asks me who's picking me up. My reply clatters onto the lino: No-one. She doesn't flinch. She smiles. Don't worry, Leo. I'll work things out. You're mine now, okay?

He sits across from you in Glen's seat. There's nothing to say. You don't ask him anything because he'll tell you when he wants to, if he wants to. Both of you eat and eat and eat. You hear him breathe and chew and swallow. You hear his cutlery and plate tap tap tap on the table top. Only once do you ask, Is it okay? He nods, Mmmm-uh-uh. He doesn't look up.

After dinner he disappears to the bathroom. You go out to the balcony. He's gone so long that you wonder if he's throwing everything up. You wonder if he's dropped dead. You turn to check on him. He's staring at you through the glass door. He slides it open, sidles around you and lies on Glen's yellow banana lounge. You sit, feeling your thighs pour over your wooden stool. Together you watch the white and red twinkle of the cars coming and going along the street. You offer him a cigarette, gesturing back to uni, when you each posed and pretended you were too cool to care that the world you wanted didn't want you. You can still feel the agony of that final year when he froze you out, as if he were using you for practice. Oh, forget it Nina! He's here now, and anyway, if he hadn't frozen you out, you would never have known Eddie's lovely warm skin.

When you light your third cigarette you begin to tell Leo everything he never asked you about. Then you tell him about Glen and his work, and about light and dark and time and space and weightlessness. You tell him how your poetry and Glen's physics are really two and the same, for you're both just dealers in metaphor, and isn't everyone just trying to put a shape on things? You tell him how you must move out soon because Glen will never ask you to and he and Sally should be together.

When you finish you look at him. Under the harsh fluro of the street lamp he looks starchy and stringy and white; just as a man should on a banana lounge. You want to laugh. Then fury surges through you. I hate you, Leo, for forgetting me, for ignoring me, for mocking me and for never asking me, *ever*, how it's been.

You turn back to the red and white constellations of the cars. You say, I can't stop eating. You repeat yourself, just as you did at Gallows', as if Leo can't

see what everyone else sees when they look at you and weigh you up before turning away from you forever. Eventually Leo puts out his hand. He only wants another cigarette. He leans in to your lighter, muttering, Oh well. He lies back and says, I can't stop shitting. Then you hear it. It rumbles up from deep within him, up and up, setting his plastic cradle creaking and it's not the pig in him laughing, it's him, it's *him*. And you're laughing too.

I could stay like this forever, full of her food, looking and listening and wondering if she'll let me dress my bones in her, warm myself in her, rest in her. Look at those big sad cow's eyes, sizing me up, looking to see if I hear her and see her. I have. I do.

Nina, I know you'll be gentle, that you'll make a ritual of it, that you'll make a feast of me, that you'll relish me, that you'll pick my bones till they're so damn white we'll throw the light right back at those precious stars of yours. Together we'll blind the lot of them: Glen, Gallows, Renee and Georgie boy. We'll show them there's a thousand ways to eat and shit and live and die. **M**