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Sticks and Stones

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The day I returned home,
 the house,
 the structure,
 was but a pile of rubble,
 an amnesiac to its own past.

When I used to ride my bike down these streets,
 the buildings longed to meet the sky,
 r e a c h i n g
 for a rendezvous that they could only achieve
 once they and their inhabitants collapsed into dust.

The memories my family and I had once shared
 were now reduced
 to the ash
 of betrayed trust
 and grief-induced madness.

I sifted through the ruins,
 the smoky, sadistically overzealous smell
 of scorched safe havens
 and the hint of incinerated inhibitions
 overwhelming my consciousness.

In the broken glass from the living room window,
 my sister's reflection stared back up at me.
 "If you keep talking to me like this, I'm done."
 My stomach clenched, whispered sorries
 lingering in the smoke, choking the life out of the air.

Every time I had to cover my ears to drown out the screams,
 she had been there to chase the monsters away.
 I had grasped her hand then,
 but that last time, I thought she was the enemy.
 I stopped listening. Her visits stopped. Her calls stopped.

Looking down at my ashen hands,
 I couldn't help but wonder:
 Did I light the match?

When I was about 5 years old, I started to notice that I was different from the other little girls in my class. There was no way for my kindergarten brain to understand if the differences were positive or negative, but I just knew that I would attract what seemed like a million more stares and crinkled eyebrows than my peers. Those crinkled eyebrows and intense 'why is that chunky girl wearing a swimsuit to the pool? Doesn't she have any respect for our eyesight?' kinds of cruel comments have followed me throughout my teenage years and leaked into my now 24-year-old daily routine. Little boys never wanting to admit they would ever have a crush on me in the third grade has morphed into grown men pretending they don't know me until it's midnight and they are alone in bed seeking easy company. And crying to my mom in a JCPenny dressing room trying on first communion dresses has transferred into crying to my mom in a Forever21 dressing room trying on 21st birthday dresses. Some things never change but the realization that the problem was never the girl counting calories in middle school, but rather the surrounding audience that cheered on her commitment to do so.

"You're not big! You're beautiful" comments have always echoed in and out of my eardrums whenever I reflect on my upbringing to anybody who wants to listen. But those comments are exactly the problem. Why do those two adjectives have to be so exclusive? Why couldn't I be big AND beautiful? Twelve-year-old me would wonder to myself shamefully while looking at the tear-stained pillow pet buried deep in my grasp. I remember audibly gasping whenever a new development sprung to mind. "Doctor Sarah said that all I needed to do was grow up a few more years and let my chub stretch out alongside my height and I will be normal! I'll finally be pretty." I can picture middle school me smiling, almost gawking at the thought. Oh, to be pretty and grown up, and totally NOT a monster to my classmates anymore. Little did I know that Doctor Sarah would give up her pediatrics license and go on to be a full-time Uber driver... or at least she might as well have with the way she was so incredibly wrong. Well, to be fair to her, she was right that my body just needed time. Time to grow, time to change, and time to develop multiple eating disorders by the time I was seventeen. And the even more heartbreaking development was that my classmates and their opinions were the least of my worries. The scary, mean bullies at school were comparable to Mother Theresa when you took into account that the real mean, scary bullies stemmed right from my family tree.

I can still remember the first time my family fully let me down. Developing faster than my classmates and appearing full-figured before I even knew what full-figured was, my family collectively decided that it was time for some changes in little Mia's life since Mia wasn't so little anymore. You might say that a reasonable reaction to a child naturally growing is to offer support and just let a kid be a kid, but my family would say that the kid in question needs to be enrolled in a Weight Watchers program immediately.

Sometimes when I contemplate my childhood I get a sense of dread rushing through my grown-up, full-figured body. It must be the same dread that I felt at an after-basketball team dinner when I pulled out a calorie tracking book just to make sure the slice of pepperoni pizza the waiter slapped on my plate was Weight Watchers approved. Or the same dread I felt in the Von Maur dressing room getting fitted for an “adult bra” by a random employee who had never seen a girl so young having to get professionally fitted for underwire. Now that I think about it, I still haven’t forgiven my grandmother for that day, even if she was just trying to help.

The more I let the outside world influence me and take charge of me, the more I began to see what they all saw. I looked in the mirror every morning after putting on my Catholic school uniform and I would pull and tug at the fabric draping my front side so it didn’t cling so much; a habit I still haven’t let go of. My obsession with altering my clothing quickly snowballed into wearing up to 5 high-impact sports bras at any single time. The goal was to make myself appear as flat on every side of my body as humanly possible. Only middle school Mia would look up to the storybook character Flat Stanley as an inspiration. I shake my head as I type this because, when I close my eyes, I can still feel the scabs that would develop under my arms from where the elastic from the undergarments would dig and drag against my flesh. My parents started to beg for me to take them off when it was bedtime but I would put up such a fight that we usually would compromise with only wearing two sports bras over one of my dad’s Carhartt t-shirts so it would create a barrier between me and the nylon torture chambers. The scarring eventually got so bad that in the seventh grade, a doctor at Good Samaritan hospital questioned my family about any physical abuse that might be occurring in the household. No, it was just a product of me and my insecurities. I would rather constrict myself so much with seven layers of clothing than be seen with my natural curves.

I cannot seem to put a finger on the exact moment it all changed for me. It must have been the culture shock of transitioning from a private elementary school to a public high school that made me realize how important being different was. Instead of trying to blend into a crowd that didn’t even treat me with any respect, it was finally my chance to be whomever I dreamed of as an emotionally suffering middle schooler. My dad was generous enough to lend me money just before freshman year to start a new wardrobe... with the promise of throwing away any restricting undergarments. And for a while, I loved whom I was developing into. But, it was not without its challenges. Even in high school, I would often come across a scenario or a comment brought by either a peer or a family member that transported me right back to the little girl crying into her stuffed animals. And, I would be lying if I said all of those insecurities are behind me as a 24-year-old woman writing this paper. In fact, most of those insecurities that

other people planted are still inside of my mind somewhere. The real challenge is to not allow any water to nourish those plants.

I look back at photos of little Mia and can’t help but tear up a little. An always smiling mouth with soulful eyes gleams back at me. The water that forms in my ducts gathers quickly as I think about the world of hurt projected onto her perfect little mind. I would protect that little girl from every danger in the world and fill her mind with love and hope and... I pause at the thought and chuckle as a flashback of me hesitating to get out of my car earlier today in fear that the “Maxxinistas” in the TJ Maxx parking lot would point and laugh at me springs into my head. The reality of it all is that no matter how much time and therapy has passed, I will always be the girl getting pushed into the mud at recess and being sent to a weight loss summer camp across the country to try to stop the bullying from her peers. She still lives inside of me but now that I’m almost at the age that the prefrontal cortex stops developing, I realize that while I cannot prevent people from expressing their opinions, I can control how I react to them. Only taking in uplifting and positive energy from others and choosing to leave negativity behind is just one of many ways I have decided to navigate my life. One would say that’s easier said than done and I would have to wholeheartedly agree. But if I didn’t at least try, I would be letting down my inner child—just like everybody else once did.

And This Is How I Felt, Photograph

_Alexa Solonenko

