
Living Thin: One Girl's Fight for
a **Full** Life

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I dedicate this multi-genre paper to my body.

The body, that no matter at what weight it was, has carried me through my life without fail. It has healed and bounced back from heartbreak and weakness, it has walked great distances, and—most importantly—it has danced. Please, take this as my apology. I will try to look at you and treat you better. Thank you for working with me even when I don't.

“You can't have a life and an eating disorder at the same time. You can play the game and fool everybody for a really long time, but it's like the difference between life in a grainy black-and- white film and in Technicolor. Life is so muted when you have an eating disorder -- and that's the point. If you don't like life, you can turn it down and have your own little sadomasochistic affair with yourself.”

-Marya Hornbacher

Dear Readers,

I want to let you in on a secret. You can't be happy, and have friends, and have an eating disorder. At least I can't. But I'd go as far to say that no one can. You can hide it for a while. Food and weight are touchy, taboo topics and no one wants to bring them up if they don't have to. You can lose ten pounds without anyone really noticing. You can lose another ten pounds and blame it on stress. We are all so busy in our lives that we don't have time to look after each other closely. No one will notice if you skip that meal. Friends won't prod you when you say you're not hungry.

You aren't fighting your friends for the freedom to not eat. You are fighting yourself. You are fighting the instinct you have to nourish your body and keep yourself alive. Your head and body become a war zone—the mental illness overpowering every healthy and logical notion you have. You are fighting the enjoyment of food. The pleasure of eating. The feeling of full. The argument is long, twisted, and everyday. Two sides. Two needs. Two voices.

In the Beginning...

It started off as attempted bulimia. Maybe that's how it starts a lot. An instinct to feed your body what it needs to survive followed by a compulsion to get rid of it. Have you ever heard someone say *I'm so full I could puke?* That's where the compulsion comes from. You ate that extra slice of pizza or one too many bites of that cake and now you feel miserable with yourself. Even though you know that there is no possible way one slice of pizza can magically make you gain eight pounds, all of a sudden you feel huge. You imagine that your thighs have swelled to twice their size and you are convinced everyone can see how fat you have suddenly gotten because of that last piece of bread. You are sick, disgusting, and doughy. That meal wasn't worth the way that you feel now—unattractive, bloated, unworthy, weak. You feel out of control and need a way back to feeling good. You have to reverse what you did to yourself.

That's how it begins. I was out of control and I wanted to find a way to get back in control. So I tried my hand at puking. After a meal that felt wrong I went into the bathroom searching for a way to feel good again. But it didn't work. Bulimia isn't reliable enough. It doesn't change your body. But it does destroy it. Bulimia erodes the enamel of the teeth, it burns the esophagus, it causes ulcers, and it weakens the heart and disturbs its rhythm, it swells the salivary glands, it dries out the skin. I could never purge enough to make myself feel better about the food that I consumed. I could never loose enough weight to justify the damage. That is why I chose anorexia.

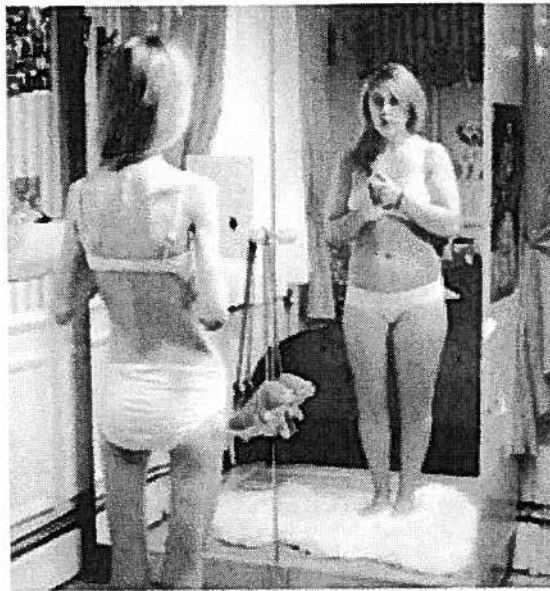
Experiment

An experiment starts with
A question
A wondering
A hypothesis
What would happen if
I didn't eat breakfast?
How would I feel if
I skipped lunch?
Made some coffee instead,
Forget,
Tell myself that I'm too busy
What are the results
Of my little experiment
With self-control?

