

Chasing Imperfection: Inside the Mind of a Not-Enough Girl

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*“Cause I'll be by your side wherever you fall.
In the dead of night whenever you call.
Please don't fight these hands that are holding you.
My hands are holding you.”*
~~By Your Side

I've always had a love hate relationship with food. Growing up my family would sit around our wooden oak table beneath the pale green curtains that lined our front windows, recounting the day's events during lunch and dinner. Never breakfast. Yet, I would not categorize myself a foodie. I do enjoy meals surrounded by the people I love, but there are few things worse to me than the putrid, soggy remains of food on dinner plates stacked in the sink. And despite my Italian, Irish and English background, my family has grown up with a bland palate of spices; raw vegetables sometimes boiled with butter or pepper, chicken with store bought Italian breadcrumb mix. My friends stare dumbfounded at me in line at the cafeteria when I turn my nose up at the food selection, not because I don't like the food, but rather the type of seasoning it is cooked with. Food was a way to grow closer with the people around me, not just a source of nourishment.

Like a magnet, eating disorders pulled at my force of gravity, tugging me closer without any awareness of the kind of effect it had on me. Maybe the pull towards ED's world was so undetectable because I had grown up reading about countless characters from broken families that dealt with addiction, alcoholism, cancer, death, depression, and abuse to comfort me. They held my tears when wouldn't let anyone else see they had fallen. They held my laughs that I

wasn't allowed to have. They carried my secrets with them. Broken characters became my lifeline.

But eating disorders were a seldom spoken issue in these books. Sure, characters experienced self-confidence issues and depression, but rarely did the brokenness manifest itself in an eating disorder except for this one book; *Reasons to Be Happy* by Katrina Kittle. Here was the narrator openly navigating the depths of such an illness, but more than that, the story was about her pain of survival. I related to her loneliness. Yet I never saw myself as her; as a person with an eating disorder. I knew I couldn't ever become Bulimic, like that narrator, because the very idea of throwing up made me want to throw up. I had a weak stomach when it came to bodily fluids: never pulling out my own teeth for fear of the miniscule blood.

Likewise, I could never be Anorexic. For starters, I disagreed with its psychological laws. Starving myself didn't seem like answer, it seemed like the easy way out to a problem I didn't have. I spent hours in the mirror studying my flat feet, short stature, cockeyed shoulders, limp haired self, trying on words to see what fit. Fat never did. Neither did overweight. Maybe I couldn't see, didn't want to see it, but I never felt ashamed of my body. Sure, I was heavy. I never pretended to not know that. But I needed to love myself, truly accept myself as I am because the world around me wouldn't. I didn't need to be skinny. Because of this, I felt safe from eating disorder's reign.

How wrong I was.

I could count on one hand the number of times I got in trouble during elementary school. I was not a particularly bad child, but I did believe in standing on a chair to help some reach

something on a top shelf. That ended in no recess. This time it was more than losing recess, it was losing my dignity. I was in Mrs. Satkowski's third grade classroom. Every day I would sit at this desk by the window filling out pages and pages of multiplication tables, cursive paragraphs, and facts about Native American tribes.

In between our five times tables and our spelling lists there were snack breaks. During some these breaks I would sneak leftover Halloween chocolate bars under my desk. Then throughout the remainder of the day I would eagerly pinch off a bite, pretend to cough only to shove the fistfuls of bittersweet coco down my throat. At first it was only Heresy's bars, then I grew bolder drafting Heresy kisses and chocolate eggs onto the battlefield.

"Allison can you stay behind for a moment," my teacher asked me one day before the start of outdoor recess. My small brows furrowed as I questioned why I was being asked that. I was one of her best students. I never talked out of turn or disrupted the class. If anything, people hardly knew I was even in the room most times.

"Okay," I slowly shuffled towards her desk wondering if she found out the signature on my reading log wasn't my mom's but a half hazard scribble of a nine-year-old. I wrung my hands in front of me counting the number of titles on the grimy floor.

"I have a question to ask you," she began gesturing back towards my desk, "and I need you to be honest." I nodded in reply, feeling my vein on my left-hand bulge rapidly.

"You know snack time is a privilege I let you guys have. And that sometimes we can't eat certain things because of classroom allergies." *She knew. How much did she know?*

"Yes." I stated firmly.

“So sneaking food during class isn’t acceptable. Not only is it distracting, but what if someone has an allergic reaction. You are too big for this.”

