

# My First Love, Anorexia

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Writing 101: *Memories and Society*

Instructor: Leslie Maxwell

[Halloween candy. 2017]

I stripped them furiously, the candy bars, with red desire. And while Snickers, Milky Way, and Twix churned and slid warmly down my gullet, I hated myself. Come dinnertime, I'd stave off rice--off any real substance, and then beg my father to please take me to the gym so I could obsess over my stomach on the elliptical, told him he needed to, just like I needed to convince him that his 13-year-old had nothing in mind but her cardiovascular health.

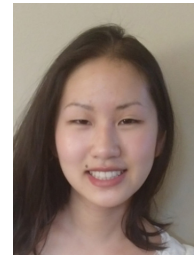
Why wouldn't I let anyone else in on this dirty ritual? I knew it was wrong. I also knew that it felt impossibly good, this sin so deep it made me godly. Siddhartha had starved himself and found Nirvana. I would too.

And so, Anorexia began to materialize. A heady jasmine smoke hung around his lips in the beginning, as he took the form of a leather-clad road dog, the only real, grown-up man who'd ever paid me any attention.

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When I was young, magazines blared "thinspo" in the supermarket, worming into my mind. I now recognize rather than worship these internet trends, and shudder to think that young girls may be experiencing the same pain I did. Entire industries feed off the anorexic standard, a just-quite-unattainable concept of *thin*. Diagnosed or not, so many sufferers berate themselves for failing to conform. It's nothing short of disgusting, that we are taught so prevalently to hate ourselves, and love hating ourselves. I'm not free of this yet; I run from the forest even as roots wrap around my ankles, dragging me back when I'm not careful.

It's hard to re-channel the mindset of a young anorexic, but rather than giving me a means to accept my breast-less, ass-less adolescent self (which is normal for that age!), I believe Anorexia actually amplified my insecurities. The difference was that he pushed me towards concrete goals. My self-dubbed 'negative curves' had failed to earn me the male gaze that seemed so golden. By starving myself, I could emaciate my stomach so that comparatively the rest of me was bigger. Like my servings, scooped into measuring cups and weighed, I was concave, merely half a girl. If I couldn't construct myself like a Barbie, if I couldn't pack plastic onto myself



Marina Chen

At my rather competitive high school in a Seattle suburban satellite, I wrote often about history, literature, and humanity broadly, but never

about myself. Come time to select my first college courses, Leslie Maxwell's Writing 101 course, *Memoirs and Society*, called to me immediately as a way to do so. Professor Maxwell's welcoming teaching mode and the opportunity to synthesize experiences and societal issues became not just an essential tool but a lifeline as I processed my life in real time. I chose to write about my tryst with Anorexia because it truly haunts me almost every moment of my life, even almost two years after my hospitalization. I hope that this piece can serve as more than an informational pamphlet that's handed to scared young girls perched at the precipice of recovery. I hope my personification of Anorexia and how I shrugged him off will tug at the innermost thoughts, the ones you think are nestled deep within but are actually symptoms of a common disorder, for at least a few other people. This story has sadly been heard many times before, so I wanted to write my piece in a way that was as unique as my experience. I'm grateful for the support I had for my choices, and I hope Anorexia's control is made comprehensible and tangible for every reader throughout the text.

I am still uncomfortable admitting that I had an eating disorder to others and even writing these paragraphs for *Deliberations*, but somehow I never felt judged in Writing 101. Freewriting, organizing my thoughts, peer reviewing, and adding sources in a graduated process allowed me to forge a real story out of my memories, which had always begged to be written about. I didn't know where to start--didn't know which aspect of the complex, tangled mess that is an eating disorder was most important--so I started chronologically. Analyzing something so personal, as both a sufferer and an outsider, helped me, in the end, feel more free. Something academic, it seemed, could actually aid me personally.

I extend my gratitude to Dr. Sheryl for her brilliant edits, Professor Maxwell for her encouragement and for always offering a welcoming space, my parents without whom there would be no story to tell, Nini, who was always there, and Sophie Zhu, an effervescent mind who was my first and only outside pair of eyes during the writing process.

for curves, I would carve them out of my flesh like it was marble. Meanwhile, Anorexia, my faultless man, egged me on. He made me feel desirable.

