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NO ONE TOLD ME THAT WHEN I GOT SKINNY I'D grow fur. Tiny, translucent hairs, fine like white mink, appeared on my arms, my legs, and even, to my horror, my face, giving me downy blond sideburns no girl should have. When I looked it up, the fur had a name—*lanugo*. Babies are born with it. Anorexics grow it.

My first thought? *What a pain in the butt.*

My second thought? *So far, so good.*

After all, you had to suffer to be beautiful. Of all the things Mom ever said to me, I knew this one was true. If you wanted people to notice you, want you, admire you, envy you, want to *be* you, you had to sacrifice. Easy? No. But that's why people call it suffering.

And even when it seemed like it was getting me nowhere—well, nowhere except the Wallingfield Psychiatric

Facility's Residential Treatment Center—I tried to remember this: There is always success hidden in failure. I might have been locked away, but I was still a size 0.

It was just past ten on a cloudy morning when my parents and I first pulled up to Wallingfield. The treatment center was only fifteen minutes from my house but might as well have been in another country. It sat atop a rolling hill in the old-money part of Esterfall, where houses overlooked the Atlantic and the families who lived in them had ancestors who came over on the *Mayflower*. “Elite and Discreet Mental Health Care, tucked away in a scenic part of Massachusetts.” That’s what the tiny box ads in the back of my parents’ *New Yorker* magazine promised.

Dad parked in front of a large brick building. A burnished brass sign read *Wallingfield Psychiatric Facility Residential Treatment Center. Building Two*. The other buildings, I’d learned online the night before, were for the patients with schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and other psychiatric illnesses.

I opened my door and willed my legs to move, but they felt like cement.

“Brush your hair before you go in.” Mom passed me her purple travel brush from the front seat and touched up her lipstick.

In the rearview mirror I caught Dad's eye by accident. The skin around his eyes was the color of a bruise, like he hadn't slept in weeks.

"You okay, Elizabeth?"

I glared at him. "I'm *great*." I knew I sounded like a jerk, but the moment I walked through those big wooden doors, I'd forever be known at Esterfall High as the girl who'd gone nuts. So no, I was definitely not okay.

Inside the waiting room, a man in a gray suit sat on a green couch, bent over a laptop. Next to him, a dark-haired girl with a messy ponytail and a hospital ID bracelet scrunched in her chair, scowling. Her purple hoodie and black leggings hung off her like clothes on a hanger, and her legs, folded beneath her, were so thin they made her feet look too big for her body.

My cheeks burned. I felt inferior. She was so much skinnier than me. I held out my hand and tried to look friendly. "Hi. I'm Elizabeth."

"Lexi." Her fingers were cold and her handshake weak, but her eyes were angry. I shivered and pulled away as fast as I could. She didn't seem to notice, though.

Dad cleared his throat as he approached the front desk. "We are here to admit . . ." He couldn't finish.

Mom spoke up, her voice strong and all business. "Our daughter, Elizabeth, is here to be admitted to the eating disorder unit. Are we in the right place?"

I wanted the receptionist to say no, to say, *I'm sorry, but we don't have an Elizabeth on the list. You must have made a mistake.*

But she didn't even have to look me up. "Yes, here you are," she said, glancing at her computer. "Please sit down. Someone will be with you shortly."

When Lexi spoke, it startled me. "Where are you from?"

"Here," I said. "Esterfall. You?"

"Long Island. Massapequa. But I go to Smith in Massachusetts now."

I'd never been to Long Island, but Smith was at the top of my list of colleges to apply to next year. It was supposed to have a great psychology department, and I wanted to be a psychologist someday. "Oh, that's cool," I said.

"Yeah, I guess." She turned away, picking at the chipped red polish on her fingernails. We sat in silence until, a few minutes later, an older, crunchy-looking woman about Mom's age entered the room through double doors. She wore a gray top draped over her shoulders, flowy black pants, and black clogs. Vaguely gold-colored bracelets clinked on her arm. Mom looked her up and down, a slight frown on her face. She wasn't impressed.

The woman walked over and stuck out her hand. "Elizabeth? Hi, I'm Mary, your therapist." I hoped she didn't notice my clammy skin. "I'm going to help you get settled. Follow me." I looked back at Lexi and waved, but

she was gazing out the only window, staring at the parking lot, and didn't see me.

