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Memory is a seamstress, and a capricious one at that. We know not what comes next, or what follows after. Thus, the most ordinary movement in the world may agitate a thousand odd, disconnected fragments, now bright, now dim, hanging and bobbing and dipping and flaunting, like the under linen of a family of fourteen on a line in a gale of wind.”

Virginia Woolf, Orlando

MEMORYHOUSE is a quarterly student-run publication that curates the personal narratives of the UChicago community through creative writing and visual art. In addition, the organization features a performance ensemble and hosts a variety of literary events, performances, and workshops each quarter. To learn about joining Memoryhouse, or submitting work, please visit: chicagomemoryhouse.wordpress.com

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36 Notecards

Brady Dale

None of this would have happened if not for HotorNot.com.

HotorNot wasn’t just a website for judging people’s looks. For $7 per year, you could contact the folks you thought were hot if they thought you were hot too. That’s how I developed an email relationship with this girl in Chicago who said “defenestrate” was her favorite word.

I was living in Madison, Wisconsin, at the time. A big college town in the upper Midwest. I was working for the University’s student government as an advisor. Which meant I was in my mid-twenties, primarily working with undergrads and doing a really good job at work that wouldn’t mean much for my career at all. And while I was from the Midwest, I preferred big cities, so I went down to Chicago as much as I could, to visit some friends in the Andersonville neighborhood and go to the Art Institute. So on one of those trips, I went and met up with the HotorNot girl.

We got coffee at this bakery that was crazy packed and sat at this table that barely fit two people. She told me that her favorite book was *Franny and Zooey*, by J.D. Salinger, the *Catcher in the Rye* guy.

So, when I got back to Madison, I read it. I wanted to impress her. If you haven’t read it, it opens with a young woman from a well-to-do family named Franny, who becomes nearly catatonic from praying. She gets into this book that said that if you prayed this one prayer, over and over, something would happen. God would say something to you.

She left college and came home because of it.

The prayer is called The Jesus Prayer, and it is very simple:

*Dear Lord, Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.*

And after I read it, I got into trying it for a bit, too.

Nothing came of the HotorNot girl, by the way, which is the story of my time in Madison. I quit online dating. Meeting girls was not the problem. It was getting anywhere with them, that’s what I couldn’t swing. She became one of the ladies whose name would go on a stack of 36 notecards.

I lived in Madison just under three years, and toward the end of my time there I was on the phone with my best friend one night and we were talking about how many girls I had chocked with. On the one hand, it was depressing how badly I did with women in those years. On the other, it was kind of impressive the sheer number I had managed to meet and establish some level of initial interest with. So, he suggested that I should make a list. So I got out a stack of notecards and put one name of a girl who’d shot me down or faded away on each card.

We made a stack of 36 notecards. My 20’s were rough.

The HotorNot girl was on one card, as was another girl who lived in Madison, named “Rachel.” I had dug Rachel from afar for a while. She was a senior at the University, but she ran some of the programming in the student union and worked out of an office, next to mine, where I worked as an adviser to another student organization.

I would see her passing through the hallways and, to me, she was the pretty Wisconsin girl, in that way that Wisconsin girls are pretty. Big smile. Curly hair. She had the ideal amount of each, in optimal proportions.

What I’m saying is that I thought she was hot.

I got to know her in time. She worked in the next office over from mine. And I remember this one time I went over there and she pointed out how much messier her desk was than that of another student who worked out of the same office.

In fact, on the other girl’s desk, the stapler and tape dispenser were in the corner, pointed, perfectly parallel, toward the center of the desk. Rachel moved the stapler so that it pointed toward the tape dispenser and said, “I guarantee that when she comes in the first thing she will do is move that back.”

Which meant we both found neatniks funny. So we had that.

Then I noticed that she had a bunch of photos of LL Cool J behind her desk and I said, “What’s with the collage?” and she touched it, saying, “LL is my lover. One day I will marry that man.”

So I didn’t have that.

But whatever—I got her number. This was April. This was on a college campus which meant this was in hookup culture which meant that a phone number was meaningless. I’d been through text message exchanges to nowhere. Coffees where we both wondered what we were doing there. I’d had girls tell me I should come “hang out” at some party, only to pretend they don’t know me.

The number is nothing. I’d gotten 36 of them. I’d sat there with those 36 notecards, remembering each slow fade. The unreturned emails. The studiously ignored hints. The one-on-one get-togethers that turned out to be two-on-one.
So you learn to pursue over time without investing too much. Get their clothes off first and then we can talk about what it means. It took till September for us to finally hang out.

Here’s how it happened: I was going down one of the huge staircases in the building we worked in and she was coming up, and we started chatting about movies. That was her thing. She ran the movie programming for the Wisconsin student union. I happened to say that I had never seen The Ring. She surprised me by saying that she had a copy of the DVD and I’d be welcome to come over and watch it at her place sometime.

I had to ask myself if what she was really saying was, “Why don’t you come over and I can put the DVD in and we can make out a little. How about that?” That’s what I wanted to believe she said, so I took her up on it. On, like, a Wednesday night. When I got over there, she met me at the door in sweats and house cleaning clothes. Bad sign. My confidence was fading. So then she led me up to her place and left me in her living room, while she went into her bedroom to get the DVD.

And I had a choice to make. Did I sit on her couch? Which was a way of saying, “Hey, if we wanted to, maybe, we could make out during the horrible psycho ghost girl movie.” Or did I sit in the chair? Which was a way of saying, “Don’t worry, I am way too much of a candyass to even leave the option of making out open.”

I sat in the chair. We watched The Ring. And it was very scary.

So, before I go on to the next part, I need to tell you all something and you may not like it so I’m sorry but it’s critical and it’s true and I have to tell you: I believe in God.

Like, for real town.

In fact, I will take that a step further and say that I am a spiritual seeker. That is, I peer into the mystery of God from time to time on purpose, as best I can, searching the impossibility of knowing what’s out there for sure, trying to close in on feeling something that you can’t ever know.

Seeking engages me the moest when I am at my emotional lowest. And I’d been in Wisconsin for almost three years now, and it was not where I wanted to be. I was living in a one-room apartment that used to be a hotel room and I was flipping through 36 notecards of ladies’ names who’d taken a pass.

So I was really open to that mystery. And I decided I should read the book that Salinger’s Franny had read. It’s a real book. It’s called The Way of a Pilgrim. It’s a classic from the Russian Orthodox Christian Church. Pilgrims were once these mystics who wandered the country, looking for God. They had nothing, but they didn’t need it because it was considered an honor to help a pilgrim. The Way of a Pilgrim is about how the pilgrim reads this other even older book, The Philokalia, which is, of course, a book about the Bible. So, if you’re keeping track: Franny & Zooey is about The Way of the Pilgrim which is about The Philokalia which is
about the Bible.

So here I am at this moment of spiritual openness/profound depression, and I am reading this story of the eponymous pilgrim, who was at church one day and heard a passage from The Epistles of Paul that said to pray always.

“Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” 1 Thessalonians 5: 16-18.

He didn’t take this passage as you or I might take it, as a somewhat hyperbolic statement about how grateful we should be. He took it as a literal commandment to pray constantly, and he wasn’t and that troubled the pilgrim. In fact, he went back through the scriptures and found lots of passages that commanded constant prayer and felt a burden that he needed to find a way to pray all the time.

So, he began to pray the Jesus prayer, from rising to sleeping:

Dear Lord, Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.

But he didn’t feel as though he were praying constantly, as commanded. He didn’t pray when he slept. Or when he did other work. He got distracted from praying. So, at the end of a long journey, he found a cabin in the woods. There, he re-read a book called The Philokalia in a new order that came to him in a dream, and at the end of that reading he had the idea that he should begin to meditate on his heartbeat. Once he could perceive each beat, he began to pray.

“Dear Lord, Jesus Christ,” with each beat.

“Have mercy on me,” with each rest.

He did this for five months, until he found her could feel the prayer inside him, even when he wasn’t consciously praying.

