



**WHAT I
LOST**
DISCUSSION GUIDE

A Letter from the Author



Dear Reader,

My “once upon a time” starts 25 years ago, during my senior year in high school. A friend brought a container of homemade brownies –chocolate chip, my favorite -- to concert choir, and I ate one. It wasn’t a big deal; my whole life I’d eaten whatever I wanted, whenever I felt like it.

But that day was different. I regretted that brownie the second the last bite passed my lips. Maybe it was because it was prom season. Perhaps the ten pounds I gained the previous summer were to blame. Or maybe I just felt bloated. Whatever the reason, I felt guilty and ashamed that I’d eaten that brownie and made myself vomit, a solution that brought short-term relief but set in motion a downward spiral of anorexia and bulimia that consumed my life for the next 13 years.

For those engulfed in the eating disorder firestorm, each morning brings a fresh dose of hunger, anxiety, depression, self-hatred, and myriad other painful emotions. There were times when I was desperate and desolate, when I was convinced I would never recover. Years of tearful therapy, support groups, two weeks at an inpatient eating disorder facility, and family and friends begging me to get better didn’t help. I still felt isolated and alone.

Sadly, I wasn’t. At least 30 million Americans suffer from an eating disorder. Every 62 minutes, someone dies as a result of one, which is why eating disorders have the highest mortality rate of any mental illness.

Luckily, recovery is possible. For me, it began when, living alone in New York City, I decided I couldn’t take another day of worrying I might die in my sleep. Today, I have been symptom free for 14 years. I enjoy a full life, food included.

My struggle with and eventual recovery from my eating disorder inspired *WHAT I LOST*, my YA contemporary novel about Elizabeth, a strong, smart, funny sixteen-year-old suffering from anorexia. When her parents check her into an inpatient eating disorder facility, Elizabeth is determined to do one thing: get out. She isn’t that sick, she tells herself. Not like the other girls. But Wallingfield—and her fellow patients—aren’t what she expects, and Elizabeth slowly realizes that she might be right where she needs to be if she truly wants to recover.

Like Elizabeth, I didn’t know if I wanted to recover, or if I even could. The pull of the disease is strong. But I did it. I am in charge of my life again, and I am grateful every single day.

I hope, in some small way, *WHAT I LOST* can help people where I once was. An eating disorder is treatable. It should never be a life sentence. If you or someone you love is suffering, please know that there is help out there. You are not alone.

Love,

Alexandra

Discussion Questions for What I Lost

1. Throughout the book, Elizabeth struggles to understand her mother and make sense of their relationship. Why is this relationship so significant, and does it change as the book progresses? How?
2. Eating disorders are the deadliest mental illnesses. Yet, many people continue to think that having an eating disorder is a choice, and often tell people suffering to “just eat.” How do Elizabeth and the other patients at Wallingfield show that it isn’t that simple?
3. Do you think we as a society are moving in a positive or negative direction when it comes to body acceptance and the way women are seen/shown in the media?
4. Where does our notion of an “ideal” body come from? How does it change as we age, or does it?
5. It is almost impossible to grow up in today’s world without having someone, at some time, comment on our bodies. What are some of the comments you’ve heard over the years that helped to shape your body image? How did they affect you? How did you respond at the time? Would you respond now any differently?
6. One of the most difficult moments in the book for Elizabeth was when Lexi returns. Why is this so hard for Elizabeth?
7. When Elizabeth tells her father that “she likes her bones,” what does she mean by that?
8. Phrases often heard in the media include “I’m not strong enough to be anorexic,” or “I tried to be anorexic and I didn’t have the willpower.” What is problematic about these statements? How does it affect how eating disorders are viewed by the general public?
9. The title of this book is WHAT I LOST. What does the title mean to you? Have you lost anything of significance to you? What did you do about it?

10. At one point in the book, Elizabeth's father cites a quote from Robert Frost, "The best way out is always through." Have you found this to be true in your life?

11. Elizabeth and many of the others at Wallingfield don't feel comfortable in their own skin. Have you had a situation like that? How did you handle it?

12. While at Wallingfield, Elizabeth is hurt that her friends don't make more of an effort to reach out to her. Yet, at the end of the story, she accepts their apology and welcomes them back into her life. Why do you think her friends had such trouble connecting with Elizabeth during this time in her life? Do you agree with Elizabeth's decision to forgive them?

13. Elizabeth struggles with her memories of her relationship with Charlie. While she admits he wasn't very nice to others, she maintains throughout the book that he was always kind to her. Do you agree? What do you make of the fact that she is so protective of him, all the way to the end of the story? Does he deserve that consideration?

14. At the end, Elizabeth makes a decision about her relationship with Tristan. Why did she choose what she did? Do you agree with her decision? What would you have done?

15. What do you think will happen with Elizabeth after the book is over? Will she recover? Why? Why not?

16. If WHAT I LOST were a movie, what actors would you cast, and in what roles?