Walking through the wooden double doors, I expected to see 70-pound girls in hospital gowns hobbling through cold, linoleum-lined hallways. Instead, Mary led us into a cozy space that smelled like cinnamon, not medicine, and was full of sofas, slouchy chairs, and soft carpeting. Windows looked out onto a lawn, which stretched down to the woods, the trees in full October reds, oranges, and yellows. Across from them was a line of bedroom doors, each decorated with photos, drawings, dry-erase boards, and letters fashioned from construction paper. It looked like the Boston College dorm I'd toured with my parents last summer.

On the closest couch, a little girl who couldn't be older than ten sat hunched over her journal, her ear pierced all the way to the top, her arms covered with soft pink scars I assumed were self-inflicted. A pair of taller girls sat across from her, quietly talking, their jaws sharp and distinct. They giggled. I couldn't imagine ever giggling in a place like this. They all looked thin, but not life-threateningly so.

"It'll be snack time soon," Mary said, sniffing the air. "Smells like Chef Frank's famous coffee cake muffins." We all inhaled. The room smelled like the Cinnabon stall at the mall. I looked at the girls on the couches. *They* were going to eat muffins?

“Well,” said Mom, her voice full of relief, “isn’t this cheery!” I wondered if she’d pictured a hospital, too. The girl with the scars looked up and watched us, her face blank.

Mary turned to me. “Elizabeth, if you’d like to eat snack with your parents, they can join you in the guest dining room.”

Eat? Already?

“Thanks, but I’m not hungry,” I said.

Mary smiled like she’d heard this excuse a hundred times. She probably had. “I understand, but we eat all our meals here, hungry or not.”

Of course “we” did.

Mary continued. “So, every day we gather in the dining room for breakfast, lunch, dinner. There are three snacks scheduled throughout the day—morning, afternoon, and after dinner. Meals last forty-five minutes, snacks twenty. For the first few days, your nutritionist, Sally, will set your menu, but after that you’ll work together to create your food plan. At each meal you’ll find a menu check sheet on your tray. A nurse will make sure you’ve eaten everything. Any questions so far?”

I shook my head. She didn’t say what would happen if I didn’t eat, and I didn’t ask. I’d read about places like this online, how they required you to eat every single thing they put in front of you, how they punished you with super-fattening nutrition shakes if you didn’t.

Mary kept talking. “Weights and vitals is every morning from six to seven. Since it’s your first day, we’ll also do a medical intake, like a physical, this afternoon. Oh, and at some point we’ll take you to get a bone density test.”

A bone density test? I didn’t need one of those. My bones were fine. I ate yogurt. And why did they need to weigh me so soon? They knew my weight already. They wouldn’t have admitted me otherwise. I shook my head. *No. No weighing.*

Mary watched me, her face soft and knowing. I recognized that look. It was the same look my friends Priya and Shay always gave me at lunch at school. They felt sorry for me. Sometimes, when I left the table, I saw them bend their heads together and whisper.

Mary put her hand on my shoulder. I flinched and she dropped it. “I know this is hard, Elizabeth, but we weigh everybody. Every day. It’s an important part of recovery.”

Mom piped in. “Does she get to know her weight each morning?”

“No,” Mary said. “We don’t reveal numbers.”

Mom frowned. She probably wanted me to know so I wouldn’t gain too much.

Once, at lunch, Priya asked me if I was anorexic. I didn’t know what to say. I’d hoped that maybe I was, because of the lanugo and all, but to have someone else actually say it? I felt like dancing right then. But I couldn’t

admit that. No one was supposed to *want* to be anorexic. So I'd said, in as sarcastic a voice as I could muster, "Obviously, no. Have you seen my thighs?" Priya didn't push the issue after that, and I spent the rest of the day smiling.

". . . alarm clock?"

"Sorry?" I'd completely spaced.

"Did you bring a cordless alarm clock?"

We'd bought one at CVS on the way; everybody I knew, including myself, used our phone alarms, but Wallingfield didn't allow anything that got Wi-Fi. Or had cords. I guess so we wouldn't strangle ourselves. I nodded.

