

The Outline
Summer Coryell

I remember a dull light, a blast of cold to my face, and hands searching, searching, searching. There was a white box with miniature blue women holding parasols with strange characters I couldn't read. Inside was something dark that smelled like fish. There was sugar, free peanut butter that smelled rancid.

Hands kept searching.

There were bottles of wine, a bag of something green and sticky, and artichoke hearts. Cheese, lots of cheese, and tortillas. I remember cheese on tortillas with butter, butter, butter. There was beeping, and then the cheese burning my mouth, my lips, and my tongue. It happened over and over until there was no more cheese, no more butter, no more tortillas.

There was only pain and guilt.

Something knocked on my teeth, bringing with it pain and fire, deep burning fire. Water poured down my face. Tears, fire, and guilt. I was hunched over, something freezing cold; it was bright white, and menacing. The fire continued to roar in my throat and flood out of my body. I heard popping, cracking, and whistles. The fire kept coming. It washed over me in waves, popping, and cracking. My body was breaking; it was splitting into two.

I clench, twist, and burn. I'm dying. Oh my God, I'm dying.

Then quiet, instant and sudden. I felt peaceful, whole, and happy. Euphoric, empty, and loved. I was alive. Oh my God, I was so alive.

I was nine.

Bulimia is defined as; 1: an abnormal and constant craving for food 2: a serious eating disorder that occurs chiefly in females, is characterized by compulsive overeating usually followed by self-induced vomiting or laxative or diuretic abuse, and is often accompanied by guilt and depression —called also *bulimia nervosa*. If only it were that simple, that tidy.

I did not know what bulimia was until I was diagnosed with it by a psychologist at my first eating disorder treatment facility. She thought I was being facetious when I asked what it was. The label of bulimic upset me, not because I was diagnosed with a horrible mental disease, but because my secret, the thing that made me special, was neither a secret nor special. That summer, I was locked up with a bunch of other girls who were also not special, read Sexton in a hospital gown, and tried to chase the fire away.

I was fourteen.

I weighed 125 lbs.

The yelling woke me up, loud rambunctious yelling. It was so loud and cluttered, the voices blended together to form a maddening hum. Where am I? My head felt like an anchor and I could not feel my face. I was slimy, sticky, and cold. I was afraid. Vanishing, and could do nothing to stop it. There were two tiny bottles knocking around between my twisted knees. My body rocked like a boat about to capsize. Dropping my anchor, I tried to read. My eyes

rolled back into my head, my head buzzed. I felt I was going blind.

i-p...i-p-e... I tried to focus, i-p-e-c-a-c, ipecac. I remembered. Someone banged, banged, banged, at the door. I attempted to yell at them to go away, but the moment I lifted my head and opened my mouth the fire came back. It roared out of me like an angry beast, a furious murderous beast. Then came the popping, the cracking, and that whistle. It came more fiercely now, more intentionally. My neck felt like rubble and my head felt it was surgically removed and dropped beside me. I looked to find it, but only saw tile.

The tile came closer, and then everything went black.

I was fifteen.

I weighed 115lbs.

“Tell me about your childhood.” “Were you a happy child?” “What about your mother? Are you close to her?” “What is your relationship like with your mother?”

They always asked the same questions. They asked them repeatedly until they got the answer they wanted. The answer they could apply to the knowledge they already possessed. They gave me books on codependency, and depression. They gave me poetry books about flowers, trees, and health. They stuck me in group therapy circles where people cried, screamed, or both. They told me I couldn’t become better unless I talked.

“Tell me about your mother.” “What is your mother like?” “Summer, are you listening? We need to talk about your mother.”

Have you ever seen a belladonna flower? It’s really spectacular. It’s graceful, mysterious, and really, really beautiful. It’s also deadly, seriously and dangerously deadly. My mother was a belladonna flower. She was a captivating woman. Blonde, unabashed, and owns every room, every situation, with her perfectly tanned 36” long legs. When I was young she drove us around in a brown 1974 Volkswagen bug, screaming Nina Simone, and chain smoking. I remember everywhere we went people knew her, loved her. She wore white peasant skirts with cowboy boots and neon crop tops. She dripped with turquoise. I remember she never slept and rarely ate. She made art, wrote poems, and played music. She always told me I was her masterpiece. The best piece of art she ever made. She told me all great artists know to never touch a masterpiece. Leave it alone. And that’s exactly what she did.