He wrote that he could pray with his heart.

And I wanted to pray with my heart, too.

Like the Pilgrim, like Franny, I wanted something to happen.

... But I also wanted Rachel. So I kept trying for her, as well.

I don’t want to make it sound like I was in love with the girl. You couldn’t think like that with 36 failures separating you from your last girlfriend, but she would have been a great catch. And it felt as though I were getting closer.

In December, we went and saw Sideways together and then she told me I should come to her New Year’s Eve party. Which made me nervous because I didn’t know her crew; but I also didn’t have any other invitations.

But I felt a lot better about it when she called me up the night before New Year’s and invited me to come hang out with her friends. If you don’t know Madison, it’s home to the state Capitol and the University. The two institutions are connected by State Street, which is where all the crazy partying goes down.

Rachel and her friends, three girls, were hanging out at a new Irish bar on Capitol Square. When I found them there, her girls were all like, “so this is Brady.” And Rachel was wearing this shimmery white sweater that accentuated some of her most appealing qualities.

There were only five of us there and I was the only boy. They joked. They flirted. We stayed out till bar time and then Rachel gave me a big hug which felt awesome because she was an optimally curvy girl.

I went home convinced I would be kissing Rachel on New Year’s.

If only I’d left it with the eve of New Year’s Eve.

The New Year’s Eve party was at a bar near the Capitol on State Street. In one of those bars I never went to, but I didn’t think it would matter because it was a private party, right?

But when I got there, it didn’t seem as though they were really trying to keep it private. At all. There were loads of people there and though I saw Rachel and her friends from the night before again, I didn’t get to spend much time with them because they had lots more people around that they had known longer. And a few of them were boys that they wanted to get to know lots better.

So I talked to a few people who couldn’t wait to extricate themselves from me, and then I hung out by the bar. Awkwardly, because there were no open stools. And I couldn’t even drink that much because they weren’t taking credit cards and it was the end of the month so I didn’t have any cash.

I wanted to leave but I could hear my best friend, the guy who’d convinced me to make the stack of notecards, inside my head telling me I had to stay out till midnight because it was a New Year’s party. So I toughed it out. Midnight came and I cheered the new year alone. I’d shown up alone and I was alone the whole time. Rachel blew me a kiss from across the bar while some dude lurked around her, and I thought to myself: 37.

So I went home.

I went to bed but I couldn’t sleep. I was just drunk enough for the festering depression to cut loose inside of me. Why do you even try? It’s pointless. It would be better if you never even talked to girls because none of them will ever like you anyway.

And that was on repeat until maybe 2 am. The thoughts were too loud for me to sleep. So I decided I would try to counter them with prayer.

Dear Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me.

Dear Lord, Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.

DEAR LORD, JESUS CHRIST, HAVE MERCY ON ME.

But the doubts were stronger. I couldn’t break the self-negating loop on repeat in my mind. Then I thought: the pilgrim met other pilgrims on his way who sought God by scourging the body, because they believed the flesh muted the spirit.

My problem was of the flesh, too, and I hated it. So I decided to try that approach.

I already didn’t have a shirt on. I took out one of my leather belts and held it by the buckle.
And I started praying again, and every time I said the word “mercy” I whipped myself. I hit myself over the left and the right, and the thing you find when you are whipping yourself is that the first lashings don’t hurt. It’s where the lashings overlap, where you hit a bit of skin twice that hurts. Say you go from the left and then from the right. Where those two lashes cross, that hurts more than the rest of the two lashes combined. You start to get this really clear image of your back, in your mind, rendered in pixels of pain.

I whipped from above, the left and the right. I even whipped under and up. I whipped looking for places I hadn’t whipped before but when I ran out I kept going.

Dear Lord, Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.

I went on long enough that I must have covered my back two or three times. It wasn’t so long, but long enough that I drew a tiny amount of blood. Just specks, but there was blood.

Which I deserved because I was mad at myself for being alive.

I woke up the next morning and thought, “Well, that was fucked up.” I realized that the blackness had been growing in me and, until I shrunk it again, I couldn’t drink any more. So I told myself that for the year of 2005 I wouldn’t drink. And I didn’t. And when people who knew that I like drinking and love bars asked, I didn’t tell them I was taking a break because I had given myself what felt like a sunburn one night in the middle of winter from beating myself so badly with a belt that I took a layer of skin off. I have hardly told anyone this story, for years, till now.

In May, I moved to Philadelphia and I got a job working with grown-ups again. By the next New Year’s, things weren’t great but they were a little better. I spent that New Year’s in Baltimore with another Wisconsin girl that I wanted to kiss at midnight and didn’t, but once it struck I had my first drink in a year. A vodka cranberry, because the party was running low.

It was unremarkable. Nothing special happened once I had that first drink. Since then, I’ve put a lot of bottles behind me but the booze has never had quite so much inner blackness to work with. I’ve turned back to that prayer a hundred times, in good times and bad, and while it hasn’t sank down into my heartbeat yet and it hasn’t made something happen, I also haven’t used that belt again for anything but to hold my pants.

But forget about the belt. Beating myself with that belt isn’t the real act of self abuse in this story. It was making that stack of 36 notecards. That act was my own not-quite-40 lashes. If I’d kept it up, it would be well past 40 now, but that’s beside the point. Part of what I think the Pilgrim found in the Jesus Prayer -- the part Franny and I had both missed -- was how praying it as he did let him live in the now, not looking forward for something to happen that would fix her, as Franny had, or looking back at all the things that hadn’t, as I sometimes still do.
Anonymous I

For all the words denominated and christened tonight
I do not bow before the wind and smoke,
but stand to my height and soak what bears on me.

What claims ownership on this rogue rambling mind that has inherited
a set of hands. Thumbs dancing but mind a slandering in night marches
onward in celebration of what isn’t. Ye who exist shall inherit the
earth if only ye ask it.
In the first grade I decided that I hated sequels. Sequels were the parasites leeching off the genius of the originals, the outsiders trying to slip their way into the canon by piggybacking on their predecessors. As definitive proof of this logic, my sister, two years younger than me and a perpetually yowling amalgamation of mucus, was a sequel to me, and she clearly had not received my outstanding genetic pedigree. Sequels were the runts of the litter.

The Lion King 2 epitomized
everything abhorrent about sequels: it was the continuation of a classic, and inferior to this classic in every way imaginable. The songs were unmemorable and bland, lacking imagination. The plot was unintelligible, following the forbidden love affair between Simba’s daughter and a young male lion who lived with a group of lions all resembling Scar. The logical inconsistencies were disconcerting. If this male lion was Scar’s son, which would make sense because they looked exactly alike, then wasn’t this tryst incestuous, because he was pursuing his cousin? And where were all these devoted Scar followers at the end of the first movie, when Simba and Scar were battling? Did they decide to be loyal by just watching, instead of helping, Scar fight his younger, stronger nephew? Even the animation seemed to be of a lower quality than the first movie, as sweeping multi-colored landscapes were wholly replaced by monochromatic close ups. It was a cinematic nightmare, and yet I watched it repeatedly, at least once a week, squinting to see every flawed detail.

My friends were also engrossed by lions. During lunch, we formed The Pride, patrolling our schoolyard. I was the youngest of the group, which earned me the occasional refrain “baby” when someone was either feeling affectionate or pedantic. I was also the tallest and the lankiest, with wrists so weak that I often had difficulty opening doors. Before beginning our prowl, we practiced our roars. I hadn’t quite mastered mine yet, but I could do a fearsome hiss, projectile spraying spit everywhere. This ineptitude didn’t worry me. I may not have been able to impersonate a lion, but I could roar “FUCK” in front of my peers better than anyone, a word that my friends only whispered. Periodically they punched out of their roles as lions to watch me stalk around the playground, blaring out my monosyllabic messages. They told me swearing was bad, and we all grinned, showing off our canines.