Anorexia:

If Anorexia were a person it would be neurotic and controlling. Not worried parent, mom-looking-over-your-shoulder-at-the-computer-screen controlling, but more like abusive-boyfriend-where-the-fuck-have-you-been controlling. Maybe it wouldn't even be like an abusive boyfriend, because despite what they say about everyone being susceptible to eating disorders—Anorexia is definitely female. She is hypercritical. She looks in the mirror too many times a day. Not because she is vain, but because she gets a sick joy from noticing your flaws, pointing them out, and blowing them up. Anorexia swaps all of the mirrors in your house for fun house mirrors. She distorts the images in your head so that, like in the rear view, images may appear larger than they actually are.

From an outsiders view it looks as if Anorexia just skips meals, but the truth is that Anorexia doesn't need food. She has conquered hunger by living above it. She relies on nothing. Anorexia is a good liar. A creative liar. She says things like, "I just ate" and "I'm not hungry" or "I'm actually allergic to that". But it doesn't matter too much because not many people question her. Anorexia will hide food in shoes and underwear. She will go to extreme lengths to self-destruct.



Prepared for judges with eating disorders



'per·fect  *adj* \ˈpər-fɪkt\

Definition of PERFECT

1 a : being entirely without fault or defect : **FLAWLESS** <a *perfect* diamond>

b : satisfying all requirements : **ACCURATE**

c : corresponding to an ideal standard or abstract concept
<a *perfect* gentleman>

You know what I never want to be described as? Perfect. Perfection is unattainable. Even as I strive for it, I know that. It is impossible to reach and stressful to maintain. Once you get there what's next? You have to claw, scratch, and fight to remain at its peak. It's exhausting. It's constant. It's not worth it. But the alternative is so much worse.

The Space Between

There is a hole. A gap. A space. One that was not there before, just days ago, it tells me I am on my way. It is a space not many achieve. But I have. Their legs chafetogetherandrub. But mine stand alone. Two separate entities that speak of my triumph. Two trophies, side by side, that tell of my glory. My success, my power, my control, my gap.

The History of the Dressing Room

“You’re being ridiculous,” Mom sighs, exasperated, as she walks out of the dressing room. The door slams behind her and the tears fall faster. I pull myself into a standing position and take one more look in the mirror, but what I see there only makes me cry harder. In fifth grade, at 4’11”, I am a healthy hundred pounds and change. I wear a girls size 12 slim, which is reflective of my age and, supposedly, my build. But when I look in the mirror all I see is fat. Round, doughy, soft, fat. I lift my shirt over my stomach to examine the jeans, or top, or dress that I am trying on. This could be a hundred dressing rooms on a hundred different shopping trips gone wrong. All ending in tears, and self loathing, and hatred.

I turn from side to side, exhausting all of the angles in which I can despise myself. I sit down. I stand up. I revisit the long routine that I will bring to dressing rooms for the rest of my life. Turn this way, turn that way. Walk around. Scrutinize. The mirrors judge and the fluorescent lights don’t forgive, but I don’t blame them. Instead, I look my little girl self in the eye and tell her that I hate her body. I tell her that she is fat and ugly and that nothing is going to look right on her because of that. Somewhere on the edges of my mind I remember that my mom is waiting, annoyed. Another shopping trip ruined by the tears and irrationality of her oldest daughter.

I remove the clothes that belong to the store and return to my own. As I hang up the garments I compose myself, I plan. I play around with the idea of eating less and exercising more. How freeing it would be to cut food from my life altogether. Smaller meals arrange themselves in my head as I imagine the way my body will transform into the ideal image that I want it to be. I take one more look in the mirror before I go so that I can give that little girl one more loathing glance.

