

MIS FIT

CHARLI HOWARD



PENGUIN BOOKS

PENGUIN BOOKS

UK | USA | Canada | Ireland | Australia
India | New Zealand | South Africa

Penguin Books is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies whose
addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com.

www.penguin.co.uk
www.puffin.co.uk
www.ladybird.co.uk



Penguin
Random House
UK

First published 2018

001

Text copyright © Charli Howard, 2018

The moral right of the author has been asserted

Names have been changed to protect the identity of the people mentioned.
Permission has been sought and obtained where real names are given.

Set in 12.2/18pt Sabon LT Std
Typeset by Jouve (UK), Milton Keynes
Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-0-241-32882-8

All correspondence to:
Penguin Books
Penguin Random House Children's
80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL

www.greenpenguin.co.uk



Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable future for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made from Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.

*To all the girls who have ever
felt their bodies weren't good enough*

Dear Reader,

Before you start, I just want to warn you about a couple of things. The topics I write about are sensitive and I really want to be honest about my experiences, because I believe talking about things is healthy and we should be able to discuss these matters openly.

However, there is a lot of honesty in *Misfit*. This is a book about my mental illnesses. I use words that I find best express how I'm feeling: mental, cray cray, insane. I know that some people find these words offensive but, for me, it is the best way to talk about my life. So, if you find that problematic, please be aware that you will find words like these in my book.

This is also a book about my eating disorders. I have suffered from both anorexia and bulimia, and I want to talk about them because I am recovering now and passionate about promoting body positivity. But I wasn't always that way, and I have to honestly show what my life was like when I suffered from my eating disorders. I know how certain images, words and phrases can trigger difficult emotions in people suffering from eating disorders, and in people who have suffered from them in the past. I know that people with eating disorders will look for weight-loss inspiration everywhere, and that this book could be one of them. Therefore, be warned: there will be triggers in this book. This was the most truthful way for me to tell my story, but I do not want to cause any harm to others at all – the reason

I have been so honest is to help others who feel a pressure to look a certain way to realize that happiness is not proportional to dress size. If you are suffering or could be triggered, please do not read this book. I'm not a health professional and there is no advice in here. It's all just my experience.

Although all the stories are real, for obvious reasons some names, dates and even locations have been changed. That's because it is my story, not theirs, and I have been respectful of privacy.

Also, when you read this, you will discover that I was quite badly behaved, even as a kid. My teenage years were no better, and there are stories of underage drinking and other stupid things in here. I in no way condone or promote any of this bad behaviour – I was an idiot. Do not try any of these things at home. I really regret them, but have put them in this book because they are part of my story.

These things happened to me and if anything good came out of my experiences it is that I can share my mistakes so that maybe other people don't have to make them too. If it ever seems like I am making light of a situation, please be assured that I'm not – it's just that humour is the best way I know to find light in the darkness. And you can find humour in just about anything. That is my philosophy, but I don't want anyone to be offended by what I've written. This is my personal story, not a self-help book.

If you are suffering, be kind to yourself, and maybe don't read this just yet.

Charli x

No one can make you feel inferior
without your consent.
– Eleanor Roosevelt

PROLOGUE

I am not normal.

From the ages of four to six, I thought I was a dog. A German shepherd, to be precise, though I could also be a Dalmatian, depending on my mood. The dogs I grew up with were spoiled and loved, and played around all day, so that's what I decided I wanted to become. I'd put my hands up to my chest and pretend they were paws, then walk on my tiptoes to mimic the way dogs' feet arch up. I'd squint at things in the distance, the way dogs do when they spot something they're curious about, and growl under my breath at strangers. In fact, I squinted so much that my nursery sent me to an eye specialist because they thought I was going blind. I was *obsessed* with becoming a dog, barking at strangers in the street in the hope they'd mistake me for a real one.

To prove how passionate I was about my alter ego, I spent one Christmas writing countless letters to Father Christmas begging for a metal dog cage I'd seen in the Argos catalogue. I wanted a big one, with room for a few pillows so it would be comfy to sleep in, and space to allow

Misfit

me to grow. Funnily enough, I was disappointed on Christmas morning.

Like many parents, mine thought this was just a phase, until my school genuinely became concerned and wanted me tested for autism. That's when the '*Why can't you just be normal?*' questions began.