After these vocal warm ups and a few practice “lion runs” (we ran on two feet but simulated lions by hunching over as we accelerated) The Pride was ready to attack, the world’s youngest troupe of harlequins. The concrete our street theater, we chased down and surrounded our “enemies,” which always took the form of boys that we disliked. The Pride tackled the victim like they were wildebeests, occasionally pinching or hitting them as they fell. I always stood on the fringes of the circle, laughing, less lion than hyena.

Sometimes the boys attempted to counter-attack. They were usually unsuccessful and shoved back to the pavement by The Pride. One day, one of the straggling targets, a second grader named Nick, grabbed me and stuck his hand down my shirt. I could see every hair on his smooth face, an unwelcome close up. Immobilized, I meekly clawed him away. I was too afraid to strike, and I knew that something sacred and unspoken within The Pride would be violated if Little Izzy ever took a swing.

After every attack, I would jump on my friends’ larger, flexing shoulders. I’d always bleat out the same song, a variation on “nice job” or “we got ‘em.” Sometimes I’d add in a random expletive at the end of my praises, like a flourish of a trumpet. After the incident with Nick they told me that they’d fuck him up, and I was too honored by their adoption of my vocabulary to notice that they didn’t fulfill their promise.

Delighted as I was by what I saw as my complete acceptance to The Pride, something scratched at me, the same sensation I got when I watched The Lion King 2. The movie never became any worse, but instead started to make my memory of the first Lion King better. I began peering at the victim like they were wildebeests, occasionally pinching or hitting them as they fell. I always stood on the fringes of the circle, laughing, less lion than hyena.

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Anonymous II

There is no falsehood in my moments. Regret comes at the expense of sincerity, and my voice hushes itself for others’ sakes. But I suffer from a drought within. Salt flats waver near to me, debate among the stars and bikes created from steel. I dangle from the constellations, a terrestrial satellite with slowly decaying orbit.
—Hey honey! I made you a plate, why don't you sit down and eat with us?

—Mom! You're home early! Ah I'm so sorry, but I have a lot of work tonight, do you mind if I take the food upstairs to my room?

She didn't object. I exhaled, hoping to calm my pounding pulse. I swiftly walked into my room, closed the door, and set the plate down at my desk.

I stared at it. A giant pile of rice covered most of the plate. Curry sauce—cornstarch, sugar, fat, preservatives, and artificial flavoring—smothered the rice, seeping into chunks of potatoes, carrots, and celery. A slab of fish carcass lay beside it. The pounding in my ears started up again.

Pushing the plate aside, I opened up my laptop. I searched “Curry Calories.” Almost a hundred different types of curry popped up. What brand did mom use? Maybe the golden curry. 110 calories. I winced. “Salmon calories,” I typed. I glanced at the plate, which held about two servings of salmon (typical mom)—over 300 calories.

I felt a sharp stab; my stomach was trying to digest itself. I sighed as I fished through the curry for the vegetables—potatoes didn't count—and placed them on my napkin, trying to wipe off as much of the gunk as possible. I looked for the rice that seemed the least contaminated by the curry and pushed it to one side of my plate. I cut off a fourth of the salmon and moved it aside too.

Probably 60 calories from the salmon, 50 from the rice, 30 from the veggies, another 20 from the curry that has already seeped into the vegetables? So that's... how much did I guess for the rice again? 60 plus 50 plus... but what if the curry seeped into the vegetables and there are a lot more calories from the curry than I guessed? I calculated and re-calculated. It was like being forced to count hundreds of marbles while dealing with the maddening paranoia that I had skipped a single digit along the way, forcing me to start at the beginning all over again. The room was spinning, my stomach was panging, I had to eat.

I stabbed a dull orange carrot with my fork and, slowly lifting the metal prongs, inserted the object into my mouth. With a few chews it was mush. I scooped up a few grains of the clean rice and forced it down as well. I could feel the starch beginning to fix itself to my being. My traitor stomach churned and stabbed, groaning for more. I had a few more bites of the veggies, and then I shoved the who-knows-how-old bit of carcass into my mouth. I chewed while looking at the dead flesh and food objects remaining on my small white napkin. I swallowed, understanding I had just put it all inside of me. I put the evil objects inside of my stomach. It begged for more. I couldn't do it.

I picked up the plate, peeked into the hallway to make sure no one was there, and snuck into the bathroom. I turned off the sink, placed the plate on the floor of the bathtub, and closed the shower curtain. I turned off the sink, and saw my little sister waiting with an impatient curl on her lip. I smiled, motioned for her to enter and returned to my room.

After she left, I went back to pick up the plate and carried it swiftly down the stairs. I peeked into the kitchen—empty—and scurried over to the garbage to bury my food beneath other trash, just in case.

When I got back to my room, I sank to the floor as the adrenaline rush started to subside. This can't happen again. I should make sure to make my own dinner. I'll just eat before everyone else is hungry and then tell the siblings I've already eaten... Suddenly all I could think about was the food I had just ingested: the smothering curry, the heavy flesh, my upper arms, my thighs, my face. I was blowing up with the curry. It was seeping into me just like the rice, becoming part of my being, infecting me. I had to get it out. I couldn't throw up though because that would make me even more dizzy, and I needed to finish my homework. Run. I had to burn it off. [“Ungrateful”]. I looked outside; it was too dark now. I wanted to cry. KNOCK.

I froze. I tried to steady my voice.

—Who is it?

—It’s Caroline! I need to use the bathroom!

The urgency snapped me out of my despair. I scooped up about a third of the food on the plate and slipped it into the toilet. Flushed. It all went down without a problem.

I turned on the sink, placed the plate on the floor of the bathtub, and closed the shower curtain. I turned off the sink, and saw my little sister waiting with an impatient curl on her lip. I smiled, motioned for her to enter and returned to my room.

—Hey honey! I made you a plate, why don’t you sit down and eat with us?

—Mom! You’re home early! Ah I’m so sorry, but I have a lot of work tonight, do you mind if I take the food upstairs to my room?

She didn’t object. I exhaled, hoping to calm my pounding pulse. I swiftly walked into my room, closed the door, and set the plate down at my desk.

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I stared at it. A giant pile of rice covered most of the plate. Curry sauce—cornstarch, sugar, fat, preservatives, and artificial flavoring—smothered the rice, seeping into chunks of potatoes, carrots, and celery. A slab of fish carcass lay beside it. The pounding in my ears started up again.

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I felt a sharp stab; my stomach was trying to digest itself. I sighed as I fished through the curry for the vegetables—potatoes didn’t count—and placed them on my napkin, trying to wipe off as much of the gunk as possible. I looked for the rice that seemed the least contaminated by the curry and pushed it to one side of my plate. I cut off a fourth of the salmon and moved it aside too.

 Probably 60 calories from the salmon, 50 from the rice, 30 from the veggies, another 20 from the curry that has already seeped into the vegetables? So that’s... how much did I guess for the rice again? 60 plus 50 plus... but what if the curry seeped into the vegetables and there are a lot more calories from the curry than I guessed? I calculated and re-calculated. It was like being forced to count hundreds of marbles while dealing with the maddening paranoia that I had skipped a single digit along the way, forcing me to start at the beginning all over again. The room was spinning, my stomach was panging, I had to eat.

I stabbed a dull orange carrot with my fork and, slowly lifting the metal prongs, inserted the object into my mouth. With a few chews it was mush. I scooped up a few grains of the clean rice and forced it down as well. I could feel the starch beginning to fix itself to my being. My traitor stomach churned and stabbed, groaning for more. I had a few more bites of the veggies, and then I shoved the who-knows-how-old bit of carcass into my mouth. I chewed while looking at the dead flesh and food objects remaining on my small white napkin. I swallowed, understanding I had just put it all inside of me. I put the evil objects inside of my stomach. It begged for more. I couldn’t do it.

I picked up the plate, peeked into the hallway to make sure no one was there, and snuck into the bathroom. I turned off the sink, placed the plate on the floor of the bathtub, and closed the shower curtain. I turned off the sink, and saw my little sister waiting with an impatient curl on her lip. I smiled, motioned for her to enter and returned to my room.

