BLACK-AND-WHITE THINKING

Latria Graham

A random evening from last winter: It's dinnertime, but I don't want to go to the cafeteria, where the eating patterns of the whole campus are on display. Instead, I head to the local college hangout, Lone Pine Tavern. I enter the semidarkness and sit with my back to the other people. I resolve to pick just one item from the menu, and something to drink. I'll have a turkey panini; that will be safe if I ask them to hold the cheese. And the mayo—mustn't forget the mayo. Fifteen minutes later, I am floating back to my room with two chicken wraps, a turkey panini, and a large order of cheese fries with extra mayo packets. It doesn't take long before I am surrounded by empty wrappers that reflect my bloated face in their shiny insides. I've overstepped myself again, and there's only one way to make amends.

“How did it start?” Everyone who knows asks me, and I never know how to answer. When did I start tracking my relationship to food? When I was in the hospital last year, my father told my therapist that I was just different from other babies: If you had to feed a typical baby every four hours, you would have to feed me every three. Do I begin there, or with
my awareness, from early childhood, that food defined who you were—if you were country, like my dad and his family, or worldly and sophisticated like my mom? On visits to my paternal grandmother’s house, while the rest of the family dove into the mountains of food she’d prepared—oxtails, chicken brains, chitlins, “junkpots” (a congealed mass of pig’s feet, tails, ears, and random cuts of beef)—I watched my mother hold back and politely say she wasn’t hungry. After a while, she would fix her plate with only the more conventional cuts of meat and vegetables. The message to me was: “We don’t eat that stuff.” And if I wanted a piece of my grandmother’s amazing butter cake with the chocolate frosting, she would say, in front of everyone, “Haven’t you had enough?”

My first real memory of doing something wrong is from when I was seven years old: I ate some Girl Scout cookies I wasn’t supposed to. Until that point, I was a big seller of Girl Scout cookies—one of the highest sellers in the state, in fact. (I felt like a drug pusher, foisting cases of cookies on my diabetic music teacher, Dr. Mackey.) But when it came to eating cookies, initially I had self-control. I asked my mom when I wanted some and ate enough to satisfy me. Then something switched. One night, I climbed out of my top bunk, crept past my parents’ room, into the living room and around the armchair I thought of as the “Daddy chair,” to the boxes of Girl Scout cookies stacked near the fish tank. I wanted Thin Mints. They were my favorite, and I knew what they looked like before I got to the crate: the green box with a troop of girls rock climbing on the front and a blurb about diversity on the back. I knew what to expect when I opened the box: There would be two sleeves of chocolate-covered cookies, but this time they would all belong to me. I sat on the tan tweed couch (the same couch
food defined who I and his family, or a visits to my pater- he family dove intoails, chicken brains, pig’s feet, tails, ears, mother hold back while, she would fix al cuts of meat and don’t eat that stuff.” iner’s amazing butter would say, in front of hing wrong is from Girl Scout cookies I as a big seller of Girl in the state, in fact. (I of cookies on my diabetic came to eating cook- mom when I wanted mom something switched. k, crept past my par- round the armchair I e boxes of Girl Scout ed Thin Mints. They ooked like before I got of girls rock climbing y on the back. I knew x There would be two x this time they would couch (the same couch that I threw up on when I was four after swallowing bleach), tore open the box, ripped out a sleeve of cookies, and sat munching and watching Mutt and Jeff, our two severely overweight goldfish, swimming around the night-light in their tank. I didn’t finish all the cookies at once, so I took them back to my room and hid them in the corner of my toy box, under my dancing ballerina doll. Later my parents would search my room for something (I don’t remember what) and find empty flattened Girl Scout cookie boxes. When the Thin Mints ran out, I moved on to the Tagalongs... the Trefoils... the Do-sidos, and when I got desperate, the Samoas. After I was done, I stuck the boxes under the edge of my mattress, certain no one would think to look there.

