

Ruth

She sat next to me in drawing class. Freshman year.

During free-sketch, I watched her fingernails, bitten pink. She fished in her lunchbox and pulled out a yogurt, spoon clattering beside it. The tin lid crinkled, peeled back, tore down the middle. She swore. Those ragged nails pulled the rest of the lid off, fingers covered in yogurt, and she sucked her knuckles clean.

Ruth trembled when she ate. Her shoulders hunched. Sideways eyes darted to the walls, the humming fluorescents, the streaks on the chalkboard. She would look at me, too, and I pretended to draw, pen tracing already-carved lines on a long-since-finished sketch.

Ruth ate slow, each bite hardly more than a pea-sized collection at the tip of her spoon. She left the fruit, blue, at the bottom of the cup. When she finished, she would pack the lunchbox, scrunch a little lower, and blink. Then she'd start to draw.

This was one of my first clues.

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In 1944, 36 men lived in University of Minnesota housing for a 13-month period, subject to semi-starvation.

Each had agreed to submit their bodies to science. Seeking data for the treatment of starvation victims, scientists launched the Minnesota Starvation Experiment to evaluate the impacts of food restriction. Over six-months, the men were monitored in the diaries they kept and at meal times, ensuring they consumed only 1600 calories a day.

As the study progressed, the men reportedly began to coddle their food, play with it, mix strange concoctions within their meals. They were known to lick their plates, preserve mouthfuls

without swallowing, dilute their food with water to increase the volume. Small bites, slow eating.

The men would read cookbooks for fun, nights plagued by dreams about their next meal. They chewed through entire packs of gum in single sittings, chugged water.

1600 calories each day.

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A year before, Ruth and I went on the eighth grade Washington D.C. trip.

At the mouth of summer, our class was all sweat stains darkening our matching green t-shirts, chapped lips, snapped bra straps. We were going into *high school*. And I was starving.

My stomach, knotted since December. I only remember a few things about D.C.— Abraham Lincoln’s marble nostril, rusting like a nosebleed, ripples drawn in the reflecting pool (like the ripples drawn in changing room mirrors, the ripples that warped the white on our bellies; remember, Ruth and I could not trust the mirrors).

I remember wearing an Adult Small t-shirt for the first time since fourth grade and moving down a belt loop. I remember slow-eating and mixing weird foods and the hotel room, curtains pulled, dinner. I remember Ruth.

I had known her for a while—classes together in seventh grade, the venn diagram of our friend groups nearly a circle. In Washington, we shared a table at some pizza joint. Everyone lined up and said “Cheese, please,” or “Pepperoni” or “Yeah, that piece without the crust.” Ruth followed me to the salad bar. We went for the same wilted lettuce, the same cardboard-cutout mushrooms and soupy tomatoes. We didn’t need dressing.

(You know that saying? Hunger is the best sauce?)

Ruth trembled when she ate. Hunched shoulders. A vulnerable thing, a creature watched through the glass, a one-sided mirror. She glanced at my bowl, chewed only between the bites I took. I tried to ignore her, but started doing it, too. She ate a mushroom? I pushed one to the side. She speared a forkful of lettuce? I chugged a glass of water. Each of us horribly aware of the other, and the rest of the table unaware of us both.

That night, thighs stuck to vinyl seats, I realized Ruth and I were the same. The other kids, slurping pizza and smacking lips, couldn't notice. Because Ruth and I didn't have collarbones slicing creamy skin, because we weren't wilting like the lettuce, nobody else recognized it.

(You know that saying? Takes one to know one?)

There was something calcifying inside of us, gnarled like the roots of a cavity. We had cold fingertips and lips blooming blue.

By the end of D.C., we laughed and hugged and said Have a Nice Summer! and we were both a little lighter.

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In 2003, wanting to lose That Stubborn Muffin Top from her last pregnancy, Kate Winslet consumed 993 calories each day. In 2013, Kate Hudson told Shape Magazine that she survived on 1500. 2004, Victoria Beckham, 595.

