

## CHAPTER ONE

# Toxic nourishment

**E**motional toxins and nourishment often are so mixed as to be indistinguishable. Even if they can be distinguished, it may be impossible for an individual to get one without the other. In order to get emotional nourishment, one may have to take in emotional toxins.

A life can so sour, and a person so accommodate to high levels of toxins, that he or she may develop aversive reactions to less polluted opportunities for nourishment. Life may not feel real without large doses of emotional toxins. Some people cannot take nourishment that is not embedded in psychic poisons.

### *Alice*

Alice grew up in an atmosphere of warm self-hate. Her parents hated themselves, each other, and Alice. Yet the hate was not cold or icy. It was mixed with love. Alice tried to be a good girl in order to get the love. As she grew into middle childhood, it began to dawn on her that she was the family scapegoat. As she saw it,

her older brother got all the support and advantages and idealizing. He could do no wrong. He was the family hero, destined for big things, the messiah. He would justify their existence.

She was worse than Cinderella, for she was no hidden princess, and no prince was looking for her. As she grew up, the men who courted her seemed so messed up that genuine consummation was impossible. She took her failures with men as confirmations of worthlessness, a worthlessness that went back as far as she could remember, a bottomless, timeless worthlessness. She clearly linked it with her parents' own bottomless worthlessness, which they could not process and dumped on her.

She, indeed, felt like the garbage heap of the family. Her mother put her down at will. Nothing Alice did met with maternal delight. When Alice accomplished something at school, and later at work, her mother reacted with incomprehending surprise. It was as if Alice's success must have been a freak occurrence, a lucky chance. Her mother anticipated failure with everything, even the simplest household chores. Alice was used to orgies of maternal rage, tempered by scorn and snide remarks. According to her mother, Alice could not do anything right.

Alice felt loved by her father, but he was too weak to support her. He would collapse after a day's work and look for comfort from her. There was deep warmth buried in his helplessness, and Alice felt nourished by it. But she also felt guilty for not being able to make him happy. She could feel his deep, muffled joy in her existence when he looked at her, yet it was somehow still-born, ineffective. He was basically depressed, angry at life, and filled with self-pity, and she could not rescue him. She felt drawn in by his depression and feared sinking in it. The nourishment that she got from his stifled warmth was spoiled by the depressive anger and self-pity she drank in with it.

Yet Alice did not give up on herself. She persevered, went to school, became a talented psychotherapist, although she suffered many setbacks. For many years she could not sustain having her own apartment. She *had* to move back to her mother. She felt too guilty to separate and have her own life. Her mother exercised a pull on her that was irresistible.

Yet did her mother *really* want her home, or was the pull inside Alice? Her mother continued to be self-absorbed and to use

Alice as a psychic garbage dump. She buried Alice in the detritus of her own self-hate, putting her down for everything she did or did not do, scarcely aware of her daughter's actual existence. Alice would stay with her until it became more than unbearable, and then she would try living away again. When Alice was away just long enough to begin to feel a little like a human being, the pull would start again; she would fight the urge to go back to the hating mother until the pull simply overwhelmed her.

It was like a negative refuelling. She was addicted to toxic nourishment. She had to go back until she overdosed on indifference and disparagement. It was what she was used to—the emotional atmosphere that she grew (or failed to grow) up in. It was like having a seizure. We could see it coming, but there was nothing we could do to stop it.

Did Alice feel too empty and unreal without negative refuelling? Yes, to some extent, but the opposite seemed truer. Just as she began to feel more real, more alive, more herself, she gave way to the need to undo her movement into life. It was as if she lacked the ability to support movement into life, even with help. She lacked equipment to sustain less toxic living.

I think of a wonderful philosophy teacher who had emphysema. In his first semester of retirement, he decided to teach in Switzerland, after years in New York. He died soon after arriving in Switzerland. I imagined his lungs could not take fresh air, after years of adaptation to toxins.