I didn't know that wasn't considered to be acceptable behaviour. I was happy pretending to be a dog. In fact, I would go so far to say that I was probably the happiest (and sanest) I've ever been. Since the dog thing, I've had a lot of obsessions. I've been obsessed with germs, believing I've caught HIV from a toilet seat, and wearing gloves on the Tube so I don't touch the poles with bare hands. I have been obsessed with the idea that everyone hates me, working myself up into a frenzy until I want to rip my own hair out.

But, most obsessively of all, I spent almost *twenty years* of my life worrying daily about my weight – nit-picking all my flaws, believing my body to be grotesque, and feeling utterly convinced with every fibre of my being that I was morbidly obese.

My longing to be thin took over my life. To this day, I have never craved or wished for anything so deeply. I wanted to feel the outline of bones underneath my clothes; I wanted people to gasp at my frail frame. Most of all, although I didn't realize it at the time, I wanted people to see I needed help with the anxieties in my brain, without having to actually say the words myself.

To cut a long story short, I know I am a bit mental. I know the word 'mental' isn't a very politically correct term

Prologue

to use, but that's what I am, I suppose. A bit cray cray. I know I don't *look* mental. You wouldn't think I had any of these issues if you saw me on the street, put it that way.

In fact, I have what I like to call 'Sexy Illnesses'. Not because my OCD, depression, anxiety and eating disorders go walking around in fishnets and stilettos, but because they're often glorified and gossiped about in the media or in magazines. You read about a celebrity losing an excessive amount of weight, written in a tone of awed admiration. How many people do you know who have referred to their tidiness as 'OCD', when all they've done is neatly fold their knickers in their drawer? How many people do you know who refer to their PMS mood swings or stressed-out mums as 'bipolar'? These illnesses are talked about as if they're fashionable now, but coping with them is another story.

My story begins at the age of eight, because that was the last time I remember being completely angst-free. Yep, it all went downhill from there, to be honest with you.

Aged eight was the last time I recall feeling like life was simple. I had no idea that periods existed, or that women were treated differently to men, or that my celebrity crush, Ricky Martin, was, in fact, gay. Money grew on trees and people were either fat or thin, black or white, rich or poor. I was, for the most part, totally innocent and naive, with everything a girl could have wished for.

Aged eight was the last time I remember viewing my body as solely that: *a body*. It was the last time I didn't question the way it looked, or view it as though it was Mr Blobby (if you don't know who Mr Blobby is, you're missing

Misfit

out). There was nothing to preen, nothing to alter, nothing to lose. Little did I know it would take nearly twenty years to view it in the same, non-judgemental way as I did back then.

Some people think eating disorders are genetic, and others think they may be caused by the influences around you. Perhaps you were destined to be that way inclined – I certainly had my fair share of mental health illnesses – or perhaps they develop from a build-up of things you see and hear. I personally think it's a bit of both.

My eating disorders were an addiction. I was addicted to being *perfect* – the type of girl other girls want to be. When I saw a series of beautiful, skinny women plastered across fashion magazines and TV, as an impressionable young girl I formed a belief that took me a very, very long time to get over: that to be happy, I had to be thin.

Unlike a lot of people, who can open a magazine and see pictures of thin, beautiful women smizing back at them without so much as another thought, I stored them in a mental filing cabinet. I couldn't forget about them. I managed to convince myself that becoming thin would somehow make all my problems disappear. I mean, if I looked like the girls in magazines, what would there be to be sad about?

You might not be aware of it, but your brain is currently soaking up lots of slogans and pictures without you even realizing. Suddenly, the things you didn't notice about your body before seem *very* noticeable. You're not the same shape as the models you see in magazines. You notice you

Prologue

have acne and cellulite, but those happy girls in adverts would never have flaws like that. For someone with an obsessive personality like me, becoming thin became something else to fret over. I began to hate my body, and wondered how I could possibly change it.