The other issue was the value pounded into me by years of comments from relatives—you're stick thin, you have ballet legs, that's what makes you pretty. My

family's culture allows for frank comments about looks, and I felt the pressure to live up to my image. I also didn't think it was possible for me to have an eating disorder. I see myself reflected in a statement in an NPR article: "I'm a woman of color and I certainly didn't know that people like me had eating disorders" (Meraji), believing rather that anorexia was only for rich white women. I've always lamented with friends who are also people of color, through media consumption and pressures in our communities, that beauty standards are traditionally Eurocentric. Built off the white woman and imposed upon the woman of color, they instill a bone-deep sentiment of being lesser than, often leading to physical pain—see skin-bleaching, hair-straightening, eyelid-slicing, and self-starvation. I wasn't, would never be, but had quietly always wanted to be blonde-haired and glamorous kneeling beside the toilet. The shared act of food restriction, however, lent me



a brush with glory. This dual belief, that I couldn't be a "good" anorexic because of how I looked and that I was born to exemplify a starched-white thinness, allowed Anorexia to leech off me for years once he had planted his seeds.

Later, it would be only my parents' furious, quiet love, pressed like a diamond from the stress of a stoic home, that coaxed me off the final edge.

[Water. 2018]

The way water hits an empty stomach was a sick pleasure like no other. To him, it was high-inducing, the crown jewel on a 500-calorie day. It was a special prize that coaxed purrs out of his bile-crusted mouth, and I would do anything to please him.

[Care package. August 2019]

My guiltiest memory is throwing away a gift from my mother.

At the same time Anorexia was sinking his hooks bone-deep into me—around 3 years ago—I began writing poetry. My first writing camp was at Kenyon in Ohio, where group pictures reveal that my meals grew smaller, into scant fist sized plates. My second was at UVA.

There, my mother mailed me a package, lovingly wrapped with reused tissue: chocolate, cookies, caramels, all the things I canonically loved, even choosing sugar free chocolate because she noticed I had started tiptoeing around junk foods like they were tripwires. My heart aches at what happened next:

*I tear at cellophane, blinded by lust for these sweets, my favorites that I've deprived myself of for 3 weeks at camp. Before my roommate can return, I'm shoveling caramel after caramel, square after square, biscuit after biscuit into my mouth. This is ecstasy. Then Anorexia wraps his loving arms around me, splits my forearms with his nails; I spit. He drags me by my hair to the trash, and somehow, I've smeared my half-chewed treats onto tissue and packed the box back together, and now I'm dribbling chocolate-tainted saliva over the cardboard my mother chose just for me. Spit, and I am seething at her for these extra calories, I am covering the evidence with paper towel, and I am*

walking away with my stomach sucked in, and all that matters is Anorexia's praise,  
not my mother miles away at home, so proud of herself for mailing her heart to her  
daughter.

I almost can't keep writing.

I process this mistake so I can learn to love her right. When this memory knifes  
its way through its shackles, I vow afresh to never take her love for granted again.  
I would truly rather leave this life than never pay her back for that lost love, lying  
wasted in its own sweet rot in a landfill, even today.

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The following poems (abridged here with ellipses) were written in 2019, up to  
my time at UVA. Reading them back, I recognize the strain of beauty standards and  
family tensions that seem foreign today, their decay now being peat for my growth.  
In addition to this, they always, always referenced food:

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Krispy Kreme, on cornflake trees, on the preeminence  
Of Christmas and the semipermeable membrane of decay.

... Blood stains my heather

Tee, or raspberry Bismarck / does, but I slip pink satin covers over the / red  
And write letters: Momma, forgive me; it was late and I remembered him again.

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i fear we are unsatisfactory fruit  
misaligned.  
unfulfilled pear  
bruised apple.  
don't waste your diet, honey,  
on unripe calories ...