I was a clever girl, so you’d think I would learn that sneaking food was bad. Instead, I just got smarter about hiding the evidence. I learned by trial and error. Eating an entire box of Andes mints from my grandmother’s refrigerator and putting the empty box in the trash: bad. Eating the contraband candy bar and flushing the wrapper: much better. So the closet eating started early, but it took a while to develop into an eating disorder. It wasn’t a sudden thing, like diving into a pool—splash! Instead, I just sort of slipped in.

At age nine, I was put on a diet. Or perhaps I put myself on a diet. I’ve always tried to emulate my mother in just about every way possible. I followed her around the house, learning whatever it was she happened to be doing at the moment. My contributions never measured up to hers: When she cut out a dress, her lines were perfect; my dress would be misshapen, and would hardly look like a dress at all. To an extent, my mom followed me around, too: She always dropped me off at school, was active in the Parent Teacher Association, made all the cos-
tumes for the school play, made cookies for every bake sale, taught my Sunday school class, and went on every field trip (which I loved because I got anything I wanted, even if I wasn’t cool). On top of that, she managed to be social. She was—and still is—my ultimate definition of what a woman should be: tall, thin, chic, sophisticated. (Before she got married, she attended the Fashion Institute of Technology to become a designer, and modeled on the side.) She always knows what to say and never seems overwhelmed.

When she went on a diet, I decided I was going to go on one, too. It seemed like a good idea at the time—to me and to my parents. I’ve always been a bit chubby—more chubby-athletic than chubby-fat, but chubby nonetheless. At nine I’d already had my period for over a year, and I was bumping into things with my large hips. I didn’t take these changes well. I threw a fit when I had to go with my mom to Belk’s to get a training bra, and I was even madder when I couldn’t get the thing over my head. “You have to undo the clasps,” my mother said, but how was I supposed to know? My reasoning skills couldn’t keep up with my body.

But I wanted to tame my body if I could. My mom ate salads, so I ate salads. My mom ate grapefruit, so I did, too. (I hated both.) My mom did her floor exercises, so I was red-faced and panting on the floor next to her. Most of this was well and good: I was faster when I played basketball and softball, and trading in my Hawaiian Punch for real fruit juice wasn’t a bad thing. It’s just that I take things to the extreme.

I’m a black-and-white thinker, and I always have been. When I want something, I have to have it. I wanted to go to boarding school; my parents said no, but in the end I won. I wanted to go to an Ivy League college, and I did—even though
I pushed myself so hard it almost killed me. Eating was the same. It became a war, in which one side had to lose: my body or my mind. For a while my mind got the better of me. I learned how to curb my hunger and turn my feelings on and off at will. But eventually my body rose up and took back what it thought it deserved.

I started skipping meals. That seemed the most direct way to make myself smaller. I didn’t really like breakfast, anyway, so I stopped eating it. I had excuses not to eat lunch: My junior-high band met during part of lunch, and because the rest of the period was so “hurried” I decided it would be better not to eat at all. After getting out of my mom’s car in the morning, I would go into school and dump my lunch in the nearest trash can; if I carried it with me till lunchtime, I might be tempted to eat it if I got really hungry. I became more productive with my lunch periods and tried not to think about food by occupying myself with bigger things. I used the time that I wasn’t in band to create Jere Baxter Junior High’s first classroom newsletter: *Mrs. Cron’s Chronicles*, named after my teacher. It included all the accomplishments and awards of my peers as well as announcements for the week. When I was done with the newsletter, I spent the rest of my time playing the computer game Oregon Trail. Eventually Mrs. Cron started playing detective: When *was* I eating? I answered her truthfully—I only ate dinner—and she called my mom.

But Mrs. Cron’s power over me was to be short-lived: We were moving to South Carolina. My grandfather died, my mother grew tired of my father’s infidelity, and they both knew it was time for a big change. We were moving back to my parents’ native state so they could give it one more shot. I saw the move as an opportunity to reinvent myself, so I changed my
name. Until then I had always gone by my middle name, Nicole, but now I asked to be called by my first name, Latria, which I thought was more distinctive.