My experience is not unique, I know. It's universal. Think about it. You wake up in the morning and scroll through your Instagram feed, which is full of girls who look like you, just a bit more polished. You leave the house in the morning, drive past a few adverts full of glamorous women having a whale of a time, laughing at things that aren't actually fun, like salad and couscous. After you've finished your food at lunchtime – having battled past so much contradictory dietary advice everywhere you look (*LOW FAT! DELICIOUS! CARB-FREE! BIKINI BOD! INDULGE!*) that you end up hating yourself and whatever you chose to eat – you might flick through a magazine, which features even *more* beautiful women, and whose lives look *far* more thrilling than yours. Later, you make the return journey home, seeing (you've guessed it) more billboards and advertisements. You'll go online and scroll through Facebook or Twitter, clicking (X) on a few weight-loss pop-ups as you go. Afterwards, you'll watch a bit of TV, where women giggle hysterically while eating yoghurt and chocolate in the ad breaks. Then you'll check your phone again before bed, and repeat the same process the next day. And the next. And the one after that . . .

As a teenager, I looked nothing like the girls I pinned on my bedroom wall, but I so desperately wanted to. Their

Misfit

lives were so glamorous and perfect and worry-free. I was chubby and tall – not thin and beautiful like they were. I hated school and felt isolated. They had rock-star boyfriends, tons of money and beautiful clothes, which couldn't have been further from my life if I tried. And so I soon discovered I could plough my anxieties about fitting in and being lonely into controlling what I put in my mouth.

After many years and much soul-searching, these fashion images are what I think triggered my eating problems. At least, in part. As I said, I'm a little bit mad. It could have been a lot of things. Either way, it was after coming to this conclusion from the images around me that I suddenly grew even more concerned about fitting in with the girls in my class. I didn't want the outside to reflect the craziness that was happening up in my head. I was a teenager in the noughties, at the height of the size-zero trend. That was what I thought I needed to look like to be normal.

Maybe if I'd opened up about how I was feeling, my eating disorders wouldn't have been triggered. But if I have learnt anything, it is that people do not like discussing mental health. It freaks them out. And despite the fact that children are capable of developing things like anxiety, eating disorders and depression, it makes grown-ups somewhat uncomfortable. And because we don't like to talk about children's feelings, the domino effect begins, where one undiscussed problem leads to another, and then to another, until children become so overwhelmed that they can't deal with life. At least, that's what happened to me. By the time I was in my late teens I was a seasoned pro

Prologue

at bulimia and starving myself. I was a nightmare at school, acting like a total arse and obsessing over boys. I felt directionless and alone, and thinness was all I could control and therefore all I cared about.

So, how did a slightly bonkers misfit with anorexia, bulimia and anxiety decide to solve her problems? I became a model. As you do.

I truly believed that becoming a model would make my life better. It would mean I was beautiful. It would mean my body was perfect. If I couldn't be 'normal', then I'd be superhuman: the type of girl other girls wanted to be. That was *better* than normal. The people who had ever doubted me or bullied me or called me 'weird' would suddenly want to be my friend. Finally, I'd have a chance of becoming those girls in magazines I'd aspired to be and live the lives they had.

What a prat.

In fact – surprise, surprise – my anorexia and bulimia were exacerbated by modelling. My obsessive personality clung on to the idea that being considered 'beautiful' would make me happy. Over time, my anxieties and self-image got worse and worse. Even when I became really thin I *still* wasn't thin enough. And guess what? Losing weight didn't make me more beautiful, and I certainly didn't end up looking like the girls in magazines.

That's the thing: the girls in magazines don't look like the girls in magazines. Half the time, even *I* didn't look like the overly Photoshopped images I'd had taken of me.

But what better way to prove to the world that I was 'normal' than by hiding my eating disorder behind the

Misfit

glamour of *modelling*! No one needed to know I was making myself sick, or measuring my hips obsessively ten times a day, or falling off running machines from exhaustion. I was becoming the girl I'd dreamt about since my early teens, but as my illness became worse, maintaining the illusion that everything was fine sent me into a meltdown.

It feels insane, looking back now, that I went along with these weird beauty standards. In fact, by working in the industry that partially caused my illness, I was contributing to the problem. It couldn't last, and it didn't. I'm out the other side, and I want to talk about it. I don't want to make the same mistakes again – I want to start a conversation.

This is the story of those missing in-between years, which stretched from my childhood to my mid-twenties, that the pressures of society and pre-existing anxiety conspired to ruin by triggering an obsession with food and thinness. Twenty years of my life that I will never get back. It's a tale of how chasing perfection did not make me happy; how no matter how much weight I lost, I never reached the happiness I wished for. But, most of all, this is how I learnt that there is no such thing as normal, and that standing out is *so much better* than trying to fit in.