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The Whole Banana

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The Whole Banana

I used to think about how I would tell my mom about my eating disorder. I imagined us sitting down at a table, coffee mugs clutched between fingers and thumbs. We would chat about normal things: our dog, the new yoga studio, how I did on my finals, and then, when silence hung between our bodies for a moment, maybe two, I would start my spiel. A spiel that I have rehearsed on the treadmill, in the shower, and in the quiet afternoon walks across campus. A spiel that is eloquent and contains the perfect number of anecdotal stories to explain why I feel the way I do and why this disorder is harder to shake than people think. I imagined that she would cry because she feels responsible, but I would assure her that she is not, and I don't cry. Amidst my hidden shame and struggle, I would want to keep my chest puffed, to remain the girl that she thought I was, the girl I wish I was, for just a moment longer.

I am curious about myself

about the way my body easily fits into someone else's,
about the way my head is always begging for meaning
even when the meaning is stretched way past the truth.

My stomach feels like it inhaled an entire vat of helium, like every piece of food I have ever consumed is sitting in a stonewalled pit behind my belly button, like there is a medicine ball, around twelve pounds, weighing me down. I am sitting in the lobby of my dorm. I am eighteen. My left leg is crossed over my right, and my arms are folded, holding the flaps of my jacket

together over my stomach. I should not have eaten those animal crackers last night. I should not have sat in that chair with my friends on the floor around me, and let the conversation, the laughter, distract me from the food that I mindlessly dipped, bit, chewed, and swallowed.

The party in my eighth-grade math class was about halfway over when I thought for the first time that I was fat. I was a few Oreos and nearly a full glass of pink lemonade in. I was sitting in the back of the classroom, wearing a green V-neck and Victoria's Secret cropped leggings. I looked down at my stomach, my thoughts muddled by the consumption of too much sugar and the fact that my friends were not eating as much as me, and felt fat.

I was not fat, but I felt fat, and at age thirteen, I hadn't yet learned the difference between feeling and being.

I did not grow into the type of woman
that men want to love.

I do not sit on street at the corner of steady and reassuring

I do not wake up in the morning with
beauty clinging to my skin like the dew on grass

I am not the type of woman.

I had not gone to church in months, so I picked a row in the back, a row that seemed safe and removed from the swaying stems of bodies that were dancing even though the music had not

started yet. As I stood there, my knees locked, I was hungry. I am always hungry. In high school, one of my best friends knew anorexia, and she was open about the realities of their relationship. I

remember walking down the stairs at the back of the school, stairs that were covered by the shade of late-summer green trees and ivy-warmed brick. The metal railing was cool beneath my right hand, and I told my friend that I could never be anorexic because I loved eating too much.

As I stood in this church, the air around me thick with loving praises to God, I cannot focus on anything but eating, my friend, and the fact that I should not be so familiar, so comfortable, with

hunger.

When I was eighteen, I ate Ritz crackers in the morning, the tiny holes overflowing with peanut

butter, and the buttons of salt clinging to the balm on my lips. When I was nineteen, I ate a peach, pitted, or half of a banana, overly ripe. I realized that when my cheeks thin and my hips pop out, slightly, against the pockets of my jeans, he will tell me that I am beautiful. He will

offer me a second of eye contact that lingers above the plastic table.

He told me I was beautiful with his eyes, browned and quiet, on a warm summer afternoon in Kentucky when I was nineteen. He told me I was beautiful for my words, for the way I thought, as he dipped curly, slightly orange, French fries in ketchup and I watched, afraid of any bloat that would crowd my stomach and prove to him I was an unfit recipient of affection. He convinced me I was beautiful when he slung his arm around my waist and kissed my collarbone, when he looked at me lavishly and praised my body as something greater than my words. He will only think I am beautiful if my body is small – I convince myself of this and commit this girl to

memory.

We are standing in our kitchen, the white light of midmorning poking through the bay window above the sink, glinting against the bumblebees on my socks.

“This is going to sound crazy,” I say, making sure that my eyes do not ever look directly at hers, at her, while I am speaking. “You promise you won’t tell me I’m crazy?”

She said yes. She probably nodded her head, her forehead probably creased, the dark hair of her eyebrows nearly touching, but I did not look up. I take a breath.

“I feel comfortable when I am hungry. I am comfortable when I am hungry.”