Moving meant more big family get-togethers, all of which involved food: Anyone’s birthday, anyone’s funeral, any special service at our Baptist church (Easter, Women’s Day, Men’s Day, Church Anniversary, Homecoming, Revival, and every night of Bible School, which we attended for a week each summer)—every occasion required a family feast.

There were several things I didn’t like about these get-togethers. There were the boring conversations about things that didn’t matter to me. I would imitate my mom, nodding politely and pretending to care. Worse was the atmosphere of judgment. When I walked through the door, one of my aunts would say, “Oh, Nicole, you look like you’ve lost weight,” or, if she couldn’t find anything nice to say about my appearance, “Oh, Nicole, I see you’re the same these days.” (They never agreed to call me Latria.) It affected how I ate; I didn’t want to look like Miss Piggy, because it would just give them more to talk about after I left.

I tried to stick to my meal-skipping regimen, and, after doing a school project on animal rights, I decided to become vegan. But it was hard sticking to my plan with people watching me all the time, and after starving myself for a few days, eventually I would break down and eat. I’m not talking about running to the corner store for a bag of potato chips. I’m talking about the time I bought a tub of Oreo ice cream and devoured it on my way to pick up my little brother from a friend’s house. I finished the ice cream and felt horrible—I’d eaten something I shouldn’t have and I was uncomfortably full. For a while I didn’t know what to do. Then I remembered something my PE coach told me in elementary school. I told...
him I was sick and didn’t feel like running. He presented two scenarios: I could continue to sit there, sick and miserable; or, if I was really sick, I could throw up, feel better, and join the other kids. I asked him how I would go about it, and he showed me by pretending to stick his index and middle fingers down his throat. It looked painful, and I decided that I wasn’t that sick.

But a couple of years later I was that sick, and a bit desperate, so I decided to try it. The first time I coughed and gagged and went red in the face and saw spots, only to get up a few remnants of Oreos. But I got something. There was hope. I could possibly undo all the damage that I had done. The thought of throwing up regularly scared me and also didn’t make sense—why spend money buying food if I was going to just throw it up? But eventually purging became a system of checks and balances: When I ate something that didn’t “belong,” I could try to throw it up. Some things came up better than others, so I learned as I went. And I got what I wanted: I started losing weight, though not enough to satisfy me.

When I moved to Spartanburg, there were these jeans: designer jeans that all the other middle school girls were wearing with their matching lavender cardigans and hair ribbons. I wanted those jeans instead of the matronly dresses that hung in my closet. I wanted to be like everyone else. More specifically, I wanted to be like Hannah D. She was everything I was not: She was of medium height (not tall and gawky, like me) and medium build (not emaciated but not fat, like me), and she had long straight brown hair. She was popular, all the boys liked her, and she didn’t have to get braces to have pretty white straight teeth. White. Oh, yeah . . . and she was white. There weren’t many minorities where I grew up, so pretty much anyone I admired was going to be white.
You can be sure Hannah D. had those jeans. My mother and I went to J. B. White so I could try on a pair. They didn't fit well: My hips were by no means “junior-size” so it didn’t make sense for me to try to fit in junior jeans. But that logic didn’t matter: I was going to get those jeans. My mother told me I could get them if they fit; she said if I lost “just a little bit more,” they would fit better. I forgot about the jeans, but I focused on the words “just a little bit more.” It became my mantra.

By high school, little had changed, except that my parents were divorced. It started with a Maytag receipt—innocuous in itself, but it was for a washer-dryer in a house that wasn’t ours—and before it was all over there were custody battles, police, hands slammed in car doors, broken pictures. We kept it in the family—for parties or church services, my dad would show up so that no one would guess they were divorced. But I knew: The Daddy chair was gone, and so was he.