"Great. So lunch is at noon," Mary continued. "I'll give you your daily schedule after lunch, but it goes pretty much like this: group therapy three to four times a week, individual therapy with me twice a week, family therapy—either in person, on the phone, or in a group setting—once a week, and various other types of activities, such as dance and art, scattered in as well. We do meal support therapy after lunch and dinner. Oh, and we got another admit today—did you meet Lexi in the foyer?"

I nodded.

"Great! She's going to be your roommate."

I shrank into myself a little. No one told me I was going to have a roommate. And Lexi? The angry girl? I shot a look at Mom. I bet she'd known. But her face looked as surprised as mine.

How could my parents leave me here?

Mary continued on. “Now, I haven’t seen your schedule, but my guess is that you’ll likely start with a group session today. Our first individual therapy session is set for the day after tomorrow. Tonight we have free time. On other nights it varies; there might be activities, or arts and crafts, or group sessions. It will all be on your schedule. Any questions?”

“Are there boys here?” I hoped not. I’d read that some programs were coed.

“No. This adolescent and early adult program is for girls only. We have a coed program in Building Three for ages twenty-five and over.” She paused. “We’ve talked about including boys, though. Their rate of anorexia is rising. But for now it’s just girls.”

“Oh,” I said, relieved. Being here was bad enough. Being here with boys? I couldn’t even imagine it.

We followed Mary back to the common room and stopped in front of the only bare door on the hall, number 16. Bits and corners of Scotch tape littered the dark brown wood, the only sign of the girls who’d come before me.

Inside were two normal beds stripped down to the plastic mattress pad. Morning sun filtered through the curtains on the single window; outside, I could see our maroon Honda in the parking lot. A nightstand with a beige lamp stood between the two beds, and across from it was another

door, closed. Mary pointed at it, her bracelets clinking. “Bathroom,” she said. “You share it with the room next door.” The whole setup reminded me of a hotel, which, weirdly, made me feel better. I didn’t need a “real” bedroom. Wallingfield’s website said that an average stay was a month, but there was no way I’d be here that long. I wasn’t that sick. I was just a little bit anorexic. All my body needed was a rest. I’d be out of here in a few days—a week, max.

The room had gone quiet. Everybody stared at me. “Okay, Elizabeth?” Mom asked. I nodded like I had a clue.

“I’ll give you a minute to get settled,” Mary said, closing the door on her way out.

When Mary left, Mom dove in. She rolled up her cashmere sleeves and opened my suitcase just like when they sent me to sleepaway camp in middle school. She pulled out my favorite sheets, my gray wool blanket, and my purple-and-blue-pinstriped duvet. She stretched the sheets tight and snapped the duvet up and over the bed. The room filled with the smell of our fabric softener, a scent I loved. After she fluffed the duvet, she reached into her purse, brought out a gray stuffed dolphin with only one plastic eye, and leaned him against a pillow. Flippy. My favorite from when I was little. I thought I might cry. I looked at her, questioning.

“The ‘What to Bring’ list said a stuffed animal,” she said defensively.

Our eyes met, mirror images of each other. We’d always looked alike—the same straight brown hair, the same cheekbones—except she’d been the thin one. I got my dad’s genes, my grandma liked to say, which meant I vacillated between average and chubby, depending on whether it was cross-country season or not. Now, though, I was skinnier than Mom. Even in this room, I was proud.

She reached out to touch my cheek, her hand soft on my always-cold skin.

Mary knocked and entered. Mom’s hand fell to her side.

The room felt crowded now. “You look settled,” Mary said, then smiled at Dad. “Will you be joining us for snack?”

Of course he’d stay. He’d stay until Mary told him to leave. I knew it.

“No, thanks,” he said.

What?

He didn’t look at me. “Elizabeth’s mother and I both need to get back to work, and I know we still have some paperwork to complete.”

My heart flew into my throat. He was abandoning me? I’d had this whole scenario worked out in my head that when my parents saw the other girls here, they’d realize I

was basically fine and take me home. They'd say, *Elizabeth, we've made a terrible mistake. This place is for sick girls. Not you.* Then we'd sweep through the front doors and jump back in the car and all go to Starbucks, and over coffee we'd laugh about how they almost had me committed.

Instead, Dad took me by the shoulders. "I love you so much, kiddo," he said, voice gruff. "I'll miss you." And then he held me so tight I could barely breathe. He grabbed his coat and tried to leave before the first sob but didn't make it, his shoulders heaving. "You are a wonderful daughter. I love you so much." And then he was gone.

