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Body Mass Index

I looked down at my new white tennis shoes, swinging a foot above the ground as I squirmed around on the paper-covered table. I felt small. Dr. Marcy Keefe walked in, closed the door silently behind her, and reached for the hand sanitizer on the sterile counter.

“Why do you think you’re here today?” she said with a tight smile.

“I don’t know,” I said. Tilting my head up towards her, I noticed the look of concern and I wished it was pointed anywhere in the room except at me. “I’ve been seeing a nutritionist. She thinks I need to get some vitamins and stuff checked. I just need a blood test or something. Maybe I have low iron.”

“Did you eat this morning?” She was already scanning the paperwork I had filled out. My heart sunk. The combination of the nutritionist reference, the fact that I hadn’t eaten since yesterday morning, and the questionnaire I had filled out in the waiting room were adding up in her head. I don’t know how I had thought that she wouldn’t notice.

“Yes.”

“Really?”

“No. I mean, I had coffee. I’m not hungry. I ate a lot yesterday. I’ll eat when I get back. I feel nauseous anyway.”

“It seems like you have a lot of reasons to have not eaten,” she murmured, glancing up at me and setting the clipboard down. “What made you decide to see a nutritionist?”

“I’m in college. I’m 19. I know how to take care of myself. I just needed a little guidance to get me back on track,” I responded.

“Back on track?” She cleared her throat. “Why don’t we go ahead and get a weight while you’re here.”

She handed me a gown and stepped out. Reluctantly, I slid the baggy sweatshirt over my head. I knew if she had let me keep it on, the numbers would be better. I knew what they were going to be. I had weighed myself four times the day before.

As the doctor reentered the room, I stood near the scale. Every second between me and knowing what I weighed that day was too short. I both needed to know and couldn’t bear to look.

“Wow. 94 pounds. Okay. And you said you’re 5’5”?”

Suddenly I’m 16, in my parents’ basement. I step out of the shower and collapse onto the tile floor, the steam and warmth of the water only adding to my confused mental state. I blink, and after a few seconds, I can get up again. That’s weird, I think. My hair seemed to be falling out in clumps in the shower. Am I getting sick? I brush it off, and go to bed without dinner for the second night in a row. I don’t dream at night anymore.

A friend calls me the next day, saying the same thing has happened to her. Neither of us choose to examine the impact of factors such as stress, nicotine, caffeine - and incidentally, no food. We have been practically living together, skipping three meals a day together, not noticing that it was 7:00 PM and we had only shared one cup of yogurt. But at the same time, we more

than noticed it. It's hard to explain to people who haven't felt this way, but you can't blame yourself for not taking care of your own body when you just "forget", or it was an accident. That's how it felt to me. Someone who did it on purpose had an eating disorder. I just didn't eat very much.

The mindset here was a very fragile tightrope. Staying in denial often only becomes recognizable in the context of a 12 step program. Step one: Admit that you can no longer control the problem.

"Hello? I said we need to talk about our ... *options*," Dr. Keefe emphasized. I was back in Austin. I saw her lips moving, tried to understand the gravity behind her words.

"...inpatient..."

I refocused my eyes and turned my attention back to her.

"What did you just say?"

"I need to be honest with you. If things keep going how they have been, we need to look at all of our options." I hated the way she kept saying "options," like it was up to me at this point.

"I understand that you have been in inpatient treatment before, but never for an eating disorder. I really need you to hear me: If you choose to keep your diet the same as it is now--for even another month--I'm concerned that your organs will begin to fail. I am particularly worried about the functioning capabilities of your heart at its current state. Your blood pressure is almost nonexistent while sitting, and when you stand up I can see that it's near what it would be if you had just run a 10k."

An eating disorder. An eating disorder? She clearly didn't understand the full situation. If I had an eating disorder, wouldn't someone have noticed by now? Another doctor, a friend, a parent? There was just no way. Maybe some days I skipped a meal. What college student doesn't? It's cheaper to get drunk on an empty stomach anyway. That's perfectly normal. You just catch up when you can and maybe eat a burger the next day to make up for it.