At school I was still awkward, but now I had a group of friends who were just as awkward. We were all band geeks together. Music emerged as one of my favorite hobbies. Now I spent my Sunday evenings in the den playing my clarinet instead of up in my room, eating my dinner under the bed while reading a book. At school, I got involved. I was in every organization that didn’t have conflicting schedules.

Having new close friends posed a problem for my eating behaviors. There were whispered concerns when I disappeared to the bathroom after lunch, or when I would avoid lunch altogether. I had to keep track of which lie I told to whom, because I realized that I could get in serious trouble if I were found out. I went through periods of “normal” eating, particularly during marching season, when I couldn’t afford to pass out, or when I felt like I was really being watched. But the rest of the time, I’d
be tired or angry or overwhelmed or unhappy about something, and instead of talking about it I'd play a game with myself: I couldn't eat until, say, I finished the homework. But by the time I finished my work, I was absolutely starving, and I ate anything and everything that I could get my hands on. There was never a shortage of food in the house. Sometimes I ate lots and lots of bread (even though I hate bread), and sometimes it was just whatever was there. Jars of peanut butter. A vat of pasta sauce.

You might ask where my parents were during all of this. They were there, just dealing with their own things. My mom was back in the working world: She had started a children's clothing business and went back and forth to Atlanta for meetings. My dad moved back to Nashville, but kept in touch. My little brother was too young to understand, or at least that's what I thought. Later, he would develop eating issues of his own. When he was about fifteen, he suddenly lost a lot of weight—so much that even my mother, who had encouraged us to lose weight all our lives, told him he was too thin.

It wasn't that I was abandoned by my parents; it was more that I isolated myself. I would get up, go to school, attend one of my many meetings, go to dinner with my band friends, have band practice, then go home for potential dinner number two, which I would take to my room so that I could do my homework. I was gone almost every weekend during the fall, even sometimes on Thanksgiving for a parade or football game. When I wasn't at rehearsal I was in Youth Advisory Board meetings or doing community service with the Anchor Club. I kept myself busy, and my parents accepted that, since they knew that getting into a good college meant doing lots of extracurriculars.

But the pressure was getting to me. The cycle of bingeing
and purging was now regular. I had routines around it. I kept plastic bags in my room because I was too scared of getting caught throwing up in the bathroom. But it no longer gave me the original feeling of relief and release: I needed something more.

I don’t know where I got the idea of self-injuring. My mom thinks I got it from white kids at school, but she also thinks I got everything bad from white kids at school: my eating disorder, the interest in veganism, my attraction to white boys. But who else was I supposed to get anything from, when they were the only people I was around?

Wherever I got it from, I used it as a way of relieving stress, and as punishment for one of many possible reasons I might be mad at myself. For example, if someone said something mean or critical to me and I didn’t respond, instead of being mad at them, I would get mad at myself for being so passive. I would go to my underwear drawer, pull out the razors (I remember the brand—ironically, it was called Helping Hand), and punish myself for my sins. At first, it gave me a feeling of freedom. Over time, it became a self-made prison. I stopped wearing short-sleeved shirts because people would ask too many questions.

Yes, people were starting to worry. During my sophomore year, I read my academic team coach some of my poems; later in the day I found myself summoned to the guidance counselor’s office.

Maybe my coach had seen the scars. I’d graduated from small slits from the serrated kitchen knife to long fluid lines that crept toward my wrists. This wasn’t the first time I’d thought about death. In the past I’d wanted to do it naturally, by dying in my sleep. When I was nine or ten, I started making
what I later called “medical cocktails,” where I would mix together all of the pills in the medicine cabinet (over-the-counter and prescribed) and dump them in a mug of cough syrup. After taking the vile concoction, I would lie in bed, praying that this time I’d gotten it right. I would roll around, sweating from whatever my body was doing, and then I would get sleepy, and my head would feel too heavy for my neck. My mother would come in. I remember the sliver of light as she opened the door; it hurt my eyes. “Are you okay?” she would ask, and I would tell her I wasn’t feeling so great, but I would be all right. The door would close again, and my head would continue to swim until I remembered nothing at all. Eventually my parents began to wonder where all of their medications were going, but they never figured it out.

