*Unacceptance*

by William Bowman

Being bullied as a kid really jacked me up.

I still remember their names: Jake Jackson, Riley Jewkes, Derek Gallagher, Brad Matson, countless others. And I still remember the day Jake and his crew surrounded me in the woods behind U-Park Elementary, laughing like hyenas, casting insults like rocks, every one gashing another bloody hole in my tender 4th grade self-confidence. I was a chubster, a rotund little fellow with greasy hair and a bad case of the nerd. They made these facts very well known to me, just to make sure I remembered. They succeeded. And their deep-seated voices of unacceptance subconsciously continue to remind me to this day every time I look in the mirror.

As long as I can remember I’ve had what doctors call Body Dysmorphic Disorder or BDD. Imagine a hypersensitivity to a single part of your body--what it looks like, feels like, real or imagined incremental gains or losses in size or shape--and the inability to escape these obsessions. Early in life, when I had a pornography addiction, it hyperfocused on my genetalia. Now that I’ve kicked that, it’s migrated to my abs, every small possible gain becoming a monomaniacal obsession I can’t often escape mentally, especially when I look in the mirror, though I tell myself the thoughts aren’t real. I always *feel* fat, no matter what my weight really is. It’s like Jake whispers to me from the toothbrush in the cabinet, telling me I’m slowly on my way to an obese body and a lazy mind. These days I carry my toothbrush with me everywhere I go, it seems.

And there’s more. Two months ago, I checked myself into St. Vincents hospital in Portland near dead from anorexia. I’m out now, have gained 25 lbs, and my heart is back to full-health. But physical health is only one 17th of the battle. There’s also the voices. When I look in the mirror, I don’t see what I see what other people see. Most people see a skinny, healthy, in-shape young man with a toned, attractive body and mind. But what I see is very different, largely because of what the voices whisper to me. Contrary to what most people think about anorexics, I don’t see a fat Will, what I see is a *potentially* fat Will. I know I’m skinny and healthy, but what I see is what I could *become,* if I don’t keep in control, that is. A huge Will. A fat Will. A Will like my father, enslaved to bodily lusts and apathetic to boot. And that terrifies me. As a result, my goal before treatment (and now too if I’m not careful) was to distance myself as much from potential fat Will as possible. Trouble was, I was never far enough. So I dropped, incrementally, slowly, until I was 6’3”, 147 lbs, with a heart rate of around 30 resting, nearly dead, but still not damn far enough away from that dreadful possibility. What part did bullying play in this? To be honest, I can’t remember Jake ever bullying me about my body image. I probably repressed it, or some freudian bullshit like that. But I know he did, because every time I look in the mirror, the voice of that fucker is still there, my anorexic self, telling me I’ve gained far more than I really have, and that I’m well on my way to fat to the fatherth degree.

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The day after my admission to the hospital for anorexia, my mom Patty flew 800 miles from Fairbanks, AK, to be with me. I didn’t want her to, anorexics are irascibly independent and loath to be intimate with anyone. I tried to convince her to stay and take care of Dad, but my mom is tenacious when it comes to her kids: ain’t nothing save ebola or the rapture going to keep her from being there when we’re in trouble. Tall with short brown hair, my mom’s a ditz, and we poke fun at her a lot for it. Once we filmed her for fifteen minutes trying to mount an inner tube at Circle Hot Springs, continually falling off and rolling around in the steaming vapor, unable to stay on. It was hilarious, and we, to this day, call her the walrus. Thing is, though, she knows she’s ditzy, and, unlike a lot of people, she has the balls and self-confidence to laugh at herself (not in a people pleasing way either, but in the kind of way that you’re so secure in yourself you don’t mind a little self-deprecation). I envy that trait in her: these days I have so little self-confidence any time someone makes a fat joke I get sadder than a panda or angrier than a sumo.

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Surprisingly, Patty was bullied too, though it doesn’t show through the confidence she exudes. She grew up in Colorado Springs, daugher of a devoutly Catholic mother Betty and extremely extroverted father Louis. Today she’s adamantly protestant and highly introverted. Funny how that works. She had three sisters, Cindy, Suzie, and Megan, and one brother, Mike. Growing up, she never got along with her sisters or the girls at school. My mom was a bike-riding, sports-playing tomboy, and all the girls wanted to do was paint their nails, gossip about boys, and stare, lovelorn, at the cover of *Rubber Soul*, the ‘65 Beatles album with John, Paul, George, and Ringo green-tinted, acid-trip wavy-beautiful and sprouting from the bottom right corner of the case. My mom hated this girlishness, so instead she passed most of her time biking or hanging out with Mike.

