

Arianna Elisabeth Thomas

Food: A Memoir

The obsession with what I thought was my ideal weight started when I was 10 years old. My focus would be on controlling all aspects of food intake for many years.

I grew up with an African American father, Italian grandfather, and Polish grandmother. My grandmother was the main cook in the household. She would make homemade pierogies, stuffed cabbage, duck blood soup, crepes, and paczki on a regular basis. I was never a chubby kid because I was always active. My kindergarten teacher observed the fact that I was always hyper. My birth mother took me to a specialist who diagnosed me with ADHD and prescribed Ritalin. My relationship with food would change from that moment on.

When I took my Ritalin, I experienced two severe side effects. One, my nose would bleed on a daily basis. When I would experience a nose bleed, it would take an average of forty-five minutes to an hour to stop. And my appetite disappeared. My grandfather and grandmother had moved out when I started to lose my appetite. It was a struggle for me to eat anything. When I was at school, I would nibble like a rabbit and occasionally would eat a quarter of the food on the plate. My body weight was less than normal. My primary doctor sent me to the dietician at the age of 7. The vitamins and a special protein-rich diet were no help.

I attended St. Florian's School for the majority of middle school. I was the only biracial child in my class, and I was a loner. My teacher took a special interest in me. She realized that I was ahead of the majority of my class in most of the subjects. It was her conclusion that I did not need the Ritalin. The reason I would not pay attention in the classroom most of the time was boredom. My teacher's conclusions and the fact my mom lost her high-paying job and the health insurance led me to stop taking Ritalin. My appetite came back, and I started to gain weight. A classmate, Courtney, taught me how to starve myself and purge. I thought it was the solution to my problem.

I had a new daily routine. Saltine crackers, carrots, celery, and broccoli with a side of ranch dressing was my main diet during the weeks I would limit my intake of food. Sweets, chicken nuggets, and pizza were the foods I would eat during my purge weeks. An example would be when I would eat cookies and a slice of cheesecake and then would make myself throw up five to ten minutes later. The next step would be to brush my teeth right after. Courtney's sister would provide Courtney and me with a daily cocktail of diet pills. I got back to my goal weight of 110 pounds within six months of establishing this routine.

Self mutilation was the next habit I picked up. I would cut myself on my arms and legs with razors, keys, and pieces of glass. I would cut myself five to six times a week. Pain was my best friend and comfort.

When I was 14 years old, my classmate Valentina told my gym teacher she found a key with fresh blood on it. My mom took me to Children's Hospital the same day. The doctor gave my mom referrals to outpatient counseling centers. She never took me to any counseling center, so I continued the cycle of starving myself, purging, and self mutilation. I looked up the best foods to eat when you are on a starvation diet. I maintained honor roll status while devoting myself to essentially killing myself in a slow, painful manner.

High school arrived with a whole new set of challenges. My goal was to get into a good college and do as many activities as possible. I was also socializing with older men, so I had to maintain my cute figure. I purged my food five to six times a week at this point. I still cut myself five to six times a week.

When I was 15 years old, I was at a friend's house for a party. I was living on saltines, diet pills, and water this week in particular. All I remember is passing out and knocking my head against a granite countertop. One of the adults at the party rushed me to the hospital. The doctors discovered that I was malnourished and dehydrated. They discovered I had signs of the most common eating disorders, anorexia and bulimia, and scars from cutting for five years. The party was over at this point.

I finally went to a residential treatment center. The program lasted 60 days. The program saved my life. I was at my lowest weight of 96 pounds. I had a feeding tube in my nose so I could receive more nutrition. When I could eat real food again, it was like I was a baby all over again. There were foods that I had not eaten in years that my system had to learn to tolerate. The bathroom door inside my room was locked for the first 30 minutes after every meal so I could not throw up my food. The group meetings every morning were tough at first but became empowering towards the end.

There is an exercise that summed up my struggle with anorexia and bulimia. Each person had to draw themselves on a big white piece of paper. I had to mark where I thought every one of my flaws were. My fat thighs were always the one flaw I focused on. The group leader would then have each person explain why we felt that was a flaw and attempt to change our thinking. Fat on my legs was horrible. I told the leader I would exercise all day to get rid of the fat on my legs. Ms. Beth got me to realize that every woman has problem areas on their body. I needed to accept and love every problem area. We did this exercise once a week.

This exercise, over the course of two months, helped me realize that I can live with fat on my legs and hips. My self image improved once I realized that I would never be rail thin and that was okay.

I will always have a love and hate relationship with food. My solution for the past 13 years has been to eat healthy food, exercise on a daily basis in moderation, and participate in support groups to prevent a relapse. I have come to realize eating disorders are common among women and men of all races and ages. The key to winning a battle against an eating disorder is getting help.

If you notice that a friend or loved one is showing signs of an eating disorder, talk to them. When a person notices odd behavior, that talk is the first step to treatment. I am blessed to have won my battle because some people do not.