“I don’t know what you are talking about.” I gazed out towards the window noticing how the sun glittered down on the basketball top between the boys scurrying across it.

“Allison don’t lie.”

I wasn’t lying technically. At least I wasn’t. ED’s manipulated the situation with the belief that I didn’t have a problem. *Stuffing your face is okay, it’s just chocolate. What...? Are you embarrassed? Of what? You’re a kid, you’re supposed to want candy.* ED tended to make everyone believe I was alright with her sing song voice downplaying the situations. ED was a master of turning the tables around to a different conversation and processed the ability to turn into a grade A defense attorney to convince the jury that she wasn’t the issue.

Mrs. Satkowsky just opened the top of my desk without a word; her downward turned brown eyes and half slouched posture said everything. It felt like the eleventh-hour evidence was just pulled out of the courtroom; a product of some secret digging on the prosecuting side. There were shreds of candy bar wrappers, a melted milk chocolate Easter bunny in its gold packaging, morsels of chocolates scattered about. My face burned. She wasn’t mad at me; just disappointed and to me, a teacher’s pet, that longing gaze of judgement was somehow worse.

“I’m.... I’m...sorry,” I said finally staring at the contents.

“It’s okay, but I want you to stay in from recess today and clean this mess up. And don’t do it again.”

“I won’t,” I said before taking the grey trash bin from her hand. I slowly got down on my knees and began pulling out fragments of “the mess.” *You’re the mess* ED started as a sneering pit in my gut. I tried to push it away and focused on my task; pull out my notebook, reach in to find an offended item, toss it out and repeat. *Did you hear me*, ED was now festering in my brain circling around like vultures looking for a meal. *You are the mess. You are supposed to be perfect. Perfect people don’t lie. They don’t get caught.*

I got exceptionally good at personas as time went on. ED constantly tested me, daring me to turn into someone else and each time I would get close to being caught we would shed our first layer of skin and grow a new disguise. I constantly lived on the verge of being confident in my identity as a child of God and accepting the impersonator ED told me I should be. By the time sixth grade came around, stealth and denial became our sidekicks as I would ransack people’s lunch boxes in our classroom closet during bathroom breaks. I don’t remember what prompted me to start or even where I got the courage to start stealing, but what I do recall is the gut churning thrill I got similar to riding a roller coaster whenever I did it. That’s the thing about addictions, your brain normalizes the action until you don’t know how to function without it.

I couldn’t understand ED’s control she had over my mind all these years because I didn’t fit the stereotype. Numbers on a scale didn’t frighten me, just the idea that somehow, I couldn’t be good enough for a God who already died to give me his unconditional grace. My story wasn’t about these so-called weight triggers most doctors liked to emphasize. I would spend years sitting across from my pediatrician in her office only to be told I was overweight. I needed to exercise more and come back in a few months for a check in. ED was spinning a tapestry that no-one saw. Shouldn’t my doctor have realized that after years of this, maybe it’s something deeper than a

teenager eating more than exercising? She was supposed to be the smart one, yet I spent years allowing ED to win because no-one noticed the symptoms or her controlling voice over me.

Back in my dorm room, I traced my dry hands slowly over the curved etched line I watched as my skin ripples beneath it. The freshness of the stretch mark was evident with its bulging plum line, unlike the faded yellow bunches of older ones on my lower stomach. Continuing to rub my fingers back and forth over it, I sunk into silence. Complete and utter silence. It wasn't the shock of the increasing number of them on my inner thighs, lower sides and stomach. It was the awareness of knowing why they were there. Not simply because I've gained weight, but that I had an issue I was struggling to acknowledge much less face.

There are times the urge bubbles up inside of me, festering the longer it sits taking on a life of its own. The piece of firewood that initially caught slips into ashes the longer it burns leaving me with no clear understanding of how I got into that state of mind. In those moments the secretly allures me further into the trap. I turn into a battlefield general plotting my army's every move. I agonize over all the possible obstacles and how to overcome them. I think about how satisfying the end will be. It's a sick game I allowed ED to persuade me into playing¹.

I forget where my mom and brother were, just that they would be gone for the next few hours leaving me home alone. Maybe it was one weekend morning during those high school or maybe it was during the winter break from college when I had a day off from work. I just remember cookies. Chocolate chip, sugar, peanut butter, oatmeal raisin, it didn't matter. As long

¹ The fact that as I am recounting this memory, I can acknowledge that ED is a sick thought is progress in itself, I think. I was surprised to have written that sentence but even more surprised that I could feel comfortable speaking ED is a sick game; I'm not sick, it's ED that is the disorder that is making me feel sick.

as there were enough to shove down my throat coating it in half chewed flour, it would taste amazing.

