

## Foreign

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I looked at the other girls in my class. Many of them I had classes with since preschool and kindergarten. Most of them were toothpicks, but some of them were just what I was aiming for. I just want to be a little skinnier. Examining their thin arms and legs hanging beneath short sleeves and short skirts, I looked down at my own. Hidden under a light sweater and capri pants, I wanted to see the same, but what I saw were great bulges around my shoulders and on my thighs. Sinking further into my chair, I crossed my arms over my stomach.

It was agonizing, waiting there in that quiet room right before lunch. My classmates sat focusing on the in-class essay, their arms slowly sweeping across the pages in front of them. My margins were crammed with black scribbles, a testament to my lack of concentration. I hunched over my desk, insulating my stomach from the silence around me. My elbow dug into my left side, my fingers gripped into my right. I could feel the muscles convulsing inside of me. I clenched my arm closer to my body as I felt the rumble clawing its way out. Don't make a sound, I thought. My body buckled. I tried to suppress the growl as it freed itself from my torso.

I picked up the pencil I had dropped moments earlier and resumed my essay on "To Kill a Mockingbird," my nose barely above the pencil marks. Maybe no one will be able to tell it was me. I looked to my best friend sitting beside me. If Sarah had heard anything she was ignoring it and vigorously working away at the essay in front of her, her light brown

hair flying out from behind her ear and splaying across her notebook paper. It's almost lunch time I guess. It's only normal that I'd feel this way. I continued looking at the friends sitting around me, all bent over in concentration. All of them were skinny. All of them were dressed to enjoy the sunny weather in their short sleeve shirts and mid-thigh shorts. I resumed focus on my paper and scribbled down a few more words before I could feel another wave bubbling up. Already? This time I was a little luckier. The grumble felt like a powerful force about to rip through my body, but was small enough to be smothered by pressing my arms against my stomach.

I felt my heartbeat quicken with every reoccurring wave of rumbling, but I picked up my pencil again. "...And the reader knows that little Scout will survive. Because she has to." What? What does that even mean? But there wasn't time; the bell was ringing. We filed out of the portable, making our way down the green, fabric-covered ramp. Our footsteps thudded against the wood below but mine always seemed to be the loudest. I was thankful to be in the white noise of people laughing, Will I be able to skip both breakfast and lunch today?



We always circled up at the back of the lunchroom since none of us ever went through the cafeteria line. That meant smelling the burritos and the mozzarella breadsticks, and all the other pungent items the hair-netted ladies were serving at the lunch carts only yards away from us. That meant watching other people devour their food all around me, watching other people give in to their stomachs' demands. I leaned back against the bright red padded wall, sighed, and listened. My circle was talking and laughing in between rounds of chewing. Some conversations we had as a whole, our band of many trying to compete with the screaming of the lunchroom. Other conversations were had as people split into smaller, more intimate groups. Sarah sat to my left and removed her peanut butter sandwich from her backpack. Robert was on my right, chuckling while he squeezed out

taco sauce onto the burrito popping out of a white paper bag in his hand. Chatting and eating, they excitedly planned our upcoming Tri-Cities date, just the three of us. I smiled, but mostly I concentrated on the opposite wall, a wall of white painted brick. Once again my stomach piped up, but since no one could hear, I let it complain as much as it wanted to. Take that. No one can help you now, I thought triumphantly. As long as I stay distracted, it really isn't so bad.



Luckily it was leftover night at home. While we all still ate together, we were all eating different meals. It was easier for me to get away with saying "I'm not really hungry right now" than it would have been if my mom had spent an hour prepping a masterful meal of taco salad, my all time favorite, for us to heap onto our plates. Dinner has always been the most important meal in my family. The TV is turned off, phones are put away, and we spend half an hour enjoying our food and the company, filling everyone else in about our day.

On normal nights, it was a sacred time.

