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To Feel Better: A Personal Account of my Eating Disorder

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To Feel Better

A Personal Account of My Eating Disorder

By Savannah Woods

Honors Capstone

University of Montana - Davidson Honors College

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Introduction

The first time I tried to throw up, I failed. I tried many other times, and all of them were unsuccessful. I turned to other purging methods, as you'll see described in the following sections, but I remember the first time vividly: the rumbling of the bathroom air vent, the rushing of the sink water, the terror of my bloated stomach full of 7 naan-like flatbreads. What had I done? 60 calories per tablespoon of honey, 100 per tablespoon of butter – who knows how many total tablespoons, and how many carbs? The thought was unbearable, sticky with guilt, and it compelled me to the bathroom. I waddled, kneeled-down, and stuck my fingers down my throat. I gagged. And gagged. And gagged. Nothing came up. I decided that if I couldn't throw up, I was going to run.

In the above moment, I was seventeen. I didn't know that I was headed down a dangerous path. All I knew was that calorie-counting was hard and obsessive and trying, and I just wanted to *eat*. The following stories, moments, and reflection apply psychological skills, knowledge, and perspective to my personal struggles with bulimia. The personal narratives vary in time, circumstance, and magnitude, and similarly vary in style and voice.

The first part includes short segments, ranging from 50 to 850 words. The aim of this section is to capture the daily thoughts and mindset I had while suffering from my eating disorder. Normal, seemingly ordinary moments will be shown from my perspective.

The remaining sections are personal essays I've written about my eating disorder for my CRWR 312 and 412 classes.

Snippets

Give her a body. Replace fat Jimmy Dean sausages with slim piano-hands and unchipped cuticles. Xerox thigh gaps – lean, spread, and position like the original. Pretend until real. Make a patchwork of preferred images; smooth thighs, smooth belly, smooth skin. Slice belly fat, simmer in pan, drain, and now there is cabbage soup. Three one-cup servings per day. She must simmer and reduce until society tastes, smells, and sees her desirability.

A web-like white material splayed inside my cheeks, patches grating my tongue. Small rivulets broke away and balled into crevasses of my molars. I tasted plastic and rubber and disease. Herpes? I drove to Helena’s Planned Parenthood. “Do you chew tobacco?” was the practitioners first question. “These are sores we see from someone who chews tobacco.” I said I only chewed gum.

A pro-Ana site recommended chewing gum to stave off hunger – it doesn’t break fast and 30 minutes of chewing offsets the five calories per stick. Cinnamon Trident was my favorite – 18 sticks for 1.06 at Albertsons, but when the cashiers with dead eyes scanned five packs of Trident and one package of Ducolax, the oddity of early morning fluorescent lighting screamed *they know*. “I love gum,” I tried to say.

Ten fifteen twenty documents. Start Monday, start Wednesday, start now. Weight now → goal weight. These foods I can eat: apple, almond milk, oatmeal, Progresso soup. Things I can't eat: cookies, cakes, anything that I want. Plans for weeks, plans for days, plans for months. Stick to the plan, work the plan, eat the plan, don't deviate from the plan. Simple, easy, cut, and dry. If I follow this, I will lose weight. I know losing weight makes me feel better. If the plan fails? Have a plan that expects you to fail, expects you to fall off the diet – a way to get back on the weight loss wagon. Don't, under any circumstances, stop trying to lose weight. Always, always try. You'll feel better. Ten, fifteen, twenty documents – all with failed plans. But start Monday, start now. You must.

An evolution of coffee: seed, plant, bean, roast, grind, boil. An evolution of my coffee: sixteen oz white chocolate mochas, sipping sweet, sipping unaware. Almond milk with sugar-free hazelnut, made at home because who knows how honest those baristas are. Americanos, maybe a dash of cream (20 calories) and Splenda. I crave sugar and an indulgent, empty latte – who knew getting what I've always wanted could taste like defeat. Today I drink full-fat hazelnut creamer into homemade coffee. White chocolate mochas are still too much. Maybe one day.

An hour between literature and accounting, and exactly thirty-two hours and seventeen minutes since food. To Corner Store: hot bagel and two cream cheese packets, cold chocolate, spoonfuls of Big Dipper Cardamom ice cream – the company sends unsold leftovers. Throw half-eaten food away. Pretend to be bored on phone while simultaneously stuffing. To Biz Buzz: an Italian panini, hot ciabatta bread, spicy oregano, and a chocolate chip cookie. To Think Tank: stuffed and angry but purchasing Xtra Winter-mint gum, an Everything onion-y bagel, two cream cheese packets. Must have, eat, consume, devour, ravish, annihilate, guzzle anything, anything, anything to get this empty feeling to stop.

Having an eating disorder is like looking at that Hoagieville turkey hoagie and wanting to eat it. All of it. The soft bits of hoagie and the hardened, post-microwaved edges. Bu you can't. You don't know how many calories it is, and you can't guess because guessing is cheating, and you'll never get skinny by overestimating. And you already had most of your calories today. Well, perhaps just the toppings: lettuce, tomato, but no, the cheese is melted in and you can't separate without looking suspicious in front of Mom and Dad. But you want to have it. Maybe a bite, estimate, calculate, masticate, swallow. But only the part that has less cheese and meat. Just bread. And it won't taste good. You know it. But your hands are defying gravity and will power and you bite into it, say, "yuck" and take out the spit-soggy hard bread out and give excuses: "tastes microwaved." Good, you've made it through lunch.

Recovery is signing away the rights to my weight. Never again to associate pounds with my physical body, with my tangible limbs and thighs and stretch marks. I've lifted the anchors on my fecal matter and water retention and dissolving food. Weight doesn't exist. I stand on scales backwards, eyes closed. The journey is in somebody else's catalog—not mine, not ever again.

My thighs scream smothered cries under endless black leggings and grey sweats. Shapeless and colorless; hidden and invisible, they are locked down tight, deflecting gazes and attention by spandex and polyester and cotton shields. On university sidewalks, a collage of knee caps and ankles and shaved calves—exposed and bare and flaunting – and I watch, envious and cloaked. How can they own their legs, pimpled with razor burn, dimpled with cellulite? How do they love them so much they can expose them to the eyes of frat boys and professors and girl athletes?

Bathrooms

Public bathrooms hold nasty secrets. They are cesspools for germs, lacking decent soap and warm water. They tell fart jokes, hide shamed poopers and self-conscious pee-ers. Stalls expose shoes stuck in stalemates and waiting Ugg boots. They are vortexes for shame: bags under eyes, off-tone concealer, smudged mascara, inflamed whiteheads, smattering of comedones, gaping pores. Well-timed flushes mask the crinkle of sanitary products. A strategic cough hides gas. Fluorescents ruthlessly highlight flaws, dimples, and matted chunks of hair done up with too much hairspray. Nobody looks good in bathrooms.

The public bathrooms at University of Montana stage wars with one-ply toilet paper. The high-traffic bathrooms of the LA Building (read: Eck Hall) offer big wheels of paper so thin they break mid-sheet. In the final stall on the first-floor bathroom you'll find a phone number to call if you're a victim of domestic violence or drug trafficking.

In the University Center, try the third-floor bathrooms. Select from a good fifteen toilets – usually the first one is clogged – and settle in for a quiet, clean, and amicable time. While most bathrooms in the UC reek of meat and burnt cheese (courtesy of upset stomachs roiling from Noodle Express or Pizza Hut) the ones on the third floor are clean with antiseptic.

Missing personal connection? Try the Math building bathrooms. Built in 1903, the only bathrooms are in the basement of this three-story brick building. The women's restroom manages to crowd five uncomfortably small lime-gray wooden stalls in a room the size of a walk-in closet. The stall doors are five feet tall, ensuring intimate eye contact with those in the stall next to you or waiting in line. Nine out of ten times it'll be your freshman year roommate from

Knowles There's a loud hand dryer and no paper towels, and it's hot, boiling, even in winter, and smells faintly of mildew.

Feeling daring? The Art and Main Hall bathrooms will satisfy your desire to see eighteenth century women in plumed hats and riding boots.

In the Corner Store bathroom, next to Le Peak coffee shop, it smells like grease and oil and ground coffee beans. This nauseating combination follows you to the third stall, the one for handicaps, where you'll find a large matte poster. "Do you or someone you know suffer from an eating disorder?" It lists the classic warning signs of bulimia: purging, trips to the bathroom, skipped meals.

Feeling homesick? Come to 9th floor bathroom of Jesse Hall. This is the bathroom of home, of community. Here you are the Resident Assistant. This is *your* bathroom. Here is a mosaic of small cream-colored tiles and bright fluorescent lighting. There are puke-pink stalls with inch-wide gaps to expose the squatting form of someone who refuses to touch their precious derrier to a pee-splattered seat. There are two doors, one to open to the east and north wings respectively, and on the back of the east wing door there is the only full-length public mirror.

