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My Embodied Cognition

By Corinne Santiago

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the
Master of Fine Arts degree at Sarah Lawrence College
May 2019

**Embodied cognition,
the idea that the mind
is not only connected
to the body, but that
the body influences
the mind.**

“To describe my mother would be to write about a hurricane in its perfect power. Or the climbing, falling colors of a rainbow.” – Maya Angelou

She decided to leave after everyone had gone to sleep. The shame and guilt weighed so heavily on her that she didn't think she could muster the emotional strength necessary for a proper goodbye in the daylight. Her 11-year-old daughter and 10-year-old son shouldn't be forced to endure what she herself was struggling to accept as a 29-year-old married woman and mother of three. She knew that a silent departure was the only way she was going to go through with it. Maybe she wanted to spare them; maybe she wanted to spare herself.

To know me, one must first know her.

We are closer than the average mother and child and she is woven into my being just as much as I am woven into hers.

I wanted to know myself as best I could so I asked an impossible amount of questions well before my mother was prepared to answer them, I'm sure. It took a long time; I think I was in high school before I got the whole story – or at least the whole of what I'm allowed to hear – the story of my very beginning and the part of her middle that it still hurt to talk about.

It was the middle of the night in February of 1992 and it was cold outside in New York City. My mother crept into my brother's Robert bedroom, careful not to wake him, and stood over his crib, staring down at his 2-year-old sleeping form in the moonlight.

“I just watched him sleep; I don't remember for how long,” my mom recalled. “I just wanted to memorize his face, the shape of his head... the way he breathed.”

She didn't know how long she'd have to go away for. Her alcohol abuse had become unmanageable and she was forcing herself to vomit after binge eating. Nobody could really tell her how long it might take for her to reach a point that could pass as “healthy.”

“Your dad told me that if I didn’t get my drinking under control, he would leave me,” she said. “I couldn’t raise our kids in the state I was in.”

She recognized that her mental health and lack of stability hadn’t been this bad since she was 17-years-old – the year after her father committed suicide. The remainder of her senior year in high school went down the toilet as she numbed all of senses with drugs, alcohol, and sex, unable to deal with everyone staring at her in the halls, knowing what her father had done. Her then-boyfriend enabled this behavior, partying just as hard – if not harder – doing so many drugs with their so-called friends that the grey cloud of smoke on the ceiling of their apartment was an inch thick.

Back then it was the conception of her first-born child that shook something in my mother’s head loose.

“Your sister, Christina, saved my life,” she told me. “I had to decide whether I wanted to grow the fuck up and take responsibility or ruin her life the way I was ruining my own.”

She chose my sister.

While her then-husband didn’t make the same choice even after the birth of their second child, my brother Richard, less than a year later, my mom continued her commitment to maturity, taking on the task of being a single mother when her toxic marriage ended.

“They were wealthy – his family, but they were bad people,” my mother remembered. “They fudged the paperwork in order to make it look like he was broke and the court ruled that he only had to give me something like \$40.00 a week for two kids.”

“I said to him, ‘Why don’t you just give me nothing and disappear?’ And he did.”

“At first, I was heartbroken,” she admitted to me. “I didn’t understand how someone could abandon his kids – choose to never see them again, but now... if I saw him I would thank him. He gave your brother and sister a chance at a real father and a real family.”

Even after exhibiting such strength and devotion to her children and the family she chose to build and expand with my father several years later – a feat I still admire her for – she had still managed to slip back, forgetting the fortitude she’d demonstrated for all those years. She knew she was capable of being a better version of herself, and she was wise enough to know that she couldn’t get there by herself this time.

She had chosen my sister back when she was 18-years-old. This time, more than a decade later, she was choosing herself. She was choosing her marriage and her three children. She was also, unbeknownst to anyone at the time, choosing me – the unborn child she was carrying as she snuck out of the house that night.

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“Oh my God. She looks like you.”

“Come on. There’s no way you can tell that.”

“She really does... it’s unbelievable.”

My mother’s jaw dropped as she adjusted her body in order to get a clear view of the screen at the obstetrician’s office and realized my father was right. Suddenly unfettered by her discomfort and jelly-covered ever-expanding stomach, she looked at the grey mass that was me and saw her own face pointed directly at her, so perfectly positioned it was as if I knew where the camera was.

The doctors at the facility she recovered in started from scratch in regards to her mental health, medications, and therapy sessions. Having admitted herself, she was more than

cooperative and patient until they got it right... or whatever “right” means when it comes to clinical depression and bulimia.

I still wonder how one “recovers” from an eating disorder, my curiosity intensifying even more as I began to shed weight in some places and gain weight in others, puberty providing far more questions than it did answers. Even as I grew into an insecure adolescent, the fear of the dangers of eating disorders persuaded me against even humoring myself with the idea of starving myself, or bingeing and purging, no matter how tempting it may have seemed as the number on the scale climbed. Mom never tried to scare me; just telling me the truth about her experience was enough to terrify me.

Alcoholics avoid all alcohol and drug addicts avoid all drugs, but one can’t just avoid food. What did they tell or teach my mother that stopped her from forcing her body to binge and purge? I know they didn’t stop her from wanting to.

Back then she was in the best shape she’d ever been in, five months pregnant with me, both physically and emotionally. She’d walked several miles on the track every day and she’d read more than 100 books.

“There was nothing else to do,” she remembers.

She refused to have any visitors. Her husband and children were never to see her there, never to enter this space that she knew had become necessary for her survival, but that she still hadn’t accepted as something not to be ashamed of. Intent on keeping her worlds from colliding, when she found out she was pregnant with me, she told my father over the phone rather than allow him to visit her so she could tell him in person.

I know I shouldn’t, but it makes me sad that neither of them got to see the other’s face when they each found out about me. It’s a ridiculous thing to dwell on, especially because I

know my mother was doing what was best for her health and if the sacrifice of being able to witness my father's reaction was something she could cope with, I should be able to as well. I guess I just can't help it sometimes. It's the emotional part of me that has been completely enmeshed with my family since I was born; I'm unable to comprehend being alone with big news whether it be good, bad, or ugly. I've always had someone to run and tell, someone to hug, someone to share physical and emotional space with at all times.

I'm accustomed to it; I thrive in it.

I find comfort in the fact that I was the only one physically with her during that 5-month period. She kept everyone at bay except the one sharing space with her. We were still one and because of that, we never had to be without each other.

Her body was my body and my body was hers.

When Mom came home from treatment, it was the summer of 1992. As of May 4th, a birthday spent away, she was 30-years-old.

I still don't know what the facility was called, where it was, or how she got there and back. I wonder all the time if it still exists, if she found their programs to be helpful, or if she even felt safe there.

I found a picture once, mixed into a box of family photos, of a woman I didn't recognize. As I held it up to ask my mother who she was, I saw a handwritten note inscribed on the back. Mom took the photo from my hand before I could read what it said. She didn't snatch it – but she took it with enough force to let me know that it wasn't for my eyes.

“She was just a woman I met while I was away,” she told me with a tone that forcefully implied that the conversation was over.

I've been told as much of the story as she feels comfortable telling. Every now and then after a big meal, I'll hear her mutter under her breath, "It would feel so good to just throw up right now," and it scares the shit out of me. She rolls her eyes at my concern as I picture her rocketing into a relapse, bulimia in full swing, imagining myself asleep in my bedroom, not knowing whether or not she's creeping out in the middle of the night again in order to avoid a painful goodbye.

"I say it out loud so you know that I would never actually do it again," she reassures me every time. "If I was really going to do it, I wouldn't talk about it."

I believe her because I trust her and her reputation speaks for itself. She was sure she was going to leave that night for what she didn't know would be five months away from her family. I don't know how long she knew for, but she knew exactly what she was going to do... and she didn't say a word.

“Blessed is the womb that born you.” – Lailah Gifty Akita

I was the fourth entity to call my mother’s body ‘home’ and I made sure no one else ever would. I nearly killed us both.

Maybe – somewhere so deep in my subconscious that even I have trouble retrieving it – our near-tragic beginning is what planted the seed of my not wanting children of my own. All I know is that I’ve never imagined myself as a mother. In spite of all the gasps of disbelief and eye rolls I receive every time I divulge this information about myself, I don’t remember not feeling this way. If my mom knew she wanted to be a parent since she was 12, why couldn’t the opposite be true for me? I know I’m not the same person I was five years ago and in another five years, I may have transformed again. Maybe that version of me will want children. Maybe she won’t. Right now, I hold no desire to be pregnant and/or become a parent. I’m terrified of the worst-case scenario every time I watched a loved one’s belly grow. My mother almost didn’t make it. She didn’t even know me yet before I almost killed her.

While our appearances may match, our blood types don’t. She developed Toxemia, or blood poisoning, suddenly while she was already in labor with me. Her blood pressure was dangerously high and her white blood cell count dangerously low, putting us both at risk. Her body was rejecting mine after having lovingly helped me grow for close to 40 weeks.

“They had to get you out to save both of our lives,” Mom told me, “But I couldn’t feel where to push.”

The doctors had administered an epidural before they realized she was sick. From the waist down, she was numb. We were dying.

A nurse stood up on a chair at her side, placed both of his arms under her breasts and above her protruding belly, counted to three, and slammed both arms down, literally taking my

mother's breath away, forcing me out. He delivered me. I shot out as though I was a baseball leaving the hands of a major league pitcher.

"Your real mother is a large, black, male nurse," Mom still jokes.

"You came out like a bullet," she said. "And immediately after that, I heard what sounded like a waterfall."

My dad looked at my mom's face and watched the color drain as though a curtain was being pulled from her forehead down to her neck.

"Seal the room!" the doctor yelled.

She was bleeding out.

"Don't name her after me if I die," my heavily medicated mother slurred to my father. "I don't want her siblings to hate her."

As my mother lay in a hospital bed, terrified of a blood transfusion and correctly assuming she was dying due to the fact that my father was being allowed to stay past visiting hours, I lay in the nursery of the hospital, a picture of my older siblings – Christina, Richard, and Robert – taped to the side of the clear basinet. They were smiling at me. They didn't yet know what I'd done to her.

After a terrifying delivery requiring much more assistance than the three births before mine, thankfully Mom narrowly survived my birth and Dad wasn't forced to make any impossible decisions with four children under the age of 13 to take care of. We didn't get to go home the next day like she'd been able to do with my siblings. We spent the first three days of life at Lenox Hill Hospital. She was still as white as a ghost on November 5th when we went home, but we went home. Her and I were finally able to start our journey together.

I have her oval face, slightly fuller in the cheeks – cheeks that would inspire my family’s controversial nickname for me. Almond shaped eyes, causing us to be confused for Filipinos and not South Americans, perpetually darkened underneath no matter how well rested, and dark pink lips, not too thin or too plump, but fitting of our shared face. The only evidence of my father’s involvement: the bump on my nose, visible only in a profile view. Otherwise, she could have made me herself.

“Race, I’ve learned, is in the eye of the beholder.” –Raquel Cepeda

When I was in first grade, my parents found us a five-bedroom colonial house in New Fairfield, CT – a town that was reported to be more than 96% White in the 2000 census.

After Mom and Dad had signed the papers but before we had actually taken up residence, my father and uncle took a drive down to what would soon be our new home, the first home my parents were able to buy instead of rent. They wanted to check everything out and assess anything that might have had to be taken care of before we could officially move in.

The house was white with black shutters on every window. Slabs of stone carved a pathway leading up to three brick steps that put you face to face with a set of red double doors. The front and back yards were sprawling. It looked exactly like the home someone would picture when they heard the word “suburbs.”

As the sun was setting and night began to fall, my dad couldn’t help but swell with pride. He owned this home. He and his wife had created our family and were now taking the next step to raise it together.

Before they could make a second lap around the property, my father and uncle saw the police car pull into the driveway and a uniformed officer step out, shining his flashlight on their faces.

“We got a report that two suspicious men were lurking around this property.”

Suspicious men. Two words that when put together in order to describe two men I love still make me cringe.

What had made them “suspicious” to the neighbor that had called the police? It couldn’t have been their ski masks and camouflaged clothing because that’s not what they were wearing. It couldn’t have been the weapons they were brandishing because they didn’t have any. It

couldn't have been the violent crashes or sounds of breaking and entering because nobody heard any.

They were brown men in an affluent area – a white area – circling a house that had recently been for sale. Never mind that the “For Sale” signs had been removed not long before this incident occurred. Neither of the men on the property could possibly have been the new owners – hence the call to the police.

Fortunately, when my dad identified himself as the new owner of the home, the officer believed him. Otherwise, the trajectory of my life would have been entirely different and I would be an entirely different human being. If he didn't believe him, he at least decided not to pursue the issue further seeing as neither my dad nor my uncle seemed to be posing any dangerous threat to person and/or property.

My parents didn't tell me anything about this until I was much older. I'm unable and unwilling to imagine what they must have felt moving the contents of our lives into that house, not knowing which neighbor had already profiled us, which neighbor was watching from their window, which neighbor was wishing a different family was moving in. Their dreams of a safe suburban neighborhood filled with kindness were already dashed.