“Consider it a death row last meal request.” ED’s voice snuck in wanting to make it seem exciting. Because what I haven’t told you at this point is that I’ve been thinking about cookies for the past half an hour now. Like a faithful general I had already checked the kitchen for existing supplies. It came so natural to me by this point; I knew it as a routine, not as ED. It was simply a way of filling the hunger I felt, a hunger that took me years to recognize as my feelings not physical fatigue. There were no cookies left in the stop and shop plastic bucket in the pantry. I scoured the freezer boxes stacked neatly on top of each other, their colors blending into a blurred blob of rainbow; nothing was appealing or small enough to slide under the radar when it went missing. There were only two or three cheese slices left, and too many apples and bananas filling up the shelves.

Everything good was gone. But I had cookies.

I pondered this fact downstairs on that steadfast faded blue couch five feet away from the television. I unlocked my phone typing into Google ‘sugar cookie recipe’ figuring it would have the most universal ingredients. In my haste earlier I couldn’t recall what ingredients I had already at my disposal. Slowly I sat up, leaving my Cape Cod sweatshirt bunched around my perpetually bulging stomach and climbed the stairs up into the kitchen. Deliberately this time, I opened the slotted pantry doors. I started at the top working my way down the wooden shelves. On the left nestled among the boxes of granola bars and crackers were a clear container of flour and a half empty bottle of vegetable oil. On the opposite end behind the pancake mix was the container holding the turquoise Stop and Shop brand of sugar. Behind that was some baking powder. Going down to the second row was the vanilla extract. I pulled each item halfway from

the shelf to double check and neatly scooted it back into its place. Closing the doors with a soft click I moved onto the drippy fridge next to the staircase. I knew there were eggs in the damp cardboard carton, but I couldn't resist sliding the carton open to count the 10 perfectly smooth eggs left. I popped open the lid of the frosty butter compartment on the fridge door. There was only a sliver of golden butter left; not even enough to cook mashed potatoes with. Going to option B, I flung open the freezer door searching along the frozen blueberry, broccoli, and mixed vegetable bags. Normally extra butter stickers were kept in their original box sandwiched between these plastic bags. But it wasn't there. I didn't have butter.

Sighing I shut both the fridge and freezer doors at the same time, annoyed with the rush of cold air that swirled past me as I did so. I trotted back down the stairs and landed on the couch still thinking. I read on a baking website that applesauce could be used as a substitute for butter. Applesauce instead of butter. *That could work*, ED breathed into my ear. I know it can I said waving away the pestering words. *There are 5 unopened containers of applesauce sitting on the fridge door. Surely that's enough*, ED spoke waiting to see how loyal I was. Yes, it would work.

But was there time for me to cook, wash dishes, cool and eat them? *All you need is a strategy*, ED replied, urging me on. Looking at the faint green lines on the cable box I did some mental math.

- Recipe takes 10 minutes to bake, meaning 12 with our oven.
- Add that to the 15 minutes I would need to prepare the dough, that's 27 minutes.
- I could wash and clean up during the baking, null-voiding any time needed for that besides the cookie sheets.

→ A few minutes to cool bringing it up to 35 minutes with a buffer. I always had to have buffers in case.

My mom mentioned before not being back home until lunchtime but wanted me to watch the news for the local weather. *This means she won't be back in time to watch it herself*, ED said. I nodded my head submitting to its twisted truth. I had time. *And cookies*, ED reminded me as I headed back into the kitchen to meet my fate.

The first place I raided was the cabinets on either side of the stove. I squatted down taking out the sky-blue pasta strainer, and the small metal bowls in order to find the large white mixing bowl. Dropping it on the counter above me, I carefully placed the rejected items back in the same order before softly shoving the door. The next storeroom was the lazy Suzan tucked into the corner of the cabinets. Nestled in the darkness lay the faithful wet measuring cup. I added that to my stockpile on the granite countertops moving along to the upper drawers. On the opposite side of the kitchen in-between the fridge and sink were the two remaining stops. One drawer held the wooden mixing spoon, dry measuring cups, and spatulas. The other contained utensils such as tablespoons, teaspoons, and knives.