Here is the elevated half-wall where you placed a sparkly Condom Box, refilled by free condoms offered at Curry Health Center. A cut-out Buddy the Elf stands sentry over the sparkly box, manically grinning and saying, "Don't be a cotton headed niggly muggins! GRAB SOM CONDOMS." You make sure it is stocked with exotics like magnum XLs, banana-flavored, studded or latex-free condoms, as well as small packets and pustules of lube.

Here your residents have a favorite stall and a favorite shower. The shower with bruise-inducing pressure is close to the sinks. When the broken nozzle is replaced, many of your

residents complain. Here is the very last stall reserved late nights and tequila shots gone wrong. More than once you find your residents clutching the bowl, feet sprawled under the doors like rag-dolls. You cluck sympathetically when you see vomit stringing together long black hair and – somehow, amazingly – bulging underneath her camisole. After you enlist the help of a drowsy resident to help carry her back to her room, you spray pomegranates over semi-dried vomit and put a warning sign on the door.

Here is where you'll hear crying, the excited chatter of girls night, awkward hellos, and “oh, were you going to use that shower?” Here is where girls from the east wing and girls from the west wing will meet for the first time, shouting, “I didn't know you were on this floor too!” and soon you'll see them get ready in the morning, swapping mascaras and scarfs.

Here is where you'll battle your bulimia. Sleep-deprived and wobbly, you rush to the bathroom, sit on the toilet, and close your eyes. You hope none of your residents find their RA groaning in pain, because god, could you imagine the humiliation? What if one of *your* residents went through this? You know all the Residence Assistant Policies surrounding eating disorders, the cookie-cutter things to say, the standard resources to offer – “Do you know Curry Health center offers free counseling?” You'd say to them, “You deserve to take care of yourself, love yourself. You don't deserve to be in pain. How can I help you in this situation?” And you'd mean it when you'd beg them, “I care about you, and I want you to care about yourself, too.”

And so here is where you'll role-play those words to yourself. Flip the situations, play with the toilet paper and wonder how much a normal person uses. And here is where you'll reject the hypocrisy: you'll care about yourself when you're skinnier.

Campus

She walks campus at night. The cold sharpens stars and mutes her shuffling. Among the few daring snow-laden sidewalks, she is a proud member of Black Coats Anonymous. She circles buildings, breaks crusted snow on little-used paths, counts steps and breaths. Around and around she goes. Machine-like. Automated. Her legs tingle and go numb. In thirty minutes, her lips crack. She chews shedding skin until she tastes blood. When she opens her mouth, cool air rushes in, crystallizing the metallic taste and drying her tongue.

She walks to the center of the campus white, stares at Main Hall. She feels small under the commanding belfry. She squints for the rotted, darkened pumpkin corpse speared on the top spire. Activists and feminists have petitioned to install more lights, but she revels in the dark. A burst of wind cuts through the empty buildings. She shivers. She likes how Montana grips her legs and *freezes*. Natural, organic CoolSculpting, she thinks. Why shovel out thousands of dollars for a cooling paddle when she can just spend hours walking in ten-degree weather? FDA approved.

Her throat craves warmth – a seductive but frightening call – but her mind refuses to stop. To her right, under ice and hand-laid bricks and feet of frozen soil, burrows 400-person lecture hall. She walks to the sign warning cars not to collapse the roof, wonders if those tiny gray, white, or maroon work trucks with an identity complex ignore it. They certainly don't mind pushing pedestrians off sidewalks.

A little farther is the Think Tank, dark and forbidding. The coffee shop windows reflect a sole lamppost. She eyes her bulky outline. Gray, shadowed, lumpy. She can still smell the hint of a Bacon-Asiago bagel she had bought not hours before. 570 unneeded and unnecessary calories. If only there weren't so many places that sold hot food.

Hot food hot food hot food. The urge to eat fills her every nerve. It scares her, how strong it is, and suddenly she needs to get away, away, away from any, any goddamned place that she frequents during binge sessions. Her feet turn, rush the library – five flights in the library; nine in Jesse Hall; three in most university buildings. Though ideal, she never risks hiking to the giant, concrete M at night.

She smells hot cheddar cheese and stops outside the rows of library doors. Across the hilly expanse, the University Center looms. In summer, the flora is a patchwork of different plants around the United States. Now, it's clean. Undistinguishable. White. And inside is full of late-night food joints with hot food. Apparently, there's a banana tree. Sustainability is big here on campus, but she heard they don't use leftover food to compost the gardens because of bears. Briefly, she imagines a bear, drawn by the scent of leftover pepperoni paninis, slicing heavy claws into her thighs, digging muscle and tendon and fat and exposing bone. Perhaps then she'll be smaller.

**

At noon, campus is an open, exposed prairie. The anonymity of night is gone. She doesn't dare stop. She refuses to look at anyone or anything. Yet her brain is a radar for legs. She is acutely aware of a shuffling schema of thighs of all sizes. Thighs toothpick thin, banana thin, hand-breadth. Thighs firm and shapely, lumpy and weak. Reflective windows help measure her thighs in relation to those in front and behind. Any ground window can be a measuring tape.

She looks because they look. She hates the moving clockwork of pupils lasering her thighs, her butt, the lumps and the soft parts. She imagines eyes trailing after her, flicking up and down, critical and judging and ruthless. Nothing is right. Nothing is good. Her clothes fail to

insulate her confidence: even in sweats she feels exposed, stripped naked. When she beelines from class to class, head down, shoulders to her ears, she squeezes Poppy, a yellow balloon she filled with flour, and wishes Montana was known for obesity instead of outdoor recreation. She wishes they carried the Freshman 15 more noticeably.

She feels worse in spring. It's nauseatingly beautiful. Rays dapple pretty patterns on concrete, people smile more, flowers bloom. So do green trees, green grass, and the green-eyed monster. As sun shines, shins are exposed, skin is tanned and charred, hair bleached. She marvels at flesh so easily betrayed and judged and open. What would it be like to bear arms to feel spring air, to lie on your stomach with legs loosely sprawled out instead of dovetailed? Capris make her legs upside-down bowling pins wearing too-tight beer koozies. Thus she sweats and steams in full-length black leggings.

If she does wear shorts, she avoids sidewalk cracks to minimize bounce – the bricks surrounding the grizzly statue are the worst, but she can't skirt the circle of smooth concrete because that would "look" weird. She strives for shade, hoping the dimpling of sun will hide the dimples on the back of her thighs. The path from her hall to the Davidson Honors College is by far the sunniest, and she hates walking there. She ducks through buildings until she reaches the open expanse of the campus green. She beelines across grass and bricks – now is not the time for proper pedestrian conduct. The faster and quicker she gets there, the sooner she escapes their eyes. The sooner her self-hatred subsides.

To Feel Better

My tongue latched to the roof of my mouth. My throat muscles worked in protest. *No, no, no.* I closed my eyes and tried to think of anything but the nine orange tabs of hell in my palm. I had to do this. In the soft light of my dorm room, I watched myself in my scratched, refracted mirror. She wasn't me – *no, no, no* – but my jaw clenched like I was about to down something foul, piss-soaked, rotten. Possessed, I threw the sweet pills onto my dry tongue, swallowed, swallowed the last one that caught in the back of my throat, gagged and shuddered. I grabbed my hydro-flask but my stomach was so swollen that anything more than a baby sip threatened to rip me open.

Ducolax pills are roughly the size and shape of dried arborio rice. The trick is to swallow eight or ten of them so fast the sweet orange coating doesn't dissolve and make you gag. It's better with water, but sometimes that's a luxury I didn't ration for. On the label of Ducolax, it specifies use "for temporary relief of occasional constipation and irregularity" and it "produces bowel movement in 6 to 12 hours". The main ingredient, bisacodyl, is known as a stimulant laxative. This means it's bad for your body.

The sweet, sickly taste of the pills persisted; it repulsed me. I quickly dug under my bed for something to make my mouth more palatable. The plastic wrappers of sugar-free mints, LifeSavers, and cinnamon Trident gum sifted through my fingers. My earlier promise to not binge and purge had left me empty of my coping calories – sometimes if I didn't have supplies to fall back on, I didn't do it. I found one piece of old, dusty gum, brushed off the dirt and crammed the stick in.

I looked outside, wringing my hands. Winter held Missoula with icy breath. Below, the parking lot was covered in snow and ice, and the trees looked like black spider legs. It was too cold to walk. My fingers rubbed my collarbones as the sweetness continued to nettle my sanity. Maybe I had accidentally thrown some wrapped mints in the trash.

There is no way to pleasantly or politely describe laxative abuse. It hurts. It's gross. And it's humiliating. Nights become brutal, throat-choking, bitter, stinky nightmares. You lay in your bed and you fart rancid, horrible, bowel-crushing farts and you think *is the feeling of thinness really worth it*. For months on end, I'd jolt awake to cramps, urges, and a gurgling under the bottom of my left ribs. I held my breath when the cramps paralyzed me. Groggy and half blind, I waddled and hunched and sometimes crawled my way to the bathroom, sat on the toilet, and hoped that none of my residents would stumble in on their RA shitting her brains out. "Food poisoning," I planned to explain to them if I was caught. "Something I ate" or "I'm never having the chicken strips again".