They watched my siblings and I excitedly fill each of our new bedrooms, knowing full well that we were already not welcome there, knowing with absolute certainty that the police never would have been called had my dad and my uncle been white.

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The first time I felt anything akin to “otherness” was also the first time I ever felt like I was less than anyone else. My parents and older siblings made me feel adored every chance they

could and I was bursting with self-love from the moment I learned how to smile and say, “Thank you!” when a family member pinched my chunky cheeks and gushed, “Aye, qué cute.”

I loved the attention. I ate it up anywhere and everywhere I could get it. On my report cards in elementary school, as time went on I paid less and less attention to the letter grades and more to my teachers’ comments about me. “Pleasure to have in class,” was my favorite. I got three of those on the same report card once. Three was a record. That meant that I had shown my value as a human being present in their classrooms and not just gotten high scores on my assignments.

I loved being valued. I loved being loved.

I’m sure I noticed but I didn’t care that the kids I usually played with were white and I wasn’t. All I cared about was that I could walk outside on any day and find a neighborhood kid to climb trees with and chase around the block.

Kyle lived across the street and he would bring me my homework when I was absent. One time, he dumped a bottle of Gatorade on my freshly braided head. On Valentine’s Day not long after, he rang my doorbell and shoved a fistful of red lifesavers in my hand before running back across my lawn and down his driveway. Eventually, when we would be in 7th grade, he would be the first boy I ever asked out on a date. He said no. I realize now how inconsistent his behavior was but at the time, I was just grateful to be living in a neighborhood full of kids my age.

My 7-year-old self had no reason to doubt, fear, or feel anything other than content with who I was as a child and what I looked like.

I was laying on my back in the grass across from my house, across the road but not quite yet Kyle’s lawn because of the low rock wall acting as a divider. It was community space. I

didn't yet realize or care what creatures and bacteria might be setting up camp in my hair and clothes. I stared up at the sky, assigning different animals to the shapes the clouds made, waiting to hear a garage door crank open or a front door creak – indicators that I'd soon have company.

I thought Cassidy was walking towards me to ask me if I wanted to play with her, like my neighbors and I had done on so many other occasions.

“My mom says I can't play with you anymore because you're black,” she told me before I could even greet her.

Wait... what?

I think I physically looked down at myself after she said it.

I hadn't even hit double digits yet when my blonde-haired, blue-eyed, pale-skinned neighbor revealed her mother's racism to me. I wasn't even black, to my knowledge. I didn't think there was anything wrong with being black – hatred is learned and nobody I knew would ever teach me something like that. Now, however, I felt like being black meant people couldn't be my friend. I knew I didn't look like most of my neighbors and classmates. Come to think of it, I didn't really look like anybody in New Fairfield, but that had never mattered before.

Was I confused? Was I angry? Were my feelings hurt? I don't remember my initial reaction, but I know I ended up crying in my kitchen as I told my family what happened.

“Her father is a cop. We should just let it go,” I heard my mother say to my dad through gritted teeth. “If I go over there we're going to have an even bigger problem and it will get ugly.”

I cried harder.

Why was she not coming to my defense this time? Why wasn't she standing up for me the way she always had? I was too young to even understand just how wrong this situation was –

but I knew she should have done something about it. I was mad at her. The mother I knew would never have let anyone, no matter who his or her father was, get away with making me cry.

Sometimes I'm still mad at her for it. I want to remember the incident ending differently: with my mother and I victorious, holding each other having vanquished the evil of the racism that lived next door, but I can't remember it that way because that's not what happened.

I don't know if it was fear, exhaustion from a lifetime of this sort of thing, or her inability to get her rage under control that caused my mother to feel that taking no action was the best course of action. If it hadn't been for my sister, this would have become my first incidence of taking shit.

Nina couldn't let it go.

Nearly 18 years younger than my parents and having much fairer skin than the rest of my family due to her white biological father, she was, more often than not, able to experience the many benefits that come with white privilege, going toe to toe with a police officer, for example. She wasn't used to discrimination, at least not as in your face as I had just experienced it.

"If you're not going to do anything about it, I will," she said.

She stormed out the back door and up our driveway before my parents could stop her, clutching my arm, practically dragging me as I wiped tears and snot off my face with my free hand. Suddenly, I wondered why I had ever wanted something to be done about the situation. Confrontation in the name of justice sounded good, but I was losing my nerve with every step.

Around this time, my sister was my best friend. Even though she was nearly 12 years older than me, she took me everywhere, canceled dates when I cried that I didn't want her to leave me, and showed up at my school on picture day to do my hair in the bathroom.

We were standing in line at the supermarket one night when a pair of older Latina women behind us insulted my sister under their breaths in Spanish, assuming she couldn't understand them because of her fair skin. They turned their noses up and whispered disapprovingly how disgusting it was that a girl her age already had a child.

"You shouldn't assume I can't understand you," my sister snapped at them as she turned on her heel. "Not that it's any of your business, but she's my little sister."

Even my parents couldn't get through to me sometimes. She was the only one that could soothe me when I was too sad, the only one that could calm me down when I was too angry, and the only person that would never shy away from standing up for me, no matter how uncomfortable or problematic the situation.

"What would you do if another child told your little sister that their mother told them not to play with her because she's black?" my sister asked Cassidy's dad with daggers in her eyes. "That would be considered a hate crime, wouldn't it? You're a police officer. Shouldn't I report it to someone?"

Inside, while I stood in my sister's shadow, staring at the tiles on their kitchen floor, begging God to make me invisible, Cassidy's father apologized profusely, understanding that the other child in this not-so-hypothetical situation was his own daughter but claiming to have no idea where she would get an idea like that.

She couldn't possibly have gotten the idea from her mother, the person she openly admitted to having gotten the idea from. He was doing very little to hide his shame, but admitting nothing. We knew it was not as though a 6-year-old could come up with something like that on her own, but perhaps Cassidy's father thought we were as stupid and worthless as her

mother's words had implied we were. I wasn't worthy of being her friend because I wasn't white. She had taught that lesson to a Kindergartener.

Nearly two decades later, I still hear Cassidy's words and see her racist mother's face in my head, reminding me that my skin color makes a difference. When I walk into a room, my natural and perpetual tan elicits a reaction. It calls upon preconceived notions and forces me to work at least twice as hard just to reach the starting line. I know that now.

By now, however, I feel the exhaustion my mother must have dealt with every single day, long before I, her fourth child, came home sobbing.

“... ‘Fat’ in America was a bad word, heaving with moral judgment like ‘stupid’ or ‘bastard,’ and not a mere description like ‘short’ or ‘tall.’” –Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

Wisps of cotton candy floated past me in the air, momentarily distracting me from the smell of corndogs, caramel and candy apples, and all the other things that can be eaten off of a stick. I wondered how much I could eat before the stomachache would become too much to bear. I loved food but it’s not like I was constantly eating.

“What’s your favorite food, Corinne?” someone would ask me.

“Meat!” I’d reply, hungrily.

Food was never withheld from me. I was encouraged to eat when I was hungry and satiate any and all cravings I had. I never went overboard, even though I wanted to most of the time. Because the cookie jar was always well stocked, I didn’t feel the need to eat entire sleeves of Oreos when I saw them. There would be more Oreos tomorrow if I wanted them. My parents made everything available to me; that meant I never had to take advantage. You don’t have to “strike while the iron is hot” if the iron is always hot. While my appetite always surprised people, my appearance and physical depiction of “health” never caused any alarm. I looked like a little brown girl with meat on her bones.

Walking was uncomfortable that particular day because the tiny pebbles and dirt on the ground had crept through the holes in my jelly sandals. My feet would surely have been blackened and filthy by day’s end but I wasn’t yet obsessed enough with personal hygiene to care. I did hate jelly sandals though because the plastic gave me blisters and my feet got sweaty, but I had more than two pairs because they were sparkly and I’m told I looked adorable in them.

I know I was proud of myself because I wasn’t crying for crying’s sake like other kids I could hear; I was too excited to cry. How could anyone have been upset there anyway? This

place was incredible. There wasn't a single direction you could look without feasting your eyes on something spectacularly fun and/or delicious. I wanted to get on every big thrill ride so I could experience that belly flop feeling that happens when your mom drives over a speed bump too fast or when the airplane sways and jerks suddenly and the pilot says over the intercom, "We are experiencing some minor turbulence so we have lit the 'Fasten Seatbelt' sign."

I eventually did join the other children's crying, however, when the realization hit that I was far from meeting the height requirements for many of the rides that appealed to me most. Luckily, there was no height requirement for the snacks.

A guy with a megaphone was shouting into it, desperate for everyone's attention, addressing passersby according to their different articles of clothing.

"Hey, Mets cap, come on over!"

"You in the blue t-shirt, why don't you give us a try?"

"Aw, come on now denim skirt, you know you're curious."

He was under a tent and there was an enormous scale behind him. It was cartoonishly big, like it could have been plucked out of Alice in Wonderland along with the Mad Hatter's giant hat. The long, skinny, pointy red arm inside was lingering on the zero, but wiggling ever so slightly, as though it was ready to rocket around the enormous circle in order to get to a higher number at the gentlest touch on the platform.

It was the biggest scale I'd ever seen so I was already intrigued. At the supermarket, I remember pressing my hand down on the fruit/produce scales to see how far I could make the needle go with the pressure I applied. I still don't know why I was so fascinated with the numbers.

Megaphone man was claiming he could guess anyone's weight before they stepped up to the platform.

When my brother Robert practiced his magic tricks, I was always his most captive audience. I "oohed" and "aahed" at all the appropriate times and they were always authentic. Anything and everything he did left me in awe, even though I was present when he was gifted the how-to: books for magicians. It was apparent that he wasn't a legitimate sorcerer – just a talented kid that could memorize things he read. He still never failed to blow me away.

When I would watch Jerry slam frying pans on Tom's head and the human-like scream echoed out of the television, I laughed the loudest, hardest, and longest. I'm a performer's dream spectator, almost embarrassingly easy to entertain; a guaranteed sucker for a colorful sign written in bubble letters, making the wildest and most sensational claims.

I don't remember what the man guessed when I eagerly approached his tent, ready to be dazzled by his psychic talent, but he must have been wrong.

"My God, what did you eat for breakfast?" he shouted into his megaphone.

Everyone watching started to laugh and I couldn't tell what exactly those people were laughing at. I wasn't laughing.

You know those moments in life that drop bombs in your brain that explode upon impact, creating those permanent craters that continue to exist in spite of your continuous efforts to fill and repair them? I don't think we realize when they're happening as they're happening, but I was experiencing one that day on that giant scale, in front of countless strangers whose gaping mouths seemed to have lost the ability to close.

I didn't understand why the crowd of strangers was so shocked by what I weighed. I didn't think a child's weight mattered as much as it apparently did. I didn't think that I was

capable of feeling this new level of embarrassment and humiliation. I didn't think something could ruin a day at the carnival. I just wanted to see if he could do what his sign had advertised and my parents let me approach him because it was going to make me happy... or at least I thought it was.

An older version of myself came across a picture of me, stepping off of that giant scale, absentmindedly captured by my mother whose finger used to perpetually hover over the shutter release button on her film camera. My head is down, bobbed hair fringing in front of my eyes, tanned belly slightly protruding beneath my red and white striped t-shirt. The smile I wore often enough for people to ask if my face hurt, nowhere to be found.

The crater deepens.

*

My nickname is Chubby. It always has been. I know the reaction it elicits to those who hear it. My family doesn't censor themselves and oftentimes uses the name to call to me in front of new acquaintances, strangers, and when we're out in public.

People in supermarkets raised their eyebrows, looking for the victim of what they thought was cruel bullying. Boyfriends and dates widened their eyes and girlfriends looked at me with genuine concern, asking if I was okay and why my family would dare call me such a thing.

Over the years, the nickname has evolved depending on which family member is addressing me. To Daddy, I'm "Chubbers," "Chubbinski," or –my personal favorite – "The Chubbiness of Love." He's always been the most inventive, sometimes even putting the name into song in order to get my attention.

Christina was just way too long of a name for me to say so my sister was (and still is) Nina to me and I am “Chubbly Dubbly” to her. Sometimes I’m just “Chubbly” if she’s in a hurry.

My brother Richard calls me “Chubbs” and I called him “Deeta” as a kid. I heard my Spanish-speaking grandparents say his name with an accent all day and for reasons I still can’t explain, I heard “Reechar” as “Deeta.”

“When should I stop calling you Deeta?” I asked him.

“I guess you can stop when you’re 12,” he answered.

“Alright, well I guess I’ll stop now since I’m 13.”

He’s just Richard now, but I’m still Chubbs.

Mom has always stuck with the original “Chubby” and the nickname never caught on with my other brother, Robert – perhaps because we were so close in age. I didn’t have a nickname for him either until we were in high school. I heard all his friends calling him “Rob” and I felt bad for the other half of his name. I’ve called him “Bert” ever since and it has slowly caught on with my other two siblings, to Bert’s dismay. How was I supposed to know that everyone would want to know where Ernie is?