But Mike just wasn’t right. He wasn’t really *wrong*, per say, but as a kid, he violently bullied my mom. He threw rocks at her on regular occasions, and once he chased her with a knife. Another time, at a dude ranch near Florissant, CO, when my mom said something he didn’t like, he pitched his glass of milk at her face, barely missing, shattering the moo-juice all over the wall like rain on the window. At his worst, he stood by while all his friends near-molested my mom. It was fall, and they’d biked several miles out of town to the base of Pike’s Peak. Once there, he stood by while his friends, boys just being boys, stripped off her pants and held her down, rubbed ruddy leaves in her long brown hair and laughed at her, calling her the Jolly Green Giant for her disproportionate height. A dog barked in the distance, and the wind threw red Colorado dust in her eyes, like it too wanted in on the fun. They didn’t technically molest her, but to a ten-year-old girl, it was close enough to screw her up good. I remember Jake and his friends bullying me like this, feeling my self-confidence ripped off like my mom’s jeans, crumbling like dead Colorado fall-time leaves, and blowing away in the cold wind off the peak.

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During my stay in the hospital, my mom tried to comfort me in the worst times, right after my meals. They say fat isn’t a feeling, but to an anorexic it is. After eating over 3000 calories a day, I remember walking around the 9th ward, my stomach like post-Thanksgiving dinner every time, Jake’s and my other bullies’ voices whispering, “You’re a fat, out of control slob; they’re making you into your father” all the way around the hall. I’ve often wondered, if my bullies knew what their bullying would do, how long the self-loathing and unacceptance they caused would stick with me, what kinds of emotional and financial burdens they would cause me and my family, would they still have done it? After those meals, I laid my head on my mom’s lap and told her I didn't want to gain the weight. I didn’t want to be fat. I remember her soothing voice, “It’s okay, Will; you’re okay.” I remember wishing I could believe it. I remember the voices contradicting every word she said.

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If Mike had begun the process of destroying my mom’s self-acceptance, Diane Godec finished the job. Early in 6th grade, my mom met and befriended Godec, a blonde, freckled, ‘cool girl’ skirt-on-legs who later went to become a cheerleader in her high school, the exact opposite kind of person my mom normally chilled with. Why my mom befriended her, I can’t imagine. Maybe my mom was, as a result of Mike’s bullying, beginning to look for external affirmation in place of from inside herself. I can only guess based my own decade-long people-pleasing mindset as a result of my bullying I’m just now beginning to isolate and move past. I can only speculate. Whatever the case, soon Diane and my mom were cruising the town on their bikes, store to store, pilfering gum packs, candies, baseball cards, sodas, pencils, pens, rulers, cheese blocks, and all other kinds of knick knacks, stealing purely for the act of the crime.

One particularly windy fall afternoon, they decided to drop a local convenience store, a job just like any other of the sixth-grade jobs they’d pulled before. I imagine they must have entered nonchalant, the typewriter ‘ding’ of the door announcing their presence to the lazy hispanic clerk smoking a doobie, listening to the radio about Regan’s forthcoming candidacy. I imagine a fly buzzing around his half-eaten donut and the rays of dust illumined by the near-noon sun. I imagine Diane and Patty splitting up, Patty the distraction, Diane assigned to pull the goods themselves. I imagine Patty sauntering down the aisle surrounded by cheetos, Bubbalicious blocks, and beef-jerky like long, meaty licorice sticks, and knocking over a container of sunflower seeds, spilling them all over the floor. I imagine the clerk getting up, rolling his eyes, pulling his blunt, strutting around the counter to the pile, dipping down and sweeping with his hands, mumbling Mexican curses with pot-heavy breath. I imagine Patty signaling, Diane clinking twin glass Cokes from the fridge, walking quickly toward the door, the tension sharp as the cold in her palms, nearly walking out when,

“Stop!”

Caught *filigrante delicto*.

I imagine soon the police were called, the girls given a stern talking to by a cop with a Tom Selleck stash and a lukewarm cup of Columbian black. I imagine he gave them a ride back to Diane’s house where, and this is certain, straight from my mother’s mouth, Diane blamed the entire thing on her. And Diane’s mom believed it, too. Now, to be fair, it wasn’t like my mom didn’t have her share in the planning of the heists, she was no saint. But do blame it *all* on her? How could Diane do that? My mom tried to explain, but Diane’s mom wouldn’t listen. She banished Patty from the Godec house for good. And what’s worse, the next day of school, Patty watched horrified as clique after clique whispered and glared, sneering as they walked past her in the halls of Pauline Memorial Catholic School on their way to first period. Diane had told *everyone*. My bullying was limited, just a short string of guys so insecure in the sizes of their own cocks they took it out on me, or so I speculate. But to be ostracized by your entire school? For a whole year? I *can’t* imagine the anomie and pain. Before 6th, my mom was extroverted, happy, got good grades, looked in the morning mirror and saw a complete girl, despite the blotches of toothpaste on the glass. But Diane changed all that. To everyone, Patty was now a modern day Eve, an evil girl who seduced poor, innocent Diane and would do the same to you, if you weren’t careful. Late in the year, one of the nuns discovered the students’ cruelty and tried to end it. Sending Patty on an errand, she smacked their wrists with a ruler and chastised them for their unChristian treatment of this poor girl, despite her sins. After this, whether because of real sorrow or just fear of punishment (my mom never knew), they *did* try to treat her better. But it was too late, the damage had been done. Patty’s self-confidence was shattered like that milk glass Mike had hurled at her years before, smashed into jagged pieces all over the cafeteria floor.