When I finally look up at her, I see worry creased into her forehead. She tells me that I should not want to be hungry. I know this, I tell her that I know this, but the way the air has settled between us, the way our minds tick and our thoughts circulate in such different directions, I know she does not really know what I mean. No matter how many times she greets my words with a nod, gracious and loving, she will not contemplate the pita chips that she is eating after she swallows, as she leaves the kitchen, or when she is trying to fall asleep.

When I finally look up at her, her eyebrows are furrowed, nearly touching, as I imagined they would be, and I wish I could love myself the way that she loves me. She rubs one foot against the other, her knee is popped, and she tells me that she just wants me to be okay, that we need to find a way to work through this. She does not allow her eyes to cloud with fear and judgment; she does not corral me into guilt. She wraps me in a hug, in a promise that even though I am not okay right now, I will be.

The constant hum of air conditioning filled the spaces between our thoughts. I balanced a mug, teal and Anthropology vibrant, on my legs that were folded beneath a blanket. You meticulously shifted pens this way and that on the arm of the couch while you fumbled into asking me how I was doing with my “eating and stuff.” I focused on the summertime bug that was slamming his body against our front door, begging to come in so he could touch the light that taunts him through the glass window. “I’m doing okay,” I say, “better, I think, than I was before,” and you finally look up at me. A little smile opens the crease of your lips and you tell me that you are glad I am doing better. I shift my focus back to the bug, his steady pounding a subtle complement to the hum of the air conditioner and realize that tonight is the first time that I have said I am doing better and meant it.

My mother and I sip on warm cinnamon apple juice in little paper cups as we walk through the produce section at Trader Joe’s. I place a sack of purple sweet potatoes, a plastic container of baby tomatoes, a butternut squash, two red onions, a cluster of multicolored carrots, and a mesh bag of brussel sprouts in the cart. We inspect the purple sweet potatoes with giddiness because we have never seen them before. She asks if she can keep one at home to try, and I begrudgingly agree, already thinking about meals and recipes that will have the purple potato as the centerpiece.

We throw away our paper cups. I folded mine in half and was fiddling with the rim in place of fiddling with my hangnails. She crumpled hers into a ball and hid it in her hand. The sample station had replaced the risotto bites with squares of peppermint fudge brownies, and we both placed a bite in a napkin. She nodded her head enthusiastically as the peppermint fudge passed

between her tongue and teeth, and her eyebrows furrowed slightly, as they always do when she is talking, thinking, or trying to show a dramatic reaction.

As we walked around the store, collecting pumpkin seeds, almond butter, moderately cheap wine, tahini, and other staples, I was not thinking about the bite of fudgy brownie, the calories, or the sugar. As we split a granola bar in the refrigerated section, one that we had both been itching to try, I did not talk my way out of the hunger my stomach loudly proclaimed. As we drove home, we talked casually about recipes that we would have to try next time I was home. We spoke about food with ease.

The yoga instructor had a brown, curly man bun that was the perfect complement to his tousled, California beach drawl. When the class starts, he turns the lights down and the people around me begin centering their bodies, minds, and legs on the middle of their mats, I suck in my stomach, just a little bit.

“Before we start,” he says, his voice smoothing the tension out of the back of my neck, “I want you all to thank your bodies for coming to the mat this morning. Thank your bodies for being a body, for being your body.”

I exhale deeply and let go of the corset-like breath that drew my stomach near my spine. I close my eyes and speak to my stomach, my legs, my arms, my back, my ankles, fingers, and toes.

Thank you for allowing me to come to the mat this morning. Thank you for everything you allow me to do.

He brings us out of meditation and tells us to rise, to draw our hands together and point our hands towards the sky. He tells us to breathe.

I tell my body to breathe. *Inhale*. I tell my body to be a body. *Exhale*.

I tell body that it is strong. *Inhale*. I thank my body for being strong. *Exhale*.

As the practice comes to a close and I totter into a balanced tree pose, I close my eyes and make branches with my arms. I pretend that my foot is rooted to my mat, to the ground, to the muddled compilation of belly breaths, flyaway farts, and sweat. He tells us to switch legs. I readjust and close my eyes again; I know that my foot is rooted to the mat, to the yoga studio, to the breaths that drift through my lungs and allow me to live in a body that can become a tree, that can be rooted. I let my body be a body.