After she left, I went back to pick up the plate and carried it swiftly down the stairs. I peeked into the kitchen—empty—and scurried over to the garbage to bury my food beneath other trash, just in case.

When I got back to my room, I sank to the floor as the adrenaline rush started to subside. This can’t happen again. I should make sure to make my own dinner. I’ll just eat before everyone else is hungry and then tell the siblings I’ve already eaten... Suddenly all I could think about was the food I had just ingested: the smothering curry, the heavy flesh,
the white connective tissue I had chewed through. I felt it all sinking in my stomach. I couldn't get rid of the weight, the feeling of heaviness, of burden. No no. Suppressed memories intruded my thoughts.

["What an ungrateful daughter"].

No no. I sank down and wrapped my arms around myself. I wanted to tear my flesh out with my nails. I didn't mean it. I didn't want to hurt you. I don't want to burden anyone!

["I got an 95, how did you do?"] I hid the blaring red marks that I had consistently started seeing for the first time. Why can't I get it? I'm so stupid.

My thighs were tingling. It's stretching out my thighs. The fat is depositing itself there. Poison. Pure vice. Conjoining itself to my body, to this flawed flesh.

["I don't really feel the same way"]).

I am unlovable.

I stood up. I need to run. I started running in place as fast as possible. The blue walls shook up and down. It's too much. Everything is too much. I was too little and too much. I struggled to breathe through my tears. I need to break out (but to where?), or burn down. Burn, melt disappear.

I had a difficult time in high school. I wasn't kidnapped or raped or abused. I wasn't diagnosed with cancer. I didn't even have to go through a single death in the family. I had a lot of hobbies and interests. I studied hard and got great grades. I had friends. I lived with a loving, healthy family in one of the most affluent towns in the United States. And I developed an eating disorder.

—Hey, good job with the French presentation Lizzie!
—Thanks, I practiced it for awhile.
—Nice. Working on Latin again, huh?

I felt like everyone I knew lived inside of a glass bubble. I knew important things were happening outside the bubble, but I felt like I couldn't experience them for myself. Instead, I was stuck sitting quietly at the end of the lunch table, half-studying the Latin fourth and fifth declensions. This clay-figurine self stood alongside everyone else, mechanically moving through life. My real self hovered somewhere above, quietly observing the banal conversations, wondering how to break through the glass dome surrounding us all.

—My plan is business at Penn for undergrad and then Stanford for grad.
—Like your dad?

Starting in sophomore year, getting into elite colleges seemed to be all that mattered. But the obsession seemed pointless; we were so well off that none of us would ever really have to struggle to survive. My parents didn't put pressure on me, and they didn't say I had to be anything. In a way, that made life harder. Why should I live? To what end should I aspire? I had existential angst. I distanced myself from my friends and the world around me as I cynically examined the usual petty talk among my peers.

—So I can still get an A for the class if I get over a 94.3 on the next test and ace the lab.

—I mean, yeah her face isn't that great, but she's got a rocking body.
—I don't know how I feel about the whole high-socks thing coming back.
—I think they're super cute! You've got to have the thighs for it though.

The last comment came from a few feet away, but it made me glance down at my legs. One was covered with a clunky gray air-cast. I used to fence and run track, but I had to stop because of a chronic leg condition I had developed from exercise. My restricted mobility made me gain weight, and as my weeks as a cripple went on, I constantly felt large, inconvenient, powerless, and ugly. I became depressed.

I chose to reject my community's culture, but I probably wouldn't have if I felt like I could have been accepted by it first. I was too scared to put myself out there and to try to make new friends. I was too self-conscious and insecure. My body did not help. It's stretching through life. My real self hovered somewhere above, quietly observing the banal conversations, wondering how to break through the glass dome surrounding us all.

—I'm so stupid.

—I don't really feel the same way.

—I can talk to about my feelings.
—Thanks, I practiced it for awhile.
—I think they're super cute! You've got to have the thighs for it though.

—I don't mean it. I didn't want to hurt you. I don't want to break out (but to where?).

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It dominates everyone’s life. Like all people want to do is make more and more of it until they die. It's like proof of how much you're worth. But it's just numbers on pieces of paper.

boyiliked2011: Maybe. But those pieces of paper can also pay for things and feed you and make you very happy. So I think it's important to make money.

mydumbscreenname: Yeah, well, I guess.

boyiliked2011: I also think it's important to have a nice wife to make you a sandwich.

mydumbscreenname: ...........
>:| >:|!!!!!!!!

boyiliked2011: Jk jk!! Hey Lis, I gotta go to dinner. I'll talk to you later.

mydumbscreenname: Ah, ok bye. Tryl!!

It was a silly crush, but it was great having someone to talk to about my secret feelings. I sent him a few obvious love songs. He thanked me and told me he liked them. He was kind of dense. Eventually I gathered the courage to tell him I liked him. I hand-wrote a note for him…and Facebook messaged him a picture of it.

I was having an especially horrible week.

It was almost time for Sunday dinner, which my mom spent hours preparing. She was particularly tired from a stressful week at work.

—Everyone, dinner!!! Come down and help set up!!

I covered the distressing chemistry marks with my textbook and clunked down the stairs with my cast, dragging myself into the dining room. What's wrong with me? The words of the Facebook message suddenly flashed across my mind like a slap in the face.

[“I'm so sorry Lis. I think you're really really great. You're a wonderful person. But, I don't really feel the same way”]. That's what you get for confessing over Facebook.

When I sat down at my seat, my mom frowned at me.

—You always keep us waiting. Your
She’s right. Ungrateful. Selfish. Crying, tipped nail. Careless. Insensitive. My heart, each of her words a poison—and I could never have imagined such insensitivity and carelessness.

I feed and nourish you with my own blood, sweat and tears. And what do I get in return? Do I even get a single word of thanks? No, I get spoiled and insulted?

The next day I avoided my friends in school and skipped lunch to go study in the library. I was sitting alone in a cubicle when the hunger pains started to come. Each strike felt like just retribution for the pain that I had caused. Jab—["What don’t I do for you?"]—Jab—["I could never have imagined such ingratitude"]—Jab—["and selfishness"]—Jab. I began to welcome the stabbing. It overshadowed the mental pain. Jab—ungrateful—Jab—careless—Jab—thankless—Jab. The bell rang. I felt light-headed, numb, pure somehow. It felt good to punish myself. I was dizzy when I got home. I saw some apples on the counter, but I wasn’t hungry. Pause. A second thought. I picked one up and brought it up to my room. I took a bite. So sweet. The juice dripped down my mouth and my fingers. I took another bite, suddenly seized by hunger, and

I scarfed the rest of it down. I went downstairs to get another. I ate the core. I heard my siblings laughing at some silly YouTube video. All of a sudden I started to feel a hollowness filling my chest. I stared at the blank space in front of me and crossed my arms as if trying to contain its spread. My stomach felt heavy with guilt. Memories flooded back to me again.

["I like her but she’s not popular enough"]. Words overheard from my 7th grade crush. You’re not good enough.

["Hmm, I don’t think that’s right, anyone have any other ideas?"]. Everyone was staring at me. My face burned with embarrassment at my teacher’s comment. Everyone thinks you’re stupid.

["I can’t even look at you"]. She was so hurt. You are guilty, bad.

I walked to the full-length mirror to look at myself. I saw sad, dark eyes—wells quivering with emotion. I recognized myself inside the eyes, but the rest of the girl’s face was wrong somehow. She had small, narrow eyes and tiny lips on a head that seemed too square and too wide. Her nose was squished and flat. The face looked like a heavy mask of excess flesh. She was an ugly person. And there was too much of the rest of her body. Her thick upper arms hung like bulging sacks of jelly. She stripped her clothes off and examined how her lumpy thighs rubbed and squished against each other. But how can that really be me?

