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That Empty Feeling

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That Empty Feeling

It began as an emptiness. Always there, never quenched. It manifested in my guts—sometimes it was so unbearable I could do nothing but bring my legs into my chest, and hold myself together. Other times, I barely noticed the pain. Eventually it had been etched into my brain. I thought of the pain as a burn, producing a scar like when a mother spills boiling milk on her infant. It left a scar that has always been there, but its origin is unknown or uninteresting to the outside world. My mother wasn’t the one who left my scar.

Actually—I lied, it began in a mirror. The mirror must have been the first one to sense a problem, because it wasn’t me or my family. The hours after school, before my sisters were home from practices and my parents home from work, were spent looking at myself in the mirror. I never saw these hours as being wasted. Although I stood sweating, fretting, and sometimes crying, there seemed like no other place existed that was more important.

I always began the abuse at my feet. Oh wow, your feet look like kangaroo feet today.

Then proceeded up my gangly thighs, small backside, too-wide hips, flexing and sucking in. Then there was that spot below my bellybutton.

After I discovered that spot, I forgot to eat breakfast. “Johanna, you didn’t eat your pancakes!” My mother yelled after me as I sidestepped past her through the door, backpack over my shoulder. There were two pancakes with syrup on a plate where I sit every morning. I rushed through the door and out, pretending I was late for school. I didn’t even miss eating it. I was fourteen.

“Bye, Mom!” I had called from over my shoulder that morning.

She eventually stopped making me breakfast. She never asked why I forgot to eat it from then on. She probably thought I ate it at school, or brought a snack with me. The spot under my bellybutton never did shrink, although the number on the scale did. I frequently checked it during the day—stealing moments into my parent’s bathroom to stand patiently on the scale, staring at my toenail polish.

Now I live alone, and have a scale I can stand on whenever I want. I haven’t eaten anything more than a slice of bread per day for eleven days. This is my longest record. I briefly thought about rewarding myself by walking to the gas station for a snack,
but since I have gone this long I might as well keep going. I probably couldn’t stomach it anyway. Today, I began my morning routine in front of the mirror. I wasn’t sure what I saw. I squinted, spun, and adjusted the lighting. My body conformed and contorted as I turned around, looking at all the angles. The mirror always seemed to be a wave inside its frame, the top and bottom at a normal depth and the middle jutting out. I looked like a child visiting a carnival who stopped in the middle of the tent to examine herself in a clown’s mirror. My hips, stomach, waist, and thighs conformed to the wave. The child at the carnival smiled at the image, and moved on. I lingered.

I thought about what Haden’s girlfriend saw when she looked in the mirror. She had way more fat hanging off her than I, and yet she was still more beautiful.

Instead of spending the rest of the day alternating between homework and exercise a light feeling in my forehead compelled me to go back to sleep. Sundays are okay for napping, I guess. I curl back into a ball under my covers. Everything behind my eyes is swimming. When I crack them open, the light bending in front of my pupils waves back and forth, like the sea. I lay on my back, watching the water. In the back of my mind I vaguely wonder when the last time I drank water was. I sense an irritating noise in the background, but I can’t identify what it is through the soft roaring of the waves. I ignore it, but it’s persistent. My hands, feet, and nose feel like ice. I reach for another blanket next to my bed and distantly try to remember why Dr. Anderson said I was so cold all the time. I can’t, so I give up and let the waves wash over me again. Until I am shaken. Two strong, unfamiliar hands roughly grab my shoulders and pull me back and forth. I can feel my head lolling stupidly—my chin hitting my chest and then whipping back. It almost brings me back to air.

The effort with which this person is trying to wake me up makes me tired, so I go to sleep.

My dreams are always vague. In this particular dream, I am watching the progression of a chess match from an odd angle. The board seems infinitely long, rushing past my eyes at a quick pace. At first, I think I am looking down at it, but I was always looking up. There are faces watching the game too, both familiar and unfamiliar poking into my line of sight from the left and right, all looking down at me. I notice that the black sections of the board aren’t actually black—they’re white, separated by gray
dividers. I think I’m still lying down, but the ceiling of my apartment doesn’t look like a chessboard. Just as this realization comes to the forefront of my mind, everything clouds with black again, and the chessboard is gone.

My next dream (that is more than just scattered voices with no meaning or origin) is in a hospital. I know that much. I am lying in a bed, and my head is disconnected from my shoulders. It lolls to one side, and I notice there is an IV in my right arm, with a sporadic beeping that is beyond annoying. I try to bend the rules of the dream, and reach my left hand over to my right arm and grab the IVs—but then I realize not even a finger can be moved. I want to wipe the sweat off my brow that has come from the exertion of almost moving my hand, but it won’t budge. Trying is too hard, so I allow my disconnected head to rest back on the pillow behind it and succumb again.

In my next dream, I am in my old high school, and I see Haden’s face. He’s wearing an attractive red shirt, and his face splits into a grin as he walks toward me in the hallway. He always knew when I would be at my locker. My face glows with warmth and becomes the color of his shirt. He stops behind me—he’s more than a head taller than I—and digs his strong fingers into my shoulders with the pretense of rubbing them.

“Oh!” I say, and push his arms away.

He winks at me and proceeds down the hallway. I never actually asked if he felt the bones sticking out of my shoulders, but I know he did.

I hide my smile inside my open locker as he walks away.