I never had nicknames in school or with friends. There was one other ‘Corinne’ in my grade and I was glad she went by ‘Cory’ because I wanted the use of my full name. I liked it. I figured it was a pretty uncommon name since I could never find souvenirs or knick-knacks inscribed with it. It felt special. The only nickname I was ever given was given to me by my family – my favorite people. It felt almost sacred.

When “Reechar” was fresh out of high school and I was around 8-years-old, he ran to my mother and insisted that we stop using the nickname I’d grown so accustomed to.

“We’re probably causing irreparable damage to her self-esteem!” he told her. “She’s going to grow up and write a tell-all book about how we mentally abused her for her whole life.” He was terribly guilt-ridden and eager to make it right.

“The nickname has never been about her weight,” my mom told him. “Since she was an infant, it’s always been about her cheeks.”

Pictures of me prove this. I smiled so hard and so often that my dimples seemed permanent and my cheeks looked perpetually stuffed with cotton balls. With the appetite I had, one might even think I was storing food in there.

“If it’ll make you feel better, let’s ask her how she feels about it and we’ll stop if she asks us to,” she assured him.

I remember sitting down with my mom and Richard at the kitchen table as though we were about to have a very serious conversation. Richard sat next to her, silent and stone-faced. He looked more pained than I’d ever seen him look. I don’t know how long the guilt and shame had been weighing on him. My mother’s slightly upturned eyebrows and soft tone of voice conveyed the concern in her words.

“Does our nickname for you bother you or hurt your feelings in any way?”

Then they just sat there staring at me, waiting for me to respond, Richard chewing his nearly nonexistent fingernails – a bad habit he still has.

“Please don’t stop calling me ‘Chubby,’” I told them after taking stock of the situation, wondering why on earth this was happening. “When you call me ‘Corinne,’ I always think you must be mad at me about something.”

Mom smiled at me. Richard let his chewed fingers fall from his face as he breathed the longest sigh of relief followed by a low chuckle.

My mother, father, sister, and brother can't really call me anything else. To this day, to everyone else's confusion and dismay, I am comforted by my controversial nickname but only when it comes from their mouths.

I don't think I'd have it any other way.

“Your body is yours. My body is mine. No one’s body is up for comment.” –Shonda Rhimes

Tyra Banks used to have a talk show. I loved watching it. She did some pretty sensational stuff like when she tried to experience what a homeless person lives like by living on the street for a weekend. I don’t think she really accomplished that one since the cameras were there and she didn’t really have to experience the desperation and fear that a homeless person with legitimately nothing actually experiences.

Something she did accomplish that I have unfortunately – and not for lack of trying – been unable to find since I saw it for the first time as an adolescent with my mom, was her life changing body image episode.

Four women sat on the stage in front of a white backlit screen. Each woman identified as a different “race:” one black, one white, one Asian, and one Latina. The screen was set up in order to have different women walk behind it, casting their silhouettes for the four women and audience to see. The women on stage were then asked to describe the silhouette, making their observations (and judgments) aloud.

A woman shaped similarly to my Ecuadorian mother stepped up and cast her silhouette.

“She looks fat,” the white woman said, the Asian woman agreeing with her quickly.

“I think she looks curvy and healthy,” the black and Latina women expressed.

Another woman stepped up behind the screen and we saw a completely different body type: small frame, thin arms, a gap between her thighs.

“She is perfect,” the Asian woman said.

“So delicate and pretty,” the white woman agreed.

“She looks like skin and bones... like she might have an eating disorder,” the Latina woman said while the black woman nodded.

The last woman stepped up behind the screen, bigger than the last two women, shaped like an hourglass with no thigh gap, wide hips, and thick arms.

“That woman is obese. She needs to see a doctor,” the Asian woman said.

“She looks like she’s just given up on her appearance,” the white woman said concerned.

“That is a beautiful shape and a beautiful woman,” the black woman asserted.

“I love her curves,” the Latina said.

The point of all of this was to prove that age-old cliché about beauty being in the eye of beholder. Body types across cultures vary widely and everyone sees “health” and what is “attractive” as something different.

I was comforted by this episode. My mother was too.

I never forgot about the episode, knowing that there were people out there that looked like what the women in my family looked like, and people who thought that was beautiful and enough. The only issue I had was that I had a lot of difficulty finding them as I grew out of adolescence and into a teenager, surrounded by people whose body types all seemed to match, leaving no room for mine.

*

I hated my pediatrician. In high school, I was shocked to hear most of my friends still went to see their pediatricians. I got away from mine and to my parents’ general practitioner as fast as I possibly could. Thirteen was “adult” enough for me.

Not every ailment could be solved with Dimetapp, although she seemed to think of the thick purple liquid as a cure-all. Her office, far too beige and smelling of unwashed children, was forever unwelcoming. I don’t remember ever seeing her smile and the Highlights magazines in

the waiting room were always filled in before I got there. She probably completed the puzzles herself so that her patients couldn't have any fun.

Dr. Satchi told me I was obese when I was 10. I guess it was true according to the number on the scale in relation to my height, although I didn't look like the pictures on Google when you searched for "obese children." I think it would have been gentler of her to take my parents aside in private to have a conversation about my health if she was genuinely concerned about it.

"What's your favorite cereal?" she asked out of nowhere, eyebrows upturned, lips pursed into a frown.

She put me on the spot. I hadn't come to this appointment prepared for questions like this to be sprung on me. I loved so many cereals. I didn't know what to say. Frosted Mini Wheats were my actual favorite (they still are) but I couldn't think of them back then with her staring at me, judging me harder with every second that passed between her question and my answer.

I knew I had to spit something out – anything – if I wanted her to stop scowling at me expectantly.

"I like Cocoa Puffs..." I answer hesitantly.

"Well, that's the problem right there," she says smugly, turning her nose up at my parents disapprovingly.

"I bet you eat Pop Tarts too," she goes on. "Those are just cookies, you know."

Did she really even care about my health or had she just wanted to shame my mom and dad in the process of humiliating me?

"She doesn't just eat junk all the time," they told her defensively. "She plays outside almost every day and takes dance lessons twice a week. She's very active."

Their defense strategy fell on deaf ears.

To Dr. Satchi, I was just another lazy fat kid.

I cried sobs of desperation in the backseat on the drive home from her office, wishing I looked like the girls at school whose thighs didn't double in size when they sat down and whose bellies didn't spill over the fronts of their pants.

I never looked like what I weighed; I was strong.

“Muscle weighs more than fat,” my parents constantly reassured me. Getting weighed at doctors' offices prompted nurses to insensitively ask, “Wow, where is all that?” followed by a quick recovery attempt insisting, “You carry it so well!”

The number just seemed to mean so much to people that it started to matter to me. I started to silently count the girls in my grade that looked bigger than me, and they were very few. “Fat” was a bad word and “obese” was a worse one. I convinced myself that my parents only called me beautiful because they were supposed to and not because it held any truth or sincerity. As I settled into the throes of puberty, I felt neither beautiful nor worthy and I helplessly longed to know if I would ever feel either.

Perhaps that moment on the giant novelty scale wasn't a bomb when it initially happened. Maybe it was actually just a stupid afternoon at the fair that would have been forgotten had society and its expectations not continued to remind me of it. I wonder if it was actually just supposed to be as unimportant and tiny as the pebbles that had gathered in my jelly sandals that day.

“I knew, too, that the fact of menstruation was a shamefully unclean secret that should not be allowed to contaminate immaculate male ears by indiscreet reference to this type of first in their presence.” –Tsitsi Dangarembga

My mother started talking to me about my period by the time I was 9-years-old. She had begun menstruating when she was 10 and her father stopped talking to her for several months. Her mother described it as a punishment from God and looked at her with a totally new and harsh judgmental attitude, as though she – at the age of 10 – would seize this opportunity to sleep around now that the uterine lining inside her could shed every 28 days. I can still hear the shame in her voice and see the sadness in her eyes today, 46 years later, when she remembers the way her Ecuadorian parents reacted to this totally healthy bodily function. Because of their treatment, she overcompensated with my older sister.

“It’s a beautiful transition into womanhood,” she told her. “It means your body is functioning healthily and can do everything it’s supposed to be able to do. It’s a privilege that we as women get to experience.”

She made it sound so glorious and enchanting that my sister couldn’t help but brag about it.

“Christina gets a period, what do I get?!” my brother Richard cried jealously.

Mom managed to find a balance when it came time to have the conversation with me. She landed somewhere between the wretched curse that her parents preached about and the magical blessing she’d bestowed upon my sister.

I sat down on the toilet in the half-bathroom on the first floor of my house. When I looked down between my bruised and scratched 5th grader legs at the big brown splotch on my pale pink underwear, I screamed for my mother. She cracked the door, looking impatient at first

because she was on the phone, but broke into a wide smile after she was able to assess the situation.

Tampons scared the living shit out of me. I didn't want them anywhere near me, even though my mother encouraged me to use them once my period became heavier and more regular. Wouldn't using tampons cause me to lose my virginity? Doesn't sticking something up inside you hurt and feel painful all day? No amount of convincing and reassurance from my mother, the person I trusted most, lessened my fear and distrust of tampons. I stuck with pads that felt like diapers until well into junior high school, forcing myself to sit in my discomfort for days at a time.

With every passing month that my period came, my body changed. Coarse, unruly hair, nothing like the hair on my head and thus impossibly foreign to me, interrupted the space between smooth skin and panties. My armpits began to smell like chicken noodle soup, the exact description my mother used when she told me the things I could expect to happen. Men were looking at me differently... dangerously, forcing my mother to have far more angry confrontations in public.

We had become closer and closer friends as I matured into an adult, my attitude more closely resembling hers with each passing day, but she never stopped being the alpha – my protector, whether I was 12 or 22. She and I had been forced to deal with “the male gaze” early in my life. Having developed my womanly figure as practically a pre-teen, I wasn't emotionally ready for the attention, and my mother was determined to make me feel safe, always taking the reigns from my startled hands.

“She's only 13!” she'd yell at the men ogling me as I walked to the bathroom in a restaurant. “Do you feel good about yourself now?!”

She'd say this even when I was 14, 15, and 16-years-old. They always bugged out their eyes and hung their heads in shame. She was so good at kick-starting the guilt trip. I was out of sight before they could glance again and realize I was definitely not only 13.

I wondered what her new retort would be once I aged and developed far enough beyond 13 that her go-to clap back would be impossible to use.

"Is that your daughter?" the uniformed man yelled at my mother as we walked past him on the sidewalk. He must have been some sort of blue-collar worker because his navy blue jumpsuit was far from clean and had a patch where I knew his name must have been sewn.

I kept walking. She'd take care of it.

My mother stopped and turned on the heel of one of her many pairs of Birkenstock sandals, or "Jesus shoes" as my siblings and I preferred to call them. She hated wearing makeup and couldn't stand it if her hair grew to be longer than her jawline. Her summer outfits consisted exclusively of Bermuda shorts and white t-shirts that she would always stain at dinnertime, forcing her to buy several more to add to her arsenal. She insisted that she wasn't a "girly girl" even after I told her that the term perpetuates societal norms and gender roles.

She had perfected her angry "don't bother me" face when walking in the city when she was younger and it had only grown more severe with age over time.

"Yes she is my daughter," she snapped back at him impatiently, somehow accomplishing her ability to look down at someone a foot taller than her 5'3" frame.

"She's beautiful," the man continued.

What did he want from her? Did he think that by catcalling me indirectly through my mother that she'd allow him to sweep me off my feet and promise him my hand in marriage? Has this strategy ever worked for anyone?

He disgusted her, just like all the men that had laid their greedy eyes on me in the decade preceding this incident.

“Thanks,” she spat at him nastily. “I made her myself.”

She turned her back on him, forcefully whipping what little bit of hair she had to whip.

I was always safe with her.

I missed being girlish instead of womanly, cute instead of sexy, and looked at with loving eyes instead of perverted, hungry ones. I stood closer and closer to my dad when out in public, my intimidating muscle. With every increase in breast size, my fear doubled. I wondered why all these people had never learned that it’s impolite to stare.

“Did Corinne get her period yet?”

“She’s getting old, why hasn’t she gotten it yet?”

“Corinne’s gotten her period already, right?”

Every older female relative I have bombarded my mother with questions about whether or not I was menstruating. Of course, I didn’t hear about this until way later in life and I still don’t know why they were so interested. I’ve never heard of any family gathering or ritual for when a girl starts bleeding monthly. I get the feeling that perhaps they wanted to be able to silently judge me the way my mother’s parents had judged her. They probably wanted to be able to infer whether or not I was taking advantage of the situation and having sex.

“I don’t know.”

“I don’t know.”

“I don’t know,” my mother said every time... even though she knew.

Their nosiness infuriated her. She wasn’t having it.

“It was none of their business,” she confidently asserts to this day.

