Numbers

I am nineteen years. I am two eyes, two ears, two arms, two legs. I am seventy-three credit hours. I am five feet and seven (maybe eight) inches. I am eighteen hours a week at work. I am a 3.5 GPA. I am nine hours of sleep every night.

I’ve always measured myself in numbers—lacrosse goals, class rank, calories, weight. It’s a perfectionism thing.

I used to think Perfectionism was my best friend. Even when she kept me up all night recopying notes or redoing assignments I’d finished hours before. Even when she punished me for an A- on a quiz, telling me I’d never get into college. Even when she stood next to me in the mirror and murmured “not good enough” until I could count my ribs through my shirt. Perfectionism was a slave driver, but she kept me at the top of my class and at the top of my game. I wasn’t happy—she never lets you feel content because contentment leads to complacency and complacency leads to catastrophic inadequacy—but I was flourishing. Sure, she never let me relax or eat or sleep, but she rewarded me with A’s in calculus, history, English, and anatomy, or a record low weight.

But she wasn’t my friend.

We first got acquainted after I didn’t make the varsity lacrosse team in tenth grade. My coach said I wasn’t “athletic” enough. She convinced me that my coach was really trying to say I was “not skinny enough.” Standing in front of the mirror while I pinched at fat, she whispered in my ear that I had to get rid of the weight and together we decided that I would spend every day at the gym that summer. And that’s exactly what I did.
With junior year and its chorus rehearsals, lacrosse conditioning, honor society meetings, tests and tests and more tests, I didn’t have time for the gym. I didn’t have time to sleep. My anxiety was like constant electricity without a destination, pulsating and constantly searching for an outlet. I was up all night studying optic nerves and Custer’s last stand and Latin roots. I was at school from seven until five almost every day. I didn’t have a second to spare at my shrine. What was I going to do? I had to keep losing, needed to keep losing, if I wanted that varsity spot. That’s when Perfectionism introduced me to Anorexia. I couldn’t cut anything from my busy schedule, but I could cut calories. And if I weren’t eating, I’d have more time to study.

They say that when you stop eating you stop functioning. Your focus is shot. You can’t sleep, even though it’s all you ever want to do. You’re always dizzy. Your skin turns pale and blue, but it’s not the pretty kind of pale like Nicole Kidman’s skin. It’s this marbled, sickly, cancer patient hue. Your hair falls out, and you’re always cold, even on the hottest days of Florida’s sweltering summers.

That’s a lie.

I mean, my hair did fall out and I could barely keep my eyes open, but I thrived under the stress. I didn’t need to eat, I didn’t need to sleep. I could do it all, and I could do it well. I had the best grades I’d ever had since starting high school, a varsity spot looked promising, and I was strong. Strong enough to do the weightlifting team for lacrosse conditioning. Strong enough to skip two, sometimes even three, meals a day. Strong enough to make myself throw up when I’d eaten too much. And strong enough to fight the human body’s most basic instinct to survive.
I thought I was in control. I had a new friend who was bringing out the best in me. I didn’t realize what a toxic relationship it was. She became needy and clingy. Soon, I couldn’t go anywhere or do anything without consulting her first. She took my autonomy, and in return she gave me anxiety to govern all my decisions. “Which way should I walk to class?” Whichever burns the most calories. “What should I have for breakfast?” Nothing. “What should I wear?” Whatever hides your fat. She took my food, my sleep, my focus, my happiness. It wasn’t a very fair friendship. Anorexia was a boa constrictor, wrapping around me like a hug at first, but then squeezing and strangling me. She was killing me and I loved her for it.

Whispers followed me everywhere. She’s so skinny. Do you think she ever eats? What is wrong with her? She looks sick.

I didn’t care. I stared at myself in my mirror and admired a body that was so thin it was starting to resemble the skeletons we used in Ms. Weaver’s anatomy class. The satisfaction never lasted. Anorexia would soon call attention to my flabby arms or my squishy stomach. I would quickly be reminded that I hated myself, and resolve to cut my allotted calories by another 100. Eventually I stopped needing her to put me down, to galvanize my iron-will to skip meals. I didn’t need her to hiss at how ugly I was because I did it to myself.

Winter semester, junior year: wake up, weigh myself, throw away my breakfast, weigh myself again, go to seminary, go to class, skip lunch, go to lacrosse practice, come home, weigh myself, study all night, sleep for two hours, and wake up to do it all again the next day. Weighing, measuring, counting. It became a religious practice that was consuming my whole life.
I remember standing in front of the mirror crying because I hated what I looked like. I remember standing on the scale hyperventilating because I hadn’t lost that half a pound—or worse, I’d gained it. I remember feeling empty. It was more than an empty stomach; my whole life was desolate. I had cut out everything that once made me happy for fear of gaining weight. I didn’t go out with friends—I couldn’t eat in front of them. I didn’t go to school dances—every dress I tried on made me look fat.

My lacrosse coach pulled me aside at conditioning the month before tryouts. We didn’t talk about calories or weight or eating, but I knew that he knew. “Stop worrying. You are good enough.”

It’d be nice if the story ended here. After a heart to heart with my coach, I started eating and loving myself again, and I championed self-esteem and healthy living. It’s not so simple. Eating disorders are like a rip current. You can see the shore of recovery, but as you get closer, the current drags you back in. Anorexia didn’t just disappear—you can’t just unknow someone who used to be the biggest part of your life. Though it didn’t go away, things started to change—including my parents’ approach.

“Eat your dinner.” I’m not hungry. “You’re not leaving this table until you eat everything.” Doors slamming, screaming, crying. Even though I didn’t want to be sick, I still didn’t want to eat 2,500 calories a day or a well-balanced diet. I felt like every bite was giving up the control I so desperately needed. I was in limbo, wanting to be healthy but wanting to be skinny. They seemed to be mutually exclusive.

We saw therapists, nutritionists, family friends “who know what you’re going through, honey.” There were tears and prayers and long talks and hugs. And finally there were cleared plates and uncounted calories and desert. Anorexia still comes back to visit
every once in a while, when I'm shopping for swimsuits, or on prom night. I’m always wary when she appears to point out how much weight I’ve gained since I started eating again. But she doesn’t own me anymore. I’ve stopped compulsively checking food labels (mostly). I got rid of the journal where I used to record every calorie as red on my ledger and replaced it with one where I can memorialize experiences instead of tally up my mistakes. When I’m disheartened by what I see in the mirror, I pray to see myself the way Heavenly Father does. I finally threw out the scale, and with it, the association between my weight and my value.

In some ways, numbers still define me. I am nineteen years. I am two eyes, two ears, two arms, two legs. I am seventy-three credit hours. I am five feet and seven (maybe eight) inches.

But I am also numberless, breathtaking Florida sunrises over the Atlantic Ocean. I am sand and surf and sea breezes. I am a busy morning and an afternoon nap. I am art history and limitless daydreams of Europe. I am vintage dresses. I am *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* and *The Princess Bride*, a thousand times over. I am a spinning record player with U2 and James Taylor on vinyl. I am Mickey Mouse and countless days at Disney World. I am lazy Sundays spent in bed. I am Cheesecake Factory birthday dinners and endless "what would Dave Ramsey do?" lectures. I am unfinished Pinterest projects. I am late night drives with the windows down and the music loud. I am late night conversations that go on forever. I no longer measure myself in calories, in pounds, in minutes at the gym. Instead, I measure myself in smiles, in laughter, in moments.

What counts the most cannot be counted.