I got down on my knees. The trash was wet. I'd dumped coffee and juice over my leftover binge food: a ham sandwich, two chewed and spit out chocolate bars, one half-eaten bran muffin, a full salami panini, the cores of two apples, a mashed banana, and the crumbles of a giant, size-of-my-head chocolate chip cookie. It smelled sugary and warm and gross. Normally I tossed hair from my hairbrush and swept my floor to throw dust on it. Sometimes it worked. Sometimes, I'd just dig through it until I found a clean enough piece and continue gnawing.

I stared at the mush and wetness, breathed in the fumes. The urge to eat filled my every nerve. I knew if I stuck my hand down there, my self-respect and decency would disintegrate with the crumbly feel of warm chocolate. I shot up, undid the trash bag and sprinted to the 9th floor trash

chute. I felt bad throwing it down – residents on the lower floors complained – but nothing else would truly stop me.

I curled up on my black futon, thinking about what I could do. I had finished my Ducolax bottle, and I needed more mints. My dependency on the pills had been gradual: I'd been using them every few days by sophomore year. Now, by the beginning of spring semester, I was going through a 200-pill bottle every two weeks. On nights the bottle was empty, I walked to the 24-hour Albertsons across the frozen Clark Fork River. Walking burned calories, and when I went at night the soft lights of the bridge and chilly air reminded me of good times.

Tonight though, I couldn't muster up the energy. As I lay huge and full of loathing, I remembered I kept my medicine basket under my futon. I took out the Tums and chewed 7 antacids. They weren't as tasty or sharp as the mints or gum, but they filled my mouth with chalky sweetness that masked the pills' rancid leftovers. I drifted off to sleep, trying to adjust so my stomach didn't hurt.

**

Nobody told me that the tendency to starve – but not starve too much – and to binge – but not binge too much – and to purge – but not purge too much – was severe enough. I thought I wasn't good enough for true anorexia or bulimia; I wasn't controlling enough, serious enough. At this point, I didn't know how to throw up (though I'd tried on numerous occasions), so I logically did the next best thing. I knew that laxatives didn't undo my binges, but they made me feel better. I'd programmed my mind to associate anger with wanting food, with hunger as some terrible admission that I had a body with human needs. I never lost massive amounts of weight, and I didn't gain large amounts either. I labored to self-improve by destroying my body. The more I ate, the

more I needed to compensate. The longer I fasted, the more I loved myself. I would look at the pictures of emaciated women and think, “I’d like to have anorexia, but not like her”. Something about those skinny, bony, horrifying looking women both scared me and infuriated me. That was *too* skinny, too scary, too sick – why couldn’t I have *half* the discipline as her, why couldn’t I just starve and starve and starve until I got “okay” skinny. The skinny that looked healthy. My weight floated within an unnoticeable 20 pounds, but those 20 pounds sagged on my self-esteem. *How fucking unacceptable*, I thought. I wasn’t good enough; I wasn’t valid; I *sucked*. I lived in a world where neither spectrum accepted me, and I felt if only, if only I fit the diagnosis for one or the other then I could seek help. If only I was fucked up enough, someone could cure me.

I woke several hours later to rolling, searing cramps. The back of my neck and behind my ears broke into sweat. The slogan on Ducolax is “Gentle, dependable constipation relief”, and if that isn’t the fattest lie in the advertising industry, I don’t know what is. Amazon reviewers claim that it’s “An Exorcism for the Stomach!!” or “Food poisoning couldn’t be worse” or “Only a masochist would label this pill ‘gentle’”. The pain is unbearable, like freezing knives grabbing the ends of my intestines and trying to make them pirouette. But it got the job done: I felt thinner, empty, lighter. I was addicted to that feeling of being empty, weightless.

But something was wrong this time. The pain was there, but there was a sour, dry taste in the back of my throat. I burped. Tangy. And then I remembered: antacids are a bad mixture with Ducolax. The bottle warns that one should avoid milk or antacids within an hour of taking them. Normally I had been fine. Nothing happened when I binged on ice cream and sugary cereal with milk right before. This time it felt different: more sour, more gut-wrenching, like improperly dissolved pills churning in acid, wet chemicals gurgling up my throat.

Panic set in. I rubbed my jaw and neck – it still felt the same. Had I fucked myself up truly this time? I burped an acidic burp. Who could I call? Should I go into the emergency room? They would laugh at me.

Mom. Mom wouldn't laugh. Mom would answer me. Mom would comfort me. But what happened over break was too recent. Going home to Helena had been a living nightmare. To remove myself from the temptation of food and binging, I left my wallet and walked the mile and half to Helena's downtown. I distracted myself for hours in The Mercantile or Murry's Café. "Savannah," my sister complained, home from her first college semester at Westminster, "Why are you gone all the time? It's not fun and it's weird." I couldn't tell her the Honey Nut Cheerios dug daggers into my head, the forbidden cookies and pies sang to my blood. It was easier to remove myself, to physically lock myself away, hole up, cower. I couldn't trust myself.

By Christmas Day, my head ached and my iron will had fractured and my legs were achy and cold from the miles I walked. I made it through lunch and dinner with "normal" portions, but my body raged for more. It was our celebratory Indian Christmas dinner, full of rare, delicious foods that I craved. One more soft, salty, fried Indian *puri*. *Just one*, I thought, *when will I have puris again?* As my family and I took turns clearing the table and cleaning up, I grabbed another *puri*, snuck into the bathroom, and shoved it down my throat. It was dry and tasteless and horrible, but my stomach demanded the pain. It demanded fullness, because who knew how long it would be until I gave it food again. *Fill me, Savannah*, it seemed to ache. *Fill me, please*. Soon roll after roll went down, and I determined that this required another fast. This one would be seventy-two hours. Three days. Or maybe as long as I could go.

But the fried bread weighed like bricks in my stomach. Round, wet, doughy bricks. The feeling itched through me. I went to the basement and dug through my suitcase, hoping that I hadn't done what I'd thought I'd done and used the last of my stash. I had.

"I'm going to Walgreens," I said, clinging to my keys and walking swiftly to the kitchen door that led to the garage.

"Why?" my mother asked. Soft Christmas lights haloed her head. The soft murmurs of the TV in the living room supplemented my sister's laugh. "It's too snowy out there."

"I'm going," I said, hopping from one foot to the other. "I need to go."

I don't remember how she convinced me, but somehow I let my mother take me gently by my hand and sit me down at the kitchen table. My hands wrung tightly, fingers picking at my fat, and my legs trembled and I needed, *needed* to go get the thing that would make me feel better.

"Why," she pressured me, "Just why?" My mother has soft green eyes and she's the cutest, most happiest, most understanding person in my world. I knew I was hurting her, but my eating disorder always, always, always came first. Trying to fight against it was like swimming against a riptide. Logically, I knew I was doing something bad, but I was too panicked and too tired and too blind and too anxious to see, let alone try, any other alternative. For the past few years, Mom had watched me try to swim harder, offering love and encouragement, but she couldn't do anything when the current yanked me back. I told her that I needed laxatives, right then, right now. She didn't blink. "You don't need them, Savannah, Christmas is a time for indulging. Everybody does it."

I begged, pleaded, vibrated. Not in the way *I* indulged, I tried to tell her. I was gluttonous, fat, unclean, my thighs puffing, fat growing and dimpling and protruding my stomach and god I

was so *ugly*. She gave in and drove me to Walgreens, speaking soft words of reason. The voice in my head shut her out. The parking lot was empty and blanketed with fresh snow. I got out and walked quickly ahead of her. Mom hung back, watching, almost as if she knew nothing could stop me. I felt ashamed purchasing laxatives, here, of all places, and at this time, so I grabbed a pink spiral journal to appear normal. The fluorescents hummed as I scanned the shelf for a generic brand of Ducolax. The cashier rung up my purchases with the blank, haunted gaze of someone having to work on Christmas Day. I couldn't speak to Mom on the way back; my heart hurt, and I cradled my purchases.

Mom's sad green eyes were still so raw. No, I couldn't call her. Not at this time, not at this place. It came to me instantly. The bulletin on Brooks Street. Community Medical Emergency Room, it said. Nurse on Call. 24 hours. I don't know if it's still there. But I remembered it. I googled the number and called it, fingers gripping my hamstring tendons.

The nurse greeted me and asked me what was wrong. She didn't sound tired at two in the morning.

"I took laxatives with antacids. And my stomach hurts weirdly."

She asked me how many of each. I told her five and five. A more acceptable number.

"Why did you do that?"

Her question threw me off. I didn't have an answer. I just had to do it. "I don't know."

She asked again: "Why'd you do that?"

I didn't know what to say. My throat dried. Panic bubbled under my chest. I was more afraid of this woman knowing than I was of potentially damaging my stomach. I always knew

how to hide my disorder, to hide the thousands of calories, to claim I'd forgotten to eat that day (and the day before that, and the day before that). I knew how to appear normal. But this was the first time a stranger had asked me: "Why do you do this?". *Why do you hurt yourself like this?* The brazen confrontation trapped me in my delusion.