Gleefully I danced around the crowded space; pivoting from the pantry, leaping over to the fridge, galloping over to the countertop. There was something so satisfying turning raw ingredients into a product unrecognizable compared to each single item that went into it. In went the two heaping cups of flour, joined next by the teaspoon of baking powder, and glimmering crystals of sugar. I churned the white ingredients around with the wooden spoon creating a whirlpool of dust. *Isn't so pretty*, I heard as ED looked over my shoulder, eyes beaming like a child waking up on Christmas morning staring under the tree. I measured out exactly the vanilla extract, hesitant to not drop precious liquid as it went into the bowl. Into the bowl it went, yellow

swirls separating out all the white. Next came the eggs, the clanking of the knife as it hit the shell ringing throughout the room.

I waited until all the other ingredients were jumbled into the bowl before adding the applesauce. Softened butter and squishy applesauce were not the same consistency. The sloshy bowl equivalent to one cup taunted me; the last hurdle in this game. *It's not poison, it can't end badly*, ED reminded me as I watched the applesauce fall into the bowl in clumps. Renewed with the persistent passion ED ignited in me, I vigorously stirred and stirred until beige dough formed. I switched to my hands gathering the dough into a solid mass. Once the sides of the bowl were scraped leaving only a ball in the center, I went to the sink to rinse my hands in lukewarm water. Drying my hands on a paper towel, I crumpled it up on the counter reaching into the thin cabinet for the baking sheets.

Two isn't enough, ED spoke up, determined to be the leader in this game.

“But twelve cookies fit on each sheet,” I argued using the remaining logic I had.

Look into the bowl. It wasn't a question but a demand. The dough ball seemed to protrude from one side of the bowl to the other constricting the air around me.

Three dozen, ED stated offering me the third cookie sheet. Like a soldier following orders, I ripped shreds of dough off rolling them in-between my sweaty palms. Little balls soon littered the baking sheets as I shifted them into perfect 4 by 3 rows.

I slid the sheets into the steamy oven closing the door and set the timer to eleven minutes. Glancing out the windows I noticed the sun was high in the sky and Mr. Curtis was out mowing his hill across the street. *Not a moment to waste*, ED chided me. Hating to disappoint, I turned my focus back onto my task. Dishes. The drying rack was thankfully void of breakfast dishes

and cups. I could wash the cooking dishes and leave them to drip dry in the humid air. But that also meant more time. It was easier to just take one of the checkered towels and mop off the water residue so that I could stash away my evidence sooner.

The before and after picture of the counter was almost unrecognizable. Bits of dough was strewn on both sides of the counter. The spoon rest lay the wooden spoon covered in a shine of dough. The boxes of flour, sugar, oil, and vanilla were shoved into a clump all open. The bowl and spoons now dirty. I had my work cut out for me and only eight minutes left. I decided to start with the measuring spoons and knives; a couple swipes with the dish sponge and they were back to the glossy silver I knew them as. One by one the rest were washed, dried and meticulous accounted for in the drawers. I taped up the boxes, screwed on the caps and returned the boxes inside the panty in the same position I found them in. Damp paper towels wiped down the granite, taking with it any crumbs. I had two minutes to spare on the timer.

It's funny that I remember doing all of this. Usually ED shrouds the mechanics from my memory, leaving only visceral flashes of taste. Yet I suppose as the fire burns longer, so does my boldness. This time ED wasn't just spinning a web of control over me, I was willing to turn it into an elaborate plan being fully aware of the end goal. Before this, I was ashamed of the action, now I am brazen about what would come of it.

The two minutes went by excruciating slow. I sat in one of the oak chairs closest to the stove, absentmindedly pointing and flexing my feet. Jumping at the sound of the timer, I opened the door only to be greeted by a wave of boiling heat rolling over my body. I set down the sheets onto the warming trivet and let the condensation melt off my glasses. The cookies weren't flat circles, but small rounded humps.

Probably because you made them too big, ED said inspecting the inventory.

But besides that, I think I did well, I responded.

You mean we did well, ED corrected. I walked over to the tall cabinet where all the plates were stored; ceramic dinner plates, old Disney character child plates, white plastic plates. I ran my fingers along the edges until I found the plastic lunch plate I was looking for. Pulling it out I set the green spatula on top, ready for the action.

I still wasn't aware of ED's true intentions yet². I did not plan on eating much more than a couple of cookies, just to take the edge off. I started loosening the rest of the cookies; some caught on the burned bottoms, others were all too eager to jump off. Soon the plate was covered in layer of golden-brown cookies and two cookie sheets worth of them were piled up into the Ziploc bag. Resisting the urge, I hurriedly put away the trivet and scrapped the burned crumbs off the sheets, running warm water and soap under them before placing them onto the drying rack. Those would be easy to slip back into the cabinet before the car returned home.