*

I was a teenager when I went on birth control, somewhere between 15 and 16. It was long before I had ever even had my first kiss let alone a sexual encounter. The kiss wouldn't come until I was 19 and sex wouldn't happen until 20. I heard the term "late bloomer" quite a bit. It annoyed the shit out of me, as though I was clinging to my lack of experience by choice and not because the people that surrounded me were completely unfamiliar with what I looked like and thus were not attracted to it.

Having sex wasn't even on my radar. I just wanted to be able to keep my period from sneaking up on me and to stop my cramps and bloating from being debilitating.

When my mother was menstruating as a teenager, she would have to miss school for at least a day every month due to the severity of her symptoms.

"My mother had to take me to the hospital a few times because I was in so much pain," she told me. "There were some days that I literally could not move."

Hoping to avoid the same fate that my mother endured, having the talk with her about going on the pill was almost a complete non-issue. It was almost as though I had told her we ran out of milk and had to go to the store to get more so I could have my cereal in the morning. She knew all the other benefits that had nothing to do with pregnancy prevention. In addition to regulating my cycle and making it less painful, the pill would relieve emotional symptoms of PMS along with the physical ones, reduce my risk of anemia, and reduce my risk of getting uterine and ovarian cancer for up to 20 years after I chose to stop taking the pill.

I set an alarm to go off on my phone telling me when to take my pill as I was told it would be most effective taking it as close to the same time as possible every day. As the months

passed, symptoms lessened, duration shortened, and I gained the ability to predict my period almost to the hour.

It was obvious that the choice I'd made with the help of my mother and doctor was the right one. I felt in control and didn't really understand why "the pill" was such a controversial issue. That was until the day I naïvely left my refill on the kitchen counter where it could be seen and judged by all who passed through.

"This is Corinne's?!" my Puerto Rican grandmother asked in her thick Spanish accent, eyes widened as though she'd just seen a ghost.

"Yeah," Dad answered her casually, not even looking up from whatever he had been doing.

"So you just gave her permission to sleep around, I guess," she said in Spanish before walking away.

That's when I got it.

Seeing those pills made me a different person in her eyes. It didn't matter that she knew me, knew my movements, and had never even seen a boy in my room. My own grandmother who lived in my house and whose room I had to pass in order to get to my own; she judged me because of a prescription.

What the Hell did the rest of the world think of me?

“I have a body, but I am not my body. I have a face, but I am not my face.” –Iyanla Vanzant

By the time I got to high school, I was extremely aware of my darker skin and fuller body. I loved being with my friends but shopping with them was a nightmare I always attempted to avoid. I put off trips to the mall with mini golf, bowling, and hibachi restaurants where people are encouraged to play with their food. We end up at the mall eventually though, whether I like it or not. Everyone loved to shop.

Why clothing for women can't be sized according to measurements like clothing for men is beyond me. Instead, we have to attach these adjectives in order to demean and humiliate each other. I used to cut and hide the tags in my blouses and dresses so that nobody would see the adjectives that defined me. Everyone knows the negative connotation that comes along with “large.” My girlfriends and I couldn't shop at the same stores unless I wanted it known that I needed to request “large” and “extra-large” while my friends could take “smalls” and “mediums” off the racks.

I was only 14 when my breasts had already reached a D-cup; unable to fit inside the confines of the bandeau bras and A-cup push-ups some girls were able to wear. I watched with envy, as my girlfriends would hand \$20.00 to the cashiers so they could purchase the pretty polka-dotted bras with lace trim. They even got change back. The bras they bought had room for these pillow-like pads that provided just the right amount of lift to create that ever-so-desirable cleavage.

There was nothing like that in the bras I was condemned to wear.

At 14, I was forced to wait for the weekend when my mother was off work so we could go to a specific “bra lady” who sold \$70.00 specially made bras with child-sized band measurements and woman-sized cups.

Her name was Beverly and she ran the business out of her condominium.

A part of me was nervous as I sat in the passenger's seat of my mom's car, driving to this stranger's home. I was embarrassed that I required this kind of special treatment. My self-centered adolescent mind convinced me that she had probably never seen anything like my "situation" before and that she would no doubt stare incredulously, being unable to provide anything that would help me cope.

The smell of cardboard overwhelmed me before I ever crossed the threshold of Beverly's condo and it looked as though a hoarder lived there rather than an entrepreneur. Her dining room walls were lined with boxes upon boxes, each one labeled with a number and a letter but not looking to be in any kind of comprehensible order.

She could guess your size accurately just by looking at you when you walked through her door and the measuring tape would confirm her guess shortly after. I would have been impressed if I wasn't so self-conscious.

"34-H," she said plainly before we could even introduce ourselves. There was no staring, no widening of the eyes, and no gasps of horror.

She was right.

"What do I have to do to get a breast reduction?" I thought constantly, asking any and every adult who held a position of power in my life.

The first time I asked my doctor that question, I was 15-years-old.

"Nobody will perform this procedure while you're this young and still developing," my doctor told me sympathetically. "Puberty continues into your twenties. It would be practically illegal."

I loved this doctor. He consistently put my happiness and quality of life before anything physical. Conversations were easy and even fun. My adoration for him was one of the things that made this breast reduction stalemate sting even more. I refused to let it end.

I had mild back pain but it wasn't debilitating. You better believe I described it as debilitating at every doctor's appointment, though – convincing myself that I wasn't really lying to this man that I cared about, just exaggerating for a bigger purpose. I needed to be understood. I needed to show how severely my life was being impacted. I needed to successfully communicate the extent of my misery.

My identifier at school became “the girl with the huge boobs,” and due to the sheer size, it was difficult for me not to look provocative in anything and everything I wore.

It didn't take long before I was forced to go up several sizes in clothes I liked in order to accommodate my breasts. Jumping rope, an activity I loved as a child, became impossible unless I wanted to physically hold my breasts in place to avoid the ache that came with their violent bouncing. The same was true of running and any kind of athletic activity, for that matter. Unable to exercise due to a lack of proper support and pain, my weight climbed. Size 10's became 12's and 12's became 14's.

I failed my physical education Connecticut state test as a sophomore in high school because I couldn't do a “proper” push-up. My gym teacher chose to ignore the fact that when my arms were bent at a 90-degree angle, “like they're supposed to be,” my breasts would touch the floor whether I wanted them to or not.

I was never without some sort of bra, even when I slept, although my “nighttime bras” as I called them were a touch more comfortable than the more restrictive underwire ones I wore

during the day. In the shower, I would hold them up so as not to feel the ache that came with the stretching caused by gravity.

My body was literally operating against me at every turn and I was desperate for a reprieve. I wanted just one single thing to work without any accommodations needing to be made.

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At 16, I found the junior prom dress of my dreams: a strapless, mint green gown with royal blue crystals embellishing a bust that was scalloped, almost the way Ariel's seashell bra looked in *The Little Mermaid*. The top of the dress, of course, didn't fit. Thankfully, we found a tailor that swore they could let it out only on top, making it perfect for me. They even promised to add delicate, fashionable straps in case halfway into the evening I found the strapless style to become uncomfortable due to the sheer weight of my chest. I left it with them feeling confident and comforted. I was going to look and feel beautiful. I was going to fit in – literally and figuratively – with all my girlfriends and be a “normal” teenaged girl wearing the dress I chose for the prom.

Less than a week before the prom, Mom took me back to the tailor's. I was nervous, I was excited; it was almost as though the unveiling of my dress was more of an event for me than the prom itself. The expectation of looking and feeling a certain way that I'd been unable to feel for so long seemed magical to me. Nothing I actually liked ever fit and the prospect of something I'd chosen being made to fit me was overwhelming. I couldn't wait to put the finished product on, zip it up without any discomfort, and not have the size of my boobs and the inconvenience they often caused be the first and only thing on my mind.

When the tailor emerged from the back of the shop with my dress, it was unrecognizable. My eyes fell on the pieces of what had been a complete gown when I left the last time. The bust, once delicately adorned with jewels, was shredded; the strips of fabric dangling around resembling the ribbons that gymnasts twirl around with in their routines. The damage they'd done when taking it apart was irreparable. I would never see my dress in tact again.

The tailor's profuse apologies began to sound more and more distant as I stared at the disaster my dress had become. Apparently, what they had sworn they could do turned out to be impossible after all.

When the ugly stepsisters destroy the pink dress that the mice made for Cinderella and it hangs torn up all over her, the fairy godmother waves her hand and fits her into a royal look, complete with ball gown, up-do, and makeup. That's what I wanted to happen. I shut my eyes, half so I could banish the tears that were welling up, and half to see if I could force magic's hand with my devastation. I was 16-years-old and praying that some sort of animated Disney pixie dust would fix this and I'd have my dress, perfectly engineered to fit my body, and I'd look like a princess.

I opened my eyes. It hadn't worked.

My feet carried me outside back to my mother's car, but I don't remember walking. My voice answered, "Okay," in response to another dress shop my mother suggested we try, but I don't remember speaking.

I had committed to the event, paid for my ticket, secured a friend as my date, and made my meal choice. It was too late to back out and it was too late to kid myself about having enough time to find something I actually wanted. I silently nodded in the mirror at the first dress that *sort of* fit: a plain navy blue frock, sized 16 in order to accommodate the baggage in my front that

ruined everything. My 5'2" stature required the dress to be hemmed and the seamstress used what she cut off of the bottom to reinforce the chest area, sewing extra pieces of fabric on the sides and under my armpits in order to avoid spillage or any other kind of wardrobe malfunction.

A year later, I didn't bother going to Senior Prom.

“Considering human body in the light of physics, we are energy beings.” –Anupama Garg

On September 21, 2010, a month and a half before I would turn 18, I woke up at 6:00 a.m. I took a shower, arm laid across my ribcage, hoisting up my breasts as I had to do every time I bathed. I strapped on one of my \$70.00 H-cup bras and took out the stud from my nose piercing. I removed the remnants of chipped nail polish from my fingers and toes and left the makeup on my dresser untouched. I sat barefaced, tired, but ready in the passenger seat of my mother’s car. We drove.

I slid my fingers along the seatbelt wondering what it was going to feel like when my boobs were no longer big enough to prevent the strap from digging into my neck. I thought of my naked self in the shower and wondered what it was going to feel like to be able to wash my hair with both hands for longer than just a few seconds. I thought of never needing to see Beverly again or her stacks of cardboard boxes filled with larger than life bras. I thought of the \$20.00 polka-dotted, lace-trimmed bras at the mall.

We pulled up to the doctor’s office and the morning air was still chilly, the sky still closer to navy with only a hint of orange in the distance. We walked inside and I filled out the necessary paperwork with Mom’s help.

The nurse called my name and escorted us to an examination room.

Mom waited on the other side of the closed door as I removed everything I was wearing and was confronted with my naked body once more. This was the last time we’d be together this way. This was the last time I’d look down at myself and see what I was seeing at that moment. I didn’t question the decision I’d made. I didn’t make myself feel unsure. I didn’t support my breasts with my arms. I allowed the weight of them to succumb entirely to gravity, stretch marks

on full display, the discomfort and borderline pain of the pull downward serving as a reminder of why I was there.

I suddenly remembered the part in the movie “Superbad” when the main characters are describing an old classmate that they’d heard had gotten a breast reduction.

“That’s like slapping God in the face for giving you a gorgeous gift,” I remembered one of them saying.

I closed my eyes and smiled to myself.

I draped the hospital gown over my shoulders and closed it in the front. I wasn’t going to pretend or attempt to say a loving goodbye when I’d been so vocal about the resentment I’d harbored. I’m sure that if my boobs had minds of their own (which sometimes I felt like they did) they’d be just as content to get rid of me as I was to get rid of them.

We’d had enough of each other.

I opened the door and let my mother inside. As they told me it was time to go, I hugged and kissed her and left her seated in the recovery area. It was the end of the line for her. She wasn’t allowed to go any further with me but she wasn’t allowed to leave the building either because I was minor. I have a feeling she would have stayed regardless of whether I was 17 or 47. I know she was scared even though she didn’t tell me she was.

Inside, as I lay on the operating table, the nurse asked me what I wanted to go to school for.

“I’m going to be a writer,” I told her as she pierced my skin with the needle and my IV began to drip.

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In the three months leading up to that September morning, my parents and I had gone over my doctor's head and secured a series of appointments with a plastic surgeon. Since I was almost 18 with a history of complaints about my breast size, they had pushed the procedure through insurance and gotten my surgery approved and booked.

They took three pounds worth of flesh out of my breasts and completely removed my nipples in order to cut them down to a size that would be proportionate to my new breasts before reattaching them. The new diameter of each was half of what it had been when I'd gone to bed the night before.

The skin on my breasts was so taught; they felt hard to the touch. They were lifted up so much higher than before it felt as though they were right under my chin. Tubes ran along the tops of my breasts directly beneath my flesh, draining the build-up of chunky liquid that the swelling caused. The blood red, jelly-like substance filled the bags attached to the end of each tube on either side. The removal of those tubes turned out to be the most excruciating part of the entire process, not including my mother having to wipe my behind every time I went to the bathroom due to my inability to reach my arm around without fainting from agony.