An eleven year old steps out of the dressing room, arms full of clothes that she discards as soon as she can. She is prepubescent, hardly a whisper of the woman that she will grow to be. Yet, she plans her life. Without knowing she rolls the ball into a future of deprivation, judgment, scrutiny, and self-hatred. She knows not what she does as a thought forms in her mind for the first time—just don’t eat.

Journal entry at 5'6", 109 lbs.

I have a problem. It's not new, but it's growing. Or shrinking. The problems growing, but I'm shrinking. The number on the scale drops as my obsession rises. Something dormant in me is breaking free. Something that my stomach calls self-control, but I know better. I guess you would call this an eating disorder. It's the only language I have for it, although it doesn't seem right since it evokes this image of someone who eats messily, which I don't. I imagine I have reached a fork in the road. No real damage has been done, yet. At least not physically. I am thin, but not too thin and if I deal with it now then I don't have to hurt myself forever.

Accountability

Sitting, curled up in an armchair at the kitchen table dissecting a bagel. She rips off a tiny piece and puts it in her mouth, chewing until the bagel has turned to liquid. Every once in a while she loses interest in the food and stares lazily at the turned off television set across the room. Her roommate and best friend walks through the kitchen, on her way to the back door to go pick up her sister. She imagines that she says:

"Hey Amanda..."

Yea?

"Do you think I have an eating disorder?"

Well...maybe...yea.

"hmm... Me too."

...

Do you want to talk about it?

"Not really. Maybe later. I just figured that right now I feel pretty close to rock bottom. I might as well figure a few things out while I'm down there.

* Nodding, understanding * Yea, I think that's probably a good idea.

Morning Routines:

I wake up when the sun shines through my window and the alarm vibrates. My toes curl under and my muscles engage as my arms extend over my head in a full body stretch. Unconsciously, my hands find my belly, searching, pinching, judging what they find there. Morning is my favorite time of the day—a nine hour fast that I don't have to try for. Sleeping comes as naturally as breathing. Already I dread the first morsel of food that will explode my stomach and expand my thighs, I will avoid it as long as I can.

Go to the bathroom. Check both mirrors on the way there. Brush my teeth and wash my face. Step on the scale. WAIT. Go to the bathroom THEN step on the scale. I said I wouldn't step on the scale. I *promised* myself I wouldn't step on the scale. Curiosity takes over and I step on the scale. The long hand shakes and I don't trust what it says. I convince myself it is off two pounds. Most people don't care about two pounds. That two pounds will ruin at least half of my day.

Make coffee, not too much creamer. The four cups in the pot will get me at least until one o'clock and it will clean me out. Then I'll give in and eat something. Maybe a half a bagel? A bowl of cereal? I could have an apple with yogurt, or yogurt with berries, or a salad with blueberries and romaine lettuce and carrots, feta cheese, and bacon bits. LIGHT dressing.

I get dressed in clothes that are becoming too big for me. The numbers on the tags shrink, but the clothes keep growing. I am annoyed when my pants fall baggily around my hips and knees, but through that annoyance also comes pride and panic. I know what I will have to keep doing to stay this way. If I put on a pair of pants and they are the slightest bit tight I become restless. I remind myself that they just came out of the dryer and that they are a size 0, when three months ago I was a size 4, and I calm down a little. Now all of the jeans that I used to wear sit in a drawer in my closet just in case. I dread the just in case.

I grab an apple on the way to class. I read somewhere that an apple gives you just as much energy as a cup of coffee. I eat it hoping that it will let me go without for a little bit longer.

This is just to say, Amanda,

You don't have to worry
I know that I have
A problem

Which you have
probably noticed as
meal times come and go

I'm sorry
You don't get why
I can't see myself the way you do.