Mom smoothed her skirt and adjusted her sweater, clearing her throat like she always did when she was nervous. "Well, do you need anything else?" Her voice was brisk and professional.

I shook my head, not trusting myself to speak.

"Okay then. Don't forget to call us, all right? You're going to be fine." She looked me up and down and nodded. "Yes, you are going to be fine." She said this more to herself than to me. Then we hugged. We never hugged. Mom wasn't the cuddly type, but all of a sudden I didn't want to let her go. I inhaled her perfume, realizing for the first time how much I liked it. And then she, too, slipped out the door, a cloud of Chanel No. 5 lingering behind

her. Without thinking, I walked through it, hoping a bit of her would stay with me.

With everybody gone, the room felt lonely and too quiet. I tried to make myself as small as I could. I sat on the corner of the bed. It crackled.

“All set?” Mary asked. I’d forgotten she was there. I nodded.

“Let’s go, then.” She led me into the hall, where a row of girls waited in front of double doors that read *Dining Room*. The tiny girl from the couch was at the end of the line, picking a scab on her arm.

“I’m going to leave you with Willa,” Mary said. “She’ll be in your cohort.” The girl barely looked up at me.

I was confused. “Cohort?”

“Your cohort is the group of girls you’ll be doing the majority of your therapy with. You have six in yours. Willa, here, is the youngest.” I looked at her. A tiny gold Winnie-the-Pooh, a silver Ariel, and an orange-and-black enamel Tigger clung to her earlobe. “Willa, this is Elizabeth. Take care of her, will you?”

Willa smiled then, and as she did, her face changed. Became friendlier. “Welcome to the crazy house,” she said in a smoker’s growl. How old *was* she?

Mary frowned. “Willa,” she warned.

“Sorry.” She grinned. “Welcome to paradise.”

2

I WAS STILL TRYING TO UNDERSTAND THE STRANGE

creature that was Willa when the dining room doors flew open. A woman dressed in baggy jeans and a plaid shirt straight out of the nineties stood just inside the door, greeting each girl as she entered. “That’s Kay,” Willa whispered. “The food police.” I looked at her, not understanding. “She’s the meal monitor, the one who makes sure you eat what you’re supposed to and makes you drink Ensure if you don’t.”

“What’s Ensure?”

“A high-calorie nutrition shake. The chocolate isn’t so bad.”

Oh, those. *I’ll never drink one of those*, I promised myself. *Ever.*

“Hello, Willa.” Kay smiled. “And are you Elizabeth?”

I nodded.

“Welcome! Come on in.”

I followed them through the doors into a room the same size as the classrooms at school. Big windows overlooking a stone patio lined the wall opposite the entrance. Off to the left, a door led to a kitchen, where girls entered in a long, slow line. Willa grabbed a tray. “So, the rules in here are simple: Eat. No matter what.” Then she whispered, “And don’t even try to stick the food down your pants. They’ll see it, I promise.” I had a feeling she was speaking from experience.

Kay appeared holding a sheet of paper. Her reddish hair looked frizzy, like she’d had an unfortunate run-in with a curling iron. “So, your menu plan is a basic one today. Here’s your list—one muffin, one apple, and one milk. Not too bad. You go through the kitchen line for snacks here, but for your meals the kitchen prepares your tray before you arrive. When you finish, raise your hand and I’ll check you off. Got it?”

“I, um, I’m sorry, but I don’t like milk,” I said.

She didn’t even blink before responding. “Well, once you can design your own menu, you can discuss that with your nutritionist. But until then, I think you’re stuck.”

I couldn’t drink milk. I’d throw up. With a pang I wondered what my parents were doing, if they’d stopped for coffee on the way home or if they’d driven straight to their offices. I stared at the floor, blinking to keep back the tears.

Kay noticed and touched my shoulder. “It’ll be okay,” she said. “You’ll see.”

I doubted it. Being here was like a permanent stain. No matter what I did in the future, I could never erase the fact that, once upon a time, I’d been locked up like a crazy person. The eating disorder unit was separate from the rest of Wallingfield, but it was still a part of a mental institution.

