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Megan Hilands

Confessions of Pre-Teen Girl Trapped in Her Own Body

The day one of my female classmates made a comment about my weight is the same day that I stopped eating. What I now know was a petty half-truth spawned possibly out of jealousy, and definitely to make my classmate feel better about her own changing pubescent body, changed my life. I listened and believed her. For all of humanity's almost animalistic desire to live, I used to firmly believe that life was not worth living.

As usual, my mother cooked a delicious dinner that fatal night after school. My mom is an excellent cook, and the meal looked and smelled simply mouth-watering. Succulent jumbo shrimp with oven baked garlic potatoes and crisp steamed green beans. Sadly, I could not muster an appetite. As I simply toyed with my food, a perplexed and concerned look appeared on my mother's face.

"I thought shrimp was your favorite, Megan?" she questioned.

A lump bulged in my throat, and I coughed to clear it. I would hate to disappoint my mom by allowing her to think that I didn't like her dinner. "It is," I curtly replied. "I'm just not feeling well tonight."

"Okay. Why don't you lie down?" she suggested. "I'll clean up here." She seemed a little worried as she rose from her chair to collect my dishes. I slugged from the table to the stairs and then to my room. As soon as my body hit my bed, I began to cry. I fell asleep slowly, my stomach aching and my head pounding.

The next morning, I woke up early to pack my own lunch. My mom usually packed my lunch for me so that I could sleep in a little later, but she was ignorant of my new diet. My mom loved me, and I know that she only wanted to help me out, but it seemed like such a shame to waste food. Children in Africa were starving after all. The more I thought about it, the more the food culture of the United States really disgusted me. The gluttonous, self-indulgent Americans consumed far too many calories, which rendered them fat, unhealthy creatures. I was disappointed in my country and felt fairly certain that its citizens could learn a lesson from the African children. If they went to bed hungry, why was it so awful for us to do the same thing?

I opened the fridge to search for something healthy. I knew that if I stopped eating entirely I would die, but I needed to eat as little as possible in order to lose weight quickly. I felt huge, disgusting, and fat, and I despised myself. That was my motivation against eating more than the most meager of portions, despite the sharp pangs of hunger. After searching for a few moments, I found a bag of pre-cut lettuce. I measured out a serving and placed it in a small plastic Tupperware container, then added five cherry tomatoes to my salad. No fatty dressing, croutons glazed with lard and butter, or greasy globules of gooey cheese would tarnish my vegetables. I sadistically giggled a little. "Lunch is served," I thought. For good measure, I also packed myself a Capri-Sun. That tiny pouch of juice had 100 calories, but the sugar would give me enough energy to get through the day. It was my one indulgence.

The meager meal that I had packed that day soon became my standard lunch du jour. My other meals were equally miniscule. Every day I would rise early, chug three glasses of water, and sip sixteen ounces of strong coffee sweetened only with aspartame. My breakfast consisted solely of liquid and contained zero calories. It offered me little nourishment or satisfaction, but oddly enough, I had already begun to enjoy the ever present gut wrenching pangs of hunger. They made me feel like I was accomplishing something.

I consumed the bulk of my calories daily during the evening meal. Dinner was the one time of the day I had to eat in front of my parents, who closely monitored every bite tiny bit I grudgingly forked and raised to my lips. My mom stopped thinking that I had merely caught a bad bout of the stomach flu after I dropped my second jean size. She didn't know what to think. Or how to help me. She blamed herself most days.

I was glad that my parents watched me eat dinner instead of breakfast. I liked to go to bed with my stomach fuller than it was when I woke up. Hunger pangs are not conducive to sleeping, and I abhorred lying alone in bed with only my cruelly sardonic mind to keep me company. The African children probably did not loathe themselves as I did. They probably slept like babies.

I ate less than 500 calories a day. Probably just enough to keep my body alive. I was possessed. Who knows? Perhaps an exorcism would have saved me. I had no control over what other people thought of me, but I did have control over this one aspect of my life. My self-confidence continued to plummet each day. Even though I did lose weight very rapidly, I increasingly felt that I did not deserve to eat. You are fat became both my mantra and the rule by which I lived my life.

The thoughts of eating and of food disgusted and nauseated me. Instead of a half-melted chocolate ice cream cone kissing my lips, I now felt the foul, acrid burn of bile at the back of my throat. I felt like a prisoner in my own body, with no greater desire than the wish to escape the constant

pang of self loathing that gnawed at my chest. A few weeks passed, and I became wildly obsessed with the number that appeared in red blockish numbers on my white bathroom scale. I had already lost fifteen pounds, but it was not nearly enough. It never would be.