"Will I be okay?"

"Yes, I would think so. It's just a small reaction, but if the pain gets worse then you should go in. Do you know where St. Patrick's Hospital is?"

I quickly hung up. I paced. The urge seared my bowels and I went to the bathroom and felt better. On the toilet, I scrolled through my phone, bouncing my legs. My stomach felt less arid, less acidic. I knew I needed to start exercising the calories off; my legs were ready, but the task ahead of me loomed heavily. After 10 minutes, I went to the west stairs of Jesse tower to begin. I settled on ten flights of stairs ten times. The air in the stairwell was cool, comforting. Outside, snow fell like falling stars in the orange lamplight.

I watched myself in the darkened windows. Step down, down, down. My dorm formed a right angle, and the stairs have windows facing inward. When I was on rounds with my RA duty partner, we used the windows to spy for parties: flashing lights, sardines of people, beer bottles on sills, an odd collection of fans facing outward. Now I wondered if those same residents could see me. Up and down like a crazed women – hey, isn't that the RA?

Why did I do this to myself? I thought. My darkened form slid around corners, pausing ever so slightly to eye my baggy sweats and sweatshirt. It hid my swollen body. I hit the bottom and raced back upward two steps at a time. My steps labored and echoed, and the stairwell became a plastic container that steamed with my overcooked breath.

I started crying on the fifth set, settling on the 11th floor, out of breath and wanting to quit. *Crying burns calories*, I thought. Warm tears wet my face and hair, but my hands and nose were cold. I felt swollen with sadness and desperate to stop. But I couldn't quit. Something in me wouldn't let me. It was like a barrier. I knew this wasn't helping, I knew that I couldn't undo the calories, and I knew that laxatives would do nothing but make me feel better. Yet giving up felt like a nightmare worse than Dulcolax-flavored ice cream.

**

When I was young, my self-awareness of my body came gradually. A hyper-sensitivity to how I appeared and related to those around me. I didn't pursue any activities that put an overwhelming focus on my body. I quit ballet and tap dance long before I determined that bodies could be ugly and fat. I played basketball and volleyball for many years, and both sports encouraged a strong, healthy body. I liked how being strong let me compete competitively, but I also disliked how "large" I was compared to my peers.

I can pinpoint the moment when I decided I was fat: I was eight, puffing out my baby tummy in the mirror. I didn't care that I could outrun my sister and play tackle football as well as my brother. I started to feel unhappy with the way I looked.

My eating disorder truly started after I left my student exchange in India. It was 2013, and I was seventeen and stuck in a room with four walls and no one to talk to. I craved home and some semblance of love, and I sought All-American Peanut Butter by the spoonfuls, spooning away my insecurity and the taste of weird vegetables and the feeling of being sedentary. All I wanted to do was run, walk, play ball. I ballooned up with puffy cheeks and thick thighs in a foreign country where everyone around me was stick-thin. When I came home, I looked at the knobbly knees of

my sister, the razor thin shoulder blades of my brother, and then to the pouch of my stomach. *One of these does not belong*, I thought.

The idea that I could actually change my body came from my dad. “You can count calories,” he said, “if you’re unhappy with your body and you think you need to lose weight. But you don’t need to lose weight, Savannah, you’re beautiful as you are.”

I didn’t feel beautiful; at that moment, seventeen-year-old Savannah felt lumpy and uncoordinated and fat. My dad’s advice was a revelation. I know he was trying to help me, but neither one of us could have predicted the change it would have on me.

I embarked on my first diet ever. I downloaded MyFitnessPal. I counted calories. I counted mouthfuls. I counted teaspoons and tablespoons and cups. As the calories went down, so did the scale, and I started to feel lighter. I rubbed my hands over legs that became slimmer, over collarbones that appeared, over the ribs that stuck out.

When calorie counting failed me a year later, I felt angry that I couldn’t just starve. Calories of food lingered in my head; it was too dangerous to just *eat* a 70 calorie egg. Better to just not eat at all. Then I wouldn’t have to count it. My body begged for food. I tried to restrict even more.

I knew how to make myself feel better. My fingers became red pens, my eyes laser-focused on my deformities. My legs morphed into some hideous extension of me, my fingers the merciless probe that deemed life was not worth living with them as is. They scoured every bump, every flabby hold, every cellulite dimpling and my nails wrote red lines of failure on my skin like an author editing his book. *No. Not good enough. What does this mean? Fat, lumbering legs. Stupid, stupid, stupid. Weak.* On my collarbones they wrote *not sharp enough, not hollow enough, not deep enough.* On my stomach they critiqued *too bulky, must trim, get to the muscle underneath.*

On themselves they scratched *where are the tendons, where are the hollows, where is the emotion.*
My eyes stripped compassion and love from my reflection and gave it to others who didn't deserve it.

My sophomore of college year, my urges broke free and I spiraled into bingeing and purging. Yet my eating disorder wasn't about control. . . but it was. It was about feeling better. It was about feeling okay in my body. Feeling okay with how I appeared to the world. In February 2018, I woke up with my head in the trash can and my sick slipping down the sides and my eyes bulging and my face hot and sweaty to realize that half-hearted efforts to recover *just weren't doing it.* So, I thought, I could throw up now. Was I a true bulimic yet? Would this make me feel better? All of this was to make me feel better. . .So why didn't I?

Comparisons

My therapist was tall. Taller than my tall. And gorgeous.

“Wow,” Clara said. “You’re tall. How tall are you?”

I stood just two inches below her 6 feet. She was pregnant and thin, her belly a small bowling ball. Her blonde hair fell softly at her shoulders, her face serene and make-up free. At our first meeting in her office on Orange Street, she wore a flowy, classy cardigan and pressed black pants. I felt ragged, unkempt, and ugly in comparison. I sat on the edge of her black couch, hunched over, clasping my fidgeting hands between my legs.

“So, Savannah, what brought you in here today?”

I’d rehearsed: “Um. Some things. I don’t know.”

“Your mom told me this might have something to do with India.”

My throat swelled, and I grabbed a Kleenex. “I don’t want to talk about India.”

“Okay,” she said. I tore the tissue paper in half. “That’s fine, we’re here to talk about what you want to talk about. So, tell me about yourself Savannah.”

**

I stared at my college application to University of Montana. I was such a liar.

As a high school junior, I was selected to serve as a “junior ambassador” through the federal Kennedy-Lugar YES Abroad scholarship program. Funded by the U.S State Department, YES Abroad selects 65 “junior ambassadors” from several thousand applicants to build bridges to countries with significant Muslim populations. After undergoing an exhaustive application process – essays, group evaluations, individual interviews in Washington, D.C. – I jetted off to Ghaziabad, Uttar Pradesh, an industrial city near New Delhi. . .

“I don’t like it,” I said to my dad.

My Presidential Leadership Scholarship essay was cold, cut, and dry – best for the eyes of those who would select me. My eyes flitted between the lines. What if they called YES Abroad?

“It’s fine,” my dad said from over my shoulder. He patted me on the head. “It’s as good as its ever going to be.”

“But it’s not true,” I said. “I don’t feel this way, and I shouldn’t even pretend I do.”

This was a real-world essay. A professional, emotionally-strangled, experience-exploited college essay. I wrote about the dead dogs, masses of people in the roads, cows, monkeys, heat, and poverty. I didn’t write about the unwanted hands that brushed my body in the crowd, the eyes that never looked away, the lice. I didn’t write about Auntie, or how I left. They didn’t need to know I left five months into my exchange, and they especially didn’t need to know why.

“It’s about your experience, Savannah. They just want to know what you learned.”

But not what I felt. I clicked send.

**

A few days after my first session with Clara, my parents came up from Helena to see me. It was an early weekend in October, and the sky hung heavy with gray clouds. We sat at a large wooden table in Liquid Planet and drank milky lattes and ate biscuits and gravy. I was struggling in my British Literature class, and I expressed my frustration in-between sweet sips of coffee. *I should have ordered the americano*, I thought. My dad laughed.

“This is good for you, Savannah!” He took a large bite of his breakfast sandwich. I wanted his sweet, decadent, full-fat mocha. “This is a challenge; he’s pushing you to become

better. I'm glad you have this teacher. I like him, it's high time you got something that challenged you."

I frowned into my biscuit. I didn't want to be challenged. Dad's blue eyes were alight.

"Yeah, I know but it sucks," I said. I took a sip of my sugar-free caramel skim milk latte. "Professor K uses huge words like he's got something to prove."

"So what! Professors are supposed to challenge you, make you study hard."

I mangled my hands under the table. My life was controlled chaos, trying not to binge, binging, and desperately minimizing the fallout. My professor's external pressure sucked.

Earlier that day, in my British Literature class, Professor K had wandered around the classroom, invading my space in the back, traversing back and forth through the desks in animated excitement over King Arthur. I watched my legs under the desk, eyes intent on my leggings, picking out cellulite imprints. They looked bigger. Professor K squealed with excitement. Sometimes he got so riled up his hands would make complicated patterns in the air. I closed my eyes. *Just shut up, shut up shut up.* I opened them, and Professor K caught my eye. I looked away, hoping against hope that he would skip over me. I didn't know what we were talking about.