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My parents' skin  
hardens into apricot marble.  
Tremor cuts into candy  
waters ...  
Pacifists on beaches  
fantasize—Manhattan burning

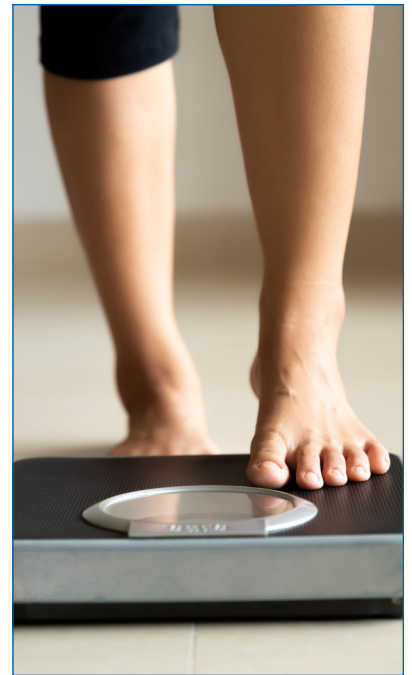
into ash—

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my vagina is male  
and mixes strawberry  
in hotel bathrooms  
my legs and blowing  
onto the mirrors

lemonade  
spreading  
fog  
like  
curd  
on  
toast

\*





I remember, in restaurants  
 my father always asking  
 for *dressing on the side*  
 of salads, my little brain  
 imbued with such sophistication  
 as eating pure, raw  
     untainted  
 green leaves ...  
 as if the glucose, brash,  
     posing as tartness  
 would seep into the holes  
 in my authenticity  
 like I were Swiss cheese,  
 into the sponge of  
 my brain, into the sponge  
 of      my future ...



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All written before my hospitalization, I cannot *not* read these back as the memoirs of an unaware anorexic.

*[Thai food. Late October 2019]*

My father was picking me up from school, and I hadn't eaten since 11 AM. Sad eyes peering through the cracks in his stoic facade, he explained my recent EKG results, which found my resting heart rate to be 40 beats per minute—20 below the normal healthy range. And despite this, the fact that I was 40 beats away from zero—that my body had resorted to cutting energy stores from my heart—I was proud. Anorexia was proud. He held me in big arms as my father drove me to the hospital. They won't tear us apart. I pushed, told my father I was fine; he mentioned something about no choice—a choice Anorexia needed. Again I pushed. Long waits, long talks, doctors, nurses, parents wheeling me in and out of rooms, corridors, chairs—wheeled you, as if we are weak. Anorexia hid behind doors. I'll see you when you get out. Get us out—wait, did his rippling chest feel a little less solid?

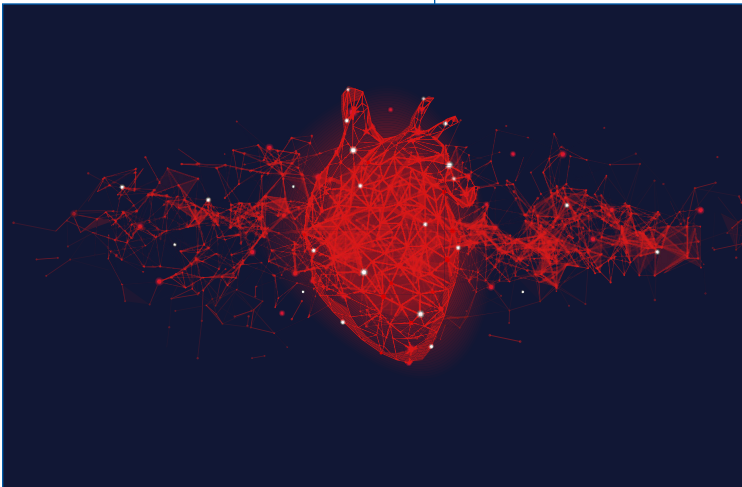
I found myself facing two steaming bags of Thai food. Curries, fragrant rice, Pad Thai. Everything that was beautiful and real and whole next to my parents' shattered hearts on the floor. I couldn't clean that tragedy up any way other than clearing my plate. Bloat would rise and expand my stomach into a blimp, hard and painful, worse

than ever; Anorexia actually raised his voice that day. Panic festered and pushed against my abdomen, tearing out by brute force.

But still, I ate.