Five tins of muffins, straight from the oven, filled the counter. The cinnamon crumble on top of each one made my stomach growl and my mouth water. I hadn’t eaten that morning, and I ached for one. That was what anorexia was. A constant battle with the ache.

At home I wouldn’t have gone near them, but here I didn’t have a choice. Gingerly I picked out the tiniest muffin I could find, the grease from it making my fingertips shiny. I shuddered and wiped them on my pants.

My brain spun, calculating. I’d never been good at math, but when it came to calories I could add like Stephen Hawking. Dunkin’ Donuts coffee cake muffins had 590 calories. That’s right. Five hundred and ninety calories. Oh, and 24 grams of fat. I knew because I’d looked it up once. These were smaller, but still. About 400 calories at least. I’d put the grams of fat at 16. Maybe more. My stomach rumbled. No. I was not hungry. No way. Not allowed. Not for a *muffin*, anyway.

I felt a nudge from behind.

“Sorry,” I mumbled to the girl behind me.

“It gets easier,” she said sympathetically.

I nodded. *I doubt it*, I thought.

I took an apple from a basket. I saw other girls reaching into a refrigerator and grabbing low-fat yogurts and cheese sticks. Others helped themselves to little containers of pre-measured granola stacked like a pyramid on the counter. Granola was a calorie bomb—up to 280 calories for half a cup. Would I have to eat that someday, too?

Milk was next. The carton was wet and made my hand smell sour. I wished I had some Purell to get rid of the smell. Willa came up behind me. “All set?” she said.

I nodded, numb, and wiped my hands one at a time on my pants.

“Great. Come on.” She led me to a table next to the toaster in the corner. Her tray looked like mine, except she had a cheese stick, too. “Let’s sit.”

I sat.

“So.” She peeled the paper liner off her muffin. “Don’t get Kay mad at you. She’ll force Ensure down your throat faster than you can say ‘anorexic.’” She placed her muffin carefully on her tray and cut it in half. Then she halved it again. And again. She continued until the muffin was nothing but a pile of crumbs.

“Are you going to eat that?” I asked. Willa gave me a sly grin. “Of course.” She popped a crumb in her mouth. Then

she did it again, except this time, she let a second one fall on the floor. Then she smashed it with the bottom of her fake black UGG. It stuck to her sole and disappeared. For her next bite, she let the extra crumb fall not on the floor but behind her, into the hood of her sweatshirt. It was remarkable, really, that she managed to aim right every single time. She proceeded this way, alternating between floor and hoodie, until she'd destroyed over half her muffin and hidden most of the crumbs in her sweatshirt or under her shoe on the floor.

"You better start eating," Willa said, reaching down to scratch her foot. She dropped a hunk of cinnamon topping into her jean cuff.

"Oh, right," I said. I broke off a tiny piece of muffin and held it in my hand. It was still warm.

"Where are you from?" Willa asked. "I'm from Worcester. That's about an hour and a half from here."

"Right. I'm from, um, Esterfall." This girl was so chatty. How could she be so chatty?

She brightened. "Here? You're from here? That is so cool!"

I wasn't sure I agreed. "I guess," I said. "How long have you been here?"

Willa shrugged. "Three weeks."

"How long do you think you'll stay?"

Willa shook her head. "I don't know. They keep saying

my insurance is going to run out, but Mary—she’s your therapist too, right?”

I nodded.

“Anyway, Mary said that I’d probably be able to get a scholarship and stay longer.”

“A scholarship?”

“Yeah, isn’t it funny they call it that?” Willa secreted a muffin chunk into her hood. “It’s like, I’m so good at my eating disorder they are going to give me a scholarship to get rid of it. Funny, right?”

I didn’t get a chance to respond because Kay stopped at our table. “Elizabeth,” she said, “please get started.” I brought the chunk I was holding to my mouth, but my throat closed and my taste buds shut down. It tasted like rubber. Kay stood by, watching.

Willa slid her napkin over the remaining crumbs on her plate. “Sometimes water helps,” she said, and poured me a glass. Kay marked something on my sheet. Why would she do that? Water didn’t have calories. Why did it matter if I drank it?

Snack was supposed to be twenty minutes, but it felt like forty. By the time girls started to clear their trays and leave, I’d only eaten about a fifth of my muffin and taken one sip of lukewarm milk, which tasted like the carton.