The first seven days of my recovery period showed me the beauty of napping. Each day, after taking my medication, I would fall asleep on the couch from 4:00 p.m. until 7:00 p.m. I'd wake to the smell of whatever was for dinner even though I had no interest in eating. Every passing day got easier.

When the pain subsided, the swelling went down, and my ability to function normally returned, I felt as though a dream had come true. My whole life would be changed forever because I'd finally made a major change to my body. My confidence would soar and I'd get into

the best shape of my life because I'd gotten what I wanted. My breast reduction would fix everything. I was sure of it.

“Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.” –Audre Lorde

A lot did change, but not nearly as much as I thought would.

I felt as though there might be a permanent dent in my neck now that the seatbelt constantly slid into it. I could now *choose* whether or not to wear a bra to sleep, now that going braless wasn't such an uncomfortable and painful experience. More often than not, I still slept in one just because I'd gotten so used to it. The bottom line, however, is that not much else was different. My mood hit a plateau once some time passed and the shock and awe of the surgery had worn off. I realized that if I wanted to continue making positive, healthy changes, I'd have to put in the work.

Exercising was easier since I could fit into most sports bras, but if my head didn't feel like doing anything, my body obeyed. My boobs didn't "fix" my mental state, they just weren't in the way as much. Nothing was actually "fixed" at all, but maybe it's because nothing was ever broken to begin with.

There were a lot of things that I'd proven over the years had needed attention more than just my physical appearance but for one reason or another, they'd slipped through the cracks. Some, I was able to grow out of, some, I ignored, and others lied dormant until I would experience an inevitable trigger.

The personal focus of the last several years of my life had finally been addressed and it wasn't until then that I realized I had been neglecting my inner growth in favor of my physical journey. In my teenaged misery about the skin I was living in, I had forgotten that there was far more to my body than what I could see in the mirror.

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When Mom went away at 30-years-old, she was officially diagnosed with clinical depression. They put her on anti-depressants soon after that. Her father's suicide when she was a teenager was a glaring moment on her medical 'permanent record' and she was consistently told the same thing from every doctor she saw:

"Mental illness is hereditary," they'd lecture. "Watch your kids."

In hindsight, I realize just how much I gave her to watch.

I don't remember what it was about, but I got so angry with my brother, I raised my fist in the air to punch him right in front of my mom.

"DO NOT HIT HIM!" she shouted at me. "I swear, you will be punished like you've never been before if you hit him." Her voice stopped my hand in midair.

I looked at her, I looked at my brother, I looked back at my mom, and then I proceeded to punch my brother in the shoulder as hard as I could.

She had no time to react.

"IT WAS WORTH IT!" I screamed, looking into my mother's eyes before stomping upstairs to my room. I knew I was about to be banished there anyway; I wanted to rob her of the satisfaction by going on my own terms.

During the time I'd be punished for an outburst, I'd scream for hours. I'd scream and cry so hard and long and loud, I would burst every corpuscle in my face and emerge hours later looking as though I'd contracted a deadly case of measles.

I saw a therapist for the first time when I was 11-years-old and it didn't last long. I was so angry. I don't mean I was angry because I had to see a therapist; I had to see a therapist because I was angry. I disrespected my parents, my siblings, and myself constantly; however, the moments of calm provided a false sense of comfort and thus, a counseling regime just never stuck.

To this day, I still identify as a control freak. I know now that those episodes of rage were all about control. Somehow, when I was completely out of control, I felt the most in control, the way a racecar driver must feel going 200 miles per hour, soaking in the danger of the situation. When the anger rushed over me, I could feel my heartbeat behind my eyeballs. It caused me physical pain and I succumbed to it every time. The small voice in the back of my head telling me to calm down was no match for the way the fury overcame me. As it turns out, anger was the first way my mental illness manifested itself.

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I didn't discover until way later in life that anxiety and anger often go hand in hand. My hostility and my physical/verbal aggression were foreshadowing my impending anxiety diagnosis and I didn't even realize it; nobody really did. We all thought that puberty had just turned me into a monster. We waited not-so-patiently for the day when people would be able to enjoy my company again, not expecting it to come until some point in my twenties. By the time I was 14 however, my irritability had begun to partner and somewhat transform into something resembling worry... constant, debilitating worry.

An irrational, overbearing, exhausting fear in me was born. I wish I knew when and how it started so that I could think of ways I might have been able to prevent it, but maybe prevention was impossible. I never thought I would crave the days when I would dive into a fit of rage because my brother made a joke about a celebrity I liked or because my dad's tone of voice wasn't precisely how I expected it to be. There was no legitimate trigger that I can remember, but the excessive and uncontrollable worrying I was beginning to experience caused me a different kind of pain.

My parents weren't sending me to my room anymore for being disrespectful; I was going to my room of my own accord to bury my face in my pillow to cry or hyperventilate. If anyone was late arriving somewhere they were supposed to be, I was sure something horrible must have happened. I accompanied my parents and siblings on the simplest and most mundane errands because I told myself, "If they're going to die, at least I'll die with them."

New experiences weren't the least bit exciting for me. I struggled with migraines and panic attacks that left me shaking and only able to fall asleep with the help of an emergency bottle of Xanax I was prescribed that my mother kept in her sock drawer.

We put our faith in the fact that the occasional, irregular therapy session combined with a strong family support system would be all I needed to stay healthy and it did indeed help for some time. I felt closer and closer to my mother and while living this way was frustrating, confusing, and tiring, I was confident that we had it under control.

Did everyone experience growing pains as intense as these? I convinced myself that they must.

Mom might have allowed me to continue in this state of mind, but her own fear and worry were lurking. The ever-present mental illness in her family's past had her hoping beyond hope that it really was just puberty and an internal struggle dealing with all the changes going on in my body and life; deep down, however, she knew it was probably more, she just didn't know what to do about it yet or how to help me cope.

“Contrary to what we may have been taught to think, unnecessary and unchosen suffering wounds us but need not scar us for life. It does mark us. What we allow the mark of our suffering to become is in our own hands.” –bell hooks

I was open and honest about my anxiety. I confided in friends about the way I felt and the fear I experienced and I worked hard in order to avoid shame. I told myself I was allowed to step away from social situations if I needed to compose myself. The attempts to slow my thoughts down often proved futile, but I made them nonetheless.

Waiting outside my high school at 15-years-old with my best friend, who was also my neighbor, I was both annoyed and comforted by his use of humor to deal with the situation. When visible panic spread across my face because my mother was more than 10 seconds late, he laughed with gusto.

“Uh-oh,” he’d mock, “It’s 2:16. She’s for sure dead.”

I lived like that for almost three years allowing friends and family to attach humor to my misery. Their attempts to lighten something that was continuing to weigh more and more heavily on me with each passing day didn’t go unnoticed. Maybe they thought they were helping, and I didn’t want them to know that they were trying to help in vain.

I hoped that the fear would someday subside and that one day I would feel free of the burden, but that day wasn’t coming fast enough. In fact, I didn’t even see it approaching.

Mom shared with my siblings and I the movies and books about “the law of attraction,” or “the ability to attract into our lives whatever we are focusing on.” I think she had hoped to encourage me to think of things in a more positive light in order to draw more positivity towards me. Unbeknownst to her, this new-age philosophy only made my worries and fears intensify. Not only was I suffering over things that hadn’t and probably wouldn’t happen in most cases, but

because I couldn't tear my mind away from them, I was convinced that I was unintentionally making them manifest in the universe.

I often begged family members not to go out, or at least not to go out without me. If they went out alone, I would be worried about them and thinking they were going to encounter something fatally dangerous and – according to the law of attraction – my focus on that worry would ultimately make it happen. I was constantly terrified that anyone and everyone I cared about was going to die tragically and unexpectedly.

It was in the midst of these fears wreaking havoc on my brain that someone I loved actually did die tragically and unexpectedly.

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There was my entire life before October 30, 2010 and my entire life after. My anxiety diagnosis had been bestowed upon me long before my friend died three days before my 18th birthday, but until then, it was just something I had to learn to cope with on a daily basis. During my years of sporadic counseling and therapy sessions, it was pretty clear to everyone involved that I was more than just your average worry-wart. Only after the debilitating sting of a tragic loss did my anxiety completely take over and prevent me from living my life. It became very apparent to family, friends, and doctors that I was both mentally and physically incapable of proceeding without a major change.

In a nearly catatonic state, I sat and listened to my doctor and parents discuss medication options with me. Afraid I would see it as some sort of failing on my part, my mom assured me that it was nothing to be ashamed of. She brought it back to my physical body, the way so many things had come back to it in the past.

“If you were a diabetic, you’d need insulin,” she said softly. “If you had a heart condition, you’d need to treat it with medicine.”

They all told me that my brain was just another organ in my body and that this was something I needed to do in order for it to function properly and in a healthy way – or at least in a way that would allow me to get out of bed without crying, panicking, or both.

The negative side effects and horror stories of complete personality changes I had heard before about taking medication didn’t really enter my mind at the time. I had become a different person anyway the moment I’d gotten that phone call with the worst news of my life. Medication couldn’t possibly make anything worse than it already was.

Everything I did felt disconnected. The hands holding my toothbrush and brushing my teeth didn’t feel like they belonged to me; when I spoke aloud, my voice didn’t sound the way it used to. Or maybe it did and my ears had just begun to hear sounds differently. I brought forkfuls of food to my lips, chewed, and swallowed to satisfy my mother’s concerns but tasted nothing and felt no more full or empty than I had before the meal.

Before trying different medications and dosages, I remember taking the tests and questionnaires with the doctor in order to establish just how much anxiety I was dealing with, as if the monstrous presence I was harboring inside me was measureable. It was after these evaluations that the words “chronic” and “severe” were pinned to the front of my anxiety diagnosis. My monster now had adjectives attached to it and I was barely 18-years-old. I went ahead and added this “enhanced” diagnosis to the long list of things that terrified me.

To this day, I often beat myself up for feeling alone in a mental illness that affects millions and millions of people, but – while I know it must sound childish – I can’t help it. Even though people say things like, “We’ve all got some anxiety,” and “Everyone’s anxious

sometimes,” I let the words ‘chronic’ and ‘severe’ isolate me. I convinced myself that I was alone in my plight, the same way I felt alone back at school in Connecticut. Nobody’s body looked like mine then and nobody’s brain acted the way mine did now. Suddenly, it wasn’t okay for people to be using serious mental illness diagnoses as casual descriptions and it definitely wasn’t okay for anxiety to be brushed off as something everyone feels at least every once in awhile – at least not my particular brand of it.

The words ‘chronic’ and ‘severe’ have facilitated three different medications and countless dosage changes over the course of nearly nine years. The way I experience anxiety has interrupted friendships, stunted romantic relationships, and forced me to work harder at every single thing I experience, no matter how small, insignificant, and/or unimportant the experience may seem to everyone else.

“You’re not fine. You’re not. And that’s OK. The first thing I want you to do is to finally tell yourself that it’s OK not to be OK... We need to change our way of thinking... We are not weak.

We are not broken. We are not odd.” –S.R.Crawford

I’ve been given a lot of tips, tricks, and life hacks to use when my anxiety gets out of control and surprisingly (or not so surprisingly, depending on how one looks at it) most of them all have to do with control over one’s corporeal body. It still amazes me how much comes back to the physical. It’s as though control over the flesh is the cure for a lack of control over the mind.

In the rare moments when I revert back to my teenage self and it manifests itself as rage, I’ve been instructed to pick up as many ice cubes as I can. I am to feel the cold in my palms and between my fingers before I throw them as hard as I can into a bathtub. The sound of them shattering soothes me as though the chaotic noise was made to accompany my racing thoughts. It was also suggested to me that I take a box of fresh pencils and snap them all in half. As a writer, I haven’t been able to bring myself to try that one.

My therapist has told me that I’m allowed to feel anything and any way I want to feel, be it rage, sadness, fear, or panic, but I can only sit in it at its worst for a maximum of 20 minutes. For 20 minutes, I’m allowed to drown in it and host my own little pity party. After that, I have to shut the party down and force myself to swim to the surface. If I stay in it any longer than 20 minutes, I’ll just be feeding into it, giving it permission to take over. I forgot that piece of advice for too long.

One of the best practices I learned to use is one that I realize is only effective because of the relationship I’ve had my whole life with food. When my thoughts won’t stop racing to every worst-case scenario, I close my eyes and think about my next meal. Not allowing myself to think

past the next thing I'll eat stops me from getting too far ahead of myself and letting my mind make up all the horrifying possibilities life could throw at me.

I got these strategies sent to me in an email from my therapist nearly seven years ago.

I never deleted it.

*

My older family members don't know I struggle with my mental health. I can hear both of my 82-year-old abuelas in either ear:

"We need to pray it away," one would say.

"There's nothing wrong with her. She just needs a beating," the other would insist.

Mental health is barely taken seriously at all, let alone by the Latin population in America. It only intensifies my feeling of loneliness, once again forcing me into that "other" box. It segregates me, like so many other parts of my identity like my womanhood and my brownness.