"Savannah," he said. "What do you think?"

Sudden tears sprang forward, hot, insistent. I didn't want to be seen, I didn't want to talk, why couldn't I just disappear? My eyes remained fixated on my thighs

"I don't know," I said. "I'm sorry."

He asked me what I thought of the passage. I didn't remember it, though I had read it last night. I told him I liked it. Professor K moved on to someone else, and I breathed away my tears,

looking up at the ceiling to drain my nose. I grabbed the tops of my thighs and pinched – I imagined taking a razor and slicing my fat off.

After brunch, my mom insisted on a walk through the University District. My throat craved sweetness. The brightly colored orange and yellow and red leaves remained fresh on the trees. The banging in my brain wouldn't stop. I crunched through the few fallen leaves, and my parents talked at me. When was the last time I had huckleberry ice cream? I shouldn't want anything sweet: I'd already indulged today with the latte.

“I want ice cream,” I blurted.

It was 11 am, but they didn't question me. My mom enthusiastically agreed. We drove to Big Dipper and got two scoops, one huckleberry, one vanilla, on a waffle cone. I tried to push the ice cream on them, but they said they were full, and I sat in the back of the car frustrated and upset. I devoured my cone slowly.

My dad parked in front of Jesse Hall where I was a resident assistant. We got out to do our goodbye hugs. The air was crisp, but I could smell food. I didn't know if it was my imagination or real. Dad's phone rang, and he walked away to converse with a client in private.

“So, how's the therapist working out?” my mom asked as we hugged. She held me close, looking into my eyes, grasping my arms. Her thin shoulders were tense.

“Oh, it's great!” I said, walking to the trash can to throw away the rest of my ice cream. If I didn't, I would just eat it all. “It's going well.”

“And do you like her?” Mom looked at me with hope, green eyes wide with optimism. “She specializes with, you know, eating stuff.”

“Her? Yeah. She's tall.”

“And how's, you know, is it helping you? With. . .”

“Oh yeah. It is. But I’m doing a lot better.” I looked everywhere but Mom. Could she see? Did she know I was lying? She’d known since my senior year of high school that I struggled – neither of my parents knew the lengths I took to correct my uncontrollable eating. “You know, I’m just not as stressed as I used to be. She says I shouldn’t apply so much pressure on myself to follow what I think are good habits. And to not think of it as failing.”

“Well,” Mom eagerly nodded. “I’m so glad, you know you are super amazing –”

“—All-righty, Savannah Kate!” Dad shouted, suddenly reappearing, arms wide for a hug. I buried myself into his thick jackets and squeezed. “Time for us to go and for you to go do your college thing and for you to take care of your ‘little chicken nugget’ residents! Look at you! You look like such a co-ed!”

**

Clara was unlike Tony, the first therapist I tried.

I sat in Tony’s office, looking everywhere but her grossly overweight outline. Her office bled with depression: the lights were dim, the bookcases shadowed their contents, and the black couch sucked me in. I felt trapped.

I watched Tony try to sit comfortably. Her fat spilled onto either side of her, pressing against her white blouse, and she could barely hold her hands in front of her stomach. She looked like the kind of person who never thought of running to burn off extra calories. She didn’t deserve my insecurities – just a couple weeks ago, I had tried to throw up the seven naan-like flatbreads I’d scarfed down in a panic. Tony certainly looked like she never regretted a single bite that went past those cracked, maroon-shaded lips, and I hated her, hated how she was happy and funny and carefree and okay with her body. How could she possibly help me? She was my worst nightmare, and I was jealous.

But with Clara, it was different. She was thin *and* a recovered anorexic/bulimic. Thin and happy – a person I deemed acceptable to be like. She still must have some idea of her calorie intake, and she had recovered and not ballooned up into her worst nightmare. But several sessions into my therapy, I was still using laxatives, fasting, and chewing so much gum that my jaw ached all the time. I barely slept. Somehow, I managed to keep up with my assignments.

“You have to want to get better,” Clara told me. “And maybe you’re not at that point right now. And that’s okay. I’m here to help you get to a point you are comfortable with.”

But I desperately wanted to get better, and it frustrated me when I made no progress. I failed to do what she suggested. When I told her of small successes the previous week, it became the talk of relapse the next week, and I couldn’t understand how I could be doing so good and be so bad.

The room’s tidy, neutral-colored feng shui infuriated me. The room held the tears and frustrations of many girls like me, and yet some of them got to be hospitalized and force fed.

“You can’t characterize it as good and bad, Savannah.”

I grabbed a Kleenex to wipe my eyes, afterwards shredding it to white fluff and snot. How could I explain it to her? I didn’t know what to call it. All I knew was that I didn’t want to be seen. All I knew was that I disliked how my cheeks puffed, my thighs rubbed, my belly rolled. Being in my body felt like watching a car crash; you know it’s going to be horrible but you’re compelled to watch, you’re compelled to strip down in front of the mirror and grab at your body, crying, sobbing, unable to change how it looks.

I looked at her, trying to think what I was doing wrong. Her nonjudgmental stare felt narrowed, critical – she couldn’t judge me, that wasn’t her job. I was trying to journal, to be aware of my mind and body states, to think before I binge and be aware of what I was feeling.

She was getting bigger. But she was growing a baby, so I understood. I didn't feel any different, and I didn't act any different either.

Clara talked about my triggers; I didn't know if I had one. Sometimes it felt that my stomach was too full, so I felt the compelling urge to fill it until it hurt so bad to move. Sometimes it felt my stomach was too empty, and the growling and stomach pain compelled me to fill it and fill it and fill it until it went away, and I was left bloated, swollen, and ugly. Food was a reward or punishment. Sometimes it was both if I was feeling particularly self-loathing and hating my self-loathing. Sometimes, it was just the way my body felt while sitting down. Everything, everything told me that my body was wrong – mirrors, clothes, postures, pictures, reflections on windows. Even sitting on the couch, I measured my legs by carpet, the edge of the rug, and the two black buttons next to my right thigh. Today I was okay, though next week they could be bigger.

“How's school going?” Clara asked.

One of my triggers was stress, though I didn't know how school factored in. I just always got As. Working in school was a thing I did, like how some people just do snowboarding, or brush their teeth. I expected to do well, so I made sure I did well.

I told her how Professor K sent me an email last week, noting he was pleased at my growth as a reader, writer, and thinker this semester. My posts on British Literature had been “sophisticated, nuanced, and reflect very serious engagement with the texts,” though all I knew was avoiding the low B's I had gotten on the first weekly papers.

“What would it mean if you got a B?”

“It wouldn't happen.”

“But let's pretend you got a B. How would that make you feel?”

“I won’t let myself get one. It’s just something I do.”

Clara tried to explore external pressures. Was it my Presidential Leadership Scholarship from the University of Montana? No, though I disliked the attention it brought. Was it my parents? They’d love me the same, I knew it. Was I afraid of getting an average grade?

“I just have to do it. I would feel angry if I didn’t get it when I know I can.”

It was simple with grades, but it wasn’t so simple with my body. No matter how hard I tried, how hard I worked, I kept fucking it up with all this binging. Now, I just wanted to remove myself from my body. Pluck it apart like an insect. I just wanted to leave it. I told her this. She asked me if I was suicidal. I told her not anymore. She wanted me to open up more. I told her I didn’t want to because I felt like I had failed my exchange.

“Why do you think that way?”

I decided to tell Clara about the lice.

**

Cleanliness of rooms, bathrooms, and yourself was the height of unspoken importance. My host family relentlessly controlled every controllable aspect of life. The six-member family living under a tarp and four poles was denied the luxury of such structure; they were subject to all of the unpredictable and volatile circumstances of India. This was the line between the "haves" and the "have nots": eight-inch concrete and rigidly enforced rules and classes.

**

My silent war with lice began in late October.

What the hell is that? Barely bigger than a sesame seed, the tan insect wriggled and squirmed between my soapy fingers. Squinting hard, I peered at the bug, rubbing it viciously until the hard exterior cracked. The carnage - six legs, two eyes, and a blood-filled abdomen -

made my gut clench. Rinsing the insect down the drain, I raked my fingernails over my scalp: amidst the suds, two horrible bugs struggled. I sent them to a watery grave, hands shaking.

Lice. I had *lice*. My heart sped up, thinking of all the things I needed to do. There was no section on how to deal with unwelcome head guests in the Exchange Student Orientation Handbook. I was on my own.

Bending at the waist, I yanked my tiny comb through my hair. *Of all the things I have to deal with, lice takes the effing cake. How -yank- the fuck -tug- do I get rid of lice?* Hot tears, a reaction to pain or distress, had little effect on my relentless vendetta. Each insect was pinched and dismembered, their remnants washed down the drain. Fuck them.

When I finally slipped out of the bathroom, arms and knees aching, Auntie Prathiba stared. My head crawled; could she see them? She paused in the kitchen, holding Grandfather's dishes, and our eyes locked. She said nothing, but her gaze - deep brown, wide, critical - followed as I retreated to my room.