Alice's psychic lungs could not take much fresh air. She collapsed under strain of supporting more life than she was used to. At first, I naively encouraged her attempts to separate and build a life. I tried to support her in face of the undertow. This worked for a time but was doomed to failure. In one of her first apartments, she actually began to smell her mother—an odour she could not bear. Just as she was about to make a break for it and escape the horror of her early life, her sensory equipment tricked her. She "hallucinated" her mother's odour in the place where she had begun to feel free. Her respiratory apparatus produced what it was used to, haunted air.

Alice looked haunted when I first met her. She was in her late 20s, thin and frightened, with anorexic tendencies. It was as though she was chronically cowering, as though something or

someone were scaring her. I feared that a strong wind (e.g. a series of disappointments, failures, rejections) might blow her away. Yet she had quiet tenacity and surprising strength. Her life was reduced to a sliver of will that refused to give up, hard-bone persistence in the face of collapse. We worked once or twice a week.

Alice had friends. For the first years of our relationship, she fought with them. She and they were always disappointing and attacking one another. A lot of bitterness characterized her relationships. Although Alice spent much of her time alone (and felt very alone), she also spent a good deal of time with friends.

One in particular occupied her time and vexed her. This "friend" exercised a tyrannical hold over Alice. She complained that Alice did not do enough for her. Whatever time Alice spent with her, this friend wanted more. Any show of will on Alice's part met with biting exasperation. She accused Alice of every sort of failure in their relationship. Yet Alice did not stop seeing her—and for quite some time did not even think of stopping.

Alice contracted to an apparently indestructible and invulnerable sliver of self, a condensed point that did little but bite back. Alice and her friend spent most of their time verbally biting each other. I imagined each as a magnetic poisoned apple for the other. They bit into each other, yet poisoned each other, and the poison held them together, as if it were nourishing. As time went on, the situation worsened. The attacks became more venomous. It seemed as if her friend meant to break Alice's fortified position down.

It was painful for me to listen to Alice recount what seemed to me to be a tale of injury and helplessness week after week. Clearly, she managed to reconstitute with her friend some semblance of her relationship with her mother, in which the binding element was being put down by the other.

Meanwhile, in the background, I held some of the pain. It might be thought that, to some extent, Alice now was the mother who held together by putting pain into Alice-me. But, I think, more deeply, she finally found someone who sensed and shared how painful life can be. Her mother had been impervious to Alice's pain, had even been nourished by it. At this early phase of work, I felt Alice's pain without breaking down or inflicting damage. In time, we became far more permeable with each other.

With her friend (and eventually me), Alice was able to bite back more than with her mother. With her mother, Alice was relatively toothless. When she tried to bite her mother back, nothing happened. Alice had no power, force, or effect with regard to her mother. Her mother went on imperviously, as if Alice were invisible or existing only as a target of animosity and emotional waste. With her friend, it was like fighting mother once or twice removed. She visibly affected her friend, since her friend desperately increased her ire in response to Alice's attempts to protect herself. One often displaces on to friends what is impossible to work out within the family.

Eventually her friend succeeded in breaking Alice down—like Alice's mother, up to a point. After months of accelerated pounding, the dam broke, and Alice began to feel the pain that I was holding in safekeeping for her. As their relationship became unbearable, Alice saw her friend less, then not at all. It was her friend who broke off all contact, once Alice backed off a bit. Not long after, Alice heard that her friend had been hospitalized. Alice went into a spin of guilty self-recrimination: had her backing off driven her friend crazy? Apparently her friend needed Alice more than the reverse. As is often the case, the more active hater in a relationship turns out to be more ill than the hated one imagined.

The fact that her friend broke down while trying to break Alice down made quite a dramatic impression on Alice. What enabled Alice to survive, while her friend disintegrated? Alice was used to surviving bombardment. It was horrifying to see her friend drop off the edge. Her friend began a downward spiral, from medication to medication, doctor to doctor. She was never the same.

