To Feel Better

Savannah Woods

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For months on end, I’d jolt awake to cramps, urges, and sometimes crawled my way to the bathroom, sat on the toilet, and hoped a gurgling under the bottom of my left ribs. I held my breath when the horrible, bowel-crushing farts and you think ing, bitter, stinky nightmares. You lay in your bed and you fart rancid, hurts. It’s gross. And it’s humiliating. Nights become brutal, throat-chok There is no way to pleasantly or politely describe laxative abuse. It

accidentally thrown some wrapped mints in the trash.

looked like black spider legs. It was too cold to walk. My fingers rubbed my breath. Below, the parking lot was covered in snow and ice, and the trees brushed off the dirt, and crammed the stick in.

Dulcolax 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 Dulcolax, 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 sup

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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 associ

it.

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.

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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 finished my Dulcolax 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.

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My tongue latched to the roof of my mouth. My throat muscles worked to rip me open. “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 mushed banana, and the crumbs 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.

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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 twenty pounds, but those twenty 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 a sweat. The slogan on Dulcolax 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 Dulcolax. 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 acidy burp. Who could I call? Should I go into the emergency room? They would laugh at me. But it got the job done: I felt thinner, empty, lighter. I was addicted to that feeling of being empty, weightless.

Mom wouldn’t laugh, 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-a-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 eye. “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 Dulcolax. The cashier rang up my purchases with the blank, haunted gaze of someone having to work on Christmas Day. I

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By Christmas Day, my head ached and my iron will had fractured and deteriorated. I was so ugly, snuck into the bathroom, 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 Dulcolax. The cashier rang up my purchases with a blank, haunted gaze of someone having to work on Christmas Day. I

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couldn’t speak to Mom on the way back; my heart hurt, and I cradled my purchases.

Mom’s sad, green eyes were still too 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.

Why did I do this? I knew it was stupid.

I asked, “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 ten 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 woman—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 were labored and they echoed, and the stairwell became a plastic container that steamed with my overcooked breath.

I started crying on the fifth set, settling on the eleventh 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 it 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.

Only now can I retrospectively diagnose myself: I had “Another Specified Feeding or Eating Disorder,” according to the new and improved 2013 Diagnostic & Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, fifth edition. But I didn’t know that. And I still don’t know why.

When I was young, my self-awareness of my body came gradually, forming a hypersensitivity 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. Yet, 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 knobly 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.
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ceptable 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.

Why did I do this? I knew it was stupid.
I asked, “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,
looking.

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 it 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.

Only now can I retrospectively diagnose myself: I had “Another Spec-
ified Feeding or Eating Disorder,” according to the new and improved 2013
Diag nostic & Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, fifth edition. But I
didn’t know that. And I still don’t know why.

When I was young, my self-awareness of my body came gradually,
forming a hypersensitivity 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. Yet, 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, Sav-
nannah, 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 dimple and my nails wrote red lines of failure on my skin like an author editing his book. No. Not good enough. 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? I felt nothing for my reflection; I hated her.

My sophomore year, my urges broke free and I spiraled into binging 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?

POETRY

SMOKE FOR DIVINITY, YOU
Gill Ritchie

It’s about talking about Hell—a layered shame, insolence karmic inflation, swelling, heat. circles in the desert

It’s about seeking Heaven like there are no words, chasing salvation of Other and others. chasing the dark corners of the mind

L-ve means discernment means I pick It, You in the end—in the every time

people are company and good company is good thoughts and one thought and many and L-ve and I say to You, what a heart-wrenching surprise. what a fucking astonishing universe.

the more we ask, the more we receive, always I choose Truth, a salve for open wounds.

the ghosts of our holy men kneeling in a pew covered in blood and white linens, no repose we ask to suffer with Christ, hands outstretched— it feels good to suffer “we are sinners”

G-d only knows the shame of holiness, far too easy to find that Hell can be comfortable.

—church, relaying something we know almost nothing about and we read like a book and there is still good in the world I fucking know it.

Coherence. two sides of a coin

the L-ve you give in the dark is the L-ve you’ll be reckoned with