Reverie. Reverie filled every inch of her—my—body. I wished the power of my hate could burn and melt the fat covering everything. I curled up into a ball on the floor. There’s no way out. This is my body. This is me. I felt the fat on my stomach pressing against my thighs, and I hated it. My existence was a grotesque burden onto the world, and my body was undeniable. I decided to weigh myself. In the bathroom I stepped on a scale for the first time in almost a year. I had gained about ten pounds. I started to cry.

People are raising more awareness about anorexia, but I think they are explaining its causes in the wrong way. The usual criticisms are directed toward fashion and the media. Outraged critics demand that fashion designers stop using stick-thin models; they argue that these models teach impressionable minds that skinny is beautiful and make people want to starve themselves. People also criticize magazines that use perfect airbrushed models; these images present an unattainable ideal that make people feel bad about themselves. Ubiquitous advertisements of “low-calorie, guilt-free snacks,” and magazine tips on “how to drop five pounds fast,” make people obsessive about their weight. These complaints and criticisms are valid—they certainly do increase the desire to lose weight. But these explanations also miss the essential problem.

I think the French sociologist Emile Durkheim came the closest to hitting the nail on the head over a century ago when he presented his polemical argument: all societies require religion.
What he meant is that all people that live within a community need to have a common moral code to follow—they need to have a shared understanding of a sacred “good” to worship and an “evil” to reject. This code teaches people how they should live their lives, and this gives them a sense of security. People who don’t need to worry about survival need to find a deeper meaning to life more desperately.

Anorexia is a phenomenon in modern capitalist countries because it is a pathological manifestation of spiritual emptiness; it is a symptom of the deep, essential need for meaning and happiness. People in wealthy nations are becoming increasingly secular, and even those who are religious cannot help but follow capitalism’s self-sustaining dogma: wealth is good, education is good, power is good, beauty is good, (beauty is power), certainty—scientific objectivity—is good. Capitalism teaches that we can create and acquire happiness, and that money is the ultimate symbol of comfort and security.

According to this doctrine, I was too privileged to be depressed. Yet I still was, just like thousands of others in my situation. I didn’t believe in the spiritual power of money; it did the opposite of good for me—it made me feel guilty. I hated myself so much I contemplated suicide, but I was wary of the pain it had caused others in my community, and I was too much of a coward to go all the way through with it. I had to live. But I couldn’t go on like I was. I was in so much pain; I needed to soothe it somehow.

Here—in this situation of desperation, confusion, and spiritual emptiness—is where the pervasive cultural demonization of fat was important. I needed to objectify my negative emotions; I needed to understand, control, and dominate them. I needed a symbol to demonize, something to worship—I needed to know how to make myself better. In this vulnerable state, I clutched at the easy answers everywhere presented by magazine advertisements and television: fat is bad and unhealthy, losing weight is good and virtuous.

Anorexia became my religion: She was my Goddess, and I followed Her church. I followed the same moral code as the rest of Her unfortunate acolytes: fat is profane, the absence of fat is sacred and pure. Her teachings didn’t seem as logically fallacious as trying to worship money. My restricting rituals yielded real, physical effects that I could validate through numerical objectivity. My weight-loss on the scale demonstrated my hard-work, self-denial, and determination. It was proof of my self-control and virtue. And it genuinely seemed to do more good than making money, because it also fought against evil. Losing weight purged me of my guilt—it made me feel like less of a burden on the world because I wasn’t consuming as much. It made me smaller, more vulnerable; no one would want to hurt me. Becoming thinner could maybe even make me less grotesque and more loveable. And I could do it forever. I could keep losing more weight, keep purging my guilt, keep getting better.
I could disappear into nothing.

Starving myself really did make me feel better, for a little bit. I was constantly making progress, and instead of worrying about the insignificance of my life, I could ritualistically obsess over the number of calories I would ingest in my next meal. But Anorexia was a false goddess, and over time Her cost compounded and seized its toll: I had no energy. I became even more withdrawn because I didn’t have the energy to talk to people, and I did not have the brainpower to concentrate on anything but the thought of food. I was too afraid to die, but I also felt too weary to live—to continue to push a boulder up an insurmountable hill only to have it tumble back down at the end of each day. So, instead, I opted to stay somewhere in between—dangling off the edge of the cliff—flirting with death, living a half-existence.

While all this was going on during my sophomore year, I was also vice-president of a student organization that was raising money to build an edible garden at an orphanage in Cambodia. The last quarter of the school year I learned that I got accepted into a summer program that sent students to Cambodia to do community service, teach English, and live with a homestay family, while reporting and journaling about these activities.

The whole experience deserves its own story to avoid sounding like a cliché, but it truly changed my life. It finally let me see the world outside of my privileged bubble. I had to brush my teeth using bottled water; I squatted in holes in the ground in order to use the bathroom; I lived constantly covered with a layer of sweat and dirt that I could only wash off in a ‘shower’ that was located exactly where my family pooped. But the trip did more than make me grateful for my modern amenities; it also convinced me that I was somehow living my life wrong. Even though they didn’t have modern showers or clean water, I saw the closeness of my middle-class Cambodian community, and how happy people were to live simply with each other—going to school, visiting friends during the day, cooking dinner and weaving baskets out of grass for fun in the evening. There was also such a strong sense of gratitude for their relative well-being. My friends were so grateful to be able to go to school. They told me one after another about their dreams: to become doctors, teachers, and business-owners, to help to advance their country, to journey one day to the United States. I saw the importance of family, community, friendship, love, hope, and dreams. They had something that I felt I was missing in my own life.

I still restricted my diet while I was in Cambodia, and for a few months after I got back. I still felt like I didn’t deserve to eat. But as my Junior year went on—as I struggled to go to class and do my homework and stay awake past 8 pm every day out of the complete lack of energy—I thought back to the friends I had made in Cambodia. How they were so determined to work hard so that they could achieve their dreams, help their country to advance, and to live more stable lives. I felt I was disrespecting them by starving myself, by wasting my life and my opportunities. I needed to do well in school; I needed to learn more and to get into a good college so I could know how to give more people the opportunity to live good, happy lives—a privilege that I feel I didn’t deserve.

I started to eat again. I gained back all of the weight I had lost and more in less than half the time. I became even more depressed; I couldn’t turn to the restricting rituals to protect and distract me from the guilt, the emptiness, and the feelings of worthlessness. But the strong moral obligation I felt to do well in school and to be the best student I could be kept me from starving myself.

The summer after my Junior year I had yet another opportunity to go back to Cambodia. Through my club at school that raised money to support international education, I met a man who had survived the Cambodian genocide. He started an NGO called CAFFE that helps Cambodian women pursue secondary education by providing them with scholarships, room, and board. I told him I wanted to help his organization, and he trusted me to go to Cambodia along with my father to research and record the cost of food, observe the organization’s staff, and teach English. It felt like the most meaningful and important experience of my whole life. I wanted to stay there all summer; I wanted to continue to teach English, to help build an edible garden at their dormitory, to befriend more girls and hear more of their inspiring stories. But my father stopped our trip after only a little over a week. He couldn’t take that much time off from work, and he wanted to go to Hawaii with the rest of my family for a vacation. I was only 16, and he refused to leave me in Cambodia by myself. I begged, I pleaded, I cried. There was nothing I could do to change his mind. I was dependent on his money and his plane tickets, and I had to go with him.

I remember the first day at that hotel in Hawaii. At first my parents apologized when they saw how upset I was to have to leave Cambodia. But eventually my sullen face and apathetic comments brought everyone else down while we were on our vacation, and they began to tell me something to the effect of, “You’re complaining that you have to stay at a nice hotel in Hawaii. Stop being a brat.” They pointed out the amazing view we had in our large hotel room, the amount of pools I could try out, the delicious food I could order anytime. It did the opposite of making me feel better.