When I was in elementary school, I remember watching a Lifetime movie with my mom based on a true story about two girls with severe eating disorders, one of whom died from the illness. "This is painful," she told me, "but I want you to see this. I want you to know that starving yourself is never an option. I will always love you no matter what your weight is." My mom has struggled with her weight for her whole life. Kids made fun of her for her weight too but to a much greater extent. The seemingly innocent and cherubic faces of children do not fool me. I know that kids can in many ways be just as cruel and as vicious as adults. I snapped under one little seemingly insignificant comment, but my mother endured years of what one could veritably call severe emotional torture.

One adult, however, also joined in the teasing. My mom's sixth grade teacher gave her the eloquent moniker "Tank," and even though my mom is an intelligent woman, she became so miserable, dejected, and forlorn that she utterly gave up and received a "D" in the class. Life does have its little ironies though. This teacher died young, and my mother is not sorry. Somehow, even though my mom is probably just as self-conscious as I am, she never developed an eating disorder. For this, my mother is my hero.

The days that I suffered from anorexia were ritually dictated. Besides the possibly obvious ritual of weighing myself five times a day, I also completed fifty sit-ups each day after school to help reduce what I thought looked like a beer belly or a baby bump. I ran on my treadmill and actually enjoyed the pain that it caused me. Realistically, I could barely run at all, and even though I later was an avid long-distance runner in high school, five minutes at a relatively slow pace was anguishing. Sometimes I was utterly unable to jog for three whole minutes without needing to rest, as my body simply could not endure any more stress in addition to the meticulously rationed starvation diet that I had subjected it to.

After my daily self-mandated workout, I would crave the soothing aromas of a hot steamy shower. I always made the water scalding hot and washed myself with the sweet scent of warm vanilla sugar body wash. Afterwards I felt gloriously clean and relaxed, even though large clumps of wet brown hair usually littered the white linoleum floor after I had toweled off. I dressed in my now oversized clothing while I berated the image I saw in the mirror. The girl staring back at me was disgustingly thin. Her hipbones violently jutted out of bruised purple skin, and her entire rib cage was so pronounced that it seemed to stretch the sallow, alabaster skin on her midriff. She looked sickly, sunken, and in urgent need of medical attention. I, however, falsely believed that she was morbidly obese.

What many people do not understand about eating disorders is

that they are mental illnesses. While my parents tried very diligently to help me fight my battle against anorexia, there was little that they could do aside from physically force-feeding me. Doctors also logically tried to explain to me that I was wreaking utter havoc on my body by starving it, but I was neither ready nor willing to listen to them. The war I waged took place inside my head and was at this point little affected by outside influences. I had to help myself first.

I relentlessly wished that I could escape into another world, where perhaps I would not feel the pain and guilt of looking into my mother's grieving face each day. I often wished that I was never born and believed that the world would be far better off without me. I could no longer stand peering into my mom's loving brown eyes, red rimmed with tears, which pleaded with me to stop. I was wasting away. If mom was not such a gentle, caring, and compassionate person, I cannot honestly say that I would have made it through the ordeal with any shred of sanity.

It took months to finally realize I was utterly out of control and in urgent need of medical attention. After the routine trips to doctor's office, I found a psychiatrist who seemed to understand me. She was a tall, blond woman with round glasses, rosy cheeks, and an overall soft, gentle, and grandmotherly demeanor. She always offered me chocolate, but I never took any. My mom never did either. Her name was Carole, and she didn't impose on me by asking harsh questions. She didn't judge me or treat me like I had a problem. She was just what I needed.

As one may expect given the severity of my illness, it took years to repair my body. I slowly incorporated larger amounts of calories into my diet, because after starving myself for so long, my body had lost the ability to metabolize normal amounts of food. If I ate too much too quickly, I would gain weight too rapidly, which was not only unhealthy but also hinder my progress.

My eating disorder stunted my growth. I'm 5'1," the same height I have been since I was eleven years old. My mother and father are 5'9" and 5'10," and my twelve-year-old brother is five inches taller than me. Sometimes I still wonder what it would be like to be tall. Especially when people assume I'm only about fourteen. An old man at Starbucks once admonished me for ordering a venti macchiato. He told me that I should be drinking milk. He did not even apologize when I told him I was a college student. Like I was going to pull an all-nighter during finals week on milk.

My battle with anorexia still plagues me. Twice I relapsed—once during the summer before my freshman year of high school and once during my junior year of high school. Sometimes when I look in the mirror I still see the little twelve-year-old girl with a tiny frame and sallow cheeks. Perfect alabaster skin because she faithfully uses Noxema every night. Rich chestnut colored hair that shines with red tints in the sunshine. Bright blue eyes full of promise but haunted by invisible demons. Maybe the exorcism would have been a good idea after all.