

Living with Diabulimia

Everyday I have to make the choice between life and death. I know it sounds dramatic but it is true. Every injection brings with it guilt, a conscious decision to care for myself, but I ask you this, would you save someone you despised? Would you really pull them up from an existence you thoughtt they deserved? It would be oh so easy just to let go and I have come close.

Eating disordered from a young age, fad diets, the idea set firmly in my mind that thin equaled good and there was far too much of me. As a rosy-cheeked girl with wonky eyes and a shy disposition, I was an easy target for name calling and playground disapproval. I usually sat in the corner of the classroom with my head down, hoping no one would call upon me. At the age of nine the warning signs came on, a healthy hue replaced by white skin, exhaustion, an insatiable thirst that kept me peeing every ten minutes or so. I was dehydrated, despite guzzling so much fluid and was dropping weight dramatically. My mother was, of course, worried and so took me to the doctors. From there it was

straight into hospital, faced with the unfortunate diagnosis of type one juvenile diabetes. With this came confusion, I didn't understand why it had happened to me, what had I done wrong? I pushed it back, pretended it wasn't really happening. I hated the attention, the wide eyes in the physical education changing rooms when I ate a chocolate bar to give me sugar before sport, the "Oh I wish I could have snacks in lessons like you." From the very beginning it felt like a curse. My self-esteem fell to rock bottom.

I remember the time a girl a few years younger than me told me of how her mother had told her diabetes was caused by eating too much sugar. All too often type one and type two diabetes are not separated like they need to be as completely different illnesses. Even though I had been told of this and how only type two was brought on by obesity and eating the wrong foods, the fact that people might think that of me was terrifying and embarrassing. Along with the management of diabetes there was to be a certain amount of focus on food, diet, meal plans, what to eat and when. I had to see a nutritionist and count carbohydrates and test my sugars regularly. Also, with the aid of insulin, this so-called "medicine," I started to gain back the weight I had shed before and although I had no energy and felt terrible that consequence had been welcome.

I still wanted to lose weight. I always wanted to lose weight. I can't remember a time when this was not the case. I felt so uncomfortable and out of control as the numbers on the scale rose with age. As for when I discovered the deadly trick of skipping insulin to achieve such a result, I am not quite sure. I do wish I had never found out. The years since are hazy, snatches of memory revealing concerned glances and hospital visits, a blur of self-destruction,

ongoing and painful. I restricted my intake and started to throw up when I felt I needed to. With unwanted revelation and attempts at intervention by those who cared about me I had to be more careful and eat under supervision. It was then I began to binge in secret and purge with shame numerous times a day.

In a few months' time I will be 21, and I have missed so much out of living. The things a typical teenager took for granted were impossible for me. Socializing and having fun can be so difficult when you feel dead inside. People can see through the façade and know you are breaking, even if all you want to do is hide it, cover the scars, the red marks on your hands, and halt the tears. My last year of high school was patchy. I was absent more than present and in the end scrapped the last term as I could not summon the strength to even walk there in the mornings. I passed my GCSEs, with starred As in English and English Literature and having done no revision. I was proud, but as usual dwelled on the negatives – a D in Science, C in History, C in Art which was achieved with the aid of a medical note as my portfolio was not even finished. I lasted just two weeks at college, where I rushed around as a 71-pound ball of nerves. I was working constantly, throwing up everything I was eating, which wasn't much at all, and disguising the strong smell of ketones with chewing gum. My mother has always been able to tell when my sugars are raised simply by standing near me and recognizing that smell. At this point I crashed. I was sent to hospital, which I thought would be the weekend, after blood test results showed my liver and kidneys were struggling to function. This was a result of omitting my injections and surviving on as little insulin as I possibly could. Although upon learning this,

the danger did not register. I was dumbfounded by the urgency and fuss, the words, "you might die" meaning nothing. They threatened to section me if I did not comply with further treatment at a specialist adolescent unit for anorexics and bulimics. I cried and fought and promised to get better if they let me go, but they would not. In the end I just had to give in.