Plus, who was this woman to tell me I needed to go into inpatient again? The last time I was there, it was for completely different reasons. I had been a danger to myself, and I'm clearly not anymore. As soon as I heard the word "inpatient", I shut down the little part of my mind that was still listening. My eyes filled with tears, remembering the lowest mental state I have ever been in. I promised myself I would not ever need to be there again unless it was my choice and the best thing for me at the time. It just wasn't where I needed to be right now. My life is fine. I am a strong and capable person. If I needed to gain weight, eat more, get my shit together, I was going to do it myself.

Until this exact moment, I had no idea what I had done to myself. I sat in my car in the parking lot for an hour and a half after, watching the beginning and end of the time I was supposed to be in class go by. I cried. I screamed at the cars on I-35. I called my mom. I didn't want to tell her, but I knew that if this was a choice I was going to stick to, I needed to have her on my side. She seemed relatively unfazed at the news that her daughter had developed a heart condition from starving herself for three years. Was I the only one who didn't know? Asking her about it more recently, she said she had already known, she was just waiting for me to realize it--so that I was the one making the choice to save myself. Apparently I haven't had a great success rate with listening to advice from others.

But there I was, listening to someone tell me that what I was doing was killing me and believing them. The depth of my own denial shocked me the most. I truly went to the doctor that day expecting nothing out of a routine blood draw, other than the potential result of anemia. The way that I slowly felt the doctor connecting the dots right in front of my face was terrifying. Before then, I had gotten away with it, because I was the one I was fooling. I lied so well about it that even I believed I didn't have a problem. My physical symptoms had been like an alarm, but woven into my dreams, so the music became pleasant and I could keep sleeping. This appointment was a slap in the face, a cold shower at 6:00 AM.

When you wake up like that, your first instinct is to look around to see where you are, and to ask how you got there. I've been trying to think about which ideas got me to the place of struggling to eat regularly, but they aren't hard to find.

Since I've been living at home again over the past few months because of the quarantine, I've been remembering how my family used to talk before they knew I had these issues. Recently, we have had conversations about how those phrases are painful to me, and they've been very respectful and cautious to avoid saying anything negative about body image, dieting, eating issues. Here are some of the things I've been hearing up until this point from the rest of the world:

"You're not hungry, you just ate."

"Slow down there, we want to have leftovers."

"You're going to eat all of that? You don't want to split that pizza?"

"If you eat right before you fall asleep, you won't burn any of the calories. It's fine now, but if you still do this in five years, you'll be fat. I don't want to see you struggle with your weight as your metabolism changes. I didn't mean to say fat. I just meant--you know--overweight..."

The end of these types of sentences always vanish into nothing. The person who said them walks upstairs, goes back to their work, leaves those words hanging in the air behind them for me to hear over and over again.

And these voices aren't just ringing in my childhood home. At a party last fall, a girl from my sorority walked up to me and cinched in my waist with her hands, pinching right above my hips.

"Ugh! You're so tiny! You look so amazing! I wish I looked as good as you in that outfit. I could never. You're like Barbie! You *have* to tell me your diet and workout routine. I'm so jealous," she said, emphasizing every word over the blare of the music.

"Thanks," I laughed, with a shrug. I walked away and went home alone 10 minutes later.

None of the people behind these types of statements are aware of their impact. If you look around at the larger culture, you can see that they cannot be blamed at all. I also refuse to take any blame for the social dynamics that were projected onto me by a self and looks obsessed society. Not one of the people in my life that have had an effect on me directly are responsible for the way women's bodies are edited in magazines, or the fact that almost every time an overweight woman is represented through the media, her story centers on her weight. It is displayed as if she still has worth, "despite" her dress size. But no matter the intent behind the words, they sting, and they have a way of sticking with you.