Anorexia walks into the kitchen and jabs me in the ribs. She pinches belly fat as I try to make dinner. She leers at me and I know that she is mocking my weakness. She is right. I throw it all away and walk upstairs.

Panic

A few days ago I started eating and I couldn't stop. A weekend long binge. I wake up and eat and eat and eat and the food that I eat keeps getting worse and worse. Chocolate, fried, with peanut butter smeared on everything. I'm not even hungry, but there is something inside me that refuses to fill. It is my worst nightmare come true. I try to keep track of the calories in my head, some masochistic act to torture myself into further depression and despair, but I lose track somewhere around a million. The only thing that could make me feel worse would be to step on the scale. So what do I do? I step on the scale. 4 lbs. I gained four pounds in three days. The anxiety pulses through my body and I can't sit still so I go and purchase a laxative. A solution. I have a solution so I keep on eating. After each bite, I panic. Everything in my body screams and begs for me to stop. But then I take another bite. I feel disgusted with myself, which makes me take another bite. I feel ugly and chubby. Another bite. Worthless and flawed and bloated. Bite. Fat. Bite. Useless. Bite. Bite. Bite. Bite.

The World's Distortion

“I don’t care if it is a kajillion calories, because I *deserve* this candy bar!” Have you ever heard anyone say this? Have you said this? I have said this, or something like this a million times. Today it might be a candy bar, a few days from now a piece of cake, last week it was that second glass of wine. On the surface this declaration sounds harmless. You may even be thinking, *You go girl! You do deserve that cake. You work hard!* But there is a problem with that way of thinking. The way that has us believing that you can only eat when you deserve to eat, implying that there are times when you don’t deserve to. This way of thinking is damaging because it gives food too much power. It takes food and it turns it from the nourishment that our body needs into something that is given or taken away depending upon the worth of the consumer. Food becomes something that goes beyond filling the physical body—it is now an agent of emotional fulfillment too.

In the United State about 7 million women and girls are affected by eating disorders. Ten percent of college-aged women suffer from eating disorders. When asked in a University of Cincinnati survey what they would rather achieve, weight loss or any other goal, 30,000 women answered that they would rather loose weight. Eating disorders have the highest rate of mortality of all mental illnesses. The statistics are staggering, and yet they don’t show even a percentage of the distortion women have in regards to weight today. Women all around us are counting calories and logging miles trying to obtain a level of perfection that they see represented by models and actresses covering our magazines, billboards, and TVs. While most models and actresses wear anything between a 00 and a 2, the average American woman wears closer to a size 14. Yet we still see the world through a thin is more beautiful mentality. For some reason being skinny is like being in a state of grace and there are too many women who believe that if they just loose x amount of weight they will finally have found happiness. But the truth is, almost 50% of people with an eating disorder meet the criteria for depression. Being thin doesn’t equal being happy. So when someone congratulates you on losing weight that you didn’t have to lose to be healthy, remember that you looked great before. After all, it’s not them talking; it’s the world’s skinny distortion.

Anorexia, Revisited

Sometimes I mourn Her loss, fear my lack of control, and urge Anorexia back into my life. I plan Her reappearance. As I lay in bed at night, I map out the miniscule meals and the obsessive exercise of tomorrow. I count out five hundred calories. *That's it*, I tell myself, *you have to get yourself back under control. You are going to ruin everything.* There are times when Anorexia makes you feel powerful instead of weak. During these times food feels like a weakness, like something dirty and shameful whose presence is only there to tempt you out of your pure and steadfast existence. Saying no to food feels empowering. You are standing strong in the fight, proving your self-control can withstand the pressures and persuasion food. Anorexia's a mystifying character. She makes the good feel bad, nourishment feel like weakness, food feel like greed, and health feel unhealthful.

A Changing Routine

Today you wake up and you know what you must do.
You lift the covers and slide out of bed, grabbing a sweater
from the floor and slipping into it as bare feet
pad down the wooden steps to the kitchen

You make yourself coffee,
but just enough to lift the haze that sleep
has drawn around you.