Her friend had much higher aspirations than Alice and demanded perfection. Her parents were wealthy and expected great things from her. They pushed her past what her inner resources could support. In the end, Alice's friend collapsed into the position that Alice most dreaded: she fell entirely into her parents' hands. Her parents dictated the terms of her life, including getting her the doctors and treatments *they* wanted for her, rather than letting her find someone she might want.

It took a while, but for the first time in Alice's life an amazing thought began to form. Could it be that in some way Alice was

luckier than her friend? How could this be? If her friend's parents wanted too much, Alice's wanted too little. Their expectations for Alice were nil. They expected nothing from her therapy and did not even have a sense of what getting help might mean. Could their total lack of interest in Alice's life turn out to be a boon? At least they did not interfere with her choice of therapist. Alice was left to go her own way, since what she did meant so little to them.

Alice felt lucky to have found me. She had gone through several therapists, with poor results. Her last therapist helped her to some extent, but Alice felt that he lost interest in her. He began to talk on the telephone when she was there and showed other signs of not caring. She felt ashamed of seeing him in face of his lack of interest. With any helper, she might feel the bad feelings that characterized her relationship with her parents. Nevertheless, she refused to tolerate her doctor's impatience with her, and finally she left him.

Alice nearly left me many times. One especially important crisis occurred in group therapy. At this time, about two years into therapy, Alice was seeing me weekly in individual therapy, and once weekly in a group. Alice began raging at me for my insensitivity, and she started to leave. The group members stopped her and formed a psychic cushion for her. They consoled her yet insisted that I was not as uncaring about her as she thought. The group did not deny my faults but refused to let her destroy her life because of them, or, rather, refused to let her let my faults spoil what she could get out of working together.

Her rage, trying to leave, and staying was a turning point. It marked the possibility of going through the inevitable trials of a relationship that was not essentially mutually annihilating. Alice could scarcely believe that our relationship did not have to spiral downhill and remain horrible. Could our faults really be part of a larger, working relationship?

Eventually, our group broke up, and Alice and I were left alone with each other. I wondered whether we could survive one-to-one intensity without the buffer of the group. It did not take long for Alice to rage at me, threaten to break things in my office, and rush towards the door. I do not remember exactly what I did, but I remember standing up and shouting and holding her arms.

What I remember most vividly was how strong she felt. I was surprised by her strength and a sexual feeling in her skin. She seemed frail, but not to the touch. I was taken aback, as if an electric current had passed through me. Alice was high voltage. I was fearful and happy. She was *alive*.

We weathered many emotional storms. My appreciation of Alice grew over the years. I admired her persistence in the face of horrors and periodic depressive collapse. I cherished her hard-pressed aliveness that surfaced through difficulties. As time went on, our relationship was no longer endangered. Alice realized we had each other as long as she wished.

When she began to settle into our relationship and use it, she had the following dream:

*A doctor removed what seemed like an infinity of micro tongue depressors from Alice's mouth. Like the sorcerer's apprentice, the more he took out, the more they multiplied. He persisted and, finally, they began to diminish.*

We took this as an image of depression from an early age. The ripple was depressing instead of nourishing: perhaps depression *was* the nourishment. I pictured Alice's mouth filled with particles of glass, not simply tiny tongue depressors. What dreadful inhibitions she had to fight in order to function! Oral rape. A splintered mother stuffing her psychotic fragments into her daughter. Quite a feed! To use herself at all (to move her tongue, to taste life, to speak, to express feelings, to think and be), Alice had to oppose an enormous, destructive undertow.

As we went on together, Alice's relationships with friends changed. Her new friends were more in life, not mainly attacking and noxious. Whatever their problems, they mainly helped each other and had good times together. Alice still had a tendency to accuse her friends of neglecting her and not caring enough. The sense of being emotionally undernourished and fed bad things ran deep. She and her friends got through rough waters together without unduly damaging each other. They liked and respected each other and learned to absorb or work with destructive cross-currents.