I couldn't eat them in the kitchen. ED was never comfortable eating much more than a bite or two in that sunlit room. Instead the darkened playroom, half underground at the back of the house served as the eloquent dining room. Biting into one of the lesser burnt cookies I struggled to not choke on it. Instead of the airy sweetness I expected, the mush in my mouth was more of a muffin or biscuit. It was dense and tasted more like bread than sugar. *Still it's not that bad* ED's voice fluttered by in my head as I managed to scrape the mixture off my teeth with my tongue. ED was right; it wasn't disgusting, just not what I had envisioned.

² As I reflect more and more on these moments, I realize I am never fully aware of ED's logic or desire during an episode. I can't objectively separate that voice from my own during those moments, I just see it as an extension of my own. It isn't until I look back that I can see the damage ED is causing.

I finished the first one, then ate another. And another. By the third cookie in, I was used to the texture. I kept stuffing one after the other down my throat reveling in the taste. At some point my saliva couldn't keep up. The cookies were arid pieces in my mouth gathered at the base of my throat as I forcefully made my tongue commence the swallowing without any aid. The next thing I remember, the plate was empty. But the hunger persisted. *The gallon bag*, ED shouted over the roaring protest of my stomach. No longer caring about rationing provisions, I found the bag upstairs only to end up back on the couch. Fistful after fistful, I shoved my hands from the bag into my mouth until I could no longer distinguish what was my voice or ED's.

Fullness. It overcame me with no precursor, no warning label. My stomach expanded, stretching each muscle the thinnest it could go. I no longer could think or feel anything besides that fullness. Silence evaded from the inside out as I stilled my movement feeling nothing. Peace came for but a moment. Roaming my hands over my swollen stomach, I comforted it the way someone would to a crying child. It was then that I looked over and saw half the Ziploc bag emptied and the remaining crumbs on the otherwise deserted plate.

Shame. It wasn't fair that I couldn't have one without the other. I pleaded for ED to say something, anything, but it was only then ED lost its ability to sooth me, saying nothing. I knew I messed up, but it wasn't anyone's fault but my own. I didn't deserve the pity or comfort I so desperately craved. I was now drowning in shame, grabbing for anything to steady my feet on. I had failed on my own accord and that left me with not enough. Of what I wasn't sure. Pushing those thoughts away I returned to my stomach now cradling it in acceptance, learning to love the damage I caused. Fullness and shame were like oxygen and kindling in this fight; I needed both for this fire. I didn't know how survive and start a fire without one or the other. Knowing that now, I can be more compassionate on my younger self as I watched her pick up the grimy bag

and trudge on up the stairs pushing the food deep under a pile of her t-shirts for the next time ED visited.

As time went on it became harder to ignore these increasing thoughts. My desire for perfectionism became the stronghold for my ED. I was hurting but I wasn't sure why or how to fix it.

"It's hard not being good enough," ED lonesomeness voice began.

"I'm trying," the other half of brain desperately tried to fight this losing battle.

"We know why you do it,"

"I don't use these episodes to fix anything," I countered biting my chapped rosy lips. It was thoughts like these I was tired of having and deliberating over every night in my dorm room.

"Oh yeah? What does that mean?"

"I don't know. Maybe I just love food too much or too little, just definitely not the right amount."

"Sure, in fact they aren't even episodes...you have read too much to be anorexic or bulimic." A good accusatory comeback for ED. It was logical enough for me.

"Well duh."

"So why?"

"Why what? Why is it in that I surrender to this feeling allowing my heart to hurt worse afterwards? Why does my mind continuously think? I tired of all of this, if I had answer I wouldn't be in this situation right now, I could have fixed me by now."

This routine was exhausting, yet I never wanted to end it. There couldn't be an end because in my diseased mind, I thought I would always be a perfectionist and perfectionism wasn't an issue to fix.

Until my friend in college recommend me a book to read, *Manic: A Memoir* by Terri Cheney. Tiffany and I would periodically do this and even had a Pinterest board of books we love. That night I opened the preface and I couldn't put it down. She wrote in detail about her manic episodes and bi-polar illness showing the unarticulated madness she endured throughout her life. Each episode in her book sucked me deeper into this world of disordered thoughts. I was her. I didn't know in what ways, but her episodes of dissociating from the world was like mine in so many ways. Tiffany saved my life without realizing it. Afterwards I spent hours on my computer writing keywords onto a Goggle search--*eating lots of food, do I have mental disorder, disorder thoughts*. Each search brought me closer into another world; binge eating disorder. I am fairly certain after reading blog posts, academic articles and posts from the NEDA website that I have it. But why? And How?