Anxiety means a lot of things to a lot of different people, but no matter how much research I do, no matter how many articles I read, and no matter how many quotes I try to make into mantras for myself, nothing will ever be able to truly define exactly what it means to me.

Anxiety is having an alarm set on my phone to go off every night when I have to take my medication because it's most effective when taken within the same hour of every day.

It's turning down invitations to socialize because the dread of going somewhere new or seeing someone I haven't seen in a long time is too much to bear.

Anxiety is my childhood girlfriend hiding her cancer diagnosis from me for six weeks because she was more concerned with my mental health than her own physical health.

While it certainly has an impact on everything I do, I consistently remind myself that it doesn't own me – at least I hope it doesn't. For every negative thing it's done to me, I can probably (if I try really hard) find something positive that came out of it.

While it nearly crippled me after my friend's death, it also forced me – with the help of my family – to take complete control of my mental health.

While it distanced me from friends that didn't understand why I am the way I am, it helped point out to me the ones that were willing to be patient and understanding while I figured out how to be patient and understanding with myself.

It's still a monster, but it's a familiar monster. It rarely jumps out from under my bed anymore.

I'm not cured; I'm being treated. I'm not suffering; I'm coping.

“Nothing, is what it appears to be, when it’s only with your eyes you see.” –N’Zuri Za Austin

When I was 16, every time I stood up, my vision would go completely black for several seconds. The first visit to my general practitioner revealed to us that I had strangely small ear canals that became quickly and easily impacted with wax.

“It’ll probably stop happening after we flush them out,” he insisted.

The periods of darkness continued.

The eye doctor did an examination and proceeded to tell us that something was putting pressure on the back of my eyes, but without further tests, he couldn’t tell us what.

Was it a tumor? Was I dying?

“I don’t know what it is right now,” the doctor told us.

My mother left the room to sob in the car before coming back inside to ask what our next steps would be.

For two months, I went to the eye doctor every single week and did every test that could possibly be performed.

My pupils were dilated over and over again. My head went into boxes where I had to click buttons when green lights appeared. I went into completely dark rooms and followed sounds with my eyes. I took stress tests in which gooey substances and wired caps were secured on my head while I took deep breaths as fast as I could. Nothing rendered any answers or remedies.

“The last thing I want to try is a spinal tap,” my eye doctor told us.

My parents were from an era where spinal taps were terrifying and dangerous. My mother sobbed again.

“I don’t care if she has to have a spinal tap,” my brother said in order to calm her down. “I just don’t want Corinne to die.”

Sometimes Robert has a way with words to knock sense into people.

The day of the procedure, I was shaking with fear. When my parents were afraid of something, I was convinced death was imminent. The doctors couldn’t proceed until I calmed down and steadied myself. Somehow, with much convincing about the safety of the procedure from my parents (who I’m sure were simultaneously trying to convince themselves) I ended up face down on the operating table, a giant mechanical needle positioned over me with an X-ray machine just visible out of the corner of my eye.

The process of numbing my lower back (a feeling akin to a blazing fire being lit beneath my flesh) turned out to be more painful than the actual needle piercing my skin and bone – that and the seemingly endless headache that came after the procedure.

I was told that the average amount of spinal fluid a person has should be between five and ten of whatever unit of measure they use to measure something like that. Mine measured at over 45. They drained the buildup of fluid and I was immediately put on a water pill, a pill that I’m still on and will probably stay on for the rest of my life. The spinal tap provided immediate relief.

I was never actually going to die. The doctors said that the worst thing that could have happened had my condition gone untreated was that I would have eventually gone blind.

My body apparently produced far more than the “normal” amount of spinal fluid. It was called idiopathic intracranial hypertension, also called pseudotumor cerebri: “most common in obese women of childbearing age,” according to the Mayo Clinic. There was that word again.

Even when my life was focused on another body part, it seemed to always come back to my weight.

Sometimes I wonder what life would have been like had I actually gone blind ten years ago. I would have never seen my nephews boyish faces morph into young men. I'd have never laid eyes on my youngest nephew at all, for that matter.

I would have also never seen the tattoo on his bicep. I might not have ever said anything to him at all.

“I once read in my physics book that the universe begs to be observed, that energy travels and transfers when people pay attention. Maybe that’s what love really boils down to—having someone who cares enough to pay attention so that you’re encouraged to travel and transfer, to make your potential energy spark into kinetic energy.” –Jasmine Warga

The support system I’ve had with my parents and siblings has filled almost every hole I ever felt I had. In fact, their presence has prevented many holes from even happening at all. They’ve given me more than I could have dreamed of and I rarely ever had to hear the word “no” when I asked for something. The one thing they couldn’t provide, however, was the banishment of the feeling of loneliness I felt throughout the years I was desperate for a romantic relationship.

Back in high school, boys said I was too fat, my smile too crooked, too this, or too that. The all-too-obvious fact that I didn’t look like everyone else meant that I was the unknown. Nobody wanted to date the unknown. I was 19-years-old before I went on my first date or even kissed anyone. When that guy found out I was a virgin in every way one could possibly be a virgin, he told me he didn’t want to hang out with me anymore.

My family called me a late bloomer in their attempts to comfort me in my loneliness.

“It’ll happen someday, I promise,” they told me, but I still hung my head daily in a combination of hopelessness and longing.

Every rejection fueled a newfound sense of insecurity-driven jealousy. Why wasn’t I good enough for anyone? Why was everyone seemingly better than me?

I prayed for a boyfriend, hoping to convince any higher power that might exist to give me what I imagined a real relationship to be: holding hands in public, kissing like in the movies, listening to sweet nothings being whispered in the air.

It finally happened during my sophomore year of college. He told me he wanted me; he told me I was perfect; he told me that even though I wasn't his first, he was going to make sure I would be his last. He also told me the worst thing of all. He's the one that told me he loved me.

I've heard about and watched a countless number of toxic relationships unfold before my eyes within my immediate and extended family, including two that ended in devastating divorces. If it weren't for my parents' consistent efforts at their marriage, I may not have even wanted to make an attempt at finding a partner. In spite of my choice to focus on the hope their relationship gave me, I was still forced to add my first romantic exploit to the list of failed attempts I had grown up witnessing.

The first (and pretty much only) experience I've ever had with a serious relationship resulted in the shattering of my heart. It's the only version of "love" I've ever had, obviously not counting the unconditional familial love I've been blessed with for 26 years and counting. Were it not for growing up with them, the heartbreak I endured may have broken more in me than just my heart.

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I'd never felt as cool as I did when I was flirting with the older tattooed guy in the Spiderman t-shirt that sat behind me in class. He was 21 and a senior at SUNY Purchase where I was a 19-year-old sophomore. He was the kind of guy that would stay quiet for extended periods of time until he would tell an immature joke out of nowhere and proceed to laugh the hardest. He had friends everywhere, waving to someone new in the hallway during every class. It was the fall of 2012 and I was a completely different person than who I entered college as the previous September.

That Corinne was straight out of New Fairfield, still feeling like her skin color was an anomaly scarcely ever seen. Regardless of the diversity I was now surrounded by in New York, I was holding onto the idea that my body was something to hate and hide, full of curves, rolls, and scars not worthy of attention or affection. My social life still stung with the burn of abandonment when “best friends forever” decided without me just how long “forever” really was. I had been taught that out of sight meant out of mind and I was going to college to please my parents, having had no interest of my own in furthering my education.

Ever the ones to want to make me happy, Mom and Dad let me have a year after high school in order to try and figure out what it was I wanted. Before I knew it, my time was up and I was still clueless. College at SUNY Purchase was the last resort of the angry, lost girl I had become.

I stayed miserable for a year at Purchase – walking everywhere with my head down, dragging my feet as I got out of the car, and avoiding any kind of social life I could have had. It took longer than I’m proud to admit for me to realize I didn’t want to be lost anymore. Choosing to make an attempt at happiness meant I had to figure out how to draw myself a map if I wanted to thrive.

My second year of college brought with it familiar faces from the year before, studying the same things and relating in ways I hadn’t expected. Girls I’d previously ignored and sat away from in lecture halls became partners I worked with in interviewing subjects, reporting on stories, and writing articles. I allowed myself to bask in the diversity of New York, having left the rich, white, citizens of Connecticut behind along with my resentful attitude. I embraced the variety of bodies and skin colors I encountered and began the journey of freeing myself from

self-doubt and hatred. Second-year-of-college-Corinne had finally decided to unleash herself onto the world and she was happy.

For the most part, I was happy.

“When I was with him, I felt like a book worth reading all the way through, again, and again, and again... I imagined him buying the book, studying it, quoting it, memorizing his favorite parts.”—Candice Raquel Lee

“I got school, I got a job, now all I want is a novio.”

That was my Facebook status on November 25, 2012. In my then-20 years, I had never had a boyfriend and I’d ALWAYS wanted one. I’d hear girls call my house for my oldest brother and watched my sister cuddle up on the couch in her boyfriend’s clothes. I wanted it all and I patiently, but desperately, waited for the time to come when it would be my turn.

It took *forever* for it to be my turn. I was jealous of every relationship I saw and wondered why other people had what I wanted and nobody wanted me. My jealousy was a continuous problem and I don’t remember a time where I wasn’t ashamed of my jealous nature. I was determined to make somebody want me and I actively prepared to hide my biggest flaw once I was in a relationship. I was finished believing that my body and I were unworthy of what I wanted. My complete lack of dating experience was no match for my newfound confidence in college. If ever there was a hesitant or timid version of me, she was benched indefinitely the day I stood outside of my classroom on a break talking to two of my girlfriends.

“Who’s the guy that sits behind you in class?” my girlfriend asked me, peering through the doorway in order to catch a glimpse of him. “He’s hot.”

“He’s mine,” I snapped back before my brain caught up with my mouth. I admitted my desire out loud before I even admitted it to myself privately.

Everyone backed off.

It took every ounce of effort I could give to sustain the level of confidence I’d worked tirelessly to develop. Every move made brought with it the fear of rejection and humiliation but I

took the chances anyway. The day I took his phone out of his hands and saved my phone number without asking his permission was the day I deliberately told my insecurity to fuck off.

I don't remember what flirtatious emoji I put next to my name, but I remember the hours and hours of exchanging text messages, grading his pop quizzes at my desk as he graded mine behind me, and saying we'll study as an excuse to meet up with each other outside of class. He had tattoos crawling up each arm and I wasted no time in writing the letter "C" on his wrist to add to his collection, if only temporarily, so he could think of me until the ink washed away and I could write it again.

I wanted to leave my mark on his body the way he'd already left a mark on mine without even touching me. It was the most intimate relationship I'd ever been in and we weren't even in a relationship. The first time I went to his apartment on campus, my girlfriend came with me under the pretense of meeting his pet turtle. I wanted nothing more than to be with him alone but my inexperience combined with my paranoia of worst case scenarios dictated what I would and would not allow myself to do regardless of my pent up energy and constant longing. The last bit of patience I had didn't last long, however, I was back in his room without any backup less than a week later.

While he sat on the floor – respecting unspoken boundaries thus making me even more attracted to him – I took off my shoes and climbed onto his bed. I sat up there, allowing myself to take up all the space I needed to be comfortable, something I wasn't used to letting myself do. As he made ridiculous things happen in his video game, I held nothing back, laughing so hard that tears streamed from my eyes. I was the most authentic version of myself I had ever been with a person of the opposite sex.

I began to adore the feeling of the seats in his shitty old Toyota Camry as we drove to get junk food or to see a movie – paying no mind to the way my thighs expanded when I was seated. The camera roll began to fill with pictures of our matching Converse sneakers, selfies at Buffalo Wild Wings, and documentation of the temporary tattoos we got on our hands at the Palisades mall.

“It looks like you got stamped at a concert and you never washed it off because you’re dirty,” my brother teased me. I paid no mind. Anything that made me think of the other person and his tattooed hand flooded me with emotions I had been longing to feel for so long. While we never called them dates, our hugs at the end of each night together grew tighter and longer as more time passed. My soft body – once the cause of so much turmoil – when wrapped in his arms and pressed against his tall skinny frame, felt safe and valued.

The first time I ever spent a New Year’s Eve without my family, I was at his house an hour away. I sat with him, taking any and every opportunity to touch him: wrapping my arms around him from behind, resting my head on his shoulder. When I stretched out on his couch, he scooped my legs up and laid them across his lap. My whole self was a presence when I was with him and he treated me as such.

Something was going to happen but I could only initiate so much and I had run out of steam by the time the ball was dropping. Too afraid to kiss him for the first time in front of his high school friends, he was the first person I hugged in the year 2013.

Each moment spent with him left me wanting more. He made me feel as though every boy that had rejected me in high school, every time I’d cried over being lonely, and every wish I’d made on shooting stars and birthday candles, they had all led me to him. The prayers I’d said aloud as I’d laid in bed to any higher power that may exist had been answered. I couldn’t stop

wanting him, no matter how much my constant talking about him induced eye rolls and feelings of nausea in my mother.