That day I remember lying down on a chair by the poolside with my parents as my siblings played in the water. I watched them order food and alcoholic beverages sold for around $30. Those frivolous drinks—drinks that rich adults (surgeons, lawyers, bankers, and CEOs no doubt) didn’t finish or spilled carelessly as they flipped their heads back with laughter—could feed a person in Cambodia for a whole month. I
continued watching the laughing and lounging and splashing all around me. How could they? But they didn’t know; they didn’t understand. No one there could possibly understand. The images became blurry as tears rolled down my face underneath my sunglasses.

The fries my mom had ordered had come. There was no way she was going to finish them all. She offered me some and urged me to order something myself. I refused. I didn’t eat much during the trip. I felt repulsed by the food, the excess, the waste around me. I didn’t want to take part in it. Starving was my silent rebellion.

When I came back to the U.S., the founder of CAFFE snapped me out of my sullenness. I shared my experiences and my findings, he thanked me, and he made me a member of his board. I was dumbstruck and elated by his validation that I did something meaningful. I realized this is what I wanted to do—I wanted to dedicate my life and energy to helping others. I would make the world a better place. I resolved to finally become mentally and physically healthy so that I could go forward. I wouldn’t count calories anymore, I wouldn’t starve myself. That wouldn’t help me do anything.

My senior year was one of the happiest years of my life. I started doing regular physical activity that was safe for my leg condition, and I decided to be a little bit more careful about what I ate just to be healthy. I opened up socially; I joined a bunch of new clubs I had always wanted to try, I became extremely out-going, I reconnected with my old friends, and I made new ones too. I was also started receiving a lot of romantic attention for the first time and was bewildered. I started my first relationship.

I had visited the University of Chicago right before school started. Learning for the sake of learning; “life of the mind;” a core curriculum to give me a solid foundational education and to help me figure out who I was and what I wanted to do; I had never even really known much about the university before, but it was perfect for me. I applied and got in early. I accepted the offer right away, ripping up snobby ivy-league applications. I was so happy. College would help me make like-minded friends who were also genuinely intellectually curious, and I would be able to take classes that would help me understand myself and how I could help the world. Everything was going so well—or so I thought. Anorexia may lie dormant, but unless you remain constantly vigilant, it will not easily let go.

I walked into the kitchen. It was May of my senior year, when school was starting to wind down, and I was just waiting for college to start already.

I had a big salad for lunch—lots of raw veggies, no dressing—like always, but that was about 4 hours ago. I was hungry. I looked into the refrigerator. There were some boiled eggs leftover from breakfast. I used to be afraid of eating even these! Ha, how silly.

I peeled the shells off of two eggs. I realized it was important to have a lot of protein; when I wasn’t getting
enough during my restricting phases. I got extremely dizzy and lethargic and my hair started falling out a little bit. I went into the pantry and took about 6 almonds out of a container. I realized that dietary fat was important too: it kept your hair shiny, your skin clear, and the myelin sheaths of your neurons maintained; you needed it to think clearly. A little bit of unsaturated plant-based fat is good for you.

I took the egg whites off of the yolk, and threw the yolk out into the garbage. Animal-fat. Saturated fat. High in calories and cholesterol. Unhealthy. I took out some of the sautéed spinach that my housekeeper had made last night and put that on my plate as well. High in vitamins and minerals. Good.

I had worked to perfect my diet, eliminating processed foods, starchy carbs, dairy, saturated fat—foods I deemed excessive and unnecessary for basic survival. I lived off of vegetables and egg whites with a few nuts, beans, and the occasional cubes of tofu. I realized I wasn’t eating many calories, but I couldn’t be anorexic. I ate a square of dark chocolate every day! I was happy.

I slowly ate my carefully-prepared snack. I finished the eggs and had a few almonds. Took a bite of the spinach. Slowed my chewing. It tasted kind of creamy. I glanced over at the kitchen counter. There was a stick of butter sitting there. I looked at the spinach. Creamy.

My heart started racing. I stood up and went to the refrigerator. There was a container of half-and-half sitting out on the shelf. A mere tablespoon was 50 calories and 4 grams of saturated fat. I opened the container. It was half empty.

WHY would Amelia add that to the spinach?! It’s so unhealthy. I felt kind of nauseous. I needed to purge myself of it. Taking off my school clothes, I changed into athletic-wear and climbed onto the stationary bike in my living room. I don’t want to be skinny anymore. I just want to be healthy.

I raised the difficulty level of the bicycle work-out. I imagined the heavy cream oozing throughout my body and converting everything to fat. I started pedaling hard. A negative voice in my head spurred me on.

—Do you think anyone would like you if you were the same as before?

I raised the incline level on the machine.

—Why do you think you have so many friends now? Or a boyfriend who loves you?

I pedaled harder.

—It’s because you’re not sitting around being miserable. You’re not a burden and a waste of space. You’re working hard, you’re being disciplined, you’re exercising. Do you think people would still love you if you were fat like before? [“I’m so sorry Lis… but I don’t really feel the same way”].

—How will people possibly like you in college if you go back to that? How will you possibly do all the good you want to do if you lose your determination and discipline?

My head was spinning. The veins in my arms were jutting out. The memories came back again: thighs squishing against each other, jelly arms, sobbing on the floor.

I wanted to escape, to fly. My forehead and back were soaked with sweat.

—Without this you’re stupid, worthless, a burden onto everyone.

—No. I don’t want that again.

I finally got off the bike. “14 miles. 550 calories burned.” Feeling a little bit dizzy, I downed a few glasses of water in the kitchen and then went to take a shower.

I looked at my body in the mirror. It was still compact, muscular. Relief.

I made it a point not to weigh myself to avoid getting obsessive about numbers, but out of curiosity I climbed on the scale anyway. I was 5 pounds underweight. Good.

—Insurance. What if you need to eat restaurant food loaded with butter? What if you need to eat something unhealthy at a special event? If you briefly lose your discipline or your control, you’ll be safe.

I didn’t want to be too skinny. But I did not want to risk getting fat again. I didn’t want to lose my happiness.

A few hours later, I went to have dinner with my younger siblings. The endorphins from the exercise were still keeping me high. I felt energized and hyper-alert. It felt like my nerves were on fire. I felt powerful.

I watched my siblings get themselves plates of shepherd’s pie. They broke into the thick, flaky crust. Chicken flesh flowed out of the pie along with the heavy cream. They shoveled the greasy food onto their forks and stuffed it into their mouths, swallowing greedily.

I watched with a weird kind of pleasure.

—You are superior.

They kept shoveling it into their mouths.

—You are unfettered by those basic physical needs that hold back the weak.

—Hey Elisabeth, aren’t you going to eat?

—You are virtuous.

I started making myself a big plate of salad. Raw veggies and greens austerely mixed together with a few chickpeas.

—You can eat less than everyone else, bike 12 miles a day, and get straight As.

I ate slowly while watching them chew through their gooey pies.

—And you can think more clearly than all of them. You have mastered the body. You have transcended your human weaknesses. I have destroyed the id; I am pure superego. I am approaching perfection.

For anorexics, the brain actually does register starvation as good and eating as bad. Many articles in neuroscience literature now show that anorexic patients experience abnormal functioning in the reward center of their brains. An eating disorder neurologically operates just like a drug addiction. While most people feel pain when they starve, the anorexic’s brain releases the neurotransmitter...
Dopamine in response to starvation, creating a high that makes them feel more alert and energetic. The repeated release of dopamine also strengthens neurological connections in an area of the brain called the ventral striatum, which reinforces motivated behavior. So the longer you starve yourself, the more your brain registers it as good, and the more addicted to it you become.

How can one escape the addiction? The first step to achieving freedom is self-understanding. You have to understand that anorexia has become your religion. Then, you must choose to let go of the security her moral teachings offer. You need to overturn the reality that your religious rituals reinforce each day: that fat is bad, and skinner is better. You have to let go of the feeling that you can attribute all your negative emotions, fears, and imperfections to something tangible. You have to decide that the protection, the powers, and the comfort that anorexia offers you are not worth the sacrifices you have to make. You must choose to dethrone Her and cast Her off the altar of your mind, all while your body and brain fight back against you and try to reinforce Her power.