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Asian family structures notoriously leave no room for emotion. As I grew out my bangs and grew more aware, I stopped telling my parents I loved them, stopped kissing their cheeks. It's not that I didn't want to. I could simply sense a boundary laying sizzling in the 2-foot space between us. *Don't touch*. It was not worth a hug to cross it.



Nevertheless, when I received indirect verbal affection from my father in the emergency room, it nearly broke us all. His voice strained with terror as he argued with my mother—*this is her life, we need to listen to the hospital, school can wait*. I don't blame my mother for not seeing the gravity of the situation, especially as the next day in the hospital was when I'd planned to turn in my early decision college application; (indeed, I still turned it in from the hospital bed and was accepted). However, in the midst of frantically emailing teachers and texting friends, it was nice to know my silent, unyielding father was staunchly in my corner. For years, he had tracked my movements with my phone, so time with friends was rare—my mother, similarly, had long prohibited me from taking walks alone. In other emotional instances, he writes emails to express his feelings, so his words that October night must have been a result of parental desperation. Forever, I will treasure them.



Later, I'd wonder: How could tensions with my parents have forced me into an eating disorder for some semblance of control? How could they also have been the ones who healed me?

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*[Hospital chicken. Late October 2019]*

5 PM: Dinner. The nurse brought in a tray heaving under the largest chicken breast I'd ever seen, alongside it a fat baked potato, steamed vegetables, and 2 pats of butter.

"I'll be back in 30 minutes," she said.

I eyed the meal wearily, casting glances at Anorexia in the corner, with his tail between his legs—scared of doctors, I guess. Eventually, I gave into long-suppressed deprivation. Anorexia's arch-nemesis was allowing me to eat. Okay. I'd sail the river of recovery, and eventually of triumph, in a boat of unseasoned chicken breast. Though I had always sorted food into good or bad, or amount of calories, eating my first meal sapped the meaning from food in a new way. Food was now fuel, the newfound heat on my skin, my heartbeat. It was warm soil healing the land after volcano flow. A spoon had never felt heavier.

Soon, however, fat distributed and redistributed around my body, padding my bare bones, tormenting me for months to come. I knew I would be faced with a near impossible choice: the painful road to health versus the instantaneous, seductive satisfaction of cutting calories.

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After this point, I began to question the beauty standards I'd always trusted; I discovered that the rose, so to speak, really does have thorns. As Anorexia intensifies his hold on millions of other sufferers, many attempt to take their own lives; one USA governmental statistic found that anorexia is the second most deadly psychiatric diagnosis ("Eating Disorder Statistics"). Some don't make it out alive. Knowing their pain, my heart breaks, for Anorexia does not arise from trivial vanity as some believe. Such cycles of destruction seem the only solution to self-hatred,

and linger stubbornly, even in the pain of healing—how many were close to the light before theirs were snuffed out?

*Come back, Anorexia whispered sorely.*

*[Goat cheese and pear. Late October 2019]*

Our silver minivan pulled in quietly to the driveway; the hospital still clung to my body like a plague. It had been the longest day and night of my life. My father cut pears and cheese, knife slipping slick through honeyed fruit, the beginning of a silent exchange of worry and affection.

Calories had never tasted so like resurrection, especially not from the tips of my own starvation-gilded fingers. I'd never had goat cheese before, fearful of the fat content, of enjoying food for taste. That night, I spread cheese on crackers on pears on cheese again until the plate looked like a promise. October night pulled me down, a happy drowning. The hospital had listed the conditions. Now I'd signed the deal.

Anorexia's dark brow furrowed. *Who the hell is this woman, pushing back.*

*[Pork and fennel. November 2019]*

A study on fathers' roles in their anorexic children's recovery saw "the theme of empowering the father to be a better parent" (Ma) emerging from each case.

But my father, my *Baba*, started at the peak of support and never stopped, compounding my gratitude for him, for the ancient cultural dynamic that tied us together. Even now, thinking of his home-cooked meals can bring me to tears. I watched him get into the rhythm of vacuum-sealing my lunch Thermos full of leftovers the next morning, moved to the point of guilt by his distress whenever he forgot. *It's ok*, I'd say, because such love was enough. *It's ok*, Anorexia would back me up, because no lunch meant a step in his direction.