This dream makes me think too much. I try to swim even deeper into the sea, plunging into the blackness so I can no longer see the shapes outside my eyelids, but it doesn’t work. A current sucks me back into this warm, yet dark, place.

I think the warmth is coming from the bonfire in front of us. It’s the only thing illuminating the woods that night, except for the distant glow that was the light of his back porch. There is a thin barrier of trees between us and that glow. We are naked and dripping. The feeling forces me to remember how much we liked skinny dipping. The pool behind his house was black, but warm. It quickly got cold on my skin so he kept me close, pulling me through the water by my arms and twirling me around gently. My white, thin arms look like twigs on a tree, but he
doesn’t seem to mind the sight, and I don’t either. All I can hear is the water we disturb, and the life in the woods. The stars reflect in the water, swirling around us like we’re swimming throughout the cosmos.

We streak through the grass after emerging from his dark pool. “Johanna, hurry!” he says over his shoulder at me. Haden throws a panicked look toward the window of his parents’ bedroom, but it remains dark. I pick up my pace and link our arms together. He had goose bumps on his muscular arm. I’m securely covered with both our towels—“I know how cold you get”—so I quicken my pace so he can enjoy the fire that he started earlier in the night.

I always think that not touching is too far apart. He pulls me onto his lap and puts the towels over us. The warmth of the fire eventually dries and then cures the goose bumps on his skin. We shed the towels after a while, and bask in the fire’s warmth.

“This is amazing,” he says.

There’s no space in between my back and his chest, and both of us are watching the fire, in a trance. I lean back and tuck my head under his chin. Both our hands are exploring, while our eyes are watching for a light in his parents’ bedroom.

When I wake, I know he won’t be there. Wherever I am. I’ve known that ever since his face and red shirt appeared behind my eyelids—which is why I want nothing to do with these dreams. Haden’s face, half smile, and eyes lit with excitement, incite a new pain in my guts. I’m not used to that kind of pain. Hunger pain I understood, and welcomed, but not this kind. We stay here, watching the bonfire cool and dim, until it goes out, and the darkness behind the trees encircles us. Now, I can resurface.

“She’s waking up. Julie, run and get mom!”

“Shhh, shhh. She probably has a headache, be quiet,” says my dad’s voice.

I crack open my eyes. My two younger sisters are looking down at me to the left side of my vision, and my mom and dad are on the right. The only real pain I feel is in the crook of my right elbow where I knew my IV was, but I think that was all inside my head. There is no other sensation except my mom’s warm hand brushing my hair off my forehead. My guts are singing like a bird in spring, and tears roll down my cheeks.

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One week. I eat real food, smile, talk, sleep, and
don’t exercise for one week. I feel like a different person—going through these strange motions of life, living in the hospital until I am told I can leave. In the first days I obstinately refuse my solid foods, and vehemently harass my nurse and family, imploring them to remove the liquid ones entering my body without my permission. I feel myself getting stronger, and the storm clouds that exist in what I imagine to be my frontal lobe wane and eventually clear. There is no mirror anywhere in my room. I am kind of thankful for it. I know if I saw myself—bloated, obese, swollen, and fat—I won’t be able to make it. Years of preparation, only to be taken away by people who don’t understand.

I feel like a circus animal. I am no longer the young child staring in the clown mirror, but the mirror itself. My mother, father, and sisters see themselves through me. They see their own bodies, their treatment of me, what they believe they did wrong, and what they want to change for the future. I can see all these emotions flit behind their pupils as they really look at me for the first time. Most of all, I can see the pure, unadulterated pity that manifests in their faces and actions.

So I go through the motions.

On the third day, my mom comes in my room alone. My sisters haven’t come since they saw my reaction when I first woke. Their smiles faded to confusion and hurt when I tried to take out my IV. Neither are much younger than I so they understood, but even this action surprised them. My parents have come every day, fretting at my bedside, but my dad is not here today.

My mother’s short legs bob into the room, her brown hair in a ponytail and wearing a sweatshirt and sweatpants. Looking at her now, she looks so small and worn. The circles under her eyes are especially dark and the lids are swollen and white. She takes her place in the chair next to me. My mom’s eyes are big and round and filled with unshed tears. She does not allow them to escape in this moment. I know she wants to appear strong and no longer overlook the sight of my bones under my shirt.

“Johanna. We can’t ignore this problem any longer.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You could’ve died.”
“Mom—I would have been fine—it’s not a big deal—”

“Come on.” She grabs my cheek and angles it toward her own face. “You have to let him go.”

“What are you talking about? This has nothing to do with that,” I say with venom in my voice. She is making no sense. I have been like this since I was fourteen. Years of skipping meals and she thinks it’s because of a boy I met three years ago and haven’t seen in two years?

“I’m not blind, you know. Your condition has never been this bad.”

“But that’s not why.” I set my jaw. “I know, okay. I feel a lot better now,” I say, and plant a smile on my face. Her face, in turn, looks almost hopeful, and breaks into a tiny smile.

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One week and six pounds. I finally get to live alone again. I resent the strength that I feel when I put my clothes back in their drawers, and take a shower. My eyes avoid all mirrors until I am staring at my blue toenails on the evening of the seventh day. Haden’s girlfriend stands behind me, with rich, thick thighs, and a lively, bright face. I cannot see her from behind me, because all I can see is the spot below my bellybutton.