When snack ended, Kay said, “Because it’s your first day,

I'm not going to make you drink an Ensure, but starting tomorrow, you will be expected to eat your full portions."

Willa picked up her tray. "She's got it. Let's go, Elizabeth," she said. "Later, Kay."

Kay stopped her. "Not so fast." She picked up Willa's napkin. Crumbs stuck to it and fell to the floor. "Willa, lift up your shoe."

"No."

Kay said it again, her voice steady. "Willa, lift up your shoe, please."

"No!" A couple of girls turned around.

"Willa," she said, her voice still calm but also with an edge. "Please lift up your shoe. Now."

"Fine!" The entire bottom was coated with muffin.

Kay sighed. "Willa, we've talked about this. I'm sorry, but you're going to have to have a supplement."

Willa's impish, little-girl face contorted. She stared at Kay for a few seconds and turned bright red. Then she lost it. "I don't want an Ensure! I hate you, Kay!" she said, kicking at the crumbs on the floor. "I hate everything!" And then she pushed out of the room, past the other girls waiting patiently to get checked. I just stood there, mouth open bigger than my muffin, wondering how the hell I ever got myself into this mess. And, more importantly, how the hell I was ever going to get out.

3

AN HOUR LATER IT WAS TIME FOR MY MEDICAL intake. In a small room off the main hall, a stone-faced woman made me take off all my clothes except for my underpants. I put on a hospital gown and stood on the scale, the rubber surface cold on my bare feet. She shielded the paper with her hand when she wrote down the number. I tried to tell what it was based on her scribbling, but I couldn't. Then she took my pulse lying down and standing up. I peed in a cup. She measured my height. She checked my blood pressure. And then she asked me questions about my weight that I didn't want to answer.

"Lowest weight?"

"(Pause) This morning. Ninety pounds."

"Highest weight?"

Shameful, I wanted to say. *That's what my highest weight was.* "A hundred thirty," I muttered.

"When was this?"

"Eight months ago. Last February."

"Do you purge?"

"Purge?" I stalled.

"Make yourself throw up after eating?"

I knew what she meant. I'd done that a few times to correct mistakes, like when I'd let myself have a spoonful of Dad's ice cream in August. The worst time had been in June. Nobody else was home. I let down my guard for a minute and my brain shut off, and I stole a chocolate from the box of See's Candies Dad got for his birthday. They were my favorites—fat circles of marshmallow perched on caramel disks, the whole thing covered with dark chocolate.

I didn't stop there. I ate the whole box—nine chocolates—wolfing them down so fast that after the third or fourth I didn't even taste them. Afterward, my stomach bloated, and I looked up the candies online to see just how much damage I'd done. Each one had 80 calories and 4.5 grams of fat. That meant I'd just stuffed 720 calories and 40.5 grams of fat into my face. I was horrified. I ran to the bathroom in a total panic, stuck my finger down my throat, and puked into the toilet until my eyes watered and my mouth was sore. But I knew I hadn't gotten rid of

all of it. A hard ball of chocolate and caramel and marshmallow remained and was slowly dissolving in my stomach and turning into fat on my thighs.

Afterward I called my boyfriend Charlie and told him I needed to get a present for my mother and would he please come pick me up. He drove me to the mall and I marched right into Lord & Taylor and up to the candy counter. When the saleslady asked if I wanted a free sample, I said, “No. Thank you. Definitely not.”

Charlie perked up. “I’ll have hers,” he said, and ate two.

Once home, I replaced the empty box and no one was ever the wiser. From that point on, I made sure I didn’t go near food I really liked. Too dangerous.

I’d never told anyone that story, and I wasn’t going to start now.

“No,” I said. “I’ve never purged.”

Back in the common room, I caught a glimpse of my reflection in the mirror above the fireplace. A narrow-faced girl with long, dark hair and arms that looked skinny only because a shirt hid the flabby bits stared back at me.

Leave me alone, I told her.

That girl made me sick. I hated catching glimpses of her. It didn’t matter where—whether in a mirror, or a window reflection, or on my phone screen after a group selfie.

And right now, I had no patience for her. *She* was the reason I was here. If she'd been able to keep it together a little bit more, maybe I'd be at school right now, trying to text my friends during pre-calc.