My father rotated the dishes each evening to keep my curiosity stronger than the pull of restriction. I recall most potently a pork roast with fennel. I'd never tried fennel before; the tanginess soft with spice was a far cry from the concave quarter cups of oatmeal I'd spent the last months eating. Chinese parents really do show love through food. I have countless memories of my mother shaving apples and slicing oranges when I was a child, and she began this habit again to heal me, every morning and

afternoon. A flightless bird again, I took her hands as I stepped, quivering, into the unknown. For many recovering patients, loved ones are who lug our weight through diseased swamps when we are too weak to heal ourselves.

*[Almond milk. December 2019]*

From shifty glances at nutrition labels and hands lingering on stomachs, I've learned that Anorexia is a playboy. Hearing friends' diet-culture-tinged comments, I make panicked chastisements, fearing for not only their mentality but also their lives. I shudder to imagine how many friends' eating disorders go undiagnosed—how many are part of this public, secret romance, seeing that dark, sick man in the corner and thinking he's all solely for them. Because of my past, I notice things others don't. I'm sure I sound like a broken record to loved ones: Why curse carbs,





sugars, lipids when these are what keep life sparkling and our hearts full?

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Often, I am terrified that friends may think they are doing something normal or good, not recognizing they are actually eating themselves from the inside out. I'm reminded of a quote from Jesmyn Ward's memoir, *Men We Raped*. Ward writes of the unbearable pain of pervasive death in the Black community and how young people turn to drugs in the face of their grief: "I did not see the despair at the heart of our drug use" (Ward 34). She perfectly describes how humans take our destructive tendencies at face value, unaware of the leagues of hurt that lie beneath, undisturbed. This facade makes societal and personal catalysts much harder to process, escape, and even recognize. While not a perfect parallel, I know that anorexics feel this same desperation described by Ward, turning away from society and towards starvation for some semblance of control. These habits then become addicting, and soon the victim is lost, blinded to the original root of the pain. However, society, deeming it vanity, never sees this self-loathing and therefore never does anything to stop it. I was lucky to have a genuinely caring circle of support to shield me, to numb the pain. For example, I've now realized that my father, though he was harsh at times, never judged me.

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With the thermos packed with pork or stew or potatoes or eggs or rice, my father would pack an 8-ounce carton of vanilla almond milk. Sweet-cream almond met hearty, spiced meat on my palate--not exactly a classic combination. But this sludge of protein, carbs, and calcium was what padded my stomach first, then my back, then my ass. I'd never been this soft; the feeling was entirely alien. My cheeks hadn't been this rosy since second grade.

I chugged the dregs of calcium at the bottom of the carton.

Sometimes I resented the milk. It felt like a useless assignment when my stomach was already bulging. The after-lunch full-feeling debilitated even my ability to walk, due to both the beauty standards I was still harnessed to and my physical pain. All this after touting the normalcy of bloating to friends just days before.

Today, these feelings strike when I should have enjoyed myself—after a scoop of ice cream for pleasure or extra jam on my toast. I fear bloating because it makes me feel unattractive, as my young-self did. Because of this, bloating and fullness are Anorexia's favorite tools when he needs to reel me back.

*[Birthday cake. June 2020]*

I've made a birthday cake every year since I was 6. I love to bake, but these occasions were a slow march towards the torture of consumption--painstaking rituals of measurement as Anorexia held every added calorie over my head. On my 18th birthday, during the first COVID-19 lockdown, I sifted flour with cocoa and watched red food coloring swirl into batter.

*Why have you let me keep baking?* I asked the eating disorder in leather pants



leaning his long torso over the counter. He was reading the nutrition facts for the cream cheese softening on the counter.

*Because I like it when other people gorge on sweets, and you don't. And when you bake, you're the reason they do. The pigs,* he returned, not bothering to look up.

*Please let me go!* I begged.

No was the sweet response. Later, I brought a trembling knife to frosting. A piece for my best friend, for my parents, my brother. A piece for me.

