

Beyond My Skin

It was during my first year of high school, where you think you're stepping forward into becoming a well-grown and independent adult. I went on my very first day of school dressed in jeans and a black Vans shirt, matching Vans shoes, my hair carefully straightened, and mascara on my lashes. It took me an hour to decide the outfit the night before, so I felt really confident that morning, walking the steps of my artistic high school.

That changed as soon as I got lost finding the right class. When I finally found it, I sat on an empty chair next to the window, and the person in front of me turned back to look at me and started a conversation.

Her name was Elisa, and the person next to her was her best friend, Greta. They asked for my name, and then, with an intense gaze as if they were trying to analyse me, they said that I looked exactly like one of their closest friends. We then started talking about her, and they asked about myself as well, and, by the end of the day, Elisa exclaimed, "I like you! Let's be friends, give me your number!"

That was the start of my first high school friendship, and at the time, I thought I was so lucky to have managed to meet and become friends with someone right on the first day.

We went along pretty well, apart from certain situations in which I didn't completely agree with what Elisa said or did, but I never called her out; I simply decided not to join her in her doing. Instead, I felt like I was deepening my friendship with Greta, who was more introverted and thoughtful; I felt really at ease with her.

One day, the three of us went out in the city centre for some shopping, and me and Greta saw a skirt that reminded us of the one an actress was wearing in the movie we recently saw together. As we were looking at it, Elisa stepped between us and said, nonchalantly, "Greta, I want to try these pants, can you come help me? That skirt is too small for her, she's not going to buy it anyway," her arm already wrapped around her wrist and dragging her away like a predator would do once fetched the prey. But I didn't really think much about it; I was used to her behaviour by that point, since it wasn't the first time she tried to steal Greta away whenever we were together. Now I think that I never spoke up because I was too afraid to lose them both, as fighting with Elisa would have meant Greta having to choose between her best friends since they were five and me, someone who she met a few months ago. I knew I wouldn't have stood a chance, and I didn't want to be left alone.

But as the days passed by, her comments got meaner and sharper; they managed to get into my head. And rooted deep inside.

I started to wear baggy clothes all the time, afraid someone would notice the shapes of my body. I thought that maybe looking down as I walked would have prevented them from looking at me and started to become acquainted with the streets' shapes and colours. I remember paying attention to every detail in order to keep my eyes busy from rising them.

One day at dinner I didn't feel hungry at all, so I only drank a warm raspberry infuse with some honey and went to sleep.

After that, I stopped feeling hungry at all.

You can keep on living without eating; the thing is, your body isn't used to it; therefore, it doesn't take long before it starts sending you signals asking you to feed him. But I simply chose to ignore it, covering it with a huge amount of flavouring water and chewing gum.

I was giving him just enough to make him feel full, as if eating was some kind of reward that the both of us deserved. As if it wasn't something necessary to live. As if I didn't care to live.

When Elisa started to see my body change, she pretended not to realise something was wrong. Instead, she asked me how I managed to lose so much weight in such a short time.

We carried this toxic relationship till the start of the summer break, when we both got invited to a birthday party that involved alcohol. We both got a little bit drunk, enough for me to remember her telling me that she loved me but hated me so much and me simply replying, "I hate you too." I guess she also remembered, because we never spoke to each other again after that.

I didn't feel sorry at all. I believed I was finally free.

I was wrong.

I went out for lunch with my friends, and we had pizza, one of my favourite dishes in the world and my comfort food. It was painful seeing how it wasn't the case anymore, not for my brain. That was the first time I had to face the change and make a choice.

I happily ate my Margherita, but almost immediately I was assaulted by thoughts about my weight increasing exponentially, and every slice in my stomach started to feel like pieces of lead. I felt sick. So I acted like one and threw everything up.

From that moment, it was a dive into a very profound and dangerous ocean without oxygen and no rope to climb back to surface with. I think I wanted to test how far I could venture myself, convinced that I was too limited.

I underestimated my own self.

I was lying down on the couch, waiting for my head to stop spinning so fast. I thought I was now used to it, but I didn't consider that in summer the temperatures would have been higher and therefore, I would have needed more energies.

When I finally managed to stand up without seeing little flickering starts all around me, I went in the kitchen, looking around as if I were in an unknown and even scary place. As a matter of fact, I was.

On the table, the freshly cut bread was menacingly looking at me; on the shelf on my left, the Nutella jar seemed to be ready to attack me. I hid myself behind the refrigerator's door, looking inside in search of some fruit, finding a bunch of peaches and taking one.