And you ask yourself the simple question : "Am I hungry?"
Your body quietly responds back, Yes.
"What would you like?"
Your body evaluates and whispers, *Toast sounds nice.*

So you make some toast and thank God for small victories.

Better?

There is no such thing as better. Or recovered. We are all just works in progress. Some of us are further along than others, but no one will ever reach the finish line to perfection. So when people ask me if I am better I can't find an answer that is good for them. Most of them just want to hear that I am. They love me and want me to be well and I have decided that I want to be well for them too. Well for me, and well for them. So I give them the only truthful answer I can, "Today is a good day." Or, sometimes, "I'm feeling a little panicky today." That's how I describe the bad days—panicky. Because when I am feeling consumed by the disorder I feel panicked. I get anxious and obsessive. I start counting calories and planning where I can skip meals or get away with eating as little as possible. I weigh myself multiple times and spend most of the day trying to fit in mini workouts. I look in the mirror and talk badly about myself. Bad days come less often, but they are still there and I deal with them as they come.

Good days are the days when I wake up and I ask myself if I am hungry. If my body says that I am then I eat something that is good for it, something that will fill it up and nourish it and I don't feel badly about it. Good days are not perfect days. They are days when things align themselves more manageably. They are days when I don't see food or my body as the enemy. They are days when the coping mechanisms are effective. But even good days have their moments.

I don't know if there will ever be a day when I don't think about food or weight in a disordered way at least once. Maybe I will always be fighting off the mind set. So each day I wake up and try to make the decisions that I know are best for me.

This is just to say,

Thank you.
For being so normal
And looking in the mirror with pride

For not
Bashing your body
Or regretting that meal

You will never know how
Your silent confidence
Grounds me, gives me hope.

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End Notes

Page 2, Marya Hornbacher quote: I included this quote because it was instrumental in me beginning to *want* to get better. Even after admitting that something was wrong I was reluctant to give up my habits. It was after reading this quote that I realized how much the disorder permeated through my life. I wasn't willing to give up my *joie de vivre*, so I had to try to give up the disorder.

Page 4, "Experiment": Based on a lot of the accounts I read I got the impression that many people start off eating disorders as a kind of experiment. They hypothesize that they might lose weight and it will make them happy. They do lose weight, they begin to feel the power of having control over their body, and they continue to obsessively continue the pattern in order to prolong the feeling.

Page 6, "The Space Between": This poem derives from a habit/ anxiety I have developed over time. When I am very thin, or at a weight I feel most comfortable at, there is a space between my thighs when I stand with my feet together. In the last few months I have looked at that space with a sense of pride and fear. Pride because at the beginning of the year my legs were chafing together, and therefore this space represents a sort of triumph. Fear because sometimes when I think I ate too much I imagine that I can feel the fat accumulating there and the gap closing up. It is an anxiety and obsession I am still trying to find some control over.

Page 8, "Accountability": This is a conversation I wrote down in my writer's notebook before it happened. I was trying to play out the scene in my head the way that I thought it might happen while I was still trying to decide if I would share this information. It is a big decision to make because these types of things scare people and they are very unlikely to understand. Amanda has such a normal view of food and the body that she has a very hard time comprehending the kind of distorted thinking that I sometimes experience.

Surprisingly, the conversation that we initially had wasn't too different from this one. She was uncomfortable, but honest, and didn't really know what to ask. I wasn't looking to talk, but needed someone to know because I was getting ready to try to change and I needed someone around to hold me accountable for what I was doing to myself.

Page 12, "Anorexia, Revisited" There are always going to be good days and bad days. On the bad days I miss having a solution to the problem. I miss not having to worry about eating or not eating or what I am going to eat. Not eating at all simplified that. Anorexia sometimes feels like control, and being in control feels powerful. It makes eating anything feel out of control. Occasionally I find myself planning how I am going to minimize the next day. I almost never go through with it anymore, so in the moment it feels kind of like the death of an option.