I was like a reverse King Arthur, I thought; this cake was my rock, and the knife, my sword. Each bite was a legendary feat to me, an impossible feat. Frustratingly, it wouldn't have been this hard at a birthday party, around friends. This was no coincidence. Stress during the start of the pandemic was thick, palpable, buttercream—a perfect breeding ground for relapse. In one NPR article detailing this phenomenon, another patient noted that COVID-19 was an eating disorder's best friend: “[Anorexia is] always there if the conditions are right—or wrong, rather—for me to have a relapse. And so I feel like I can't let myself become complacent about it” (Noguchi). Because I'd experienced this, I knew this was the collective experience, and I was terrified, with only that serrated, crumb-smeared sword to keep me grounded. I was terrified for the girls who might be using extra free time to hate themselves in the mirror, for the boys who turned to restriction for control, for the people who took up calorie counting as a hobby. For them: *I can't let myself become complacent about it.*

Over the next week or so, I ate that goddamn cake, piece by piece.

*[Ice cream. August 2020]*

Tires screeched; I was home late, and I was supposed to move out that night. Veins buzzing too wildly for me to get food down, I wouldn't touch squash or wild rice. Anorexia purred; at this point, I had bound his limbs but hadn't had the strength to gag him.

My mother faced me with a choice. *Ice cream or you can't leave.*

I'd long feared ice cream; it was my siren, enchanting yet too steep of a caloric expense. I regarded my poor mother—thought of the way she'd dropped her own afternoons to look after mine. For my whole life, it had been difficult to view her commands of what to eat and when as in my best interests.

However, the wildness in her eyes that night, perhaps catalyzed by the realization that I'd be absent from her gaze within minutes and knowing what could happen again if I skipped meals, was different. What did she sacrifice for, if I couldn't let myself have butter pecan? For her sake, for the sake of her peace, calories became simple.

I choose the ice cream, swerving with one hand on the wheel on the road.

*[Fruit snacks. December 2020]*

Months later, my car door shut against the swirling chill of December nightfall. The heater whirled to life. I handed my grocery bag to my boyfriend in the passenger seat.

We'd decided to replicate a meme we'd seen: a Gushers sandwich with Fruit-by-the-Foot bread. A sandwich of my forbidden foods. Something Anorexia, who I'd successfully gagged in the trunk of the car, would hate. I'd thrown the thought of sacrifice, of loved ones, of health in his face. My history flickered in front of me in a projected shield: *starvation—my duty to lead friends far from this path—my mother worried, sleeping beside me in the hospital—flat stomach—calories added up on a calculator—every silent second of my father's love—muscle mass—the worth of my parents' lives against the temptation of emaciation.*

Something shifted with those empty calories--no, not empty, but memory-making-fruit-juice-filled bites. I laughed at my silly meal, such a ridiculous 2 AM dinner. It wasn't that I was healed; rather, after months of therapy, I was finally able to imagine Anorexia as an outside being, a hostile *other*. The imagined conversations, the whispers, the cold slick fingers stretched by bone—I wasn't sane for scoffing at their improbability, I was sane for finally recognizing their corruption. Societal evils of body image had coalesced into a literal *male gaze*, ash, and tendrils. Finally knowing this meant I could begin to truly protect myself. In the car, I could still hear Anorexia's muffled jabbing. I think I may always continue to hear him, but for the first time in years, I'd chosen myself, and it didn't hurt quite so bad.

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For years, in a twist of scientific fact, less calories meant more energy: I was powerful. This was the twisted law, the constitution that ruled my habits at the dinner table. I don't





know what issue or psychological habit anorexia decided to use as potting soil, sinking its roots coredeep. All I know is that I felt more valid as a woman when I starved myself: thinner, sexier, with no substance in which to find flaws. That delicious plastic sheen on a concave stomach, that creaseless skin, that excavated ribcage, we're all taught to want those things, right? So, I don't blame myself for ending up at the hospital after school one day, instead of at a club meeting. I don't blame myself for leaning into the faceless nurse at

midnight, at 2, at 4, knowing they were there to ensure my heart hadn't stopped, and seeing them as a zealot sees an angel. I don't blame myself for listening to that voice all those years as he whispered, seductively, purred, never screamed, *don't eat, stop, skip two meals, no food at school, 100 more crunches, two more pounds, don't eat don't eat no no. no no nonoNO.*

Even today, Anorexia still fights to maintain his grasp. I strive to break free, once and for all.



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