I cleaned it under the running water of the sink and went on biting it, running away from that food hell, back to my safe land, my couch, where I could rest my head from the headache and my body from the strain of walking.

I ate that peach as slowly as I could, hoping that in the meantime, my stomach would have felt full before I finished it. That never happened; I had to count every bite I made and think about how many were left so that I knew when to stop myself, as the food could never, for any reason, be completely eaten. Or else I would have gained weight.

I knew I wasn't exactly all right; I could see it on people's faces, especially the ones close to me. Their eyes were always following my every movement as we sat down to eat, watching me put aside certain foods on my plate and only eating the vegetables that I strategically took in abundance in order to deceive them into thinking I was eating a lot.

I know now that the only person I was deceiving was myself.

Their stare followed me all around the house, especially right after a meal, nonchalantly occupying the bathroom with some obvious excuses that only made me feel upset, because they knew, I thought, I would have found a way somehow.

After I brought back the half-eaten peach and threw it away, hidden under some other left-overs, I walked back to the sofa and turned on the TV, but I couldn't focus, as my stomach was rumbling as if it was starving for days, and I had no intentions of listening to him. But, after what felt like hours, as I kept checking my phone in the hope to finally see the screen showing dinner time, I decided to walk back, already thinking about what I should have eaten, looking on the Internet for the fewer calories aliments I could find, as this situation was already a big trouble. I went for a carrot, as it was the best compromise between what the health website I checked said and what was available in the refrigerator. I picked the smallest one out of them, peeled it, and ate it. A few bites and it was already gone.

I couldn't concentrate after that at all. I tried and tried again to focus on what the people on the screen were saying; I took my phone and opened Instagram to keep my mind busy, but she wouldn't stop reminding me how big of a mistake I just made, and that even carrots, if eaten outside the designated meals, could have made me turn back as I was before. My mind was just completely out of control, going straight for its own way like it was in self-pilot mode and there was no way for me to jump out like actors do in action movies.

I bit my lips, hoping that the pain would have somehow made it stop, but I knew there was just one way for me to shut those voices. And so, I went in the bathroom.

My dad caught me.

I already knew what he would have said, but seeing him so upset like I never did woke up my conscience. He didn't touch me, but I felt like being slapped on the face.

"I just threw up a carrot." Was what I kept reading in the back of my mind, and I just knew, at that point, I hit the deepest and darkest rock bottom. But what hurt me the most was the consciousness of knowing that I didn't accidentally fall in there; I deliberately jumped into it. I liked the cold walls of that place, in which there was nobody telling me to eat more and that my body was too weak. It was just me and myself and silence.

But now everything was so loud by the rings of self-consciousness and guilt that I felt like I just committed an atrocious act of violence; my hands felt so heavy as if I was still carrying the murder weapon. And as a matter of fact, I did. They were the weapon.

I didn't notice at first, but we weren't alone, as I started hearing my mum's crying from the living room. I felt like all my organs disappeared, taking with them all the vital functions of my body, and the air felt like poison. I started to feel my throat going sore as I was holding back from crying, as I thought I didn't have the right, not in this situation. I wanted to cry for my mum, I wanted to cry for my dad, and I wanted to cry for my sister, whom I knew felt like being left apart as I was always everyone's centre of attention. I wanted to cry for my body. I wanted to cry for that little girl who loved food so much to the point of asking, "Is it something to eat?" at her parents' phrase, "We've got a surprise for you!"

I wanted to throw up again.

Now I think that despite these emotions, and despite some moments of consciousness, I didn't really want to fight it, that a part of me was actually happy and grateful to do all of this if that meant staying skinny. And when it's like that, the fine line between the illness and your own self becomes so blurred that you struggle to distinguish them to the point where you ask yourself, "Who am I even fighting against?"

Finding my way back was really hard, especially if you're so accustomed to all that darkness that you forgot what the light looks like. Going to a therapist was fundamental, as well as having caring people around me and with whom I could talk whenever I felt like a new tempest was coming and the waves were getting bigger and stronger, repeatedly hitting the parades of my mind. They showed me how to make the sun shine stronger.

Now that I'm doing better, even if I know I still have a long way to go in regards to fully accepting my body for how it is, I can tell that I let Elisa's words cut through me because there was already a stain of insecurity inside me; she just helped it to expand. I don't know where she is now and what she is doing, but I hope she also managed to find some self-confidence, at least enough to not repeat the same thing all over again with another "me."

I don't think I resent her, not anymore. She made me learn an important lesson that gives me the power to help someone else. But I know now I should have just replayed her, right from the very start, with a nice, evergreen "fuck you."