The guidance counselor was pretty much useless. An older black woman, she tried very hard to be sweet and relate to me. We made polite talk about her new granddaughter. I told her I was fine. She said, since I liked poetry, why didn’t I write about something nice—maybe her baby granddaughter?

But no one could check in on me because I was about to switch domains again: I was going to boarding school. My parents didn’t want me to go, but I needed a change. They’d recently gotten back together, which meant they were fighting all the time, and besides, I was too driven to stay in my small town. So when my friend Thomas came into our German class with an application to the South Carolina Governor’s School for the Arts and Humanities (SCGSAH), I knew I had to figure out a way to get there. I presented the case to my parents: I could get into a better college, you wouldn’t have to take me anywhere, it might even be cheaper in the long run than supplementing my current public school education. They said no.
So I forged my mother’s signature for her permission to audition and got a money order for the application fee. I lied and told my mother that I had a competition at the SCGSAH on Saturday morning. It was plausible: I’d had a competition there the year before. I told my mother she could stay in the car, and I would be back in a few minutes. She left the radio on and flipped through her copy of Vogue as I grabbed my instruments and music from the trunk. Forty-five minutes later, when I emerged from the audition room, my mother was sitting in the lobby.

— **Did you just audition for this school?**
— **No.**
— **Are you lying to me? You shouldn’t lie to your mother.**
— **Yes.**
— **So you did audition for the school. Look at me.**
— **Yes.**
— **Well, since we’re here we might as well have a look at the place.**

We took a tour and talked to students. I got in. I convinced my parents to let me go. I got what I wanted.

Or at least, I got what I thought I wanted. It was change: I was leaving the people who knew me and going somewhere to excel at . . . something. It didn’t matter what. I spent the summer reinventing myself again and picking things out for my new life. I visited the Martha Stewart section of our Kmart for ideas to decorate my “home”: really two hundred fifty square feet that I’d have to share with another girl. But my new home was going to say something about me, and thus I took it very seriously. The only thing I took more seriously was my appearance. I didn’t want to be awkward anymore. I wanted to be
chic. I wanted to flatten out some of the curves: The breasts were nice, but the hips didn't have to be so extreme. My shoulders could come in some, and I could have a longer neck. I read every magazine article on style and confidence I could get my hands on: "How to Get the Body You Want." "How to Have Shiny Hair Every Day." "27 Pants You'll Look Great In." "How to Make the Most of Your Shape." "How to Create Your Signature Look." I asked my mother for her opinion on everything. I became obsessed with clothes. My closet began to look like my mother's, except I was bigger than she was—way bigger—so the clothes were bigger, too. I'd been shopping at plus-size stores since the seventh or eighth grade, which had been part of the awkwardness. The prints were matronly, and things didn't fit right, or were just too racy. At age thirteen, my breasts popping out of a shirt didn't seem too sexy. But now I was sixteen, so low-cut tops were no longer off-limits. Stilettos became a fixation; they lengthened my legs so they didn't look like tree trunks. It was also part of a height complex: I stopped growing in the sixth grade, having reached only five feet eight. My mother is closer to five eleven.

Once I got to school, the work went well, at least in the beginning. I was used to not having to work too hard. In the past, I'd won competitions and placed in regional and state bands without really trying. I would pull out my instrument a couple of hours before the competition, run through the piece at home, practice a little more in the car en route, then go in and play. But this school was different: I realized I wasn't very good.