Then again, if you know anything about anorexia, you know a lot of things mess with your head. Like TV, and fashion magazines, and skinny jeans, and social media, and the Internet, and pro-ana websites, and Diet Coke, and *People* magazine's diet issue, and peer pressure, and every tabloid with celebrity cellulite on the cover. I mean, I could even blame Caroline, the super-skinny senior at school with the kick-ass body I coveted, and on and on.

But mirrors are the worst. One reflection lifts your spirits and another crushes them. A good one can make you feel like the most beautiful girl in the world. But a bad one can make you burst into tears.

Sometimes, walking down the street, I'd catch a glimpse of myself in a mirror or window and there would be this millisecond before I realized the girl in the glass was me. I'd think how she looked as thin and graceful as a ballet dancer. But then I'd come to my senses and realize that it was just me, and I'd look down at my real-life thighs and get pissed at myself for falling for such crap. That's why I only trusted the fat mirrors. At least they didn't get your hopes up. Last February, my best friend, Katrina, wanted me to go bikini shopping with her in preparation for a trip

to Florida she was taking with her parents in April. I put her off for a month and convinced her to diet with me, saying how much cuter the bathing suits would look if we were 10 pounds slimmer.

I knew we'd go to Target. Target had fat mirrors. Every time I tried something on, I left wanting to sob on the handle of my red plastic cart. "How does Target expect to sell clothes if their mirrors make everybody look like Honey Boo Boo's Mama June?" I'd joke if I was with a friend, but deep down a tiny part of me was grateful that the person staring out at me wasn't at all distorted. At least then I knew what to work on. And if forced to choose between the truth and a lie, I'll take the truth every time.

This time I decided to beat the fat mirrors at their own game. I cut out carbs and ate things like cauliflower mashed potatoes and noodles made from seaweed. I told Mom I was dieting and she said, "Let me know what I can do to help. I think you'd look great if you lost a few pounds."

By March I'd lost 10. Katrina had given up after the third day and looked the same. When we got to Target, I marched into the dressing room with the teeniest bikinis I could find, convinced that this was going to be the best day of my life.

I looked like crap in every single one of them.

Katrina didn't fare much better than me, but she wasn't

worried. “Everything looks better with a tan,” she announced as she plunked a pink-and-blue bikini down in front of the cashier.

I left mine on the dressing room floor.

People say anorexics don’t see themselves as they really are. But what if anorexics are the *only* ones who do? What if we are the clear-eyed ones, and everybody else out there sees some brain-altered version of themselves, a massive mind trick designed to make them feel better?

Katrina went to Florida and came back with tan lines and crushes on all the lifeguards. I went back to Target. Four times. Just to try on bikinis. But even after I lost 40 pounds, when I looked in those mirrors, I saw something shameful.

A fat cow.

4

ON MY FIRST NIGHT AT WALLINGFIELD, I AWOKE TO loud thumps and heavy, tortured breathing. I'd had trouble falling asleep—the heater was loud and I shivered under my duvet. The room was full of weird noises, and even before Lexi started doing whatever it was she was doing, I'd heard her breathing, rustling, and smacking her pillow as she twisted and turned.

The rest of the day had been overwhelming and exhausting and a big blur. We'd had some sort of therapy session where we'd written bad thoughts about ourselves on balloons with black Sharpies and popped them. I'd taken a nap. There was snack, where I ate two tiny chunks of granola, and at dinner I'd shared a table with Willa, who acted like her whole outburst at snack had never happened, and Lexi, who sat with her arms crossed, refusing

to eat anything. Kay told Lexi that if she at least tried, took a bite or two, she'd avoid the supplement. Lexi didn't move. At the end of the meal, Kay brought her an Ensure and told her that she had five minutes to drink it. "That's the rule around here," Willa whispered. Lexi didn't touch it.

And now, apparently, she was having sex. Or trying to dry heave. Or doing . . . burpees? We used to do burpees sometimes as a warm-up at cross-country practice, and they always killed us. You had to jump in the air with your hands raised, then go down in a squat, do a plank, and then spring back to a squat, then stand, jump in the air again, and start over.

I turned on the light, but she didn't even pause. Jump, squat, plank, up. Jump, squat, plank, up. *Boom-cha-boom-thump.*

I needed to stop her. We'd both get into trouble. This had to be against every Wallingfield rule.

