

# PREFACE

“CROHN’S DISEASE — ISN’T that where you poop and poop and then you die?” — a ten-year-old

“People like you often get Crohn’s.” — a doctor

“I wish I had Crohn’s disease to lose weight.” — a bulimic friend

“Just remove gluten from your diet. You will be cured almost immediately.”  
— a colleague

“It’s all in your head.” — more people than I can remember

“You eat too fast.” — Dad

In 1968, after years of illness, I received a diagnosis of regional enteritis, now called Crohn’s disease (CD). With Crohn’s, the body’s immune system treats its digestive tract as a foreign object.

Not a death sentence, the diagnosis became a life-sentence. Nothing could be done. The pain and exhaustion I endured daily would continue or worsen. The disease might destroy any part of my digestive tract, from mouth to anus. My body harboured a hidden rebellion against my guts, inflaming, twisting and ripping holes in them. My future was to suffer unseen as a drained, pain-stricken freak. How would I get through a semester, let alone a lifetime? No girl will want me. The prognosis was for endless surgeries, my guts replaced by a bag, dying of malnutrition, or a long, lonely torment, pooping myself to death.

What had I done to deserve this? I wished it went away. I hated my guts and myself. For decades following the diagnosis, I believed my situation remained not just unique but uniquely unique. That no words existed to

describe my life with Crohn's. That no one cares about my bowel movements, and certainly no one wants to read a book about them.

Fatigue from Crohn's and other autoimmune diseases differs from normal fatigue caused by insufficient sleep or over-exertion. According to *Harvard Health Publishing*, "For many people with autoimmune disease, fatigue is the most debilitating symptom. . . . It's a feeling of constant exhaustion that makes it hard to get through the day, let alone participate in activities. . . ." <sup>1</sup> Writer and poet Meghan O'Rourke describes her own: ". . . autoimmune fatigue is different from a sleep-deprived person's exhaustion. The worst part of my fatigue, the one I couldn't explain to anyone — I knew I'd seem crazy — was the loss of an intact sense of self." <sup>2</sup>

Autoimmune disease and CD can destroy our connection to who we are. *The Buddha in Our Bellies* is concerned with my transformation of both the "loss of an intact sense of self" and the physical experience of CD.

An immune system disorder behaves something like organ transplant rejection. In addition to the physical symptoms of Crohn's, I experienced a kind of psychic rejection. We will see how the guts form the physical basis of non-physical qualities — courage, will, and foundational sense of identity. I also rejected my guts' intuition and imagination.

I can not change the fact I have a chronic, life-long, often debilitating disease. But my response to my sickness defines my experience. I didn't choose Crohn's. I chose my response. My future of pain, fatigue, and loneliness has become a present of joy and purpose, even a calling. And now I know: I'm not alone.

## Let me set the table

As a kid, even if my stomach hurt, I set the table for dinner. That was my task, and I enjoyed it. It wasn't all fancy, and I didn't turn cloth napkins into roses, but I figured out how many forks on the left and whether we needed steak knives. We had a massive oak dining table with leaves. If guests were coming, I had to figure out how many leaves and, little me, open the table, carry the heavy leaves, and put them in place.

Often the family dinners themselves ended in family fights, but that's not my fault. I just set the table. When people came over, I had to be extra

attentive to what bowls and cutlery to put out and whether to polish the fancy silver. Spreading out newspaper to contain the mess, I used a rag and a tin can of Twinkle Silver Polish. My fingers worked the creamy polish into the crevices and curves of the old Hungarian cutlery.

Later in life, I cooked dinners for family and friends and clients and set lots of tables. I enjoy it. Once dinner starts, I don't have to talk or be the centre of attention. Just set the table and people will figure out the rest. Let the conversation and the good times flow.

I became a sommelier. A sommelier brings the efforts of a sincere, hard-working winegrower and a sincere, hard-working chef to a sincere guest. We find a bottle that matches the three to the occasion and the season and company. We open it and pour it and get out of the way. Those times we get it right, the guest experiences bliss; we make memories. Lives change.

I became a manager and host of short-term rental properties. Travellers belong, feel at home, in the spaces Yoshiko and I create. They can enjoy a memorable life experience in a strange city, even for a few nights. The romantic getaway on the surface may be a last shot for a couple in crisis. A typical business trip might be a career on the brink. A family vacation might be the summer of a lifetime. All the pilgrimages of life.

Over time, I learned these skills. Respect the guest; anticipate their needs. Prepare every detail. Generosity. Latitude. Set the table. Pull the cork. Get out of the way.

As I learned to make room for others, I learned to make room for my own disowned character. Possibility and imagination have found space in my life. Hopefully, some of these skills arrive at the pages of this book. I set the table for you, dear reader. Set out these tales of hardship and uncertainty and possibility. Have a seat.