But tonight was leftover night. A night where we scrounged up bread, cold cuts, tortillas, leftover steak, chicken or pork from the refrigerator to throw a quick meal together. I sat down in my usual spot by the window and watched my mom, dad, and brother share graciously with their stomachs. Mine once again tried to get a few words in, but I was already waiting with both hands, muffling it. I spoke a little just to keep the conversation going, but I mainly sat back and let the rest of them chatter away, watching them enjoy the conversation. My German mother wished my brother, Karl, good luck with a test in the morning, innocently reporting "I'm holding my thumbs" instead of "I'm crossing my fingers." Normally I would've inserted some sort of European joke here, but instead I remained quiet while my dad and brother proceeded to tease her. It was weird watching them laugh, knowing I would have normally joined them. I felt the corners of my mouth raise at the appropriate times like my brain was trying to help me blend in. I looked

down at the empty plate in front of me, half wishing the grilled cheese I could have made was there. When my family was finished feeding their stomachs, I gathered my unused flatware and cup and placed them in the dishwasher.

Dinner led to what was becoming a nightly ritual for me. My parents' bedroom contained the longest mirror in our house, the only mirror that let me scrutinize my body fully. I'd stand there and pat myself down, feeling for the squishy parts and seeing what needed to change. I'd pull my clothes tight around my waist, first to the right, then to the left, and finally straight behind me. The TV was turned on in the other room as my family gathered on the couch, probably flipping through channels trying to find something semi-appealing to everyone. I knew I wouldn't be able to be gone too long without someone getting curious about what I was doing. I lifted my shirt up, exposing my stomach. Even though it was fairly smooth I stood as close to the mirror as possible and squinted my eyes, searching for the flaws I was certain were there. Running my hands over my stomach, I felt the anger boil up inside at the sight of my 120-pound, 5' 5" frame.

I had managed to go two days so far without food. I drank lots of water to trick my stomach into feeling full and after the first day it seemed to have given up fighting with me. Its rumbling had grown weaker.

I had won.



The next morning, my mom was so busy with getting Karl out of bed she didn't even notice my careful pretense of busily getting ready and skipping out on my third breakfast. I could hear her threatening him with an ice cube from down the hall. My dad had already left for work so I was in the clear.

This might not even do anything, I thought, sitting in English class again. With those words my stomach moaned as if it knew my resolve was being compromised. The energy my triumph had provided had been fading all day. Lunch was coming next. I don't think I'm going to make it. I braced myself for another attack as my stomach began bubbling as

if to let me know it agreed. I lifted my fingers to continue taking notes but they only trembled. Soon both of my arms began to feel foreign. I lifted my right arm knowing it was attached to my body, but wondering why it didn't float away or plop down onto the floor. When did you get so heavy? My brain was trying to force it to cooperate, but it took so long to respond. I wondered whether it was going rogue. Mutiny.

Discouragement broke way to anger as I let my arm drop back down to my desk. The bubbling of my stomach melded into the bubbling of my frustration, watching the dumb thing lay there lifeless. Why am I doing this? I imagined my brain yelling across my nerves like a parent trying to warn their kid about a hot stove top. "Don't do that", "That'll give you an owie", "Please baby, mommy doesn't want to see you get hurt."

I needed food.

When the bell for lunch rang I grabbed my car keys—my arm suddenly solid again-- and drove to McDonalds. I was craving their salty, crunchy, oily french fries. I smiled. Go big or go home. I found it funny that my first meal in three days would be almost my entire calorie intake of one day. Before stepping out of the car, I wondered: will this waste everything I just did? Perhaps. I hopped through the restaurant door, stepped in line, and ordered.

I moved aside and waited for my order, feeling truly relaxed for the first time in days. All around me people were sharing with their stomachs, and I would soon be joining them. Children were laughing and chasing one another in the plastic play palace. Parents were trying to balance trays of food while herding their children to the right table. I couldn't have been happier when the cashier called out my name. A tray with a container of golden fries and a yellow-wrapped cheeseburger rested in front of her and as I approached she pushed it towards me with a "Have a good day."

I most definitely will, I thought as I replied with a "You too."

A cheeseburger had never tasted so good.