I had my first round of "juries." At the end of each semester, students filled out forms listing all the pieces of music they had learned during the term. On the day of the jury, each student
waited at the appointed time until called into the room to perform. Sometimes you knew who would be there; sometimes you didn’t. The professors looked at your list of music and asked you to play scales and a practice piece. Then they asked you to play whatever they wanted—it could be the hardest piece on the list, or just a piece they happened to like. It’s arbitrary. Then came the critiques: The judges courteously wrote down all the things you did wrong, and after you played, they spoke sternly: “Do you think you’re going to get into a conservatory playing like that? Are you going to get a job playing like that? Do you think you could even audition for a gig like that? Where’s your head?” These are people with degrees from the most prestigious music schools in America—Juilliard, the New England Conservatory, the Curtis Institute of Music—so you take what they say seriously. After I got a C (a C!) as my final jury grade, I realized that this was going to be a bit harder than I originally thought.

The other kids at the school were just like me: ambitious kids looking for a chance to excel, or in some cases, just an excuse to leave home. (A lot of the guys were gay—and South Carolina is the buckle on the Bible Belt.) For me, SCGSAH was just a way to hasten my future success in whatever area. I liked music, but in my heart I wasn’t dead set on being an artist forever. I needed backup plans, but I started doing too much and going too fast: taking the recommended music course load, but also four academic classes each term. The recommended amount was two.

During this time, my bulimia was at its most volatile. I was still skipping breakfast. Lunch period was short on the days that I had Wind Ensemble, so sometimes I wouldn’t eat. I took German and Italian during my dinner period, so I could either
take my food with me or just not eat. While working on subjunctive cases, I would smell the other students’ food and get distracted. I was always hungry, and I thought about food all the time. My parents didn’t want me to skip meals, so they would take me grocery shopping every week, which left a lot of food in my room. And the cafeteria was buffet style, which was dangerous. If I had the time I would eat, throw up, finish eating, sneak off to the science wing and throw up, then go to the library before my friends caught up with me and I had to sit through lunch again. Because we lived in a dorm, we could also order out. On Fridays, friends and I would get together and order Chinese food. Sometimes in my room by myself, I’d order meals from Steak-Out, and then throw up in a trash bag.

One day my roommate saw my arm and told the school nurse. I was summoned from European History to Nurse Gail’s office. She asked to see my arms. I resisted. She asked again. I asked her why. She said it was important. I asked her if I was in trouble. We went back and forth for about fifteen minutes until I finally yielded. Her horror was warranted: My entire left arm was a series of strawberry gashes—some fresh from earlier that day. She called my dean, who called my parents, and we had a serious chat about my, um . . . The adults had a hard time naming what it was I was doing. My mother had sensed for over a year that I was doing something to my arms, but I think it was too much for her to fully process.

I went home for the weekend, and my mom tried to talk to me about it. She got religious—she went as far as anointing my room with holy oil—but I would have none of it. God had failed me, so I chose not to believe in him. In the end, I was
given an ultimatum: I had to see someone to talk about my problems, or I had to leave boarding school. I chose the former, and ended up with a therapist who looked like Donna Karan, but dressed like a lumberjack. I hated her. I didn’t trust her. She was trying to take me off my path to greatness. If I stopped cutting, I knew I would fall apart. If I could make it through the year, then I might be able to entertain the thought of stopping, but not now. (In the end, I wouldn’t stop for another six years.) So I learned to fake it and play the therapist’s game. She asked me how my day was, and I told her, using adjectives that had no positive or negative connotations. She tried to tease out my words, but I shut her down.

One of my roommates must have squealed about my food issues, because somewhere along the line, Donna Karan accused me of having an eating disorder. My parents and I vehemently denied it. I was fine. I mean, I was a little plump but that could be fixed with some exercise. I had my head in the toilet three to four times a day. I was spending fifty to seventy dollars a week on food in addition to eating in the cafeteria. I couldn’t play my clarinet half the time because my fingers were swollen from edema, but I was absolutely fine.