Or maybe you should join her, you fat ass.

"Lexi?" I whispered.

She didn't answer.

"Lexi!" I hissed louder.

Startled, she let her knees hit the carpet.

"Lexi, what are you doing? You know if you get caught you're going to get in trouble."

She lifted her head and went into a cat stretch, staring at me the whole time. She looked a little ridiculous in her PJs, which were light blue and covered with dogs knitting sweaters. “Are you going to tell on me?”

“What? No! Sorry, that’s not what I meant. I just don’t want you to have to drink Ensure or anything.”

“That’s my problem, okay?”

In the shadows Lexi’s eyes were just sockets. She was so tiny her pajamas looked more like a blanket.

“Okay, sorry.” I turned off the light and rolled over, face hot.

I waited for the *boom-cha-boom-thump* to start up again, but it didn’t.

“Elizabeth?”

“Yeah?”

“Do you want to get better?”

“What?”

“Do you want to get better?”

“Of course.” We all did, right?

“No, I mean, do you really?”

Maybe it was because of the dark, or maybe it was that I’d already caught Lexi doing something worse. I don’t know. But I told the truth. “If I have to gain weight, then no. I don’t. I totally don’t.”

“Me either,” she said.

She climbed back into bed. “Thanks for being honest.”
Her blankets muffled her voice. “It helps.”

“You’re welcome.”

And just like that, we were friends.

5

THE NEXT MORNING MY ALARM CLOCK BEEPED AT 6:55 for weights and vitals. I shivered and started pulling on a pair of leggings. Lexi, from under her covers, said, “Just wear your bathrobe over your pajamas. That’s what everybody does in these places.” Sure enough, when I peeked out my door, a long line of girls in brightly colored flannel and terry-cloth robes snaked down the hall.

“Told you,” she said.

In line, Lexi turned to me. “Oh, and tomorrow, set your alarm for six. That way, we can beat the line so the whole thing will take two minutes and we’ll still be sleepy enough to go back to bed after they weigh us.”

Apparently I was in charge of waking us both up. Everyone in line seemed to be trying to cling to sleep by leaning

against the wall with their eyes closed, so I whispered, “Okay.”

“By the way,” Lexi whispered back, “you know that today, we’re going to have to eat everything.”

I nodded and gulped. “I don’t know how I am going to do that.”

Lexi shrugged. “Even if they force an Ensure on you, you still can say no. You just have to be okay dealing with the consequences.”

I nodded. How did she know these things? “Lexi, have you been here before?”

“No,” she said, twisting a strand of black hair between her fingers. “But I’ve been at a place just like this. And this is what I know: They’re going to try to make you eat whether you like it or not. If you refuse, they give you Ensure. If you refuse Ensure enough times, they’ll make you go around in a wheelchair or make you get a feeding tube. At least here they make you get an NG.”

“NG?”

“A nasogastric tube—the one they cram down your nose to your stomach. But an NG isn’t as bad as the stomach one I had a while back. That one really sucked. Oh, and it scars.” She undid her robe and hiked up her PJ top to reveal what looked like a second belly button above and to the left of her real one.

I cringed.

“I know. Gross, right?” She pulled her robe closed over her shirt. “You basically have two choices when you’re here. You can either refuse to do everything, and then eventually they’ll kick you out. That’s what happened to me at my last place. Or you can do what they tell you, get fat, and go home when your insurance runs out and do it all over again. It’s up to you.”

What about girls who want to get well? I almost asked, but then she might think I was one. “Thanks for the intel.”

Lexi fussed with her top. “Anytime.”

Breakfast was a nightmare. It was so bad, in fact, that I can’t even talk about it except to say just imagine someone putting ten times the amount of food you’d usually eat in front of you and then telling you to finish every bite. I cried. A lot. Lexi refused to eat again and sat with her mouth glued shut in front of the resulting Ensure. She amazed me. I wasn’t as brave as she was, so I left with a bowling ball for a stomach. Then I got nauseous and barely made it to the bathroom before it all came up, burning my throat the whole way: two scrambled eggs, two slices of buttered toast, another carton of milk, and three orange wedges. I didn’t throw up on purpose, but Kay, after handing me a paper towel for my mouth, still made me go to group therapy. “Once your stomach settles,” she said, “that will be one Ensure.”

Fantastic.