“Do you feel abandoned by your mother?” “Do you hate your mother?”

I did not.

“Do you hate yourself?”

I did.

I could never blame my mother. I was not one of those crying girls in the circles blaming mommy, magazines, and Kate Moss. I never blamed anyone or anything. I just saw bulimia as an extension of myself with no clear explanation. Addiction can be tricky, and is often misidentified. Doctors allow what they think they know to influence what they do not know. When someone does not fit into their manufactured criteria, they assume something is

amiss with the diagnosis or the subject. It is rarely, if ever, the fault of the person who performs the diagnosis. The proponents of this method, who are nearly every doctor in a treatment facility, often eliminate or discourage any other form of thinking as experimental and risky. I flat out rejected this notion. I figured living with bulimia was far more risky than seeking alternative therapy.

“How long do I have to hold these?”

“Shhh concentrate, repeat your chant.”

“My arms hurt.”

“Shhh concentrate.”

I held crystals against my temples, chanting om shanti shanti shanti. It meant peace in the world, peace within. She said this was going to cure me. Fix me. In a trance-like state, I saw my mother locking me out of the house because she was on the verge of a “break-through,” while I cried about my scraped knee. I saw PETA videos I was made to watch when I was five. All that blood and screaming. I saw my grandmother pinch my cheeks, and calling me her chubby little princess. Chubby. My mother told me how thin she was when she was my age, and how different we were. I heard thin, thin, thin. Not me. And I saw fire, tears, and pain. Euphoria.

I beg to be cured.

This had to work.

It didn’t.

I was seventeen. I weighed 100 lbs.

It was hot, humid, and extremely crowded. Everything was miniature and giant. I was sweating, dizzy, and lost. I was in Tokyo, it was July. If you have ever seen a postcard photo of Tokyo, you have seen Tokyo. It’s perfect; it’s a perfect city with perfect people, walking in perfect lines down perfect streets. I was not perfect, and I was unable to walk in a straight line. I remember the feeling of concrete under my hands. It’s hot, burning hot, and it hurt. I remember the stench rising beneath my face, and smelling it getting closer and closer. My knees buckled, and metal that clanged and pinged. I landed on something soft, hot. Stench hit me fast. Everything went black, deep swampy black. I felt peaceful, hollow, and heaviness like I was covered in boulders. I let myself sleep, and I was peaceful.

A voice near my face. It was a woman, but I could not understand what she was saying. I struggled to open my eyes. I saw a Japanese woman, and she looked terrified. She spoke to me again, “Daijoubu?” I didn’t understand, “daijoubu?” I widened my eyes and tried to concentrate on her words, hoping I would magically understand her.

“You are kay?” I was being pulled upwards, the boulders fell off, and the stench lifted, “You are kay?”

I came back enough to say “Yes, yes, I am okay.” I came back enough to see I was covered in vomit. I came back enough to see I was lying in a pile of garbage in an alley way. I came back enough to see I was not okay.

I check into a hospital.

I was nineteen.

I weighed 90 lbs.

I never had any illusion I wasn't sick. I was never in denial, and never rejected my disorder. My collection of hospital bracelets and intake forms spoke for themselves. I always felt a deep disgust for the skeletal girls defending themselves, and saying, "There is nothing wrong. No really, I'm fine." Every logical person knows that purging everything you eat is not healthy or sane behavior. And I always maintained I was a logical person. But being logical didn't cure or fix anything, and it gave few answers. Most of the time, it down right hindered my recovery, because I was too self-righteous to see I truthfully knew very little about myself, and the only point of reference I had were my medical records. I scoured them, digging and praying for an answer. Summed up in 4 lines.

