

Stageplay

CHAOTIC NEUTRAL

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EMMA

I know it shouldn't be hard to talk about food. It's an unavoidable topic in day-to-day conversation - 'ooh you must try that new restaurant', 'oh my God, look at this #foodporn'. I'm recovered now; I shouldn't hate it. I don't hate it. It's just that they tell you to work out your triggers and avoid them... but you can't avoid food. It's everywhere, mocking you, saying 'ooh, look how much you hate me and yet you still can't survive without me'. It's like some toxic, abusive partner.

No, that can't be right. Because you do actually need food, and it's delicious and nourishing and good and... not the enemy. It's not like a Dungeons and Dragons monster you need to slay or avoid. That's the eating disorder talking. Food doesn't abuse or taunt. Mental illness does.

My therapist will be glad I can recognise that now. It wasn't always like that. I cried over a caramel shortbread when I was seventeen. Literally just burst into tears in the middle of the common room. My best friend, bless her heart, was completely and absolutely right in not believing my defensive bravado when I told her I wasn't hungry at lunch. So, being the sweetheart she was, she thought she'd take matters into her own hands and buy me food. One minute I was joking around, ignoring hunger pangs, and the next minute she dropped the treat on my lap and I just broke. I think people thought I was just really fucking happy about having caramel shortbread.

Back in those days, the cinema was one of my favourite places. Not for the films or escapism or anything like that, but for the few hours where it was acceptable for me to sit in the dark and gorge myself on butter-drenched popcorn and endless bags of sweets, and not stop shovelling until I was dizzy with nausea. It was never enough to fix anything. One time - I think it was during the new Star Wars film - I stuffed myself so much that I spent the end of it throwing up in the car park. Now, I'm more angry that my eating disorder made me miss the excitement of Star Wars but, at the time, I just couldn't escape the disgust in myself. The sight of unchewed popcorn and regurgitated tangles of strawberry laces is still burned into my mind.

Everyone knows it's pretty horrendous starving yourself to exhaustion but it's seen as kind of laughable if you stuff yourself to the point of bursting. It's still hard to get that balance right.

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Food is not the enemy but food is also not my saviour. It's true neutral.

Well, maybe it's chaotic neutral for me. Chocolate chip cookies still make my hands clammy, but most baked goods are fine now which means I can watch Bake Off without feeling guilty. I still avoid share bags of crisps and I can't let myself skip a meal because I'll still get that addictive buzz if I do. So, yeah, maybe I do still have a long way to go. But I'm one of lucky ones. For me, food is at least on its way to becoming neutral. I gave it power it shouldn't have, and now I'm taking it back.