I was patient, but traces of my jealousy resurfaced from time to time. Any girl I saw him near was a threat to me. I hated myself for the jealousy I felt but I couldn't turn it off. In spite of his constant reassurance that I was the one he wanted, the boys that mocked my body reared their ugly heads every time I told myself I had nothing to worry about.

His kind words were temporary comforts capable of getting me through only short periods of time. When I was alone with him, I could bury my jealousy, I could bury my fear of being left alone, of not being enough or my body being too much. I began to cut deals with God or the Universe to make him mine and make me his. I would do and promise anything to make a "real" relationship with him materialize.

"If I finally get what I want... if I get him... I'll never invade his privacy, I'll never snoop through his things, and I'll never let my jealousy take over to a point where it makes me look crazy."

On February 17, 2013, I became his girlfriend and I finally felt his lips on mine for the first time.

I promised myself that I would keep my promises.

The first thing he did was leave his mark on my body, the way I always craved for him to do. He left a dark purple hickey on my neck because I said I'd never gotten one. It looked as though I'd allowed him to tattoo a giant eggplant just below my hairline.

My parents were appalled but their disgust did nothing to deter my heart from swelling. I wrapped scarves around my neck with pride before going to work and blushed every single time my phone vibrated and his name appeared.

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My knees bounced nervously as I sat next to his parents at the Westchester County Center three months after we put a label on our relationship. My shaky hands clutched the expensive camera he entrusted me with to photograph every moment of his graduation. When he walked up the aisle towards us in his navy blue cap and gown, my legs calmed and my hands steadied. The nerves surrounding my close proximity to my boyfriend's family vanished with the flash of his smile. I captured it on his camera and in my mind. He paused at the aisle we were seated in and reached out to me.

I'd asked countless people what it would feel like when it happened. I had tirelessly wished for a partner to experience everything important and nothing important with. I wanted to feel what it was like to be totally comfortable, made happier just because of one person's presence in the room. My body and mind were starved for affection, starved to feel like they were good enough. I wanted to feel what it meant to be totally in love and for someone to be totally in love with me.

He reached his arm out and wrapped his fingers around my outstretched hand.

I finally felt it.

“Have you ever imagined loving and hating someone so much, exactly at the same time? It is suffocating.” –Ama H. Vanniarachchy

As the youngest in the house, I’ve hardly ever had to experience being alone. Even when my friends ditched me, I had at least one of my siblings nearby to entertain me. They were my safety nets. My parents and three older siblings considered raising me to be a team effort and were at my beck and call 24/7.

When I was in 5th grade, I wanted my sister to give me a special braided hairstyle for picture day, but our schedules didn’t line up because she left for her classes at culinary school a lot earlier than I left for school. It was one of the rare times I didn’t immediately get my way.

To my surprise, about an hour before my class was to be sent down to get our pictures taken, I was called to the main office. I walked down the hallway, turned the doorknob to the office, and recognized the chef’s uniform before it even registered that my sister was smiling at me. We went to the bathroom and she did my hair.

I wasn’t used to being told, “no.” While it made me grateful for the people in my life, it also instilled in me a sense of entitlement. I was used to getting what I wanted and I wanted it to stay that way.

They did everything in their collective power in order to make me happy and everything I’ve done since I could walk and talk has been done in the hopes of making them proud and showing my appreciation for every smile they ever put on my face. I knew that whomever my partner ended up being someday, he’d have to be able to fit into my safety net.

When I asked them to let my boyfriend in, as usual, they exceeded my expectations. Under our Christmas tree, wrapped gifts from my parents and my siblings sat, addressed to him. My baby boomer parents made decisions beyond their generations’ limits and allowed me to

have sleepovers, understanding that I was a 21-year-old woman in a serious, committed relationship with someone they knew and trusted. They practically adopted him once he convinced us of his tumultuous relationship with his own parents.

“They don’t support me... they humiliate me... they don’t trust me... I’m so unhappy at home,” he told us.

His self-esteem took a new nose-dive every single day. He began to openly tell me how much he hated himself, how he didn’t have any talent, that he should give up all his hobbies because he’ll never succeed at any of them. Every word out of his mouth broke my heart further and I wished that he could see himself through my eyes. It must have been the same feeling my family felt all those times I used to look at myself in the mirror with disdain.

Like they’d done for me so often before, my family did everything they could to make it better.

My father introduced him to his favorite comic book store and frequently talked about superheroes to take his mind off anything he may have been stressed about. My sister asked him to photograph my nephews’ birthday parties and dress up as Spiderman, something he’d loved to do since he’d gotten the costume to attend Comic-Con. When his misery working at Target – a job he’d had since he was in high school – became too much to bear, my dad and brother got him job interviews at new places – “big boy desk jobs,” they called them.

He came to Disney World with my family twice and held onto me in every family photo, photos that would eventually appear in frames and all over social media.

When I watched my parents embrace him, when I watched him laugh at my brother’s jokes, my heart swelled in my chest. The relationship I had with him and the relationship he had

with my family was more than I'd ever asked for. They had expanded their safety nets to allow room for both of us.

I wrote him poems in the middle of the night, my fingertips tapping the keys, my entire body feeling every word. The body and mind I felt had once been conspiring against me were now a part of this dream coming true.

"I want a princess cut ruby engagement ring in a platinum setting," I'd tell him.

"Okay," he'd say, and kiss me on the forehead.

*

His parents threw him out in February of 2016, something he'd warned my family and I might happen.

The weekends leading up to the day he showed up with a pile of clothes in the backseat of his car were miserable. No amount of comic books or Spiderman references could cheer him up and it brought everyone in my house down. It must have been like what the house felt like after every rejection and bullying insult sent me into a downward spiral of low self-esteem. I spent Saturdays and Sundays with him, sitting on my couch, watching him lose video game matches and angrily stare into his phone.

"You'll always have a place to go if you need one," my parents and I told him.

I could only imagine what my extended family would think of my parents allowing something like this. All of their worst fears when they found out I was menstruating and on birth control were coming true.

Their judgment didn't matter to my parents, though. All that mattered was whatever it was they could do to make me happy. It made me happy that they gave my boyfriend a place to stay.

As I thanked God for my parents, the way I had since before I could remember, I detested his. He belonged to them even more than he belonged to me and they took it for granted. I laughed as I remembered I had once been jealous of them for every minute of his time he gave them. It was the same way I was silently jealous of everyone that ever got to be near him.

The charismatic, flirtatious boy I had sat in front of in class three years earlier rarely showed his face after he moved in with my family. Perhaps it was naïve of me to expect him to have a positive attitude after having been rejected by his own family. I couldn't be expected to crack any semblance of a smile after being rejected by people who were little more than strangers. He went to bed hours before anyone else, opted to stay home when everyone else went out, and moped around the house, hardly saying a word.

I looked back then – and now, still – on all the times my parents and siblings bent over backwards to make me feel better, to make me feel special, or just to make me feel more loved than I could already feel. Their goal was to inspire self-love within me and it was my turn to do it for someone else, taking action for someone I adored the way they always had.

Playing the role of housewife, I packed lunch for him to take to work every day, writing love letters on little pieces of paper and hiding them inside.

“Try to be a rainbow in someone else's cloud.” –Maya Angelou

“Whatever you are, be a good one.” –Abraham Lincoln

“Love yourself first and everything else falls into line.” –Lucille Ball

I took these quotes and others like them, printed them out, and taped them to the ceiling above my bed so that they'd be the last things he saw before he fell asleep and the first when he woke up. The last one was from me:

“I'll always be proud of you. I love you.”

*

My family has often described me as an emotional hurricane and my therapist has called me extremely empathetic on more than one occasion. It's nearly impossible for me to hide the way I feel whether it be positive or negative. The struggles of those I feel strongly about affect me in an almost unhealthy way. I have felt physical pain over the deaths of people that had practically nothing to do with me, solely because the loss had hurt someone I love.

Everything he went through, I went through. I learned that love is not only blind, but also stupid, as his treatment of me began to fall far beyond the line of what I knew I was worth, and I ignored it. I not only ignored it, but I believed his excuses and vehemently defended him every time I was confronted with his behavior and what it was doing to me.

“Why has he been disappearing every weekend?”

“When's the last time you two actually did something together?”

“Doesn't he notice what he's doing to you?”

The questions my parents were asking me were seemingly endless, but I was armed with the answers he'd given me.

“His aunt was in a car accident recently and he's going to the hospital to see her.”

“His parents' house was robbed while they were away and he has to be there to help until they got home.”

“He's getting his car fixed and it won't be ready to be picked up for a few days.”

Watching my partner's misery and experiencing this new level of neglect lead to me gain weight, suffer through headaches daily, and avoid the coping mechanisms I knew deep down that I needed to be using. I avoided being alone with myself both physically and emotionally at any and all costs because I knew I wasn't the same person I had grown into. I had regressed to a

physical and emotional state that I hadn't been since before I was in high school. I forced my family to deal with me because I couldn't deal with myself, clinging to them at every turn that he left me, but still making a case for him and his behavior every time they questioned it. They had every ounce of suspicion I should have had.

In spite of my jealous nature and penchant for jumping to the worst possible conclusion, I trusted him completely and never did a single ounce of doubt creep into my brain. I was keeping my end of the deal I'd cut with a higher power. I'd have bet my life on his every word even as each one tortured me. My heart broke more every day I was left alone. Regardless of the fact that I'd gone into this relationship with a newfound confidence and sense of self-worth, I abandoned it all in favor of making excuses for the way I was being treated.

Not everyone was happy 100% of the time. I'd seen my older siblings suffering over relationships. This had to be a normal thing.

I chalked my headaches up to stressors that had nothing to do with him because I didn't want my parents to question his behavior and resent him any more than they already were.

"Please just trust him," I pleaded with them while simultaneously pleading with myself to remain calm.

Never wanting to disappoint me, they obliged. After one too many phone calls with tales of his failing car, my dad helped him find the car of his dreams online. The three of us road tripped down to North Carolina with him to pick it up.

In an attempt to repair his relationship with his parents, he left me again soon after to show them his new car. That was when he got the news of his father's early onset Alzheimer's diagnosis. It was serious and it was sudden. He was devastated.

“What if this is hereditary?” he said to me through tears. “It’ll be like you lose me twice and you’ll be left alone. I’ll make your worst fears come true.”

The only thing I was scared of more than everybody I loved dying, was everybody I loved forgetting about me.

He stayed with his mother for a few days to help at various doctors’ appointments. I was alone again and I was losing it.

At night, when he did end up back at my house and in my bed, he’d hold my hand and apologize for everything he’d been putting me through. My mind rushed back to the 16-year-old girl praying for a boy to lie next to her and hold her hand. In spite of my increasing bitterness, everything faded away when he came back to me. No matter how sad, angry, or distant he was, no matter how much he complained about his life, his parents, or his job, and no matter how many weekends he had other things to do without me, I just stayed and waited for him.

My relationship had turned me into a drowning victim. I tasted tears daily and choked on them, gasping for breath every short time I was able to break the surface, only to be dragged down again, my lungs not being anywhere near satiated. Being taken for granted brought back old feelings of worthlessness. There must have been something about me that was making everything fall apart. Something about me wasn’t enough or was just too much. I didn’t remember the 20 years I’d lived without him before we met; I just knew I couldn’t go back to it.

I’d felt a lot of things over the course of my life: excitement when my sister was expecting my nephews, grief when I lost my best friend, proud when I received my college degree, etc. Now, the only thing I felt like I was, was pathetic.

“The truth is, it’s hard to get people to like you, but it’s even harder to keep people liking you.”

–Mindy Kaling

When he told me he was fired from his job, I prepared myself to be confronted with the worst version of him I’d ever been exposed to. I thought of all the right, positive things to say and planned several of his favorite things to do, but it was all for naught. Losing his job had forced him to realize what his priorities were. As it turns out, I wasn’t really one of them.

He was leaving.

For a girl that had grown up consistently getting her way, I was stunned and confused.

“I’m sorry,” he told me as he held my crying face in his hands. “I’m going to make everything better and we’re going to get married someday.”

I’d convinced myself that I was enjoying playing house, childishly expecting it to continue, to get better, to somehow wind up being a positive experience. My addiction to him made me delusional.

My weight had continued to climb over the last year of our relationship. I didn’t wear makeup regularly anymore, I smiled less, and I cried more than I ever had. This made it easier for me to blame his refusal to touch me on myself and what I looked like and not his situation. I looked and felt more like the person I was when I was going into college, not the person I’d worked so hard to become after embracing the diversity I was now surrounded by. I looked at myself in the mirror and saw all the things I used to hate and proceeded to blame them for his distance. He didn’t want me with him during times of trouble anymore because I clearly wasn’t good enough. He wasn’t attracted to me anymore. Everything he’d said to me in the beginning had lost its meaning.

As I approached my bed to curl up and continue to cry, I saw his phone charger lying on the floor. I realized that if he couldn't charge his phone, he couldn't text me to tell me he'd gotten home safely. I calmed my sobbing as much as I could and worked up the courage to dial his parents' house line.

