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Atelophobia

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Atelophobia

There's a common misconception about perfectionism making someone flawless. Mine doesn't do that at all. My perfectionism is the devastating disappointment I feel when I don't accomplish what I've decided I should. My perfectionism is my refusal to write in pen when completing assignments, the ulcer that developed after my first semester of college, and the dark bags that exist semi-permanently under my eyes. My perfectionism is the way I counted calories for months, but stopped when I decided that eating a nutritious diet was more important to an impeccable life than knowing how many calories are in an apple (ninety-five). My perfectionism became the pedometer strapped tightly around my wrist, constantly reminding me of how much exercise I had gotten that day and how much time was left for me to do more.

My sister expressed her perfectionism with much more impressive outlets. She had a perfect grade point average, a resumé that took up over three pages single spaced, and had enough scholarships that her PhD program was paying her to attend. If you didn't hear her anxious sobbing at night, you might be fooled into believing the idealistic image that she projected.

My mother was affected as well, but she kept it under control better than I ever could. It had taken me eighteen years of my own neuroticism to recognize that the lipstick she hastily applied before her pre-dawn coffee run was masking lips tired from smiling all the time, and that she cooked dinner every night so that she could measure out her own carefully controlled portion.

My sister wore her expectations like the tassel hanging limply from her graduation cap. My mother painted her impossibly high standards on her face in gaudy hues. I fastened mine around my wrist.

On one of the rare occasions where my sister allowed herself to relax, she and I decided to watch television. We were flicking through channels when we found a documentary on a woman living with agoraphobia. Probably in an attempt to convince ourselves that we were normal, she and I watched the entirety of the film in fascinated silence.

The woman panicked even when she was opening the door to leave her home. She talked about feeling trapped, not by the four walls enclosing her and the restrictions she had placed upon herself, but by the boundless freedom outside. There was too much space, too much room, too much uncertainty.

When it was over, my sister stood and stretched. The hollow strip of skin exposed under her shirt reminded me that I had just spent over an hour sitting sedentary and needed to work out. For a moment, anxiety pulsed in my body like a heartbeat. I checked my watch and saw that I still had plenty of time, and I released the breath I did not even realize I was holding.

“That was so stupid,” my sister decided. “No one’s afraid of freedom.”
“You’re right. She’s probably just looking for attention.”

A week or two later, my pedometer died.

I was in the middle of a long run, 3.63 miles in, and the screen went blank. I slowed to a stop and stared for a moment incredulously. The wind pushed into me impatiently, demanding that I keep moving. But how could I, when I didn’t even know how far I could go. My life was measureless. I felt myself shrinking back inside of my body, unwilling to take a step further, because it was all too...free. How would I know if I had done enough exercise that day if I didn’t even know how much exercise I had done?

I trudged back home, each step pointless without something with which I could measure it. I loosened the watch and removed it, thrust it into my pocket, and suddenly my wrist seemed very bare. There was a tan line where the watch had been, a thin stripe going from golden brown to startling white. It reminded me of the summer days spent running, or biking, or making up excuses for why I couldn’t go out for ice cream with my friends.

The cool air felt good on my body. I paid more attention to the trees changing color when I walked instead of running, to the way that my footsteps struck the leaves on the sidewalk like thunder, how the clouds drifted lazily from one side of the sky to the next.

When I got back I thought about sucking down a protein shake. But I couldn’t shake the memory of missed ice cream sundaes from my thoughts, so I walked into the kitchen, a rebellious thrill pumping through my body. I reminded myself that these were my rules, so I wasn’t technically breaking them—just amending.

My brother was sitting at the table, eyes trained on his phone. I expected him to comment on how different and calm I seemed, but he didn't even lift his head, he was so focused intently on what was in front of him. I deflated slightly, but the thought of eating what I wanted kept me moving towards the fridge. It was full of fruit and vegetables. That was the only snack that my mother and I bought while grocery shopping. But I knew in the back there was a secret stash of chocolates, something my mother had bought during a particularly stressful month and hadn't touched. She had needed the reassurance that she was, at least, good at controlling herself.

I pushed aside cartons of sickly sweet berries and wilting lettuce. There they were: a crooked stack of three small chocolates, wrapped in shiny purple foil. They looked out of place amongst the produce, like coal wrapped in pretty paper. But I took all three and closed the refrigerator door.

My brother lifted his head, and I waited proudly and expectantly for him to comment his approval on the progress I had made.

"Hey," he said, glancing down at his phone and back at me. His eyes were distant, almost glazed. "Do you know how many calories are in an apple?"