“To Hell and Back”

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Sitting down to write this essay is like facing a very persuasive demon, a hideous fiend that may rear its ugly head at any moment. Every time I turn a corner in my life, I am afraid that this personal devil will take hold of me. When I see its life-diminishing effects in the tired eyes of others, I am reminded of the damage it can and has done. This demon is anorexia and with it I have been to hell and back.

How have eating disorders impacted my life? Perhaps a better question is, how have they not? They say the body is a temple; if that is the case, my temple has been pillaged, torn down and many aspects of my life have been sacrificed to its altars. Never have I been able to have a sound relationship with anyone, friend or otherwise, because I cannot help but think about and envy how much prettier, how much skinnier than me, they are. I cannot love someone easily, nor can I totally give myself to him emotionally, because I constantly worry that he is judging me, and I cannot look in the mirror without judging myself.

My own Paradise Lost, my personal slow and painful descent into hell, began in about seventh grade. I was always of the chubbier disposition, but I had never really thought about it until hormones started to kick in around me. I realized that my best friend was a stick-thin goddess while I still retained what my mother insisted was “baby fat.” I didn’t feel like a baby anymore, so I didn’t understand why I still had to look like one. I had never thought being over one hundred pounds at age 11 was a big deal, but when I did, the realization stung me, a sense of helplessness set in, and the walls of my temple began to crumble.

My insecurities manifested in various ways. I plucked my too-thick eyebrows into barely-there thin lines; I colored my hair all different hues, insistent upon the fact that the right one would change everything. I talked back to my parents and picked fights with my skinny friends. No fight was more injurious to me, though, than was the one I picked with food, which I decided had to become my mortal enemy for my life to turn around.

As soon as I started to lose weight, people noticed. The attention fed my desire to lose even more: boys called me “hot” and I finally began to rival my now-ex-best friend in skinniness. But it was never enough. The disease consumed me and I always had to lose more. At thirteen, I weighed 81 pounds, my skin was sunken and my arms were as thin as sticks. Every bone in my body jutted out as if it could no longer stand the containment of my pale grey skin, and the black under my eyelids deeply contrasted the whites of my eyes; I felt beautiful. No pair of pants was small enough to fit me without alteration, which I found so utterly and inexplicably satisfying. I felt a sense of fulfillment at this point in my life, one that no food could have ever brought me. I ignored the pleas of my family and teachers and friends and soldiered on. I avoided mirrors for fear that they would staunch my delight; one look and I found every imperfection imaginable staring back at me.

I saw my depleted energy and thinning hair as signs of triumph; I sacrificed the enjoyment that everyone else my age was experiencing from eating, playing sports, and living life, upon the altars of my frail temple. In one minute, I went from being satisfied
with myself to screaming with frustration at what I saw as my bulging stomach and general hideousness. By the time my Bat-Mitzvah came around, I was no longer enjoying the fruits of my victory in the war with food. My hair was wiry and no longer in abundance, people no longer appreciated my weight loss but rather they murmured to each other about “my illness” whenever they saw me. Why had everyone lost interest in me? Why weren’t boys gathering around me like they used to? Finally, my mother dragged me to a nutritionist after two years of fighting; I had had enough of the negative attention and began to recover, albeit slowly. I could no longer bear the warnings of stunted growth and infertility – of the possibility of never being able to have a family when I grew up. I wanted to be left alone, and so I began to heal.

Every now and then I would go for a few weeks without eating full meals. On the alternating weeks, I would gluttonously binge like I had never eaten before. I went from being skinny, to being chubby, to skinny, and chubby again. I still have yet to find a happy medium.

At age seventeen, I received a prank phone call from some younger boys asking me to join weight watchers. I weighed 120 pounds, and I was only 5 feet 3 inches tall. It’s not hard to imagine how I reacted. Immediately the weight began to drop off. My past was so well known in my small private school that people immediately noticed what was going on. A few months later, just after my eighteenth birthday, I was in a serious car accident. I was hit on the passenger side of my car by a drag racer in broad daylight. His car flipped over and rolled across the two-lane road, eventually landing on his passenger who had not been wearing a seatbelt. My car hit a tree. Both were totaled. I was remarkably okay physically, with a few minor burns and an injured neck, but emotionally this accident set me over the edge and sent me reeling. The loss of control that I had experienced became too much to handle. The only control I had was over my consumption of food. I fell into a serious depression, stopped eating, started taking sleeping pills; I seriously doubted my readiness to attend college. This was the darkest part of my life thus far, and I did not have the ability to see the light at the end of the tunnel. That fiend had returned to bring me back down into the murky depths of a personal hell that is indescribable. It was as if I was floating through a life that felt empty and unimaginably terrifying.

Every time I encountered food a voice hissed within, reminding me of my unacceptable outward appearance and prohibiting me from breaking my severe diet. I discovered the effects of laxatives, and took them regularly; sometimes I made myself so sick I couldn’t eat for two days - what a relief this was to me, the effortlessness of it. With every laxative I took, I was able to expel the toxic thoughts that swam in my mind. Every trip to the bathroom was a breath of fresh air because it meant I wouldn’t have to think, that I could just get rid of everything within me. I saw a psychologist and decided to attend Emory after all, realizing that nothing better awaited me at home where everything reminded me of emptiness. At a mere 103 pounds and with a disposition as fragile as cracked glass, I went to college and threw myself into situations that helped me to feel outside of myself, even if for only small amounts of time. This was the best decision I could have made, and soon I began to see glimmers of light breaking through the darkness. Fleeting moments kept me afloat and slowly drowned out the hisses of my devil. My temple, though weakened and broken, could, in fact, be rebuilt.
I am twenty years old and still waver at the sight of a mirror. Since the seventh grade, I have never had a healthy relationship with food, and I fear I never will. It is so difficult to build a healthy self-esteem, and yet it is so easy to destroy one. My primary response to trauma or disappointment is to skip meals entirely and then to revel in the rumbles of my empty stomach. The hardest part of my day is waking up and deciding what to wear, because every pair of pants is too tight on me and no shirt is loose enough to cover the rolls of fat that I cannot seem to avoid no matter how far away I stand from the mirror. I have considered covering all the mirrors in my apartment, but every time I do I think of the look my mother gave me the day she discovered my laxative habit. It was as if I was committing a sacrilege, destroying my body, a body that she created and that she already had to defend from me so many times in the past. Her glassy eyes, wet with tears, seemed to look right through me, searing that little devil within and pleading with it to let me be. This was the first time I realized I had been hurting people other than myself every time I wracked my temple with instability; my infallible mother had been standing beside me all along as the fiend took hold of me, and she had been fighting so hard to make it let go. As hard as she tried, she could not battle the brute for me, I had to do that myself. Since that day I think of the pain I saw in her eyes, not just a reflection of my own pain but rather a pain I had inflicted upon her on the battlefield of my war with food. This is a wound neither of us will ever forget.

I have been lifted from the darkness so many times by my family that I feel that I owe them my life. Without them, I truly believe I would have been lost in the dark depths of depression and anorexia for the rest of my life. Because of them I was able to rebuild my temple more solidly and develop a relationship with a boy who keeps me afloat, who tells me I’m beautiful just to counteract the thoughts he knows fill my mind every minute of the day. And while I still wake up every morning feeling like I need to go on a diet, feeling the weight of the food I ate the day before pressing on me and pulling me down, I have a support system that pulls me back up before it is too late.