Once I had a name for these demons. I had a burning desire to speak it out loud over and over. It was freeing to finally realize that maybe I wasn't as alone as I thought I was, but all too quickly I realized how easy it was to hide behind the name³. ED would periodically use its binge eating disorder name as an excuse to keep the pattern going, because if I was mentally sick, then it wasn't my fault. There were a few dangerous weeks where I would research more on my disorder falling into my old habits to cope with the truth. My brain was going a thousand miles

³ [1] After researching and praying for understanding it was clear my symptoms, habits and even thoughts fit the description of binge eating disorder.

per hour; eating disorder, overweight, thin, food, how much, how little, religious fasting. Each word churned inside my stomach, opening a hole I yearned to fill but didn't know how to. Didn't know how to make those swirling thoughts disappear, to make ED disappear. So I did the only thing I knew how to; numb myself to the shame and fear. Alone in my dorm room I would hide behind the computer screen while lying on my bed, one hand scrolling through Google searches, the other grabbing fistfuls of vending machine candy and chips down my throat. Time was irrelevant those weeks. I went to classes and did homework, but have no recollection of it. My bible sat untouched in my desk drawer collecting dust as I scoured around for a cure I was blind to. I was hypnotized by the power of ED in my life.

As the weeks went on, the dorm apartment I shared with my other two roommates got smaller. I wanted to evade into the denial of my bedsheets and comforter, but I couldn't for lying among the pillows were crumbled wrappers from last night's pillage. The garbage can sat overflowing under my desk, swallowing me up. Yet I didn't dare to take it outside, in case my roommates would see what I've done. *But what if you did?* That voice grew louder preventing any escape in my home. That thought couldn't have been ED, they thrived watching me squirm under the burden. But was it my own? I wasn't even sure what my voice sounded like anymore.

I don't remember when or where I was when I got the idea. I must have been listening to K-Love which meant it was either the morning when I was getting ready, or at work in the yellow house on campus. In any case I found myself one Sunday evening pondering it over homework.

"*Why?*" I was lying down on top of my purple comforter reading "Old School" by Tobias Wolf when ED started. I licked my index finger; dog eared the current page and let the book flop down before responding.

“Why what?” Playing dumb wasn’t the smartest way to fight ED but it was always my first defense. Call it a gut reaction. ED sauntered across the room and crawled onto my bed.

“Why admit something you don’t even know is true?” ED sat there staring at me, waiting. I sighed and turned over to grab my phone from the windowsill. I was trying to finish the chapter for tomorrow’s class and before church but now reading was the last thing on my mind.

“And like what are they supposed to do hmmm?” she added and crossed her arms over her chest still waiting.

“I don’t know,” I muttered silently.

“Know what,” ED prodded knowing full well what my response would be. It was similar every time and she used that to entrap me into her spider web of lies.

“Why I’m hurting. I just want to feel better.” I scrolled through my phone.

“No, you don’t want to feel better. You just want to not feel.” The truth stung and sent waves of panic into my stomach. The panic cut so deep that tears couldn’t even fall from my eyes for they were welling up in my heart, tightening the muscle with each breath I took.

“Stop.” I said it so quietly it could have been out loud or inside my swirling mind.

“It’s not just me that will tell you that fact if you go telling everyone about us.” That’s when I knew this idea was my own try and overrule every manipulative decision ED made for me over the years. Fighting to stand was my voice, the one who saw beyond my failure. It was a battle for control and I was beginning to understand that.

“I’m going to do it. Maybe I won’t say what we are but I am.”

Shaking I stood up and slid off the bed. ED was silent now but still lurking in the corner of the bed. I was weary of her, knowing that at any moment she could lunge at me like a cat prowling waiting for her prey. I typed in K-love.com onto my phone screen and scrolled to find the number for the prayer services. I hovered my fingers over the call button for what seemed like ages. I could wait a few more minutes and then it would be too late to call them. I could still make it to church with Tiffany. I could call them and hang up before I got put through. I grabbed my wooden cross from my bedpost I squeezed it tightly in my hands and pressed the green button on my phone.