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Bulimia Nervosa

Panic Disorder

Substance Abuse

This was my seventh eating disorder clinic; I had yet to turn twenty. They were all the same, and I came to expect the same results. I would pretend to become better, gain a pound, tell everyone I felt great and learned my lesson, and then leave. Each time, I left armed with more information, but growing sicker and sicker. After six stays I figured this would be as easy as the others. I was wrong. My imaginary bubble of control burst, and I realized that I might be forced to improve. I was not allowed to see my daily weigh-ins; they made me stand backwards and close my eyes. I was not allowed to use a toilet or to shower unaccompanied. I had to eat every bite of my meals, and account for what I did not finish. If I did not eat, I was made to drink some horrible liquid meal that tasted like spoiled milk. I was forced to attend therapy. I slept with the lights on. I totally lost my power, my control, and was unable to indulge my addiction.

I panicked.

I ran.

It's amazing what you will justify when you are an addict. Abuse to yourself, abuse from others, anything to build the wall between yourself, and your true feelings, higher and thicker. And I did not just build a wall; I built a fortress of steal. I dove headfirst into any type of self-destructive behavior that could possibly numb my pain, ate it, and spewed it back into the world. I loved the ones who hated me, and hated the ones who loved me. In fact, I married the one who hated me most.

I married a belladonna flower.

I remember my husband screaming at me. His face housed enough rage for a country at

war. He shouted, “You fat bitch! You disgusting bitch! I hate you! You fat bitch!” I grabbed things, mindlessly grabbed things, and stuffed them into bags. I tried to remember the poetry about flowers, trees, and health. Or picture the Japanese woman’s face, and hear her voice saying, “Are you kay? Are you kay?” My head started to grow heavier, my heart pounded faster, like a sledgehammer pounding through a concrete wall. My vision went blurry, and my eyes rattled. I grabbed keys, blocked blows, and grew heavier. I reached the car, my engine roared, my heart pounded deeper, and faster and faster. I was flying. Then, my vision blurred, and all together disappeared.

Everything went white.

I was twenty-one.

I weighed 86 lbs.

“Have you been in therapy before?” “Did it help you?” “Do you want me to help you?”

“I don’t know.”

She asks, “Can we try something?”

“Are you going to ask me about my mother?”

She laughed, “No”.

I agreed.

She handed me a red marker and unrolled a giant sheet of butcher paper. She took the whole thing and taped it to the floor, ceiling, and mirror in her office. “I want you to look at yourself in the mirror, and then make an exact outline of what you see in the mirror, on the paper.” It took me 30 minutes. I kept looking at me, then the paper, and me again. I scrutinized every line. I drew, second guessed, crossed out, and got incredibly frustrated. Finally, I finished. “Okay, I want you to stand in front of the image you drew and with this black pen I am going to trace around your body”. It took her three minutes. “Before you step away I want to ask if you felt the marker against your body.”

“Yes.”

“Okay, so there is no denying that the pen traced your body?”

“No.”

“Ok, step back.”

I do, and I do not see the same person.

This moment in my life is not easy to recall. I imagine it like a person experiencing shell shock. The room went mute and time seemed to slow exponentially. I saw myself turning around as though I was separate from my body, and then by some sort of sharp, graceful amalgamation, I was fully present again. Not just present in the room, or even the moment, it was much deeper than that. I was present in myself, heart, mind, and for the first time I can remember, I was present in my body. Present in all of it. And I felt my skin, my blood, my bones, and most frighteningly, pain. Deep unfettering pain. “Summer? Summer, are you here?”

“Yes, I am here.”

I would like to tell you that after that moment I was fine and never purged again, but it

would not be true. But when I went home that day, I did not purge, nor the day after. I hung that outline on my wall, and stared at it. Stared at it for hours. When I finally did purge, I felt sadness, and not euphoria or relief. I continued to see my therapist, finally read all those books about codependency and depression, and started to feel better. I cried a lot, and screamed a lot, and sometimes both. I blamed my mother, magazines, and Kate Moss, but most of the time, myself. I was honest, and eventually started to heal. I am not fixed or cured now by any means, but I can accurately draw my outline, and extinguished the fire.

I am twenty-six.

I weigh 145 lbs.