It was happening again: one of those moments that seem tiny and insignificant, but winds up being defining and earth shattering. The crater had started to form long before that night, but that phone call made it impossible to keep ignoring.

Every doubt and suspicion my parents had expressed in the previous months came to the forefront of my mind. I didn't know what that feeling was in the pit of my stomach, creeping up into my throat, but it forced me to pour my heart out to his mother, voicing every concern I had and asking every question that I knew needed to be asked.

My body was frozen. My thoughts were having difficulty keeping up with the words tumbling from my mouth. As I listened to his mother's dumbfounded and confused responses to everything I said, a text message came through to me: "I made it."

"Is he there right now?" I asked his mother, unable to hold the phone steady.

"No."

The tears streaming down my face came harder and faster.

"Are you two even together?" his mother asked me, to add insult upon injury. "He told us you broke up months ago."

She may not have been able to understand me through my sobs when I told her he'd been living with my family for months. I curled up on my bed into a fetal position as she told me her sister was never in a car accident, their house had never been robbed, she'd never seen his new

car, and his father wasn't sick. They hadn't kicked him out. He'd left by choice to live with "a friend."

I called and texted my boyfriend more than 80 times with complete abandon.

"I know you've been lying."

"I know you're not at your parents' house."

"Please talk to me."

"I don't know what's going on."

"I still love you."

Hours went by. After telling my parents everything, for the first time in a long time, they had no idea what to say or do. Refusing any comfort being offered to me, I sat on the couch clutching my phone until 2:00 a.m. when it finally buzzed.

The next lie I believed was his story about losing a battle with heroin. He went into depth about his addiction providing explanations as to why he didn't have any visible track marks and laid out an entire timeline of his usage. I ate it up so hungrily that I proceeded to call a rehabilitation facility at 3:30 a.m. in order to reserve a space for him.

When I broke the news to him the next morning that my parents didn't believe a word he said, he lost it. Losing his temper, he screamed through the phone at the top of his lungs. After that short-lived attempt at feigning hurt feelings and incoherently cursing my parents for daring to doubt him, he finally shouted a complete sentence.

"Fine, the heroin is a lie too!"

I didn't realize I'd been pacing until I stopped in my tracks. It was the same way my hand stopped in midair when I was about to hit my brother in front of my mom during a fit of rage; the same way I sat in disbelief at 7-years-old after my neighbor's racist comments. Until that second,

it was as though my mind and body were disconnected, short-circuiting in their attempts to pull my whole self back together.

“I’m a pathological liar,” he said calmly. It was probably the first, last, and only true thing he’d ever said to me.

My tears stopped abruptly. My knees locked. My right hand gripped my cell phone, pressing it harder against my face while my other hand’s nails dug pink half-moons into my palms.

Since I couldn’t be sure of anything he’d said to me before this confession, I resolved that I had to take the possibility of there being drugs in my home seriously. Deciding to break the promise I’d made to never snoop after more than three years of keeping it, I searched his things for the first time ever. In an effort to justify my actions, I reminded myself that this was being done out of fear and not jealousy.

There was no trace of any drugs or paraphernalia in any of his things. In fact, nothing was out of the ordinary until I opened the very last drawer.

“You’re the ying to my yang,” the letter spelled incorrectly. “Life is hard but I know I want to go through it all with you. I love you,” signed, Shannon.

The intimacy expressed in the page and a half handwritten letter addressed to my boyfriend from another woman took all the air out of my lungs.

I’d once watched a video on YouTube of an arm wrestling tournament in which it seemed as though the reigning champion was so evenly matched with his opponent that they would stay in a stale mate for eternity. That was until the bone in the challenger’s arm snapped so quickly and violently that if you blinked, you’d have missed it. I imagined that the screaming pain in that man’s arm was the only thing comparable to what I felt as my eyes rested on that letter.

I couldn't move. My old tears mixed with my sweat as my eyes darted around the room. I didn't want to be in this house. I didn't want to be in my skin. I didn't want to be me.

My hope that Shannon was a girl from his childhood, high school, or any time of his life from before I was a part of it, was dashed as he confessed she was a girl he met at the job my own father had helped him get. He'd had an "emotional affair" for 2 ½ months the previous summer but assured me that nothing physical had ever happened – not even a kiss – and that he had ended it when she gave him that letter because he didn't feel the same way.

If I'd been able to eat anything during the 16 hours that preceded this moment, I have no doubt in my mind that I would have vomited it up right then and there.

For the first time since the day I met him, I knew he was a lying.

He never loved me. He probably told every girl he met that he wanted to marry her. He never thought I was perfect. He never thought I was enough. The anger I'd buried inside me every weekend he had left me finally detonated.

Although he tried to reason with me, begging me to stop stuffing his belongings into paper bags, it was useless. Every time he tried to speak or touch me, I pulled away and recited phrases from the love letter that I'd already practically memorized – the love letter that had been sitting in my room, 10 feet away from the bed I'd let him sleep in with me every night, the bed he'd held me in, the bed that before he decided to distance himself both emotionally *and* physically, that we'd had sex in.

Suddenly, my skin felt like it was on fire. My body felt tainted, as though I'd allowed it to be overcome by parasites. I wondered how many showers it would take for me to not feel as disgusted with myself as I currently felt with him.

Every form my body and mind had ever taken erupted as though they had been frantically trying to show themselves for months. Lonely high school Corinne, jealous rage Corinne, terrified of abandonment Corinne, and the newly created betrayed Corinne came together in a last-ditch attempt to hurt him as severely as he had hurt every version of me.

“You disgust me. You’re evil. I wish I never met you. I’ve never lied to you,” I screamed at him as I stood on my bed, ripping the quotes of the ceiling, pausing as I got to the last one.

“Actually... I guess I did lie to you once,” I said as I tore down the piece of paper that told him I’d always be proud of him.

This, then, was the boy I called my first love: cursed with an Americanized, entitled upbringing that he took for granted. He was adored by many but unwilling to return any adoration, capable of displaying arrogance while simultaneously suffering from a sense of self-loathing. He was never interested in being grateful but was insatiably greedy (“used to getting my way,” as he described himself in a love letter.) First and foremost, he was taker... a deceiver—that is someone who takes advantage of all who surround him, who must leave every path and person with far more irreparable damage than when he’d found them.

“It kills me that I don’t know who my son is,” his mother texted me after she and her perfectly healthy husband had come to remove any trace of their child from my home at my parents’ request. “I’m so sorry for what he’s done.”

“My job, I realized, was to be myself, to speak as myself. And so I did.” –Michelle Obama

I wish I had learned more about myself before I gave him everything I thought I was. I wish that I had explored what made me such a jealous person before I attempted to pretend it was a part of me that didn't exist. I wish that I had embraced each and every version of Corinne instead of encouraging my soul to splinter in ways that I hoped would satisfy everyone around me, not taking my own happiness into consideration. More than anything, I wish he had only hurt me and not my entire family. I don't wish it never happened. I am a better and more complete human being for every one of my experiences whether they are good, bad, or ugly. I just wish I'd been kinder to myself when I was alone, before he wrecked all the progress I'd made, but I guess it wasn't really progress if it could be dashed so quickly by nothing more than a worthless boy.

My recovery period on my own lasted more than two years. There were boys after him, but they were sparse and short-lived. I smiled and felt butterflies every now and then, but they'd never live longer than a week or two. Some of them told me things I wanted to hear, but they ultimately either changed their minds or never meant them in the first place. I was serenaded on more than one occasion, only to be abandoned several weeks or even days later. What stung the most was the fact that I wasn't even all that surprised every time another one disappeared. I was already completely wrecked and I cried on the nights I wondered whether or not I would ever be able to get back to where I was emotionally. I hadn't really even cared about these guys. I cared about wondering if I would ever find someone whose face I didn't see the liar's in, whose voice I

didn't hear his lies coming through in. I needed someone to help me—not to forget, but to heal once I'd done all the healing I was capable of doing on my own.

I think, I hope, and I pray... I've found him.

He tells me things that infuriate me, and he tells me things that make me swoon.

“I want you to know that I just love looking at every curve and crease and mark of your body,” he wrote to me. “I could look at it all day... You're art.”

What's comforting is that I think he really means it – all of it. I'm comforted not only by the fact that he seems sincere, but also by the fact that I am allowing myself to trust him. I'm terrified that I'll be wrong again, but I think he tells me what's true, no matter what it is. That's all I ever wanted to be told – just what a person means deep down, whether it be good or bad.

I have fallen in love again – something I wasn't sure I'd ever be able to do. It happened as swiftly and painlessly as though I wasn't a woman scorned. It felt so strong that I denied it for months, trying to convince myself that my hurricane of emotions was playing with me.

What if he's a liar too? What if he disappears one day? What if I let him in completely and I'm wrecked all over again?

These are the things I told myself:

Remember things you've been told by other people. Remember how it feels to be kept in the dark – to be lied to. Remember the way you yearned to be told that someone loves you – that they mean it. Remember what you wanted to hear before all the others tainted it.

*

Due to changes in my insurance and other variables, I haven't been to therapy in longer than I'm proud to admit. I also weigh the most I've ever weighed. Actually, I haven't been weighed in a couple of months so it could have gone down by now – or even more up.

It confuses, frustrates, and fascinates me all at once because I *looked* bigger when I was in high school, but the number is one of the highest on the scale I've ever seen when I step on it. My size 12's are tighter and my 14's are more comfortable again. I'm sad and I find myself caring both a lot and very little. I care because I feel insecure, undesirable, and like everyone's looking at me and judging me, making assumptions about why I may look the way I look. I also don't care because I know there are a lot of reasons why the number has escalated: my mental health, my lack of motivation, my stress about school, etc. It's all added to my desire to eat and comfort myself with food. My self-control when it comes to my previously identified insatiable appetite fluctuates greatly depending on my frame of mind.

In spite of the countless voices in my head telling me I'm not worthy of being seen and to stay covered up until I can get my body "under control" (whatever that means,) at this current weight and size, I applied, was chosen, and accepted a position as a brand ambassador for a boudoir photography studio. Without completely understanding my reasoning, I knew I needed to do something that terrified me.

Upon searching the Internet for images from boudoir photo shoots, I saw the kind of pictures I'd be posing for. I'd be embodying a version of myself I had never been and that I feared quite possibly didn't even exist. I've been in love; I've been sexually intimate; I've felt beautiful and sexy for my partner. I've never, however, practiced being beautiful, sexy, or in love with and for myself.

I pulled up to the *True Muse Boudoir* studio – a lake house situated overlooking the water – nestled in the woods of Sherman, CT. Instructed to bring "options" to my summer-themed shoot, slung over my shoulder was my Converse duffel bag, filled with an assortment of bright-colored lingerie, bathing suits I'd found the courage to buy but never to wear, wedged sandals,

and statement jewelry. My cheeks flushed, red and hot; my legs grew weaker with every step towards the front door. My stomach felt impossibly full in spite of my inability to eat anything since the day before and my thoughts, careening off of every mental cliff, begged for something to use as an anchor.

Sitting at a table one day at school, a girl walked by me wearing leggings and a crop top. Before I could stop myself, I reverted to my elementary school self, noticing that she was obviously bigger than me. I envied her and her confidence. Her soft stomach – far from flat – was on display and she paid no mind. I wanted to be like her. I wanted to get better at ignoring society's discriminatory and harmful standards of beauty.

I longed to do a better job of loving myself and showing my body the kind of care it deserves. I decided a long time ago that I could be okay with not knowing what to do and being scared.

I am scared.

“You are your best thing.” –Toni Morrison

I like to think I know who I am. When Beyoncé instructs all the ladies to, “Get in formation,” I am eagerly ready to line up. When Shania Twain’s beat starts and she sighs, “Let’s go, girls,” I know that applies to me, and when Marc Anthony’s smooth voice croons, “¡Mi gente!” my Latina heart swells with pride, in spite of my less than impressive ability (or lack thereof) to speak Spanish fluently.

I have a moment after each one of these instances where I’m nervous about whether or not I’m allowed to participate in any of these festivities. None of these people really look like me. I’m not represented in most popular media. Where I grew up, I stuck out so much I might as well have had three heads.

During an investigative reporting class in college, when delegating assignments and subjects to contact, my professor proved to me that I can still be caught off guard and stereotyped.

“Corinne, you’ll interview Gonzalo. You speak Spanish, don’t you?” he asked without even looking up from his papers.

He didn’t know me and he didn’t know where I grew up or in what kind of household I was raised. He just saw my brown skin and my Latin last name. I’ve had to deal with a lot of shaming due to the fact that I’m not a fluent Spanish speaker. It’s as though I turn into a white girl when I’m “found out” but I don’t get any of the privileges that being white offers.

Every day that passes that I am rebuilding myself from the scars I’ve suffered, the heartbreak I’ve endured, and the craters that have formed, I am finding, inventing, and developing new parts of this body and mind that make me who I am. Almost everywhere I turn, I am not thin enough, not smart enough, not woman enough, not Latina enough.

I'm just Corinne.