Gingerly, I pushed speaker so that I could continue to pace around the 5 by 6 room and use my arms without fear of the phone falling. “Hello,” a crisp voice spoke signaling it was too late to turn back now.

“Hello,” I imitated back.

“This is Pastor Josh, and can I know who I have the privilege of speaking with?” It wasn’t his pleasantries that surprised me but the familiar tone of his words. I imagined the call being impersonal: *Tell me your problem, I’ll pray quickly and give you a piece of advice.*

“I’m Allison,” I spoke.

“Hello Allison. Just so you are aware the phone call is being recorded so my team can pray for you as well.” He paused before filling the void. “How are you Allison?”

I licked my lips and paced the length of my bed. Could I do this? *You could make up some random lie about someone you know being sick in the hospital,* ED sneered from her corner.

“I’ve been going through some things lately,” I said. I paused realizing I wouldn’t be able to judge his facial expressions over the phone. “And uhh, I’ve been dealing with an eating disorder for some time but I’m not sure where to go for help and I just would like prayer to give me strength to help me through it,” I blurted it out all at once before I lost my courage to do so. As I finished the tips of my ears were burning and my shoulders were hunched over in shame. I couldn’t take my eyes off the teal bedroom rug even though Pastor Josh couldn’t see me.

“Okay Allison. First, I just want to tell you that God loves you and nothing you can do can take that away. Right? John 3:16 says that for God so loved the world that He gave His son to die for us so we can have eternal life.” I had just uttered this ugly, shameful baggage, and he was not disgusted at me. He was staring at my brokenness and seeing past all the lies.

“Yes,” I steadied my voice trying to wipe my eyes.

“And we can even put it this way. For God so loved Allison that he came down to earth and died on the cross so Allison can have eternal life and be with God forever,” he continued on to say.

“Hmmm,” I said in agreement, amazed at how much peace his words brought me.

“And God’s grace covers you. His spirit and love surround you. I’m going to pray if that’s alright Allison.” And taking my silence as permission, he began to pray. Before long his amen promoted mine.

“Thank you,” I said not sure what to say next

“You’re welcome Allison. I commend you on your bravery to call us. But this isn’t something one phone call is going to fix.” I nodded glancing out the window then back to the

pattern of my bedspread. “This is something you do need to go seek help for. Can you talk to a pastor at your church or are you in school?”

“Yes college.”

“Maybe there’s someone on campus you can talk to... someone who is a mentor to you in faith or even a therapist.”

“Okay.”

It wasn’t the solution I was looking for, but it was the peaceful reassurance that I needed to be reminded of. “One more thing,” Pastor Josh spoke again, “anything that emphasis we aren’t good enough the way God made us becomes a serious issue. Because it’s a signal that we aren’t confident in our identity in God,” he continued, “it becomes an identity conflict where we don’t believe we are God’s children. You should talk to someone you trust in the church about this.” I couldn’t believe it. Actually, I didn’t want to believe it.

As he was speaking, my mind was disagreeing simply because I’d grown up being so active in my faith. Surely, I believed what I’d been taught all these years. *Right?* “You are God’s child Allison and He loves you so much He made you in His image. I hope this has helped?” It was an open-ended question that deserved more than one word but all I could muster was a short yes. “I’ll be keeping you Allison on my prayer list. Have a great night.”

Once I hung up the phone, I tossed it on the other side of my bed in frustration. I wasn’t mad at Pastor Josh, just at what he had revealed to me. I couldn’t get his last sentences out of my head. *Not confident in my identity?* I pushed this conflict into the shadowy parts of my mind, silently praying for my eyes to not be open to that truth.

It wasn't until a year later when I was listening to a podcast about identity in God that I recalled this memory. While the public bus was spinning down pothole ridden roads my ears were akin to Lauren's explanation of her new single "You Say." My eyes stared out past the grey skies remembering this exact phone call, in particular his convicting response to me. I believed that He loved me and grappled with the very concept of identity as I entered entering the eating disorder world.⁴ Practically speaking I compartmentalized parts of myself into boxes.

1. *My eating disorder* was only present when I felt the stress of the world's expectations of me to be good enough especially in my academic circles.
2. *My faith* was my assurance in the storm. I became so involved in my relationship with God because it was my cornerstone in life.