"Lice," I said to my mom's grainy face at 2am. "I have *fucking lice*."

She shook her pixelated blonde head. "You need to tell Auntie Prathiba. They have to have some sort of chemical shampoo- this isn't an uncommon thing."

"No! You know I can't do that!" My palms sweated.

"You've got to deal with this Savannah," my mother said. "You have to get rid of lice, and since you can't leave the house and go anywhere-"

"I will deal with it." My fingers touched the tender scrapes my digging left behind. "I'll deal with it, I promise. I'll google stuff."

I disconnected the Skype call to my mother, I checked my door. The tiny feet tickled. Irritation surged within me; they had no right to be there, making my life more complicated.

According to Google, I needed to drown the big fat ones so they couldn't make small ones. Wipe out the reproducing generation.

I scurried to the bathroom, filled the bucket with water and dunked my head like some sort of awkward ostrich. Cold water embraced my scalp. It felt good. I hung there for a long time, longer than a half hour, suspended, face red, knees sore, scraping my fingers through my hair and grabbing tiny bodies and pinching roots. I struggled to breathe and sometimes inhaled water. My fingers bled from my uncut nails, and my head stung something awful.

A couple days following the discovery of my new parasitic friends, I found myself drifting up to the school's fourth floor bathroom. My separate timetable ensured many hours alone, and my Economics teacher, as usual, failed to show at our individual lesson. I gripped the window's bars and watched several workers rest in the shade of Amity International School's fence. I imagined being skinny enough to fit through the bars and just fall. An old government water tower sprouted just outside the school wall. A skinny little boy was showering, fully naked, under the broken water spigot.

At least I have running water and a private bathroom. My bathroom was as invaluable as my unconventional weapons used to battle my lice infestation.

Before bed that night, I snuck into the bathroom and doused my hair in vegetable oil. My goal was to kill the nits that hatched before they could reproduce. I coated the oil on so thick that when I bandaged the hair band around the plastic sack on my head, the oil steamed. It dripped down my neck and temples. It was uncomfortable and hot and sticky.

The internet told me that the oil would suffocate the lice in ways the water could not. It also made my newly dyed black hair shiny. That morning I woke early, before Auntie Prathiba paraded through my room at 5:15 am, and washed the oil away. I heard her footsteps pause

outside the bathroom. I stopped my splashing, holding my breath until she went away. God knows what she would've said, or wouldn't say, if she caught me with a plastic sack on my head.

Lice are notoriously difficult to remove. It took me three weeks, thousands of pulled hairs, and two boxes of hair dye to finally be lice free. I dreamt of hugs and enveloping warmth and knives. I laid in bed, staring at the ceiling.

On one of the last inter-continental phone calls I made, words failed and I broke into a blubbering, puffy-eyed mess.

“Do you want to leave?” my mother asked me. “Do you want to go home?”

Leave? My heart fluttered, beating in my chest like a rabid caged dog. *Leave?* Could I actually leave halfway through my 10-month exchange? My hands gingerly touched my scalp. I'd made my head such hostile environment to the lice, they couldn't survive. I'd defeated them. I was triumphant, and I was hurt, angry.

I told her yes.

**

My battle with Auntie had begun long before my fight with lice. It didn't start with me, either, though I was slow to find that out.

My host family picked me up at Indira Gandhi International Airport at 4 in the morning. There were four of them: Uncle Pravin, Auntie Prakshi, Pravin, and Pranik. They gave me hugs and we got in the back of a van driven by an unknown man. It was hot, muggy, and dark, and forbidding shapes flashed in yellow glows of sparse lampposts. Over the roar of the car and their thick accents, I kept asking them to repeat what they said. Silhouetted against the dim lights of the city, a dark mass rose taller than any of the buildings around. The putrid smell momentarily jolted me out of my stupor.

“Hold your breath, didi!” Pranik said. The whites of his eyes flashed, his ten-year-old grimace clear in the dark van. “This is the Gazipur landfill.”

“Oh okay,” I said.

Talk resumed, though I could barely keep track of what was said. My back sweated. I kept thinking back to the Indian man who sat next to me on the plane and who wouldn’t stop staring. We exited the highway and stopped in front of Olive County, the place they said they lived.

“Oh, no, you’re not getting out here,” my host father said.

My host mother and host brothers exited the vehicle and were ushered into an entrance manned by three guards.

“Where are we going?” I asked, suddenly alert. Hot air filled the car.

“Not far,” my host father said. “My sister’s place is just up the road.”

We stopped at the gates of another place, and the driver got out and undid them before driving the car into the driveway.

I was shocked. Where was I? Why was I in this house? Where was my host family?

**

I attended a private high school, where the children spoke English and wore identical ironed uniforms. Taught in English by well-educated teachers, I was surrounded by dedicated, hardworking friends. Schoolwork was revered as one might gold; their future depended on earning high marks in India's hyper-competitive school system.

**

I came back from my first day of school exhausted and self-conscious, my throat sore and smile frozen. Everyone had wanted to talk to me. Sweaty, I went to the bathroom and took a freezing cold shower. When I emerged, Auntie Prathiba was there.

“Go wait for Pramay,” Auntie Prathiba said when she saw me. Her brown hair was tied into a fierce knot at the nape of her neck. “He just phoned that he’s coming to take you to Olive County.”

“What?” I said. “Okay.”

I did as she asked quietly for the first couple weeks. I stood on the balcony of Auntie’s place, watching for my host brother Pramay to come escort me to Olive County. I would spend three hours there, sometimes eat dinner, and then Pramay would walk me back. I only saw my host family for those three hours, and I was confused.

--

School was only a fifteen-minute walk from my home. And yet, my host family made clear that walking there would have been suicide. I lived and attended school behind concrete walls because stepping outside unsupervised was a recipe for rape, mugging, kidnapping or murder. The only means of safe transportation was my host aunt's rusty brown car - a safety line that could only be replaced by a male.

**

Pramay – tall, lanky, and geeky – walked like he had a twenty-pound weight attached to his forehead. He had curly black hair and thick glasses. He never looked at me, and I tried to deliberately stare at him to force his acknowledgement.

“How was school for you?” I asked.

“Good.”

“Do you have a lot of homework?”

“No.”

“What are tests like here in India?”

“They’re tests.”

We didn’t speak for the five minutes it took us to walk the dirt roads to Olive County. The apartment complex consisted of eight buildings forming an oval, separated from the sprawling houses, electrical wires, and dog packs by a ten-foot concrete wall. At least three guards lazed around each entrance to the complex. The moment we arrived, Pramay walked swiftly to his room and shut the door until it was time to take me back.

**

The first month, my eyes were as big as moons. No air conditioning? I brought deodorant. Dust, dirt and smells? I adapted. Continuous staring? This is how Beyoncé feels. Endless masses of people? Just 28 million more than Idaho.

**

I shuffled between building to building.

“I don’t go over there,” my host mother said when I asked something about the other house. “That is her place, this is my place.”

It had been a week since I had seen my host father, and three and a half weeks since I arrived. When I got back from Olive County, Auntie was quickly walking from the kitchen across the living room, her long brown skirts brushing the floor.

“Hey Auntie,” I said. “Where’s Uncle?”

“He’s working,” she said.

“I haven’t seen him at all this week.”

“He works very hard.”

It struck me that my host father never shared dinners with us, though he supposedly lived in the room upstairs. We talked of general things as she rummaged around in the kitchen. The water filter attached to the wall hummed as she filled a glass.

Now was as good a time as ever. “So, um why am I here? I totally appreciate what you’ve been doing, but why am I here and not. . . over there? You know, in Olive County.”

“You are here because a family supports decisions.”

What does that mean? “Oh, yeah, I totally get that. But you didn’t sign up to host me. I like being here, and I’ve been having a really good time, and you’ve been wonderful, but I just wanted to know.”

“You know, Savannah, when my brother came up with idea of hosting a student, he didn’t know where to put you. You can’t exactly live with Pramay.”

“Oh, okay. Why?”

“You’re not a naïve girl, Savannah. Pramay is seventeen and you are sixteen.”

“Oh, thanks Auntie. I totally get it. You want me to help with something?”

She squatted on her toes, opening the dried goods cabinet. “No, I’m just giving Grandfather his dried fruits.”

**

For months on end, I saw India in 15-30-minute snippets: the time it took to travel to/from school or market. Otherwise, I couldn't step out the door. My risk increased because I stood out. Requesting to travel to anywhere besides school or market was out the question. The safety risks, economic costs, time commitment and disruption to routine placed too great a burden.

**

Two months into my exchange, silence overcame the house. I listened to Auntie. Grandfather sometimes spoke. I conversed with Choti, the lizard who crawled on my mesh screen. Cars caterwauled, children shrieked, and I watched from my window. Pramay stopped picking me up. I stayed in my room, only leaving for dinner, the bathroom, and school. I sometimes sat on the balcony where dust saturated my eyes, blurring lines of sun. Heat eked moisture from my lips and skin until I was an empty husk and sought cold water from the fridge.