After 6th grade, my mom’s parents divorced, and Louise moved them to Boise to escape the pain. Patty enrolled in public school, but the bullying didn’t stop there. Soon, Patty changed. She developed an obnoxious extroversion, started hanging out with “bad girls” Vivian and Leslie, necked with boys, acted out in class, and didn’t give a hell about school, all as means not to face the fact that, as often happens as result of bullying, Patty now believed the things they said about her. Like with my body dysmorphia, over the years a deep-seated self-unacceptance had slipped into my mom’s subconscious, Diane and Mikes voices whispering, telling her she wasn’t good enough, that she was nothing but a failure and a wretch, deserving of the pain and agony she felt. At age 28, Patty wrote in a poem:

*They say time heals all, but I don’t agree*

*It just covers up the wounds so you just can’t see*

*And when you think the pain is gone*

*Something scratches the cover and reveals the wound*

*The pain returns*

*So something else has to heal these wounds*

*And I’m not sure what it is*

*Womanhood beacons by age and desire  
I can’t go on much longer this way*

*Because unacceptance Prevails*

Those bullies jacked my mom up good for nearly twenty years. Or so it would have been easy for her to say.

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After a particularly tough meal, my mom laid on the hospital cot next to me and read from Robert Wrigley’s *Reign of Snakes* to distract me from the voices in my head. Rain tapped the window, and my heart beat softly from the speakers of a black screen to our right.

“I feel disgusting,” I said as she paused. “Fat and disgusting, like every bite I take I’m getting closer to dad. Like soon I’ll have nothing to differentiate me, to make me special in the world, to make me clean and acceptable. Did they even understand what they were doing? Did they understand the pain they’d cause?” I told her about my bullying. About Jake and Riley and all the rest. About my anger toward them and their continued presence in the form of the thoughts of self loathing I continually struggled with. She listened quietly. After I finished, she told me about Mike and about Diane. About her near two decades self-unacceptance, about never feeling comfortable in her own skin. About the opportunities she’d missed, about the jobs she’d never applied for because of her lack of self-confidence, about that voice of unacceptance that had been with her until her early thirties, she said, when she married Keith, my dad. But even then it didn’t fully go away. It was, in a way, still with her, though now she knew it, the voice that told her these lies. She told me about how easy it would have been blame Mike and Diane for all her suffering and missed opportunities, as it would be very easy for me to blame my anorexia and body image on Jake and all the rest, to become bitter and angry as a result, but that she’d chosen to grow from it instead. It wasn’t Diane and Mike’s voices, but rather parts of *herself,* her own voice whispering to her, sometimes truth, mostly lies, but always something she could use. “You know that pain and guilt can’t be taken away with a wave of a magic wand,” she quoted Captain Kirk, one of her personal heroes. “They’re the things we carry with us, the things that make us who we are. If we lose them, we lose ourselves.” No one believes that when they’re in the middle of their suffering, as I didn’t really believe it then. But it felt good to know someone else, someone as confident and caring as my mom, had suffered as I did, had felt as utterly insufficient as I felt. It felt good to know there was still hope for me, that I hadn’t fucked up for good, that someday I might still sit and stroke someone's head like she did and tell them that I too had struggled with my own voices of unacceptance and make that person’s pain just a little more bearable, even if just for a single post-meal.

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Doctors debate whether or not you can fully “recover” from anorexia. Some doctors and recovering anorexics say that, like alcoholism, it stays with you your entire life, only ever latent, “in remission” as they call it. Thirty years after her near-death anorexic experience, my mom’s friend Barb still has to force herself to eat, still feels disgusting and dirty after meals, though she eats them every day. Others say they’ve fully recovered. At this point, I don’t know. I’ve gained nearly 25 lbs from my check-in weight; my mind is completely healthy, but my bullies’ voices still whisper in my subconscious. I still have BDD. I still always feel fat. The odds of recovery, at this point, aren’t looking promising, but to be fair I’m only two months in. Some days I don’t want to be cured: my voices of unacceptance push me to limits few others ever achieve. But whatever the case, whether it goes away or stays, the closer I listen in, hearing every inflection and cadence, every word and syllable, the voice sounds less and less like Jakes or Riley’s voice and more and more like my own.

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