But it did not work. I was the best patient, I did everything I was supposed to and propped everyone up with my positive advice and friendship. Inside though, I did not believe what I was saying at all. I stayed two months and then persuaded my mother to agree on a discharge. I just could not stand it anymore. I lied through my teeth with stories of what I was looking forward to once I was recovered, but I just wanted to starve myself again. They were making me fat and they were hopeless with my diabetic control. In my last therapy session they all but admitted that when I was asked, "So what should we do if we have to admit another diabetic patient in the future?" Within months I had gotten out of outpatient sessions and finally felt free.

The years roll into each other, with little change aside from the high frequency moments when I fall into danger. I have fallen into diabetic ketoacidosis at least three times, a condition caused by lack of insulin that has a 70 percent mortality rate. I have had a minor heart attack. I have been on antidepressants for a while now. My potassium is often too low from the amount that I throw up and my finances are a mess. This is something you rarely hear of in cases of bulimia, but the result can be disastrous and it has been for me. I have spent thousand of pounds buying food, indulging my habit at a turn of the head, all too often dwelling on

a sign advertising café, takeaway or even pricy restaurant food: a means to fold into myself and lose myself in distraction, avoid the hectic pace of public life and find company in fresh sandwiches, pasta or iced buns.

I am now at university, but I am not too well. I went back to college part time and finished with two A levels. I was shocked to say the least, but relieved. Coming to university was the next logical step, something "normal" people would do and here I am still playing happy. I am balancing the eating disorder alongside my will to do well, to get my degree and make my family and friends proud. I am treading water and just about keeping my head above the tide. At the moment I confess I am struggling to learn more than the menus of everywhere in a five-mile radius. My concentration is awful and waking from the escape of sleep and getting to classes is often not possible. I have recently been in hospital again, but it was pointless seeing as it was merely a "refeeding unit" and had no therapy or group resources at all. It is just a plaster to press over a gaping wound that will peel away eventually, revealing a bloody mess. I only found this out after getting there and I felt so trapped, tricked. The trouble with my case is that it is unique, what with the diabetic complications aside anorexia with a purging subtype. A medical ward can regulate your blood sugars and an eating disorder ward can make you eat, but it is rare that anyone understands that the two come hand in hand and need to be treated together.

I would love to be able to conclude this in a positive way. Perhaps with a resolution, a description of what I have learned or what I am looking forward to. But the truth is, I cannot. There is no happily ever after, because I still struggle every day. Despite putting my body through so

much abuse, I still cannot stop. I take more insulin than I used to and I try to stay out of ketoacidosis but I am still labeled as "emaciated," still purging too much and still cutting back on injections when I feel I need a "back-up" to my other weight-controlling habits. I do not really look forward, but around me, wondering when or how the damage will catch up with me. Organ failure, blindness, a loss of a limb or two, complete immobility, there are so many risks. I feel stupid, ridiculously stupid for still being sick, for fighting in a sense to keep starving and hurting myself. To a normal person I realize it just sounds insane, but it's my excuse, my way of accepting the fact that I am here and I am alive. I do this in order to let myself exist.

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Surrounded by People but Completely Alone

If I ever need anything my family is there for me. Financial support, unexpected emergencies, earth-shattering events, apparently anything. Growing up I was never physically alone, or without company. I did learn, though, one could be very alone, even if the room is full of people. Let me put it this way, my family is Greek — and I mean Greek.

What does that mean? It means holidays weren't just my mother, father and the kids. It means the entire family, meaning humongous extended family, was always there, together for everything. Christmas was aunts, uncles, cousins, friends, sort of friends and some random Greek person who used to live in the same town of a great aunt's niece when she was ten years old who they happened to bump into on the street the other day (you get the point). Our get-togethers could have kept a catering company in business. Everything was done in packs and everything was about family and food. The focus was on who was bringing