In 2015, I counted mine in a green notebook, blue pen.

I never asked Ruth her numbers. But I had seen her fingers shoved in a yogurt cup, the skin licked clean.

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Freshman year. I watched Ruth tremble, saw the yogurt, chalky on the corner of her lip.

We became closer, sat at the same table for lunch (her, peering at what I was eating; me, doing the same). If we sat side-by-side, we snuck glances to our touching legs, tried to measure the difference in our inflated thighs. Neither of us could trust the mirror. Comparison was the closest thing we had to reflection.

We went shopping in the same section. “Because we’re the same size,” I said, testing her. Secretly, I wanted her to say something like “No, you’re much smaller than me!” I wanted to hear it from her yogurt-smelling lips. Instead, she nodded.

We didn’t buy anything. Those changing room, those funhouse mirrors. We knew how they were.

At the end of the year, we laughed and hugged and said Have a Nice Summer! and we were both a little quieter.

By June, there was a shift. My mom noticed the cavity.

(You know how kids kick and scream? How they kick the windshield of Dad’s car, how plaster crumbles beneath the pink on their knuckles, how they tire after tantrums and topple into bed, breath choppy, sniffing nostrils, rusted nosebleeds?)

That summer was a parade of nutritionists, linoleum floors and doctors’ offices, meal plans stuck to our fridge with a You’re Beautiful! magnet. The therapist who asked, Have You Heard of the Minnesota Starvation Experiment? The two-week outpatient facility, where my family Talked About Our Feelings and the glossy-haired woman watched me finish my dinner before letting us leave at 5:30.

I tired, toppled into bed. My skin stretched. Every few weeks, Mom and I went shopping. The pile of pants I had swollen out of, tucked in the closet, grew on an exponential curve.

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The refeeding process.

In Minnesota, the men had lost the ability to gauge their own hunger. After the experiment, many of them ate continuously, or binged until illness. One man, after such an episode, was hospitalized—his stomach pumped.

They no longer harnessed the invisible thing that made children push bowls of cereal aside, that told my father when to sink into the couch Thanksgiving night, unbuckle his belt with a slap to the gut, and say, Boy, Am I Stuffed!

Their bodies had taught themselves to ignore their starvation; they now had to relearn the recognition of fullness.

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Sophomore year, I only saw Ruth in the mornings, pre-calculus. She sat behind me.

Watching the whiteboard, I heard her crinkle a granola bar wrapper, unfold the flap to read the nutrition label. I heard plastic bags unspool with snacks, her lips slap around an apple, smelled the baby carrots. The velcro of her lunchbox. She finished her entire meal in the first twenty minutes of class.

My cavity wanted to turn and say, “Throw the food away as soon as you get to school.” Because I knew how a lunchbox whined until you feasted on its innards, until the lunchbox was hollow and you were full. “Just remember, dip the spoon in the yogurt so Mom thinks you ate.”

The filled-in part of me wanted to say, “Please take care of yourself.”

I could see into Ruth’s future. How a packed lunch looked, hitting the trash can floor. How a pack of gum was a kind of packed lunch, only there was no note from mom. The spider web cracks in the windshield and the hole carved in the hallway wall. What will begin as

exhaustion, defeat, later becoming the realization that there are more important things than cold fingertips and spoons dipped in yogurt.

I could trace her life in the lines on my palm, see her reflection stretch over the glass of a crystal ball—warped and wide like the changing room mirrors, the bathroom mirrors, all mirrors. (Remember, we couldn't trust the mirrors.)

Both parts of me wanted to say, "I'm sorry this is happening to you."

Instead, I finished my math homework, and the room smelled like baby carrots, and I wondered if I was the only person who could see Ruth's cavity. Because when you're thin and starving, people ask if you're okay. When you look like me or Ruth and you're starving, they ask what diet you're on.

Everyday, I considered turning around. *Ruth, I know about—*

Or, *Ruth, I know you—*

Or, *Ruth.*