Up to 1 out of 5 anorexics fail to do so without intervention. Without help, they continue to obey Her rule, and they succeed in their quest for purity. They expel all profanity from their beings. They die.

Dethroning anorexia is like trying to renounce your religion and give up on a drug addiction all at the same time.

For many, recovering on their own is impossible.

It was mid-August, the summer after senior year. I had just come back from a vacation with my younger siblings, cousin, and grandparents—a birthday present for my two siblings, and a graduation present for me. The lush vacation had exacerbated my guilt complex. I restricted and exercised more heavily than I ever had before.

I was in my room crying on my bed, shivering even though I was wearing sweatpants and a thick sweater. I had broken up with my boyfriend that day. I didn't love him anymore. I couldn't love or care about anyone—I didn't have the emotional energy.

I should get up. I bent forward. My shoulder bones cracked against each other. I started brushing my hair, but stopped after a few strokes—a huge clump of hair had just fallen out. Glancing over at the bed, I saw another clump of hair on my pillow. I felt a dull shock. I never lost that much hair before. I stood, my back hurting, and hugged myself, blades jutted at least an inch out of my back. I bent over and hugged myself, the spinal bones protruded even more prominently. I looked like a disfigured insect.

I slowly turned back around and looked at my face. My skin-color was sallow, pale and yellowish. My cheekbones stretched and strained out from underneath my skin. My hair color had always been extremely dark-black, but it seemed lighter now. I ran my fingers through my hair, and a few more strands fell out, brown and grey. Looking at the eyes, I couldn't recognize myself. There was no emotion, no light. Nothing.

I put my clothes back on. So cold. I looked at my hands—bones jutting out, fingernails blue. I walked into the bathroom and stepped on the scale. I was 10 pounds under what would be considered serious anorexia. It was the lowest I had ever weighed.

I felt a quiet, muted horror.

—but you could go even lower if you worked hard enough.

What? I finally recognized something was wrong. I wanted to be healthy, I didn't want to be this skinny. I fought the voice, I fought against the urge to restrict.

—No, this is really not safe, I feel awful, I need to gain weight.

—you want to add fat back onto your body? Do you remember what it was like before? Do you want to go back to that? This is control. This is safe.

—I don't want to be sad again, but right now I'm not ok either. And why should gaining weight change me? I don't care what anyone else weighs!

—Weak. Weak! You won't be special anymore. You won't be superhuman.

—Superhuman… how can I be superhuman? I can't think about anything but food and exercise. I want to be able to focus enough to read. I want to learn. I want to be able to care about people and help them, not hurt them. I want my life back.

—But you're going off to college and you're a worse person when you're fat. You're less disciplined, less likeable, less confident, and less loveable. You don't burden anyone when you're thin. You're pure. You tarnish yourself if you gain weight.

—No. No, this is all in my head. This can't be true. I don't care what anyone else weighs! I don't like anyone less if they weigh more! Do I want my main distinguishing feature to be my weight?! There's more to me than that. I can't do this anymore.

I went down the stairs into the kitchen. I needed someone else to help me. My mom was sitting at the table. She looked at me with a pained expression. We had developed a strained relationship over the past few months; she kept fighting for me to eat more, while I masked my weight-loss and restricting so I could argue that I was fine.

I cried when I saw her. I didn't know how to explain what had happened to me.

—You were right, I know I need to eat more. I know I'm too skinny…Can I have dinner?

I tried to eat a few spoonfuls of creamy soup. A few seconds later, I felt sharp stabbing pains in my stomach. I ran to the bathroom and threw up. I had sharply decreased the amount of food I was eating over that vacation. My stomach couldn't handle the food. My mom started crying. I needed to go to the doctor.
The next day, the nurse and doctor panicked when they saw me—my weight, body temperature, and heart rate were all dangerously low. My body was resting at around 93 degrees because it couldn't expend the energy to warm me up. My heart was only beating at about 42 beats per minute. They conducted two EKGs, which confirmed that my heart was in dangerous condition. My doctor diagnosed me with anorexia and wanted to check me into an in-patient program where I would have to lie in bed, refrain from exercise, and eat whatever food the people in the hospital gave me.

I balked. I argued that I wasn’t anorexic. I had seen the diagnostic criteria—I was not refusing to maintain a healthy weight; I wanted to get better. I just wanted to get healthy, and it got out of control. I insisted on recovering on my own at home. She relented, but told me that I needed to gain 15 pounds for her to let me go to school.

I had a 3000-calorie meal-plan, but I was failing to gain significant weight. It was hard to eat. Fat was anathema. The thought of having layers of its poison stick to my body literally gave me panic attacks. I had to constantly tell myself that it was good to eat, even though my stomach inflated like a balloon and eating made me feel worthless and depressed. I felt like I needed starvation to be happy.

I went in for another weigh-in about 2 weeks before school. I had gained 3 pounds the week before, and 2 pounds the week before that, but this week I lost half a pound. I felt a smile somewhere deep inside. The doctor's face became grave when she saw my weight. She told me I couldn’t go to school and that I needed to stay home for a few more months to get better.

I was stunned. I didn’t actually think she would go through with it. It felt like my world was falling apart. And then it got even worse. That same day, my parents talked to the head nurse at the University of Chicago, who told them I could not go to school at all that year, since first-year students are not allowed to start school late. I might be allowed to start in the fall a year later, “If I was healthy enough then.”

Out of everything, this felt like the worst thing that ever happened to me. I cried alone in my room after I found out. I just destroyed my entire life. I felt like doctors didn’t know what was best for me; they didn’t understand. I was convinced I got to my sickest point that summer because of the fact that I couldn’t go to college. Being stuck at home created the feelings of disempowerment, insecurity, meaninglessness, and at the end, guilt, which drove me to restrict all summer. Now I was imprisoned for at least another year, and I had to face those same feelings—along with that deep existential struggle that had plagued me for years—head on. I had no rituals to comfort me. I had no God of any kind to believe in. I sat facing it naked, hateful, and crying. I only managed to escape the pain through sleep.

—You don’t deserve to eat.
I was lying in my bed. I had not really left my room for the past few days since I had heard the news. I told a few of my close friends that I wasn’t going to be able to go to college, and then I deleted my Facebook; it was too painful to see pictures of them with new dorms and new friends. I also didn’t want to burden them and ruin their new experiences by forcing them to worry about me. I was all alone.

—What’s the point?

I glanced at my dresser across the room. On top of it was a small wooden music box that I had forgotten about, a parting gift from my homestay family from my first trip to Cambodia. I decided to stand up. I walked over, gave the knob a few cranks, and then let go. Für Elise started to play, and I remembered my goodbyes with my Cambodian friends.

[“I want to visit you in New York someday!”
[“Teacher, teacher! Here, I made a bracelet for you.” It said, “Good lucky”]
[“School so hard. But I want to keep on working. I want to be a doctor one day”].

It stopped mid-song. I remembered their faces, their hopes.

What do I want?

A thought suddenly came to me. It was calming, like rising from a cool body of water:

I’m here right now.

I stood still for a minute, quiet, trying to absorb its full significance. I finally decided to leave my room to brush my teeth, get dressed. I slowly walked down the stairs into the kitchen, opened the refrigerator door, and took out a blue bottle. Ensure Plus. The side nutrition facts: 350 calories. I remembered the thought again. Breathed. I opened my lips, took a big sip, and swallowed. After a few more big gulps, I finished the bottle, and set it on the counter.

I decided to text a friend who was still in high school, asking if he wanted to hang out. He responded with a very enthusiastic yes. I called to my parents, telling them I was going out for a little bit, my doctor had just told me I was allowed to go for very short walks. I was just about to walk out the door, when I decided to quickly go back to the kitchen. I grabbed another Ensure Plus and put it in my bag. The sooner I get better, the sooner I can start making the most of this gap year.