Things went well for Alice with friends in general, but not with boyfriends. The men she went out with turned out to be self-absorbed, ungenerous, and unable to create with Alice a relationship in which she felt good. She inevitably felt put down, used, put upon, and deprived of basic consideration. Her resentment would mount until she felt impelled to break off.

One man, in particular, refused to go away. He had an earthy warmth and acceptance that made Alice stay with him longer than usual. She wondered if they could work things out. She tried to stay in the ring and talk to him about what bothered her in their relationship. Perhaps if they communicated, resentment would not mount. But talking did not work. He needed to have things on his terms, constantly ignored her wishes, and did as he wished. No matter how she tried, Alice felt that she could not get him to realize that she might have wishes different from his, or that what she wished might matter. In time, Alice came to the conclusion, that, yes, he had a certain warmth, tolerance, acceptance—but that he accepted her like a piece of furniture, a comfortable object to use as needed.

Still, Alice tried to stay in the relationship, thinking it was not so bad. Her conscience told her that she should work on it if she wanted to be with a man. Alice was keenly aware that she had problems, that her bad feelings about herself could poison a relationship. If she worked hard enough on her end of things, maybe the relationship would get better, or become tolerable. Perhaps she needed to build the capacity to tolerate a relationship with a man.

Eventually, Alice became very ill. Her physician believed that her immune system was compromised by a chemical substance to which she had been exposed over a long period of time. I could not help thinking that I was the foreign substance leaking into her system, exacerbating her difficulties. Life can be cruel indeed in its black logic, at times creating dreadful unities. Alice's immune system becoming poisoned objectifies poisoning processes going on in the psychic sphere. On the other hand, poisoning processes in one sphere may develop or increase, as health improves in another area. As Alice's life got better, her body became worse, at least for a time. Still, chemical processes were working, and it would be dangerous to over-psychologize them.

Alice stopped work and graduate school and spent the better part of a year nursing herself and seeking help. Alice had little energy, yet she maintained a relationship with her boyfriend against her inclination. He brought her to doctors and sometimes helped in other ways. Yet he, too, seemed indifferent or angry and impatient with her wasted state. He was sour and consuming and needed someone to nurse his own damaged self. He expected her to be there for him when she could not be there for herself.

His mixture of indifference, anger, and helpfulness tied her up. Alice did not really feel cared for or seen by him. He wanted her to get better so he could use her again. Finally, she reached a point where she could not continue with him. But each time she broke up, her conscience told her that she was unfair, that he cared, that she was too damaged to sustain a relationship with a real man. She feared never having a relationship if she threw this one away, so she would go back with him, then feel miserable. Once they were together, she again felt that he was unbearably self-centred, and that his warmth was his way of getting her to take care of him.

Conscience pecked at her. Stay with the relationship, give it more of a chance, maybe it will work. It was not his fault that she was ill. She should try harder. Must she be someone who cannot sustain a relationship with a man? She could not take much life. She could not take a man. Perhaps, too, she could not take doing well at work or school or with friends. Was having a better life killing her? Better to be nothing.

But no, she liked being with her friends. She got something from studies and work, even if she hated the degrading aspects of workplace and school. Not all her life was demoralizing. It was mainly her boyfriend's condescending expectations, disregard, and petty demands that wore her spirit. She found him less than uninspiring. Whether she went along with him or fought him, she felt that he brought life down to a level that was not worth the trouble.

Having a one-to-one relationship with a man provoked too many fears, too many dangers. It mobilized all the old terrors of family life: suffocation, loss of will and autonomy, a horrifying mixture of annihilation, longing, deprivation, and the sickening

nourishment one takes in from the other's egocentric love. She was too damaged for love. Toxic love had damaged her.

Now her relationship with her boyfriend was poisoning her. She was paralysed by the toxic nourishment that it offered. He could not bear listening to her. He had no room for another person, except as an extension of himself or someone to buttress him. To be with him was a full time job. Alice could not be herself with him—worse, she could not even *be*. She hung on, because letting go of the relationship was a sign of failure.