The administration insisted on a physical examination, so I went to our family doctor, Dr. T. He did the necessary tests and asked me if I’d been throwing up. I told him I did occasionally, when I ate too much. After he wrote the word obese on my chart (and apologized profusely for it), he told me that I just needed some simple weight management skills (eat slowly; smaller portions; less fat; fewer calories; more water) and told my mother that I was going through a phase. Sure—a ten-year phase.

In the spring of my senior year, a friend, M., noticed that I was taking a test and told her the truth. I didn’t, And my friends tended not to be competitive first person know when they were going she could.

My parents said it was myself, leaving of my child who occasionally admire about the disease. During the now had a Ford F-15C to New Ha.

I had changed League status. When intense stud, so I pushed dinner.
was taking a lot of laxatives. She approached me about it, and I told her the truth. It was the first time I told anyone the entire truth. I didn’t talk to my friends at home much; I was too busy. And my friends at school were harder to navigate. We all pretended not to be competitive, but we were. M. and I weren’t competitive, because we wanted different things. M. was the first person I could talk to about my semiautod fears: I didn’t know where I was going to college (I had applied to forty of them), and I thought my habits were so out of hand that they were going to eventually kill me. She helped me deal the best she could.

My parents wanted me to go to college in the South, but I said it was time for a change. Again, I imagined reinventing myself, leaving behind my body issues and the lingering image of my childhood gawkiness. I wanted to be the cool college girl who occasionally floated back to her hometown to have everyone admire how pretty she’d gotten, comment on her article about the double colonization of the mind, and ask her where she planned to go to medical school and if she was going to marry the nice young man she brought home on her last trip. During the summer before college, I worked with my dad—he now had a farm growing fruits and vegetables, which he sold in town. At the beginning of September, my parents packed our Ford F-150 and a U-Haul with my things and began the trek to New Hampshire.

I had chosen Dartmouth because of the name and its Ivy League status. I didn’t think about how competitive it would be. When I got there, I realized I was again with the same intense students from high school. I wanted to impress people, so I pushed myself. I knew I was a great cook, so I started hosting dinner parties. I held a Sunday dinner every week of my
freshman year. I shopped and cooked all day—for ten, twenty, sometimes even thirty people—but at the end of the night, when it was 1:00 a.m. and I was still in the kitchen cleaning up, I'd realize how used I felt. I was getting what I wanted—popularity and notoriety—but how was I paying for it? I bent over backward to please people who didn't give a damn about me. In addition to the dinner parties, I read other people's papers, volunteered for events, worked at the hospital, maintained a social life, and tried to go to class—the latter with mixed results. I began to wonder if I'd picked the wrong school. I'd changed everything and still there was no magic: I wasn't the beautiful, charmed college girl I'd dreamed of.

I didn't like Dartmouth, so I decided that I would get through it as fast as possible. If I was on every term, including summer quarter, for three years, I would get done early. I tried it. Not the best idea. The summer in Hanover was hot because most of the buildings weren't air-conditioned, but I had too much pride to wear short sleeves: I was self-conscious about the wide, raised keloid scars on my arms. Even now, when I'm more comfortable about them, someone will ask about the scars, and I'll just try to figure out what lie to tell them so they will leave me alone. But that summer I wasn't ready to shatter the illusion that I was perfect and completely together.

As it turned out, one of my professors would do that for me. I decided to take a Shakespeare course for my English minor, and after a couple of botched papers and many missed classes, the professor gave me an ultimatum: Talk to him about whatever was bothering me, or talk to someone in Student Health Services. I chose the latter because I could lie to the
doctors there. But the night before my appointment, in my journal, I wondered if deceiving people into thinking I was fine had gotten me anywhere, and realized that it hadn't.

