

The First Bite

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“You know you can’t leave until you eat all of it.”

I took a deep breath and groaned. How had it come to this? I am a grown woman, and besides didn’t she know that I couldn’t eat this sandwich. The nurse looked at the clock and sighed.

I looked down at my plate. Why can’t I eat this sandwich? The bread was fresh, the turkey was unspoiled, the cheese was not moldy; there was nothing unusual or offensive about it sitting there in the compartment of the institutional tray. I did the calculations in my head automatically. I had eaten the broccoli first: 10 calories per stalk. Then I ate the apple: 100 calories. I had drunk my milk: 130 calories. I had eaten more in this meal than I had eaten all last week; I just couldn’t eat this sandwich.

It was my first day of inpatient treatment for Anorexia Nervosa. My struggle with this exhausting disease began at age 12. Eating disorders are primarily anxiety driven and anxiety is something I know well. A hair on my shirt, a dust bunny in the corner, the slightly less than ninety degree tilt of the paper I am writing on, all of these things can throw me into a deep spiral of panic. Some students strive for A’s and B’s, I demand 100 percent. Overachievement is so common in my family that even the family tree is afraid to fail. I graduated with a 4.0 and numerous acceptance letters.

That Fall I started college with the same grueling expectations of myself and the new found freedom to starve myself to death. The pressures of college soon took their toll. Chasing perfection is like trying to fill up a bucket with no bottom. In a world of deadlines and expectations, I thirsted for control. I was dying to control.

One of my therapists once said, “You have a bad case of the shoulds. You need to control a situation to feel safe and stave off the anxiety but your sense of control is an illusion and you know it. When you can’t control anything else, at least you can control what goes into your mouth.”

I became reclusive and alienated. I quit the rugby and equestrian team; I dropped out of German club. My friends whispered, theorized and finally gave up and stopped calling. My weight dwindled and I found reasons to not come home for holidays. That summer my facade finally fell to pieces. I could no longer pretend that I was not sick and at 98 lbs I was admitted to a voluntary inpatient treatment center located in the

Appalachian Mountains.

I thought about all the reasons why I couldn't eat this sandwich.

“If you eat this sandwich you will get fat, your grades will drop, no one will love you, and your whole world will fall apart...”

I looked at the nurse. Her hair was out of style, her name tag hung just slightly askew on the lanyard around her neck, her impossibly white shoes squeaked on the sterile tile floor. Then I met her eyes. I saw steel resolve, I saw concern, and I saw compassion. Her eyes seemed to say, I hope you succeed but if you fail, we will try again. Like a mother bird pushing her fledgling out of the nest, she knew I had to fly or hit the ground. She thought I was worth it and she was not going to give up without a fight.

I looked back at my plate. This woman had just met me; she didn't know that I had an almost perfect SAT score or that the tassels of my bedroom rug were all perpendicular to the floorboards and she still thought I was worth it. If she thought I deserved to eat this sandwich, deserved not to starve, deserved to be happy, then maybe I did. The prospect of eating that whole meal was the most terrifying thing I had ever done but, for the first time in years, I cleaned my plate.

That nurse saved my life. I finished my inpatient therapy under her experienced care. Ninety days later, I went home armed with the tools to defeat the mental illness that had ruled my life for my entire adolescence and had threatened to stalk me into adulthood. I don't remember her name, but I will never forget her. The way her voice sounded as she encouraged me. The way her hands always smelled like antiseptic when she held my head. I will never forget that she never gave up on me, that she insisted that I was worth it.