When she was away from him, she felt better—but then she felt guilty for feeling better. Being with him drained her. At last she reached a point where she refused to apologize for herself. Right or wrong, failure or not, she felt better without him. She could breathe without him. If having a relationship would kill her, to hell with the relationship, and to hell with a so-called conscience that forced her to stay in situations that she would rather not be in. She sided with feeling better.

Giving him up felt like giving up hope of having a family. In the course of our years together, her parents died. Alice was a grown-up orphan. There was no one to go home to. Home now had to be where she was or nowhere. Our sessions were momentary homes, places to find and be herself. So were relationships with friends. And she made her own apartment more and more a nest. She became more and more a centre of life, her own life.

Still, leaving him was like saying goodbye to her family again. He embodied, in somewhat milder form, a mixture of traits that she had grown up with in family life. His sour disposition expressed a chronic sense of deprivation and anger at life. He looked down at her, yet needed her. He offered her his willingness to spend time with her in exchange for her willingness to be a receptacle for his emotional toxins. It was as if she should be satisfied with his just being there, while she relieved him of the hardships of existence, the hardships of his own personality. As with her family, she became an emotional latrine or garbage dump. There are creatures who thrive in such an environment, but it was breaking her down.

Perhaps it was a coincidence that she gradually regained her health after breaking up with him. Had she already begun to feel better, and that gave her strength enough to end it? Or did she

feel better afterwards? Or both? It seems less likely that he was the cause of her condition than a barometric reading of it, a sign of spirit or energy or flow. His parasitic esconcement in her existence was a sign of collapse, as his departure was a sign of recovery. Through him she hoped to bring her family back to life, to reunite with them. With him (and them) gone, she had no choice but to go forward with existence, her new life, the life that she was building.

Alice felt that her new life was closer to the one she might have had if her family had been healthier. She became more herself, less eaten up by corrosive versions of herself. She was less miserable, at times even happy with herself. As she surveyed her life, she felt keenly how taking in her family's toxic nourishment undermined her immune system. She absorbed so much garbage in order to survive that the latter wreaked havoc with her psychobiological substratum.

Her ability to sustain living was undermined from the outset. Her very immune system was jeopardized by what nourished her. It was more than being addicted to emotional "shit" as self-violating sustenance. The very atmosphere that kept her alive throughout childhood and adolescence was toxic. She hated the atmosphere she had grown up in, but her psychobiological equipment and very sense of self were informed by it. It permeated her cells.

As much as she wanted to free herself, unconscious sensors sought out toxic situations outside the family (as it turns out, even chemical toxins), so that the atmosphere that she grew up in encased her life. Alice was caught between the impossibility of continuing to live on poisons and the impossibility of living on healthier nutriments, since she lacked ability to maintain use of the latter. Yet she felt propelled to better herself, even if her equipment could not support her. Thus she could fall ill from poisons, or from inability to support herself when seeking a healthier psychosocial atmosphere.

Therapy was a kind of mixed atmospheric chamber, where a somewhat healthier atmosphere could be provided in nearly tolerable doses, so that Alice could adapt to it and use it by degrees. She could gradually get used to exercising psychic lungs in alternative atmospheric conditions, so that the contrast between what

she was used to, what she wanted, and what she got would not do her in. As years passed, she built more of the kind of life that she could say yes to.

Imagine a being that gets oxygen from water, then develops capacity to get oxygen from air, or *vice versa*. I feel that this describes Alice's condition, only in her case it had to do with developing capacity to sustain using less toxic emotional nutriments over time, or breathing better emotional air. I was deeply moved when, in a recent session, Alice brought to mind a far-reaching change in her condition. She reminded me that when we first met she could look into a mirror and see a devil (quite literally), or something horribly twisted, ugly, marred. Now she could look in a mirror and like who she saw. She had a nice look, somewhat fun, playful, ironical, caring, at times attractive—someone that interesting, searching, and good-hearted people might like to be with. People like herself.