The therapist from Student Health Services was much better than Donna Karan. To begin with, he didn't butcher my first name; he called me Miss Graham until I could tell him how to properly pronounce it. Score one for the therapist. That first session was a turning point for me. I started to be honest about what was going on, and what had been going on for years. But even a good therapist couldn't stop the downward spiral I was in. I was cutting myself several times a day, and binging and purging even more. I started thinking again about suicide. One weekend I went to a gas station to buy a tank of gasoline, but thought better of it and bought cigarettes instead. The next weekend I told a friend about my idea of setting myself on fire, and he turned me in to the dean, who sent me home on medical leave.

During the next nine months, I would go to two treatment centers—the first one wildly inappropriate, where I was with people who sniffed keyholes because they thought the smell of dinner was wafting through, and where the doctors drugged me into oblivion. The next place, the Renfrew Center, which was depicted in the HBO documentary Thin, was better. Renfrew is only for eating disorders, so at least the patients and I had something in common. But there I focused on another level of difference. I was a double minority: the only plus-size patient, and the only person of color.

I was set apart from the moment I got there, when they gave me one of only three plus-size beds. And as time went on, although I liked and got along with the other patients, sometimes it was painful to listen to them. Women who were going
blind from malnutrition talked in groups about how they felt fat, and I had to sit there, thinking that I weighed five times what they did.

But the harder part was the separation I felt because of my skin color. When I was younger I didn’t think about race, but that changed completely after I got to Dartmouth. It’s a very race-conscious place: There’s a general sense that the white students look down on the minorities as affirmative-action admits, and as a result, the minority students tend to self-segregate intensely. There’s the Native American House, the Asian Studies Center, the Latin American, Latino and Caribbean Studies House, and the Shabazz Center for Intellectual Inquiry—essentially, the African American House, though people might be offended if you called it that. I probably knew every African American student on campus. As a freshman, when I was the only black person in my English seminar, I thought nothing of it; this year, when I realized I was the only black person in my Medieval Literature class, I almost had a panic attack. That’s how much Dartmouth has changed me.

Fortunately, at Renfrew I had a great therapist, who was also a minority and a plus-size woman. We talked about my family and my inability to assert myself and disentangle myself from my mother. We talked about the pressures that the white- and male-dominated atmosphere at a place like Dartmouth put on me, how there were limited roles for me to play: I could be the motherly black woman who feeds everyone, or I could raise my voice and be defined as a bitch. When I imagined myself in the future—as a corporate lawyer, which at the time was my dream—I pictured someone who manipulated people in a smooth, ladylike way, like my mother does, someone who
always gets what she wants. But I've never been able to do this like she does. And as I kept talking to my therapist, I began to realize that this was not what I truly wanted to do.

Over time, I've come to realize that my mother and I are different. She is good at some things: She is artistic and stylish. And I am good at others: I like to read and write and think about things like race theory. I can admire her, and she can admire me.

I wish that I could give you some sort of miracle for the ending of this story, but there isn't one. No one rode in on a white horse and saved me. I didn't have a life-changing epiphany. God didn't perform a miracle and cure me so that I never think about food again. (You may think I'm joking, but in my quest to find stories of other black women with eating disorders—or any mental illness at all—I've read lots of recovery literature, and have come across quite a few deus ex machina conclusions.)

But God performed a different type of miracle: He made it possible for me to get the help that I needed, and now, one year out of treatment, I've begun to believe in him again. When something goes wrong that I don't understand, I realize I can get through it. I still have bad days, but I maintain hope. I have an amazing group of friends, and I'm starting to accept who I am. I'm not perfect, and I don't expect to become perfect, but I do think I can be happy. Because of the issues that I have had, I used to think I would never get married because no one could love me; I was broken. I don't know why exactly, but I don't feel that way anymore. As I've stopped exerting all my energy trying to imitate other people or fix things that are wrong with me, I've realized that I like things about myself. I also don't push myself the way I did in high school, striving toward some
dream of success that I can't even define. I accept that I'm still finding who I am, and I'm allowing myself to enjoy things along the way.

Tomorrow, for example, I'm going to audition for a play. In short sleeves.