One day in October, my peanut butter and tampons ran out. I found Auntie in Grandfather's room watching television. Our relationship had deteriorated since I'd asked that fateful question, and I didn't want to ask but I needed to. *Can I go to the store?* Auntie said no without looking at me.

I nodded, heading to my room and laying on my bed. I tried not to cry, but tears welled up and I groaned. A minute later, Auntie appeared. Her brown eyes narrowed, and she stated she would take me.

We got in the brown car, and I felt her displeasure radiate from her. She jerked the car into first gear. "I really appreciate you taking me to the store, Auntie."

"You know, Savannah, I don't think you do."

What? I really do appreciate you taking me to the store. I'm sorry if --"

"Savannah, we told you couldn't go to the store. We expressly told you you couldn't go because you know it's not safe and then you go and cry in your room and --"

"--I was just - sorry, I'm just having a bad day --"

"--then you make me feel guilty --"

"I didn't mean to make you feel guilty!"

“And you say things that you don’t really mean, and, you know Savannah, that ruins people’s trust in you–”

“I’m sorry!”

I am

“You’re not sorry! You say you’re sorry all the time, Savannah. And I don’t know if it’s because you don’t care about what sorry means or whether you just don’t care at all.”

**

From then on, our meals were punctuated with mechanicals sounds of chewing and unintelligible, liquid Hindi. I timed my left arm with Grandfather’s right, head bowed, arm tense, waiting for him to swallow, pausing, then following suit. Indian food was spicy, small portions against silver tin plates – aloo sabji, ladyfinger sabji, dahl – but an hour later I dived into a hidden jar of peanut butter. I spooned hints onto my tongue – *here in India we take time to enjoy our food* – and delicately wiped away insinuations from my mouth – *do you not like Indian food* – and I didn’t know how to tell them that the speed of which I ate did not mean I liked it any less.

I skyped Mom later and later to avoid being heard through the walls.

“Hey sweetie.” Her voice glitched, but its sound comforted me. I always teared up in these conversations, but the picture quality was so bad she could never tell. I was just so glad to hear her. “How are you? You look really tired.”

“I am, it’s like 12:30 here. Are you on your lunch?”

“Yeah. How’s it going! How’s school?”

“Um, school is okay. I hate the heat.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“How was class today?”

“It was. . . well, two of my teachers - you know they gave me a separate schedule - didn’t show up, and then I just sat in the room for a while. Pretty much all day. And Pramay still walks like twenty feet ahead of me. And I don’t like how big I’m getting.”

Seven hours later, I wandered halls and open corridors. The air was stagnant, muted in Amity School; the library was the only air-conditioned area, guarded by a Punjabi woman who barked at unauthorized entry. I clutched my separate timetable - a flimsy, isolating piece of paper - and I used to go to Coordinator Ma’am when my classes fell through. I didn’t anymore. During lunch, I begged Sargam for a hug. When she hugged me, she was soft - my mother was all bones and angle - and I cried afterwards in the bathroom.

I sat alone more and more often.

**

By October, I laid in my bed and imagined killing myself. I imagined moving my legs mindlessly, effortlessly, directionless, urged solely by Freudian Id, and soon I imagined stepping over trash bags and manure, sliding around puddles, beggar hands, electrical cords, and meters of colorful cloths, ignoring indecent brushes against my thighs and butt, walking, walking, and walking, but soon my legs burst into a run. I burned with wild need to run, *to go, to do*. And then I thrashed in bed, and wanted to scream at my ceiling, break the windows, break the locks, break my whiteness, break my extra X chromosome.

At night, I laid dripping cold sweat on my bed, eyes focused on one dark speck and ears on shuffling footsteps. Sometimes I glided out the door, weightless and fearless, the moon a homing beacon on my white skin. I didn’t leave past the gates, but I imagined walking outside the 10-foot cement walls holding money or playing weak. More often, though, I ascended to the

roof, friends among the wire clotheslines, broken satellite dishes and howling dogs, and buddies with the concrete ledge, pebbles tickling my bare feet. I imagined my toes digging in before pushing me gently over the edge. Unspoken words bounced in my skull. Most often, though, I walked into the moonlit kitchen. There, I held a knife tip against my skin, held with bated breath, exerting no more than a feather-light touch. I imagined digging, slashing, hacking, stabbing. But whenever I cried out and pressed down, it was always dull. I held that knife more nights than I can count. I remember it's weight. No blood, no scars but it was more tempting than the ledge, more realistic than moonlight walks, and always an option.

On those nights with knives, I tiptoed barefoot to the stove, watching the blue and orange flames dance. I made a lumpy silhouette: dark gray on the linoleum floor, awkward and jaunty, creaking on steps that didn't used to creak. I could feel my body jiggle. One half pot made a good-sized cup of chai, seasoned with cardamom and cloves and brewed with black tea leaves. That was the moment that I felt most alive, turned away from the knives and sipping chai. Normally it was two am – I either rarely slept or slept too much – and the flames and moon casted haunted shadows in a forbidden room. Giddiness tightened my chest, a tension of happiness, a flicker of rebellion, and I scooped spoonful after spoonful crystallized sugar into the chai, stirring, stirring, stirring. Back through my door, I nursed my chai.

**

I went to Clara every week the fall semester of my sophomore year. By spring semester, I was seeing a nutritionist and a doctor on campus as well. By then, Clara had her baby and was out on leave for a couple months. The doctor put me on Zoloft. The drug made me exhausted; I yawned huge yawns and couldn't keep my eyes open. I fell asleep often, woke up at night, and kept abusing laxatives. Zoloft possessed me; my body clenched, my jaw chattered, and

sometimes my legs seized up. When I chewed gum, I'd clench and grind my teeth so hard I cut the gum to shreds. But I continued to binge. I continued to try and control my food intake, fasting for days, restricting, crying on my floor. But, after a couple weeks, I was beginning to feel numb. I was beginning to feel, for the first time in my life, that I could focus on other things.

When her baby was three months old, Clara returned, and I ended back on that black couch. I told her about my marginal success – a couple normal eating days, the numbness effect of the zoloft – and she celebrated with me.

“See, Savannah, you must celebrate every step you take forward. Even if you relapse and binge again tomorrow or right after this, think about how you felt when you had this day. Don't call it normal – normal is different for everyone.”

I left for the summer feeling hopeful for the first time. I decided I was doing better, and I didn't see Clara after I returned to school for the fall semester of my junior year.

**

*There's "poverty" and then there's poverty. This is **India**. The poorest people in America are wealthy by Indian standards. My host family implemented rules and structure to combat the human squalor, unpredictability, filth, and chaos of their world. Food was never discarded; to decline offered food was blasphemous.*

**

Nearly one year later, I found my head in a trash can. Not once, not twice, but eight times over the course of three days. It was February. Even now I still don't know why I did it. Like bingeing, purging was a reflex. And part of me refuses to revisit those days, those moments when I was throwing up. But I remember the aftermath, and I remember my shock.

The wind howled outside. Snow coated the dark, twisted branches and it hurt to breathe. I threw paper to hide the watery upchuck accumulating on the bottom and sides. Such a gross, unappetizing sight; it smelled sour and sugary. The chocolate chips from the cookies had melted and liquified with the acid of my stomach, and they splattered old assignments with occasional strings of carrots, undistinguishable carb-y lumps, and half chewed spinach leaves.

The idea hit me: throwing up could help me with my recovery. As I tied the trash bag, it made perfect sense. On a base level, the wrongness of my thinking chimed a dull, overwrought tune: *this is not how you get better.*

I wrung my hands, pulled out my cell phone and texted Clara. I felt shocked, almost like my world had stopped. When I could feel again, I called Mom. *Come home*, she said. And I did the next morning, Saturday, a clear and snowy day.

When I arrived Helena, an hour and a half away, I cried about the stress of being a resident assistant, my classes, my directionless life. To mom, my eyes told a different story.

“You have the Ultimate Gift, Savannah,” my dad said. He didn’t understand. “You have the Ultimate Gift of Life and Survival. You went to India for goddssakes. You should be able to handle anything!”

We were scattered about the living room; I hid my swollen body with blankets and pillows, nestled into the couch. My mom sat on the floor, rubbing my ankle. She knew what truly troubled me.

“Do you want to tell your father what is really going on?” my mom said quietly.

I closed my eyes. “Dad, it’s not just about school. It’s about my eating.”

He crossed his arms. “Mom says you’ve been going through a rough patch these couple years with eating.”

“A rough patch is kind of an understatement,” I said. And then I told him what I had done for three days. He uncrossed his arms and came over to give me a long hug. I tried not to tear up.

“My point stands the same, honey-bunches,” he said. “You are incredible. You are strong. You went to India. You saw all the little children eating out of trash heaps and all the struggling women and struggling men who were dirty and poor and happy and the way their children, god their *children*, knew that the only way to escape the destitute life of their parents, their poverty, was to excel in school. Think of their life compared to your life. Think of the trash everywhere, the dirty bottles, the trash bags, the kids throwing chip bags out the school bus window. Look at that and think, damn, you’re *lucky*. Use your Gift, Savannah.”