I consider myself recovered. I am well into a healthy weight-range—25 pounds heavier than when I was diagnosed. I made it to my second year at The University of Chicago, and since I’m a masochist, I’m enjoying it. It feels like a happy ending.

I’m not unshakeable. A few months ago I was walking around Manhattan when I saw a homeless man, who looked like he was possibly on drugs, spinning around in circles next to a huge heap of clothes on the street. As I passed by, I heard him say under his breath, “I fucking hate you.” I didn’t really take notice of it and kept walking, but as I continued to walk I heard footsteps behind me, and he started screaming, “I FUCKING HATE YOU, YOU FUCKING MONGOLOID BITCH!” He started chasing after me, and I quickly walked into a crowd waiting to cross the street. He still came after me into the crowd, screaming, “SEXLESS MONGOLOID BITCH,” and I finally decided to sprint away into the park, running until I lost him.

My phone was dead and I had to try to go to 3 different Starbucks until I found one with a free outlet. Once my phone was finally charged, I cried on my phone to my boyfriend, explaining the whole ordeal. After I finally stopped shaking, all I could do was feel: I wanted to walk as far away as possible, and I wanted to restrict.

There were so many other Asian women walking around Manhattan, why did he come after me? Maybe if I were smaller, meeker, he wouldn’t have wanted to hurt me. Maybe my appearance wouldn’t have enflamed him so.

The impulse is still there. Whenever I feel guilty, whenever someone is mean to me, whenever I feel dissatisfied with myself or with life in general, what I feel first is the desire to restrict my food intake. I want to make sense out of the world; I want to feel like I can pin down cause and effect. I want to realign disorder and fear into certainty and meaning. I feel like I can do it by restricting.

I refuse to let the impulse control me. I notice the feeling, analyze the trigger, and try to use sheer reason to beat it away. Restricting makes me feel better at first, but it doesn’t make the underlying issues go away. And as scary as it may seem, I realize I need to face my negative emotions, dark thoughts, and insecurities directly. Real freedom is refusing to let oppressive feelings control you, it’s deciding to relinquish comforting illusions; it’s allowing yourself to be vulnerable, to experience hurt, and to move on. Because life is worth living if you make it so.

I bought myself a green-tea latte and a cookie.
Anonymous

III

A dedicated dirge for myself
I have sung thee,
Now what overcomes me but myself –
    supposed sense sends me to sleep –
to be tortured in the perils of what is to come.
    What is now - what was then - why aren’t I sane?
Early November
Laura Rashley

laundry detergent, the dampness of our t-shirts, your flask tucked into the front of my jeans: nights were when i knew you best—when

i watched as you burned yourself out on caffeine pills and library books, i’m not really a waitress
nail polish, chipped, like the bottles we stole kisses from, like each other.

the first time i slept in your bed, i didn’t sleep at all. instead: sang lullabies into your hair
resting on my shoulder like some egyptian serpent. and i hoped charming you would mean that in the morning, drinking your coffee and rum, we could dance the ritual

of togetherness—of crooked collars and scratched hardwood floors, late night television and your coiled handwriting in my books.

but your hair remained still, and in your sleep, you began to look more and more like heat lightning, like something too far away to chase, and i was beginning to sober up.
Anonymous IV

How spectacular is the numbness that holds me, steadfast in grip but poignantly created slip.
One dark morning winter quarter, my mother and father each sent me a text message approximately three minutes apart from each other.

Hey LC, hope your day is going well. Can we Skype tonight? I love you. xoxo <3

Hey bud. How r u doin? Skype l8er?

So we set a time for later that evening. Characteristically fifteen minutes late, and after struggling to fix all inevitable technical difficulties, we began talking over the unromantically convenient mediums of an iPhone and an iPad. I sat on my bed, alone in my closet of a single room, curled around a cup of peppermint tea. I balanced my phone on the top of my knee, holding the screen just far enough so my parents wouldn’t be able to detect the dark circles under my eyes and the red stress spots that had begun to speckle my cheeks.

My parents sat cross-legged on the carpet of our living room. My father was wearing the gray t-shirt he wears to bed every night, soft and threadbare from ten years of sleep. My mother held her pink satin robe around her chest. Both peered under their round eyeglasses as they tried to get a clear image of my face on the iPad screen, which was situated on our coffee table in front of them. I could still see the holiday garland hung across the mantel in the background. I could hear the popping of coals from the fire and Van Morrison playing from the stereo speakers. My father held a half empty glass of red wine in his hand.

Occasionally, a blurry mass would cover the screen, and I would coo hello to my golden Retriever, Tucket, as he obliviously walked past my virtual face.

I am good. It’s not too cold. My hands are fine. I’ve been wearing the gloves you sent me. Thank you for those, by the way. Yes, I’m tired. But I feel fine. Yes, I’ve been running.

The screen went black for a moment: lost connection, reconnecting…

The blurred and delayed faces of my parents finally rematerialized and focused.

I said, yeah, I’ve been running. And it’s safe. Why are you just freaking out about this now? I’m fine, really I’m fine. Seriously, I’ve come up with a backup plan. Plan B. It’s perfect. If all else fails, I will move to Nantucket and live in a lighthouse in Madaket. I’ll be the next Madaket Millie. You know, the impromptu Coast Guard that used to live there? It will be grand. I will live in the lighthouse alone with an old dog and I will guide sailors home when the fog rolls in. I’ll save lives. That’s what I’ve always wanted to do, right? Save lives? I could save lives this way. Living in my little lighthouse on Nantucket. It will be grand. Maybe someday I will have a restaurant named after me where people can order famous homemade guacamole and lemonade served in Mason Jars. They will order from picnic benches. Their dogs can come too. They can come and lie down underneath the table while their owners eat the guacamole and sip lemonade. The waitresses can bring out bowls of water for the dog. It will be grand. Maybe whoever is the new Mr. Rogers will travel to Nantucket and do a television special on me. On me and my lighthouse and my dog and how I saved lives. We’ll become friends, the new Mr. Rogers and I. Maybe they won’t air the episode because my answers to his questions are two words long and my eyes dart back and forth whenever the cameraman turns towards me. Maybe my dog would be named Cosmo.

My mother gave a laughing huh, raising her eyebrows as she wrapped her robe tighter. My father took a sip of wine and pushed the bridge of his glasses higher up his nose with his forefinger.

Let’s hope we will never have to resort to that.
Anonymous V

Vox clamantis in deserto
SHE calls from afar –
   and I hear my voice in my own ears.
Green shades color my landscape and hold nothing substantial

though they never did.

What could I be to just one girl?
I’ll wake up “fresh”
   ready to continue my cycle without end,
A vain hope sustained throughout,
   with or without that cruel trick.

Only the brutal taste for mortality lingers, that bloody and cannibalistic hunger.
PERFORMANCE ENSEMBLE

The Memoryhouse Performance Ensemble performs across campus at events including Logan Cabaret, Off-Off Campus Pre-Glow, The Body Project, Sex Week, the Studs Terkel Festival, and Identity week among others. The group collaborates each quarter to share their personal narratives and creative voice in solo, duo and group performances. The ensemble has a forthcoming chapbook being published by Beard of Bees. Learn more about joining the Performance Ensemble at chicagomemoryhouse.wordpress.com

WINTER QUARTER CHAPBOOK FESTIVAL

During winter quarter 2015, Memoryhouse will be hosting its annual chapbook workshop series for writers looking to transform their writing into physical art objects. Memoryhouse will provide all of the guidance, tools, and materials you will need to produce your chapbook. The program is free and will consist of four workshops. To apply go to chicagomemoryhouse.wordpress.com

SUBMIT

Memoryhouse loves you daring over-sharers, diarists, egoists, comedians, tragedians, neurotics, autobiographers, Emily Dickinsons, and David Sedarises more than you will ever know. We accept all forms and genres of writing and visual art so long as it presents a personal narrative. For more submissions guidelines visit chicagomemoryhouse.wordpress.com

NEXT REVIEW DEADLINE:
Midnight December 15, 2014