I hadn't allowed myself to see the complexities of how my longing to be so desperately loved by God meant I would mistakenly assume I needed to be perfect to earn it. In that faltering, my heart felt the pain of the lies over the assurance of the cross. I wrongly thought that if I acknowledged I felt perfection was required to be a good enough Christian, I would topple down from my ladder of faith. It was a crisis of thought: if that statement is true, then what else about my faith is a mere exaggeration of what my heart truly thought? I pushed this identity complex conflict? to the shadowy corners of my mind, silently praying for my eyes not to be opened to that truth.

Looking back, I did more harm to myself that day by failing to address part of my disordered thinking, but I wasn't ready then. I wasn't equipped to handle the questions and

resulting answers this truth would demand of me. I needed to spend more time bringing this disorder to God before I could acknowledge my misperceptions.

“Hey Tiff?” we are sitting down at Hurley eating dinner before our Christian Fellowship meeting. It is February and the chilling northeaster winds forces us to wear our heavy sweaters and scarfs. Tiffany brushes her ginger red hair off her shoulder before responding back.

“So I’m been thinking a lot lately,” I crack my knuckles, a nervous habit of mine while watching Tiffany nod her head and chew.

“What’s up?”

“Well you know how I’ve been feeling yucky things lately...” Tiffany doesn’t need to respond back; I know she is listening. I tug my necklace around its chain for a moment before continuing. *Do you really want to do this? After you tell her for real. Like really, you can’t go back into pretending.* ED’s voice hovers over my shoulder waiting to see what I would do.

“Well I think there is more to it than that.” I pause and glance at my phone. Still too much time before the meeting. I can’t leave this time.

“Whatever it is, you know I’m here for you,” Tiffany’s voice reassures me to continue. I want to do this and for this first time in a while this choice is mine alone, not ED’s.

“I have this thing where I eat a lot of food and then hide it. And feel bad afterwards. It’s called binge eating disorder.” Tiffany is no stranger to my admission of secrets. We both spend long hours discussing our faiths, dance and feelings. She knows things no-one else will.

“Allison,” she leans over to hug me.

“You are the first person I told,” she nods knowing this is important to me. It is like there is this weight lifted off so I can exhale a breath I had been holding in for so long.

“Anything I can do to help you?” Tiffany shifts her half-eaten plate full of ketchup, cold pasta and misshapen pizza off to her right side. Her leaky glass of water pooled onto the grey tabletop. This catches me off guard. *Help? Can anyone?*

“Umm. I guess...well sometimes it happens when I snack but without having portions.”

“Maybe I can just remind you like I do with someone else,” Tiffany goes on but suddenly my head is spinning. It all comes crashing down that if this is real, and this conversation is happening, then this is something I have to fix. *What, you thought you could know and not fix it? That's not what perfectionists want, don't you want to become the perfect...* Forcing ED's voice out, I turn my attention back to Tiffany. I brush the pools of water under my eyes and take a breath, “Yes and just being there for me to talk to means the world especially since we can talk about God and things like this. I appreciate it really,” I finish smiling at her.

“Of course. You know God still loves you,” Tiffany goes to hug me again before we walk out to our meeting.

As the weeks go by, I remain confident in my ability to overcome this. Being aware and actively improving a situation are two different things and I have come to realize that I have to be more aware of my disorder before I want to stop it. I spent so long neglecting that ED even had a voice that I need to give it time to talk where I could understand its point of view. The moments I want to throw away all my progress just to gorge myself on ED's lies are too many to count. But there are equally as many moments where not good enough morphs into being enough.

It is important to note that I still don't have all the answers. In fact, that is my biggest challenge in this process; relishing control. I am slowly realizing that clarify does not equal control, complete trust in something higher does not equal failure and good does not equal perfect. As I allow myself more time to process my own eating disorder journey, I have begun to understand what imperfection truly means and am learning to embrace the beautiful mess I am.

More importantly I suppose, I am surrendering this season of my life to the One who has complete control and love for me. The key to recovery lies in priorities. *Who am I allowing to reside in my heart? What am I really searching for? And where?* These questions demand constant reflection every day. In making my faith my greatest desire, a desire over the expectations of the world, I can come to find peace with ED. Chasing after the success of the world only left me exhausted, but chasing significance will leave me renewed. Significance over success. It's a mindset shifting what ED shouts into a story of grace. I'm choosing to embrace ED as a part of my journey towards discovering how imperfect people come to know the exact purpose they were created for.

All this time I had been striving for perfection, while scanning pages of imperfect storylines and characters in books that were holding me. Perhaps it's time I become one of those characters. My faith is healing me from this, empowering me by it and convicting me through it. God can do the same for you.

In fact, I know He will.