**

Two days later, I sat on the black couch. The room was greyer than I remembered. Clara sat across from me. Was she going to judge me? I felt like a failure.

Clara had remembered my vengeance on tissue paper. When I had arrived, two little containers of pink and orange play-doh sat on the coffee table. They were for kids, but I no longer tore up Kleenex and left microfibrines on her carpet.

“How’s your baby?” I asked. The clock ticked.

She allowed me to question her about her life – she was good, growing fast, her husband was good, the baby was crawling everywhere, nearly standing – but then took control once again. “What’s been going on, Savannah? It’s been a long time since I saw you. It was last April, wasn’t it? A whole year, almost.”

“Um.” *Just blurt it out. If you say it, it won’t have as much power. Then she will know and she can help me.* “I threw up for three days, and it wasn’t like when I tried before. This time I kept going and going and going and I don’t know if you’ve known what it’s like to throw up...”

“Yes, I was anorexic and bulimic when I was young. I know what it’s like.”

“Yeah, so you know that it doesn’t come up all at once. You have to keep going.” *Until your face is red and your snot and tears are clogging your vision and there’s so much saliva drooling out your mouth.* “I thought I was getting better and then I do this and I don’t know, it scares me. I haven’t done it since but I’m terrified that I will.”

I told her: it scared me *how easy it was*. How I could eat and just throw it up. How simple my life could be with this skill, and how seductive its promise was: you can eat all you want and throw up at least half of it. It was revolutionary, like the discovery of gun powder, the invention of the wheel.

“I just want this whole thing to stop.”

I told her about what my dad suggested. To compare it to my experience in India, to take strength and fix myself knowing that it could be a lot worse. To appreciate the food I have, that I can eat. To look at others and think that I could have a life like theirs.

“Your struggle is real and individual Savannah. What you feel doesn’t change, and you shouldn’t compare it to anything else because it’s yours.”

“But I sometimes I think I’m just so stupid and horrible for not appreciating all that I have. And I try to, and it doesn’t work. I flip through my memories and think how selfish of me to be wrapped up in my own world when people are struggling day to day and living under four poles and a tarp, or a lean-to against a wall, or a cot under a tree. And it doesn’t work.”

I was crying now and yanking the playdoh apart.

“And what does it say about me,” I paused, collecting myself, “what does it say about me, when I go to this place and I end up wanting to kill myself, and I have to *leave* to survive,

because if I didn't, I wouldn't have come home. And then I have this thing with my eating, and I hate it. And sometimes I say to myself, 'please stop, Savannah.' Please just stop hating yourself."

"Do you want to talk about India?"

I paused, closing my eyes. Wetness warmed my face, still swollen from my efforts to purge. Did I finally want to talk about the knives I teased against my skin? About Auntie? The dreams of death? The isolation? The days of silence? Nothing else was working.

"I guess," I said.

Recovery

My story has a happy ending (beginning?). I will graduate University of Montana this semester with “Scholastic Honors” and a 3.9ish G.P.A. This summer and fall, I will take Anatomy and Physiology, ace the GRE, and apply to Occupational Therapy Master’s and Doctorate programs.

I am no longer plagued with bingeing episodes.

I haven’t purchased laxatives in over a year.

I haven’t gone longer than 12 hours without food.

I have *no fear* that I will relapse.

Anybody can develop an eating disorder. My background certainly does not contain any triggering factors for an eating disorder. In middle school and high school, I was often teased as being “too positive” and “too bubbly.” I enjoyed positive interactions and connections with others. I was relatively sheltered growing up, and I experienced no single traumatic event that single-handedly pushed me into disordered eating. I was not abused in any form, and I lived in an affluent household with food security. All my physical, emotional, mental needs were met growing up.

I had a reasonably accomplished childhood and adolescence. As a kid, I grew up in small towns in Kansas and Northern Idaho. I started on varsity basketball my freshman year and started on varsity volleyball soon after. I was First Team All-State as a sophomore in basketball and League MVP as a senior in volleyball. As a high-school junior, I was selected as one of sixty-two recipients of the Department of State’s YES Abroad scholarship and received a fully-funded

exchange to Ghaziabad, India. I scored a 32 on my ACT. I was one of thirty-two incoming freshman to be awarded the four-year Presidential Leadership Scholarship to attend University of Montana. I was a Resident Assistant for two years. My sophomore summer of college, I spent 50 days solo backpacking in Europe.

Some of these accomplishments greatly influenced who I am today. Some of them did not. My point is, throughout this “highly accomplished” period, I appeared to be accomplished, responsible, and “with it.” I was respected, intelligent, and mature. Yet, I hated myself. I hated my body and my appearance. From age 17 to 21, I suffered extreme distress from disordered eating. Nobody knew aside from a select few. I was not bullied, and I had a set of close friends. Yet, I used to say that if a genie ever gave me three wishes, I would wish for a flatter tummy, smaller thighs, and world peace.

Before I went to India, I dealt with severe body dysphoria issues, low self-esteem, and undiagnosed and unrecognized anxiety. Coming home from India was more the “straw that broke the camel’s back” than it was a cause of my eating disorder. It was only after India that I discovered – and was willing to implement – means to combat the “root” of my problem.

My eating disorder spiraled in college, as they are wont to do. Perhaps exacerbated by stress, loneliness, or fear, my eating disorder demanded a world where I *needed* to be skinnier. I tried to “outsmart” myself. I used my Flex Dollars and bought Jesse Hall an “appreciation bowl” – say something you like about yourself, and you get a piece of candy. In reality, it was so I couldn’t spend that money on myself. I did the same thing with my weekly allowance for food. I spent Monday and Tuesday binging and feasting so that by Wednesday morning I *had* to fast because my account was empty. It wouldn’t be credited until Sunday. Often, my plan didn’t

work. By Thursday or Friday, I was so hungry that I spent my own money on food. Each week I tested my self-control.

Then, February 2018 came along. I don't know how to express the utter fear and devastation that gripped me when I had my first successful purging session a la throat. It was a surreal experience. It was almost overpowered by relief and a terrible, horrible, ugly feeling of validation. I have purposely not described those moments in detail for two very important reasons: 1) In the midst of my eating disorder, I sought out personal stories, techniques, and experiences of other bulimics and used them to construct an idea of how I *should* purge, binge, and fast. I do not want the darkest times of my life inspiring another person to further their distress and pain. And 2) I have refused to reflect on them. I have purposely and deliberately avoided trying to remember those days. It scares me, sometimes, when I think about it: would I have been so dedicated and desperate to beat my eating disorder if I had *not* thrown up? I don't know. Perhaps this is another thing I'll need to revisit at another time, or perhaps this is for the best. After all, I don't hate my body or food anymore. And, if these are the results I've been wanting for years, perhaps it's best to let it be.

For a long time, I struggled to self-validate my experience. Many times, I believed that my eating disorder was all in my head, and that the distress it caused me was the epitome of superficial, first-world privilege. To any reasonable, logical, and rational person, one can look at my situation and say there are greater sufferings in the world. *Comparisons* focuses so heavily on my experiences in India, as, in my lowest moments, I would often think back and reflect upon my experiences with a critical and judgmental eye: how *could* I be “suffering” when there was “truer suffering” elsewhere? However, as any good therapist will tell you, the road to healing and health requires a dose of self-validation. It took a long time for me to accept that my distress and

my feelings were valid and real and important. I needed to understand that I could still be in pain while others were in pain as well, and, while their situation might be objectionably worse, my pain still *hurt*.

They say that once you have an eating disorder, you are always in recovery. That every day is an uphill battle, that you will struggle with diseased thoughts and distorted thinking and desires to starve or binge and consume. I don't know if this is true. Every day, I take 40mg of fluoxetine, an off-brand of Prozac. When I regularly take my medication, my anxiety and stress around food and weight dissipates. I can remember what it *used to feel like*, but I no longer feel as if something else is possessing my brain and body. I am no longer compelled to hurt myself with food. Now, only remnants of my habits peek through. If I skip a meal, trickles of pride tell me to skip the whole day. I struggle to go out to eat late at night – a strict temporal schedule still ghosts my consciousness. I stick to the foods I know taste good, because it's hard to venture outside of a zone I'm trying to make comfortable. It's become easier to admit that I'm hungry, though. When I was struggling, I would become angry at people who said "I'm hungry" or "I'm starving! What are we eating?" I was angry at how *casual* others were around hunger, how easily they admitted their needs! But now I can say, "I'm hungry, let's eat," and I try and say it with pride. I still struggle to not compare my legs in windows. I've noticed that I avoid mirrors more, in case I try and dissect my body. These are issues I am still working through, but I can happily say that I am making positive progress towards a better self-image and self-confidence.

My medication truly helps. Perhaps my eating disorder was the result of some wacky chemistry in my brain or vacillation of pubescent hormones. Maybe I'll be on medication for the rest of my life. I don't know. But it's easier to think and feel and be *myself* now. And if this is recovery, I'll gladly take it.