I'm still surprised by how much this affects me and my friends. I imagined that those women who stuck their fingers down their throats were a thing of the past, thinking I don't really know anyone like *that*. Then I looked down at the calorie counting apps on my phone. MyFitnessPal is by far the worst offender in my experience. Every lunchroom table in my middle school had at least one girl who was tracking her calories through an iPhone, iPod, etc. and they were so easily able to defend themselves. I've asked old friends about these trends now, and how (or if) they think we were affected by them.

One of my childhood friends had a mother who said things like, "if you work out four days a week until you lose a little weight and look more like your sister, I'll buy you a puppy." She was 12.

"I counted my calories pretty much every day from age 14 to 19," another close childhood friend recently confided in me.

In my middle school health class, we were taught that abstinence is the only choice, drugs are all bad but alcohol is fine, and that *Supersize Me* is a good movie in general, and in relation to the relationship you should have with food. Yes, it is true that binge eating, fast food, not having diversity in your diet are all things that have a negative long term effect on health. But the way in which the film was taught to us was much more black and white: not only that McDonald's will kill you in a horrible, slow way, but that food itself is the enemy, and you must be constantly vigilant to protect yourself from it. Maybe. What I heard from this lesson is not the movie's fault or my health teacher's fault. I retained a much broader version of the message that was taught, which is the idea that any burger or milkshake could be the thing between me and the Victoria's Secret runway or a type 2 diabetes.

There are a lot of numbers involved in stories about measurements and specifics. It often helps to look at progress as a set of data points instead of what changes in the mirror. This month I hit a very important number: 114. This is the lowest weight that is still in the normal range for my height. I haven't weighed this much since I was 15. The lowest I got was a little below 90 pounds last summer. So about 24 pounds gained in a year, and I didn't start seeing a nutritionist or doctor about my issues with eating until last August.

I am torn between wanting people to congratulate me and not wanting anyone to comment on my weight at all. Becoming comfortable with the whole picture of looking like someone who takes care of themselves has felt very complex to me. Previously, my mental picture in reference to "taking care of my body" was mainly focused on exercise, maybe some paleo, vegan, keto ideas thrown in there. Eating more vegetables is fantastic, and so is an appropriate amount of exercise. The challenge here is to reframe what that means for someone whose physical goal involves gaining weight in a culture that only shows you how to do the opposite. I'm not supposed to run for exercise anymore because I'll lose too many calories, and salad doesn't count as a meal. Those choices affect how I feel, both at the end of the day and long term. At least for the time being, until I can stay stable and safe at the top of the mountain of change, that's where I am.

I often find myself wishing I was still asleep, in denial, whichever phrasing you prefer. I want "the old me" back for even just an hour, to remember how it felt to not have to worry. The thing that keeps me sane is the realization that I was just as worried then, if not more. It's just that then I was worrying about the same things as everyone else, so it didn't feel like worrying. Now that I am alone in this, I'm finding that I'm braver than I thought I was. So now I turn to an even more difficult endeavor: being able to forgive myself for both anxieties, and thanking my present self for being strong enough to bear the burden of honesty, facing reality, and growing up.

Author's Note

I really struggled with how I wanted to tell this story. I've been pacing back and forth across my bedroom, trying to decide if I was even capable of sharing all of it with people other than close friends or family. It was important for me to keep in mind the smaller version of myself sitting up on the exam table. That person is the exact kind of person that I hope something like this article would get through to.

I wanted to sound like a younger version of myself, so the wording may sound strange at times. Much of it is meant to represent my inner dialogue.

There are so many conflicting messages out there about what women should look like, what they should eat, what they should weigh. I very purposefully did not discuss what I eat now, how often I eat, how my body has changed. These are all things that are unique to the person experiencing them. Personally, I had to change my diet a lot, but the amount of weight I gained may seem small. The important thing that I want anyone who has read this to walk away with is the idea that you can always love yourself more, respect yourself more, and that you should not comment on anything physical that someone can't change quickly.